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Hugh O'Neill in Irish historical discourse, *c*.1550–2021

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ABSTRACT. *An analysis of the multiple publications relating to the career of Hugh O'Neill that appeared during the middle decades of the twentieth century reveals the extent to which authors who were then writing about the past permitted their interpretations to be influenced by the politics and prejudices of their own time. It is then demonstrated that the various positions then adopted by competing authors had been influenced also by polemics from the past. A study of the place accorded to Hugh O'Neill by authors writing in the nineteenth, eighteenth, seventeenth and even the sixteenth century shows that they too were divided over whether O'Neill should be considered the forger of an Irish nation or a champion of Catholicism, or an ingrate who had betrayed the crown that had rescued him from obscurity. This leads to a discussion of academic writing of more recent decades and the efforts of scholars who have engaged on fresh research to better comprehend what motivated Hugh O'Neill at various junctures in his career, even as he remains one of the more enigmatic personalities in Ireland's history.*

One of the few debates that enlivened my interest in Ireland's early modern history half a century ago concerned the place of Hugh O'Neill, earl of Tyrone, in Ireland's history.[1] Readers' understanding of O'Neill's importance had been recently refreshed by Sean O'Faolain's biography of O'Neill, by a series of articles by G. A. Hayes McCoy on various facets of the Nine Years War (1594–1603), by a book by John Silke that located the Battle of Kinsale in a wider European context, by another book by Cyril Falls offering a unionist's appraisal of O'Neill's military accomplishments, and by a sequence of edited documents published during the

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[1] I refer to the subject as Hugh O'Neill rather than Aodh Ó Néill and I limit references to him as baron of Dungannon or earl of Tyrone. I have also used the anglicised form of other Irish names, for example Florence Conry rather than Flaithrí Ó Maolchonaire. The first draft was presented at a seminar convened in 2016 by Siobhán Fitzpatrick, then librarian of the Royal Irish Academy, to mark the four hundreth anniversary of the death of Hugh O'Neill. I thank Siobhán and the participants in that seminar for this initial stimulus. I was inspired in 2021 to revise the draft because that year marked the fiftieth anniversary of my first publication in *I.H.S*. Nicholas Canny, 'Hugh O'Neill and the changing face of Gaelic Ulster' in *Studia Hibernica*, x (1970), pp 7–35; *idem*, 'The Treaty of Mellifont and the re-organisation of Ulster' in *The Irish Sword,* ix (1970) pp 249–62; *idem*, 'The Flight of the Earls, 1607' in *I.H.S.,* xvii, no. 67 (1971), pp 380–99.

1960s and 1970s by Micheline Kerney Walsh, that she later re-published together with a commentary in book form.[2]

This was, by any standards, a significant flood of publications, and one of the purposes of this article is to explain how many of the arguments made by these authors were shaped by the experiences and opinions of those who lived through previous decades and centuries. This investigation of the politics of history-writing down the centuries will show that most authors who wrote of Hugh O'Neill previous to the late twentieth century sought to present him either as a champion of their preferred definition of Irish nationalism or as an exemplar of Irish ingratitude. What follows should provide a context for an appraisal of what scholars of recent generations — most of them academics — have been writing of Hugh O'Neill, and for an interrogation of some of their assumptions and conclusions.

I

The terms of the mid-twentieth-century discourse had been set in 1942 by O'Faolain's biography, *The Great O'Neill*, where he credited J. K. Graham, who had recently completed a thesis on the career of Hugh O'Neill, with supplying the narrative thread from which to weave a 'popular account of O'Neill's life and times'.[3] O'Faolain's book attracted an extensive readership because he pursued a coherent, persuasive argument in a more accessible prose style than that used by most professional historians. However, O'Faolain assumed that, as with fiction or biography, he was licensed to embellish his narrative with imaginative flourishes. He, therefore, exploited Hayes Mc Coy's contention that O'Neill preferred Fabian tactics over fighting pitched battles, to draw a silent analogy between the Nine Years War and Ireland's recent independence struggle where the guerrilla warfare of insurgents had proven effective.[4] In so doing, O'Faolain obliquely likened O'Neill to Michael Collins, stating that he had regularly received 'from his friends and spies in Dublin … full reports' of the government's intentions until it became 'one of the constant complaints of the colonists that his secret service gave him information about every decision immediately it was taken'.[5] O'Faolain again invoked similarity between the conflicts, this time to Collins's disadvantage when he identified O'Neill as the first Irish pragmatist who had recognised that, in any conflict with crown forces, 'a military victory in the sense of a vast overthrow by numbers was always out of the question'. This insight, claimed O'Faolain, marked O'Neill out as 'an able politician and an able general, and the only big

[2] Sean O'Faolain, *The Great O'Neill: a biography of Hugh O'Neill, earl of Tyrone 1550–1616* (London, 1942); G. A. Hayes McCoy, 'Strategy and tactics in Irish warfare, 1593–1601' in *I.H.S.*, ii, no. 7 (1941) pp 255–79; *idem*, 'The army of Ulster, 1593–1601' in *The Irish Sword,* i (1949–53), pp 105–17; John J. Silke, *Kinsale: the Spanish intervention in Ireland at the end of the Elizabethan wars* (Liverpool, 1970); Cyril Falls, *Elizabeth's Irish wars* (London, 1950); Micheline Kerney Walsh, '*Destruction by peace': Hugh O'Neill after Kinsale* (Armagh, 1986). I choose the spelling Sean O'Faolain over Seán Ó Faoláin because this was what the author used in 1942.

[3] J. K. Graham, 'A historical study of the career of Hugh O'Neill, second earl of Tyrone, c. 1550–1616', (M.A. thesis, Queen's University Belfast, 1938); O'Faolain, *The Great O'Neill,* p. v.

[4] O'Faolain, *The Great O'Neill*, p. 167.

[5] Ibid.

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man in all Irish history from the beginning to the end of that dual order'.[6] Thus, according to O'Faolain, when his confederates are placed beside O'Neill they appear as 'simple minded men' who could hardly comprehend that he was 'the first modern man to give the people a form'.[7] Such anachronistic adulation was compensated for by several insights, such as O'Faolain's recognition that O'Neill had offered scant information concerning his motivations at several junctures in his career. This evidential shortfall, he suggested, explained why O'Neill was frequently judged by what was said of his intentions by hostile third parties.

O'Faolain also suggested that readers should distinguish between the younger Hugh O'Neill, who 'had never desired to attack England' and who 'avoided the clash for … more than a quarter century', and the O'Neill of the 1590s, who mobilised the most formidable challenge presented to Queen Elizabeth by any subject.[8] He contended that when O'Neill had cooperated with the government in his early years, he was a 'representative' neither of the 'old Gaelic order' nor of the Catholic church. Indeed on religion, O'Faolain believed that the young O'Neill had 'only an ambiguous sympathy with what he found himself so ironically obliged to defend with obstinacy'.[9]

O'Faolain sustained his case that O'Neill had reservations concerning Tridentine Catholicism, by contrasting Ulster with Munster and O'Neill with James Fitzmaurice Fitzgerald. He believed that 'the religious enthusiasm of the Counter Reformation' which had been the driving force behind conflict in Munster and within the Pale during the 1580s 'had not reached the North'.[10] It was not until 1592, when Edmund Magauran took up his duties as the pope's archbishop of Armagh, claimed O'Faolain, that the Counter Reformation made any significant impression on society in Ulster. However, he also asserted that from the moment O'Neill fell under the influence of Magauran and his associates, he became 'consumed' by 'religious idealism' until, by 1598, he began to speak 'for all the Catholics of Ireland'.[11] O'Neill's political ambitions had also escalated as the network of countrywide alliances he fashioned enabled him to 'see the outline of a rapidly forming Confederate army' that might make him the 'virtual master of Ireland'.[12] O'Faolain argued that O'Neill was by then promoting a form of Irish nationalism, the elements of which could be discerned in his negotiation with the earl of Ormond, when he gave expression to 'the full pride and dignity of an emergent nation — a new nation, coherent, self-aware, forward-looking, intelligent and intelligible where there had been before an incoherent dynasticism'.[13] Instead of negotiating terms from a position of strength, O'Neill had become 'locked into that vision, its creature as well as its creator' until all was lost on the battlefield at

[6] O'Faolain's reference to O'Neill as a 'big man' would in 1942, have reminded readers of Michael Collins whose designation as 'the big fellow' had been popularised in Frank O'Connor, *The big fellow: Michel Collins and the Irish revolution* (London, 1937); by dual order O'Faolain meant Anglo-Irish relations. O'Faolain himself was an admirer of de Valera and the author of *The life story of Eamon de Valera* (Dublin, 1933) and *De Valera* (London, 1939).

[7] O'Faolain, *The Great O'Neill*, pp 171, 15.

[8] Ibid., p. vi.

[9] Ibid., p. vi.

[10] Ibid., p. 85.

[11] Ibid., pp 130, 153, 195.

[12] Ibid., p. 203.

[13] Ibid., pp 221–2.

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Kinsale.[14] The ignominy of this defeat explains why O'Faolain depicted the remaining years (1601–07) that O'Neill spent in Ireland as anti-climactic, and the years (1607–16), that he spent exiled in Rome as pathetic.

Micheline Kerney Walsh took exception to O'Faolain's dismissal of O'Neill's concluding years because this belittled her effort to reconstitute the spiritual and political connections that developed between Ireland and Spain during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.[15] The first fruit of Kerney Walsh's research was a series of English language translations of documents she had identified in the Spanish archives, concerning the overtures that O'Neill and his associates had been making to the Spanish authorities during the 1590s and again between 1607 and 1616. These, as was noted, were published as a series of articles in *The Irish Sword* during the 1960s and 1970s, and republished as *'Destruction by peace': Hugh O'Neill after Kinsale*. In her commentary she contended that O'Neill and his associates had been motivated throughout their lives by a determination to achieve religious freedom, and that 'the Flight of the Earls' of September 1607, when O'Neill and his principal confederates with their families suddenly left Ireland for the Continent, was the ultimate proof of their constancy. Their departure, according to Kerney Walsh, was neither a panic decision nor a journey into voluntary exile, but a planned, tactical retreat by O'Neill and his confederates to secure military aid from Spain with which they would later return to renew the struggle to defend Catholicism.[16]

The O'Neill that emerged from the Spanish correspondence was a deferential, serene and pious person who had been left with no choice in 1607 but to withdraw temporarily from Ireland both because he and his associates feared for their lives, and because only Spain seemed concerned to defend Catholicism in Ireland. Kerney Walsh could show how O'Neill repeated this message in a succession of appeals to the Spanish authorities from the moment the exiles arrived on the Continent in 1607 until O'Neill's death in 1616. Her sources showed, however, that O'Neill's further request for royal permission to settle in some dominion of the king of Spain was studiously ignored, which forced him to reside in Rome as a pensioner of the Spanish crown. Notwithstanding this snub, Kerney Walsh emphasised how the correspondence of the exiles demonstrated that they had continued to petition the Spanish government to abandon the peace that King Philip had entered upon with the British monarchy at the Treaty of London of 1604 and to re-commence hostilities against England with an invasion of Ireland. She drew particular attention to O'Neill's argument that there was no other way to salvage the Catholic faith in Ulster because the crown was assigning the estates they had abandoned to British Protestant planters. This correspondence satisfied Kerney Walsh that O'Neill had died in 1616 as a champion both of Catholicism and of the Spanish monarchy to which he had switched his allegiance from the British crown. It seemed reasonable, therefore, to suppose that the war that O'Neill had mobilised against the Elizabethan army had also been to defend Catholicism[17]

[14] Ibid., p. 223.

[15] Kerney Walsh became interested in this subject when her father, Leopold Kerney, served as Irish minister to Franco's government, 1935–46.

[16] Kerney Walsh, *'Destruction by peace'*, p. 143.

[17] Ibid., pp 1–12. The effort of O'Neill to muster support for a return to Ireland has been tracked carefully in Benjamin Hazard, *Faith and patronage: the political career of Flaithhí Ó Maolchonaire, c.1560–1629* (Dublin, 2009), esp. pp 89–103.

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Kerney Walsh's certitude over what had motivated O'Neill throughout his career was tempered by Cardinal Tomás Ó Fiaich who wrote a preface to *Destruction by peace*. In this, he expressed reservations concerning 'the character and personality' of O'Neill, and advised that when it came to 'religious outlook' it seemed likely that O'Neill had moved from a position 'which bordered on indifference' to one where he had 'during his last decade in Ireland' become 'an ardent figure of the Counter Reformation'.[18] Ó Fiaich's caution may have been prompted by the attention that O'Faolain had given to O'Neill's marriage to Mabel Bagenal, solemnised in 1591 at O'Neill's request by Thomas Jones, then Protestant bishop of Meath.[19] However, it is likely that Ó Fiaich would have been more attentive to the opinions concerning O'Neill's shifting loyalties expressed in the nineteenth century by P. F. Moran, both because Moran's scholarship was well documented and because Moran, like Ó Fiaich himself, was a priest–historian whose career had similarly culminated in him becoming a cardinal. The interpretative disagreements between O'Faolain and Kerney Walsh in the twentieth century would also have reminded Ó Fiaich of the differences that, in the nineteenth century, had separated John Mitchel, a Young Ireland nationalist, from both P. F. Moran and C. P. Meehan, the latter another priest–historian. This nineteenth-century disputation stemmed from Mitchel's contention, repeated by O'Faolain one hundred years later, that what had motivated O'Neill was a desire to create an Irish nation. Moran and Meehan, like Kerney Walsh in the twentieth century, were prepared to countenance this only if Catholicism was accepted to be the defining characteristic of an Irish nation.

II

Mitchel came to write of Hugh O'Neill when Thomas Davis, who was both his friend and associate on *The Nation* newspaper, commissioned him to write O'Neill's biography within 'The Library of Ireland' series, that Davis had initiated.[20] These prose histories were to complement the ballad history of Ireland that Davis intended would foster a sense of nationality among people in Ireland with limited schooling but who were conversant in English. These books were designed to demonstrate through reasoned, documented argument how a sense of nationality had developed among Irish people until, by the nineteenth century, national consciousness had matured to the point where the Irish, like their counterparts in several European nations and proto-nations, stood prepared, regardless of ancestry, social composition or religious allegiance, to constitute themselves into a nation state, in opposition to a superior imperial authority. The hope of these Irish and international idealists was that an emerging conglomerate of nation states would displace what they were representing as the corrupt empires that had dominated political life in Europe, and the wider world, for centuries.[21]

[18] Preface by Tomás Ó Fiach to Kerney Walsh, *'Destruction by peace'*, pp xi–xvi; quotation at pp xi–xii. In his earlier career the future cardinal had lectured in history at St Patrick's College, Maynooth.

[19] O'Faolain, *The Great O'Neill*, pp 116–22.

[20] P. S. O'Hegarty, 'The Library of Ireland, 1845–7' in M. J. Mc Manus (ed.), *Thomas Davis and Young Ireland* (Dublin, 1945).

[21] The agenda of Davis and those he had commissioned to write in the Library of Ireland series, and the contradictions within it, are detailed in Nicholas Canny, *Imagining Ireland's pasts: early modern Ireland through the centuries* (Oxford, 2021), pp 221–43; on the broader

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James Quinn has shown how Davis and others involved with *The Nation* newspaper, who were later dubbed members of Young Ireland, 'attached a special importance to proving that the Irish were as brave (if not braver) than other nations'.[22] To this end, as Quinn has explained, the Young Irelanders constructed a gallery of heroes who had behaved gallantly either on the field of battle or in parliamentary assembly. The designated heroes were those who, whether in victory or defeat, had demonstrated that the ultimate destiny of Irish people was to live independently of Britain.

Given this agenda, it is no surprise that O'Neill's name came to mind, not least because Abbé James MacGeoghegan, an eighteenth-century chaplain to the Irish regiment in the French Royal army, had detailed the exploits of O'Neill in a three-volume history of Ireland written in French and published sequentially in 1758, 1762 and 1763. MacGeoghegan had lauded O'Neill, because of his military achievements, as '*un bon citoyen'* who had promoted '*la nation*'.[23] Some Young Ireland authors were acquainted with MacGeoghegan's original publication in French, but, as Vincent Morley has explained, MacGeoghegan's praise of O'Neill became known to wider audiences in Ireland when it was repeated in some Irish language poems of the late eighteenth century that were subsequently translated into English and published in the *Irish Magazine*.[24] Finally, MacGeoghegan's admiration for O'Neill became more generally known when a three-volume English translation of his history was published in Dublin in 1832 and in New York in 1848.[25]

Mitchel's knowledge of MacGeoghegan's work probably explains why he characterised O'Neill, rather than the dashing Red Hugh O'Donnell, as the heroic leader in the Nine Years War, much as O'Faolain would do in the twentieth century.[26] By doing so, Mitchel disregarded that it was O'Donnell rather than O'Neill who had been admired both by the seventeenth-century annalists, and by eighteenth-century Catholic authors in Ireland.[27] For Mitchel, O'Donnell was but 'a wild leader' who was 'daring and dashing' where O'Neill was 'the leading spirit of the time', and 'the first for many a century to conceive, and almost to realize the grand thought of creating a new Irish nation'.[28] O'Neill's ultimate achievement was to provide leadership to lords both from Gaelic and Old English lineages, who previously had been engaged in conflict with each other even when faced with a common enemy in the shape of the Elizabethan army. Such internecine conflict convinced Mitchel that 'there was still no Irish nation' until O'Neill established his authority over competing factions in Ulster and then throughout Ireland. He marvelled how 'the grandson of the Dundalk blacksmith', who was also seemingly an autodidact,

context, see Stefan Berger and Chris Lorenz (eds), *Nationalizing the past: historians as nation builders in modern Europe* (Basingstoke, 2010).

[22] James Quinn, *Young Ireland and the writing of Irish history* (Dublin, 2015), pp 4–5.

[23] Abbé [James] MacGeoghegan, *Histoire d'Irlande ancienne et moderne* (3 vols: vol. i, Paris, 1758; vol. ii Paris, 1762; vol. iii, Amsterdam, 1763), iii, 474–5.

[24] Vincent Morley, *Ó Chéitinn go Raiftearaí* (Dublin, 2011), pp 223–68.

[25] Abbé MacGeoghegan, *History of Ireland ancient and modern*, trans. P. O'Kelly (3 vols., Dublin 1832).

[26] John Mitchel, *The life and times of Aodh O'Neill, prince of Ulster, called by the English, Hugh, earl of Tyrone* (Dublin, 1845).

[27] Mícheál Mac Craith, 'Creideamh agus athartha' in Máirín Ní Dhonnachdha (ed.), *Nua léamha* (Dublin, 1996), pp 7–19.

[28] Mitchel, *Life and times*, pp 151, viii.

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was equally 'at home in the halls of Greenwich as Dungannon', and had been able to heal 'the feuds of rival chiefs, and out of these discordant elements to create and bind together an Irish nation'.[29] Religion had contributed little to this amalgamation since 'O'Neill was apparently no strict Catholic, and while in Dublin scrupled not to accompany the Lord Deputy to the church'.[30] This indifference, Mitchel asserted with ill-concealed admiration, made O'Neill's linking 'national feeling and religious zeal' all the more remarkable. Therefore, Mitchel proclaimed O'Neill 'the deliverer of his country and most gracious champion of the Catholic religion' who almost brought an end to a corrupt government and presented a formidable challenge to 'the detested spirit of English imperialism'.[31]

We will recall how, a century later, O'Faolain replicated Mitchel's general argument and endorsed his regret that O'Neill's efforts had been 'defeated and finally subdued' on the field of Kinsale. This conclusion explains why both biographers tapered off after that reverse. For Mitchel, O'Neill's defeat at Kinsale had enabled King James VI of Scotland, once he had succeeded Queen Elizabeth in 1603 to become James I of England, to introduce a plantation to Ulster with all its inherent injustices, including religious persecution. Then, in an argument that O'Faolain chose to disregard, Mitchel lamented that the 'distinct nation', which O'Neill had fashioned from the 'Milesian Irish' and some of Old English Catholic descent who had made common cause with them, had been extinguished by this one defeat. This confederation had proven insufficient to the task that O'Neill had defined, and its defeat had opened the way for the ensuing plantation. Mitchel recognised the tragedy of this outcome, but, on reflection, he took heart because with the introduction by King James of English and Scottish planters into Ulster, 'new blood was infused into old Ireland, [and] the very undertakers that planted Ireland grew racy of the soil and their descendant's children became, thank God, not only Irish but united Irish'.[32]

This conclusion was personal to Mitchel because, as an Irish nationalist of Ulster Presbyterian descent, he took pride in the prominent role that people of his religion and lineage had played in the 1798 rebellion, which, for him, had defined Irish nationalism.[33] In his narrative, therefore, the 1798 rebellion was the positive unanticipated outcome of the seventeenth-century plantation, and he marvelled how the planners of plantation had never imagined that 'in the scene of plunder and oppression, a new race [had been able] to rise which [had] compensate[d for] the miseries of the Ulster plantation'. Given this, the descendants of the dispossessed should no longer cherish bitter memories concerning the unjust means by which their ancestors had been expropriated. Recalling past grievance was futile, said Mitchel pragmatically, because the beneficiaries of the Ulster plantation

[29] Mitchel, *Life and times*, pp 73, 74, 77. The charge that Hugh O'Neill's father Matthew, baron of Dungannon, was the son of a Dundalk blacksmith named Kelly by a mistress of Con Bachagh O'Neill, first earl of Tyrone, was first made by Shane O'Neill to discredit Matthew's claim to be his father's successor under English law. This contention was conveniently disregarded by officials only to be recalled whenever they wished to denigrate O'Neill or challenge his pretensions.

[30] Mitchel, *Life and times*, pp 76–7.

[31] Ibid., pp 142, 218.

[32] Ibid., p. vii.

[33] Guy Beiner, *Forgetful remembrance: social forgetting and vernacular historiography of a rebellion in Ireland* (Oxford, 2018), pp 86, 262. Beiner mentions Mitchel's proud recall of the 1798 rebellion in his *History of Ireland* (2 vols, New York and Dublin, 1868) and also the visit in 1845 of Mitchel with other Young Irelanders to the Ulster sites of the 1798 rebellion.

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held 'far too old a title to be questioned … [which meant] it would be ill-striving to unplant them'. Then when it came to fostering further negative memories due to the religious persecution suffered by their ancestors, Mitchel pronounced that the era of persecution was 'all past and over', and 'the very penal laws, last relics of that bloody business, [were] with the days before the flood'.[34]

III

O'Faolain chose to disregard what Mitchel had said on these subjects possibly because he was more aware than Mitchel that Catholics (including those within Young Ireland circles) could never suppress memories of such grievances. The first, in the nineteenth century, to respond to the challenge was Fr C. P. Meehan, who had worked with both Mitchel and Davis on *The Nation* newspaper, and had himself been commissioned by Davis to write two volumes for the Library of Ireland series. In each of these, which were not published until after the sudden early death of Davis in September 1845, Meehan left no doubt that he rejected Mitchel's interpretation even as he refrained from stating so bluntly.

In his first contribution, *The Confederation of Kilkenny*, Meehan suggested that O'Neill had contributed significantly to the development of Irish nationalism. However, Meehan denied that the sense of national pride that had been enabled by O'Neill's 1590s confederacy had died on the field of Kinsale. He held, rather, that its spirit was revived in 1642 when a new Catholic Confederation was established. Meehan celebrated how from 1642 to 1649 Irish Catholics of Gaelic and English ancestries had put past differences aside to pursue national objectives, especially the re-establishment of Catholicism as the religion of the nation. Meehan acknowledged that, like O'Neill's earlier effort, this new national efflorescence with a clearly defined religious objective had been defeated, this time by a sinister combination that included Irish Catholics who refused to take guidance from the papacy, Irish people who had abandoned the faith of their ancestors, and English and Scottish Protestants who had acquired a foothold in Ireland through plantations. However, even as he lamented this defeat of what he considered Ireland's Catholic nationalists when victory was attainable, Meehan rejoiced that the nation that had been fashioned by Hugh O'Neill and revived by his nephew Owen Roe had endured surreptitiously through decades of persecution until 1829, when Daniel O'Connell had, by parliamentary means, secured the ultimate achievement of Catholic Emancipation.[35]

Meehan's second contribution, entitled *The Geraldines, earls of Desmond, and the persecution of the Irish Catholics*, was little more than a translation of a seventeenth-century work written in exile by the Irish Dominican, Daniel O'Daly, (Dominic O'Daly in religion). Meehan saw the need to revive this text to demonstrate how the amalgamation between Catholics of English and Gaelic lineages that Mitchel had attributed to O'Neill had already been formed in the 1580s in Munster to defend Catholics from religious persecution.[36]

[34] Mitchel, *Life and times*, p. xi.
[35] C. P. Meehan, *The Confederation of Kilkenny* (Dublin, 1846).
[36] C. P. Meehan, *The Geraldines, earls of Desmond, and the persecution of the Irish Catholics* (Dublin, 1847). This was principally a translation of Dominic O'Daly, *Initium, incrementum, et exitus familiae Geraldinorum, Desmoniae comitum, palatinorum Kyerriae in Hibernia, ac persecutionis haeriticorum description* (Lisbon, 1655); see also

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This argument was not totally at odds with Mitchel's version, since Mitchel had accepted the idea that it was religious zeal that had inspired James Fitzmaurice Fitzgerald in Munster to confront crown forces. Meehan exercised some collegial restraint during the 1840s even as he asserted that Catholicism had been the prime factor in bonding the constituent elements of O'Neill's confederacy. He proved less diplomatic in 1866 when he published his third book, *The fate and fortunes of Hugh O'Neill ... and Rory O'Donnell*, independently of Young Ireland. In this, Meehan insisted that O'Neill and his associates, like their predecessors in Munster, had gone to war to achieve religious freedom.[37] Meehan also hinted that Davis should have chosen him rather than Mitchel to write the O'Neill biography as he detailed how, during his years as a seminarian in Rome, he had overcome his homesickness by making regular pilgrimages to the graves of O'Neill and of Rory O'Donnell, brother of Red Hugh, and those family members who had been interred with them in Rome. The book itself was concerned principally with the phases of O'Neill's life following his defeat at Kinsale that had been ignored by Mitchel, and Meehan gave equal attention to the two lords mentioned in his title. The key event of those years was the Flight of the Earls of 1607, which, Meehan believed, happened more because the two lords and their associates were being persecuted for their faith than because they were being defrauded of their patrimonies.[38] Meehan's argument was underpinned by documentary evidence, some gleaned from official sources, which he deployed to show that it was a shared experience of persecution for religion's sake that had brought Irish Catholics of Gaelic and English lineages to consider themselves a single nation. For Meehan, therefore, Catholicism was the principal soldering ingredient of the Irish nationalism that O'Neill had championed.

Meehan's stance of 1866 won the approval of a younger priest–historian, P. F. Moran, who, like Meehan, had been trained in Rome. Moran's voice was unusually influential both because his mother was a half-sister to Paul Cullen, who became Ireland's first cardinal in 1866, and because he was well-connected in Rome after a twenty-four year sojourn, until he was summoned back to Ireland to become secretary to his cardinal uncle, and to assume other clerical duties. During his years in Rome, initially as a gifted school pupil and then as a seminarian, a priest, a doctoral student, a professor at Propaganda Fide and vice rector of the Irish College, Moran had always found time to study Irish history. In this his particular concern was to uncover evidence concerning what Irish Catholics had suffered for their faith during the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and his quest was assisted by officials in the Vatican archives who had been requested by Cullen to release documents pertinent to Moran's interests.[39] Besides wishing to structure a historical narrative for Ireland based on the sufferings of Catholics, Moran also undertook to counter the efforts of liberal authors

Margaret Mac Curtain, *Ambassador Extraordinaire, Daniel O'Daly, 1595–1662* (Dublin, 2017).

[37] C. P. Meehan, *The fate and fortunes of Hugh O'Neill ... and Rory O'Donnell* (Dublin, 1866); see James Quinn and Linde Lunney, 'Meehan, Charles Patrick', *D.I.B.*, vi, 467–8.

[38] Meehan, *Fate and fortunes*; Elizabeth Fitzpatrick, 'The exilic burial place of a Gaelic Irish community at San Pietro in Montorio, Rome' in *Papers of the British School at Rome*, lxxxv (2017), pp 1–35.

[39] I owe this information to Colin Barr, who is writing a biography of Cullen; for biographical notes on P. F. Moran, see that by John Molony in *D.I.B.*, vi, 673–4, and on Paul Cullen see that by Colin Barr in *D.I.B.*, ii, 1071–6.

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in Ireland, and throughout Europe, who he believed were using the past to legitimise secular pursuits. The efforts of liberals caused Moran particular distress because he considered them to be legitimising the overthrow of existing governments in favour of nation states organised along liberal lines as he had witnessed happening when those pursuing the unification of Italy had taken over the Papal States and expelled Pope Pius IX and his court from Rome.

Moran's historical pursuits provided him with many examples of revolution, ancient and modern, which he passed over quickly because he considered that they had always been motivated by secular ends, as he believed to be happening in the Italy of his own time, where he considered the glorification of the nation state to have become almost idolatrous. For Moran, as for Catholic Church leaders in general, the only true heroes in history were those who could be shown to have promoted and defended Catholicism. This explains Moran's particular interest in identifying individuals who, during what had been an era of persecution in Ireland, had fought, or even died, for their faith. He was conscious that his revival of memories of 'past grievances' would place him at odds with what liberals, such as Mitchel, considered "the praiseworthy … tendency of the present age to repair the wrongs of past times, and to heal the wounds they inflict'. Moran accepted that Mitchel's plea to Catholics to forget and forgive would appear plausible to secular audiences, and he was prepared for the opprobrium that would come his way because of his opposition to this 'tendency' if this was the only means to demonstrate that the 'age' in which he lived was not 'so liberal as it pretends', but was bent rather on the promotion of secular objectives and the suppression of religion. To counter this and to encourage loyalty to the faith, Moran saw the need to revive 'the memory of Irish martyrs' in what were 'times of irreligion and indifference'.[40]

Most of the candidates selected by Moran for possible nomination as martyrs were clerics (even bishops) but he wished also to identify some lay people who might be saluted as national heroes, even if they fell short of being religious martyrs. As Moran scoured Ireland's past for such candidates he, like Mitchel, whose work he otherwise despised, took inspiration from the Abbé MacGeoghegan and, again like Mitchel, he settled on O'Neill as somebody whose past deeds were worthy of praise. However, unlike both Mitchel and MacGeoghegan, Moran was attracted to O'Neill not because of his military prowess, but because MacGeoghegan had cited a complimentary testimony to O'Neill's character from a rare surviving copy of a pamphlet published in 1632 by Irish Franciscans at Louvain. This testimony featured in a copy of a letter that Peter Lombard, a Waterford priest then based in Rome, had addressed to Pope Clement VIII in 1598, in which Lombard requested the pope to recognise O'Neill as a champion of Catholicism and to declare the war he was waging to be a holy war that all Catholics would be morally obliged to support.

[40] For two examples of his writing in this mode, see P. F. Moran, *Memoirs of the Most Reverend Oliver Plunkett* (Dublin, 1861) and Moran, *Historical sketch of the persecutions suffered by the Catholics of Ireland under the rule of Cromwell and the Puritans* (Dublin, 1862); quotation in Moran, *Historical sketch*, pp xvii–xviii. There is a detailed analysis of Moran's critique of Young Ireland historical writing in Canny, *Imagining Ireland's pasts*, chapter 8. For an appraisal of Moran's historical writing, including that on Australia where he served as cardinal archbishop of Sydney, see Canny, 'How the local can be global and the global local: Ireland, Irish Catholics and European overseas empires, 1500–1900' in Patrick Griffin and Frank Cogliano (eds), *Ireland and America: empire, revolution and sovereignty* (Charlottesville, VA, 2021), pp 23–52, esp. 41–8.

What the Franciscans had published in 1632 was possibly a draft of Lombard's letter. However, Moran failed to locate the Franciscans' pamphlet because most copies of it had been seized and destroyed by the British ambassador in Brussels as it came off the press in 1632.[41] Thus frustrated, Moran tracked down the manuscript original of the letter in the Vatican archives and prepared it for publication with an introduction which he published in 1868 under the title *De Regno Hiberniae, sanctorum insula, commentarius.*[42]

What Moran did not mention in his introduction was that in 1598 when Lombard had addressed his letter to Pope Clement, he had never been to the province of Ulster, nor had he ever met O'Neill.[43] The fact that Lombard had composed a testimonial for somebody of whom he had no first-hand knowledge seems not to have troubled Moran since he presumed that Lombard's opinion had been endorsed by senior Catholic clergy in Ireland out of their belief that the best hope of preserving Catholicism in Ulster, and in Ireland, was by offering their moral support to O'Neill and by soliciting financial and material assistance from Catholic Europe for his war effort. Lombard's letter was particularly important to Moran because it bore testimony to the moral character of O'Neill when at the height of his powers, thus legitimising Moran's praise of O'Neill as a Catholic hero. He proceeded with greater confidence because what Lombard had written concurred with the interpretation of O'Neill's career that C. P. Meehan had expounded two years previously in *Fate and fortunes.* Taken together, Meehan's *Fate and fortunes* and Moran's edition of Peter Lombard's text thus lent authority to the view that O'Neill had not only died in Rome as a faithful son of the Catholic church, but might be recognised as a national hero because his guiding principle had been the defence and promotion of Catholicism.

Thus in the late nineteenth century, as would happen again in the twentieth, two opposing images of Hugh O'Neill as a national leader were popularised. The first, delineated by John Mitchel, showed a man who had dedicated his life to forging an Irish nation, even if this was not the denominationally plural nation of Mitchel's dreams. O'Faolain in the twentieth century agreed that O'Neill should be regarded primarily as a national hero, even when he was not as insistent as Mitchel that membership of the Irish nation and religious affiliation was each independent of the other. The second image of O'Neill, assembled by Meehan and Moran, accorded O'Neill the status of national hero because he had fought to preserve Catholicism as the religion of the Irish people, and had suffered defeat and eventual exile rather than abandon his faith. Kerney Walsh elaborated upon this interpretation in the twentieth century when she employed her gleanings from the Spanish archives to sustain the view that O'Neill's primary allegiance had been to the Catholic Church, membership of which she considered a prerequisite to belonging to the Irish nation.

This definition of Irish national identity and the place accorded to O'Neill within it had a long pedigree and was influenced considerably by what Peter Lombard had

[41] This destruction had been done at the instigation of the English ambassador to the court at Brussels in 1632, lest reviving memories of the aspirations of Ireland's Catholics in 1598 would disturb the relative tranquillity of the country.

[42] P. F. Moran (ed.), *De Regno Hiberniae, sanctorum insula, commentarius*, *D Petro Lombardo, Hiberno* (Dublin, 1868); chapters 23 and 24 of this edition were reprinted with an English translation on opposite pages in Matthew J. Byrne, (ed.) *The Irish war of defence, 1598–1600* (Cork, 1930).

[43] Lombard would meet Hugh O'Neill in Rome following the Flight of the Earls.

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said of the subject in the sixteenth century, and its further elaboration by David Rothe in the seventeenth. Rothe had advanced his views in a history of Ireland he had completed before 1618 on the Continent. In it, he defined the Irish nation (*nationis Hibernorum*) as one composed of all Catholic people of Irish birth regardless of ethnic origin, whose loyalty to each other had been consolidated when O'Neill led their resistance to religious persecution.

Rothe's narrative made a deep impression on Moran, not least when Moran became one of Rothe's successors as Catholic bishop of Ossory, 1872–84. During this interlude Moran prepared a scholarly edition of Rothe's history that was published in 1884.[44] This, together with Moran's edition of Lombard's letter and another historical compilation that Moran had published in 1874 under the title *Spicilegium Ossoriense*, constituted a comprehensive Catholic re-interpretation of Ireland's history during the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Collectively, these volumes made the case that loyalty to Catholicism was a defining characteristic of the Irish nation.[45] To sustain this proposition, Moran insisted that O'Neill during the 1590s, and then his nephew Owen Roe O'Neill in the 1640s, had used their talents as military leaders to defend the Irish people from religious persecution. Their valiant failures, as Moran would have it, proved that 'the whole people of Ireland might justly be regarded as a nation of martyrs'.[46] C. P. Meehan had provided collaborating evidence for this restrictive definition of Irish nationalism in *The Confederation of Kilkenny*, where he too presented O'Neill as an exemplary Catholic nationalist who had proven himself a worthy precursor to his nephew Owen Roe who in fighting for the Catholic Confederation of the 1640s had been guided always by Archbishop Rinuccini, the papal nuncio.

Authors ranging from Meehan and Moran in the nineteenth century to Kerney Walsh in the twentieth, for whom Catholicism defined the Irish nation, considered themselves to be doing no more than providing collaborating evidence for the verity established in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries by Lombard and Rothe. They considered that their case would be made more persuasive if they could identify heroes whose actions had given expression to this particular brand of nationalism. Their quest meant that O'Neill was accorded a place in the pantheon they had assembled.

IV

The certitude of the Catholic/nationalist advocates presented a challenge to authors who wished to discount religion as an identifier of Irish nationality. This challenge was greater because they could not point to any definition of Irish (or any other) nationalism that was ethnically, socially and denominationally inclusive previous to the writings of some eighteenth-century authors associated with the Enlightenment and to some pamphleteers who had justified the 1798 rebellion.

[44] David Rothe, *Analecta sacra nova et mira de rebus Catholicorum in Hibernia pro fide & religione gestis, divisa in tres partes,* ed. P. F. Moran (Dublin, 1884); Rothe's first use of the phrase *nationis Hibernorum* appears on p. 23 of this edition.

[45] P. F. Moran, (ed.), *Spicilegium Ossoriense, being a collection of original letters and papers illustrative of the history of the Irish church from the Reformation to the year 1800* (Dublin, 1874).

[46] Rothe, *Analecta Sacra*, p. xii.

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To compensate for this historical deficit, the exponents of a more secular nationalism ransacked historical sources to sustain their argument that O'Neill had been a precocious exponent of a more secular definition of nationalism than that favoured by the upholders of Catholic orthodoxy.

Those who were linguistically equipped (and these were few in number) might have looked to Gaelic sources from the sixteenth century for evidence on which to build their case. However, these would have found scant evidence there to sustain their pre-conceptions because, for most of his life, O'Neill had been viewed with suspicion by members of the Gaelic learned orders. This is unsurprising given the circumstances of O'Neill's birth and upbringing, and his fairly consistent opposition both to the sons of Shane O'Neill and to Turlough Luineach O'Neill, who had become head of the lordship after Shane had been killed. Consequently, as it was put in 1592 by Miler Mc Grath, an Irish-born Protestant bishop, O'Neill was 'thought by the Irishry to have his nomination, rather by English government than by any right to the principality after the manner of the country'.[47] Intermittent conflict between O'Neill and his kinsman Turlough Luineach would also have earned him the resentment of opinion-formers within Gaelic society because Turlough was not only the properly constituted head of the O'Neill lordship but a renowned patron of the arts. This may explain why it was not until after Hugh O'Neill had prevailed over Henry Bagenal, his bitter opponent and brother-in-law, at the battle of the Yellow Ford in 1598 that any of O'Neill's achievements were praised in Gaelic verse. Even then, Gaelic commentators frequently attributed the military successes of the Ulster confederacy as much to Red Hugh O'Donnell as to O'Neill. Thus, when Lughaidh Ó Cléirigh, the author of a life of O'Donnell, sought to explain the defeat of the confederacy at Kinsale he attributed the disaster to the bungling of O'Neill on the field of battle, and identified O'Donnell as the person who was trusted and respected by Spain.[48]

Since Gaelic sources provided scant support for those who would identify O'Neill as an exemplar of a more secular Irish nationalism, the advocates of this position looked to English records for details on O'Neill's career that would support their case. Mitchel, O'Faolain and others who championed O'Neill as a secular proto-nationalist, found that English officials, who customarily derided the Irish as a contemptible people, had elevated O'Neill's standing by attributing the military reverses suffered by the crown to the organisational and military capabilities that O'Neill had developed when serving the queen. Even before his victories of the 1590s most references to O'Neill in official sources marvelled at how a child and young man with limited prospects had established himself firmly in Ulster and had provided essential support to various English people who had been involved with the province. It was not until O'Neill was in mid-career that officials began to question his ambitions, and it was only when he could be seen to have gone over irrevocably to the enemy that these same officials began to denigrate him.

This account of O'Neill's early career that was pieced together from official sources was repeated over the centuries by those authors who lauded the completion of the Elizabethan conquest of Ireland. Ironically, those wishing to present

[47] Paul Logue, 'All things to all men: Aodh Ó Néill and the construction of identity' in Eve Campbell, Elizabeth Fitzpatrick and Audrey Horning (eds), *Becoming and belonging in Ireland, A.D.* c.*1200–1600* (Cork, 2018), p. 282.

[48] Lughaidh Ó Cléirigh, *Beatha Aodha Ruaidh Uí Dhomhnaill by Lughaidh Ó Cléirigh*, ed. Paul Walsh (London, 1948), pp 286–7.

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O'Neill in a positive light found that this same record could serve their purpose once they represented as heroic those actions of O'Neill that were considered reprehensible by English authors. This congruence explains why the selective use of English official sources has been employed as much by nationalists as by unionists who have written of O'Neill's career. Even Catholic nationalist authors, notably Meehan, made use of English state papers, augmenting them with sources of Catholic provenance. This means that of those who have written of O'Neill only Kerney Walsh based her case entirely on an alternate official archive: that of the Habsburgs rather than the Tudors and Stuarts.

The first biography of O'Neill was published in 1619 by Thomas Gainsford, an English soldier and pamphleteer, who represented O'Neill as an anti-hero who, as he saw it, had suffered a deserved ignominious death because he had betrayed the monarch who had rescued him from obscurity. Gainsford contrasted the fortunes of the 'traitorous' O'Neill with those of the loyal Richard Burke, fourth earl of Clanricard, under whose command Gainsford had served on the field of Kinsale.[49] He considered the comparison apt because each actor was a product of the surrender and re-grant arrangements of 1542.

Gainsford claimed to be flattering O'Neill by including him in this comparison because 'until the age of fifteen [he] was imputed the son of a smith of Dundalk' who, through the favour of the crown, had risen to prominence, including being recognised as an earl in 1585. Even as he drew attention to O'Neill's questionable ancestry, Gainsford contended that O'Neill would have remained a true subject had he not been persuaded to entertain, 'after the manner of Irish hospitality', some survivors of the Spanish Armada of 1588 who had been wrecked off the Irish coast. These Spaniards, asserted Gainsford, had 'choked his loyalty and cast dust in the eyes of his faithfulness', and brought O'Neill to rebel and to achieve his 'notorious victory' at the Yellow Ford. After this, said Gainsford, O'Neill was popularly 'proclaimed the deliverer of his country and protector of the Catholic cause'. For Gainsford, the Yellow Ford marked the high water mark of O'Neill's military success, and he believed that his defeat, which came ultimately at Kinsale, had become inevitable once Lord Mountjoy was appointed to command the English forces. The remainder of the text concerned O'Neill's exile in Italy, where Gainsford claimed to have witnessed his dejection at being 'the subject of charity … [with] only a supplement from some special Cardinals'. This allowed Gainsford to speculate on how different O'Neill's fate might have been had he, like Clanricard, remained loyal to the crown and ended his days nobly at the court of the British monarch rather than as a supplicant at the papal court.[50]

All subsequent biographers of O'Neill, besides Kerney Walsh, gave attention to Gainsford's text, as they tracked O'Neill's rise and fall principally from evidence drawn from the English official record. The text proved significant also for its appraisal of the military achievements of O'Neill. Already in the seventeenth

[49] Thomas Gainsford, *The true, exemplary and remarkable history of the earl of Tyrone* (London, 1619). Gainford claimed on the title page to have been 'an eye witness of his fearful wretchedness and final extirpation'.

[50] Gainsford, *Tyrone*, pp 1, 9, 15, 24, 25; Gainsford's comment on O'Neill's pedigree should have been that it was his father Matthew who was the alleged son of the Dundalk blacksmith. Gainsford's disparagement of O'Neill was consistent with that presented in another unpublished comparative study of the time, on which see Hiram Morgan, 'Parallel lives: a comparison between Jugurtha, king of Numidia and Hugh O'Neill, earl of Tyrone, by Sir James Perrot' in *Analecta Hibernica,* li (2020), pp 51–73.

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century the anonymous author of the stridently Catholic tract known as the 'Aphorismical Discovery' believed that 'all men's eyes' were 'cast upon … the gallant behaviour' of O'Neill 'in the court of England' where he was 'both loved and feared' because he was 'most inclined to the feats of arms'.[51] In the eighteenth century the Abbé MacGeoghegan cited Gainsford's narration as one of the prime sources on O'Neill's military accomplishments. Mitchel in the following century also cited Gainsford as an authority, as did J. A. Froude when he expounded on how O'Neill, who was 'indebted [to Queen Elizabeth] for life rank and fortune', became her 'most formidable Irish antagonist' because, from an early stage, he 'showed high qualities both as a commander and a politician'.[52] O'Faolain in the twentieth century similarly accepted what Gainsford had said of O'Neill's prowess as a soldier, as did Cyril Falls who, in celebrating Elizabeth's ultimate victory in Ireland, characterised O'Neill as her greatest challenger because he had served his military apprenticeship in Elizabeth's army.[53] To this extent Gainsford convinced authors of disparate allegiances over four centuries that O'Nelll had effected some kind of national regeneration, even as they differed over what this regeneration signified.

V

Those in more recent generations who have investigated the career of Hugh O'Neill have tended to evaluate well-known evidence more scrupulously than did most previous authors and have dedicated themselves to searching for fresh information concerning the more elusive dimensions to his life.[54] Their combined efforts have resulted in significant additions to knowledge, some of which have made O'Neill's character and motivation even more elusive than before.

The fundamental correctives concern O'Neill's early life. Ciaran Brady's study of the efforts by the earl of Sussex to expel Shane O'Neill from Ulster has contributed significantly to our understanding of politics within the O'Neill lordship, and Hiram Morgan has been relentless in seeking out fresh details concerning O'Neill's boyhood years.[55] Their findings discredit the romantic notion that O'Neill had spent much of his early life in the custody of Henry Sidney either in Wales or at Penshurst in Kent, where he would have had Philip Sidney as a child companion and been introduced with him to English 'Puritanism' and to an understanding of England's rightful place in the world. Froude had speculated even more wildly that O'Neill had been 'brought up at court as a Protestant in the midst of the most brilliant circle which any capital in Europe could show'.[56]

[51] 'Aphorismical discovery of treasonable faction' in J. T. Gilbert (ed.), *A contemporary history of affairs in Ireland from 1641–1652* (3 vols, Dublin, 1879), i, 5.

[52] J. A. Froude, *The English in Ireland in the eighteenth century* (London, 1872), pp 58–9, 61.

[53] Falls, *Elizabeth's Irish wars*.

[54] For recent biographical sketches of Hugh O'Neill see those by Nicholas Canny in *O.D.N.B.*, xli, 837–45, and Hiram Morgan in *D.I.B.*, vii, 764–72. There are some differences in detail but hardly sufficient to justify Morgan's dismissal of the first as 'revisionist'.

[55] Ciaran Brady, *The chief governors: the rise and fall of reform government in Tudor Ireland, 1536–1588* (Cambridge, 1994); Brady, *Shane O'Neill* (Dundalk, 1996); Brady (ed.), *A viceroy's vindication: Sir Henry Sidney's memoir of service in Ireland* (Cork, 2002); Hiram Morgan, *Tyrone's rebellion: the outbreak of the Nine Years War in Tudor Ireland* (Woodbridge, 1993).

[56] O'Faolain, *The Great O'Neill*, pp 37–41; Froude, *The English in Ireland*, pp 58–9.

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The recently uncovered evidence shows that O'Neill and his older brother Brian (or Barnaby) had been fostered to the powerful O'Hagan family, within the O'Neill lordship, until they were taken from there by Sir Henry Sidney after Shane O'Neill had killed their father, Matthew, baron of Dungannon. This rescue probably occurred between May and August 1558 when Sidney, who was then deputising for Sussex, believed that Shane O'Neill intended to kill all descendants of Conn O'Neill who could lay claim to the earldom of Tyrone in line with the surrender and re-grant arrangement that the crown had negotiated with Conn O'Neill in 1542. Sidney professed that it was to ensure the boys' safety that he had 'bred' O'Neill, with his brother, in his 'house from a little boy, then very poor of goods, and full feebly friended'.[57]

The boy's sojourn in Sidney's Dublin residence was brief since they were soon royal wards in the household of Giles Hovenden, an English planter in the Laois/Offaly plantation, and his wife Johan. The cost of their maintenance was borne from the rent due to the crown from the farm of Balgriffen, close to Dublin, that had been assigned in 1542 for the use of the earl of Tyrone. Hugh was still a ward in December 1563 by which time Hovenden was dead and one John Piggott was now married to Johan. However, the provision for Brian's safety proved insufficient since Turlough Luineach O'Neill, another aspirant to power within the dynasty, had killed him in 1562. This left Hugh as heir to his father's title as baron of Dungannon and heir presumptive to the earldom of Tyrone.[58]

Sidney was aware of these events when in 1565 he succeeded Sussex as governor. The new governor, like Sussex, aspired to oust Shane O'Neill, after which he planned to dismember the O'Neill lordship rather than reconstitute the earldom of Tyrone and transmit it to Matthew's heir as had been intended in 1542. Sidney hoped rather to assign segments of the lordship to rival branches of the O'Neill family, and to grant yet other parcels, both within and without the lordship, to English adventurers who would establish English colonies that would insulate the Pale from attack from Ulster. These would be like the planters and captains in Laois/Offaly and elsewhere in Leinster who were protecting the Pale from incursions from the Gaelic lordships of that province.[59] As part of the arrangement, O'Neill was assigned a parcel of land on the southern fringes of the former lordship abutting the Pale. After Shane had been killed in 1567 Sidney travelled to court to secure official approval for his scheme, and included O'Neill among the entourage of Irish heirs who accompanied him. It was at this juncture that O'Neill was recognised officially as baron of Dungannon, after which, as Paul Logue has detailed, he installed himself both in a *crannóg* at Marlacoo in south Armagh and in the castle he rented from the Moore family at Ballymascanlon in County Louth.[60] O'Neill was able to maintain these positions because Sidney had given him command of some crown troops. Hiram Morgan, David Heffernan and others have tracked O'Neill's participation in various government-sponsored schemes in Ulster and

[57] Brady, *A viceroy's vindication*, p. 54. Sir James Perrot claimed that the young Hugh had been 'conveyed unto the English by his fosterers, for safeguard and protection for fear of Shane O'Neill': Morgan, 'Parallel lives', p. 64.

[58] Morgan, *Tyrone's rebellion*, pp 92–3, 214. I am grateful to Dr David Finnegan for providing further details on these arrangements that he gleaned from relevant exchequer accounts.

[59] On Leinster, see Christopher Maginn, *'Civilizing' Gaelic Leinster: the extension of Tudor rule in the O'Byrne and O'Toole lordships* (Dublin, 2005).

[60] Logue, 'All things to all men', pp 271–6.

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further afield in the years that followed, especially the efforts of Walter Devereux, earl of Essex, and of the natural son of secretary of state, Sir Thomas Smith, to erect private plantations in east Ulster. O'Neill also assisted the government in suppressing rebellion in the province of Munster which earned him particular commendation from Lord Grey de Wilton, who directed that campaign.[61]

These appear to have been years of apprenticeship in the ways of war for the young baron when, according to Sir James Perrot, his 'education' consisted in his being 'brought up in military exercises and employments' that gave him 'credit with the English'.[62] These, however, were also years when O'Neill asserted himself within the Gaelic polity by making, and unmaking, strategic marriage alliances, and by cultivating links with some of the lesser septs within the O'Neill lordship that would eventually have a role in choosing a successor to Turlough Luineach who had become head of the O'Neill lordship following the assassination of Shane in 1567. Evidence has also been produced to show how O'Neill both defended himself from attacks by Turlough Luineach and responded in kind, while it also shows that he offered occasional support to Turlough Luineach in attacking the sons of Shane O'Neill. It seems also that crown officials were prepared to disregard the efforts of O'Neill to curb or even kill Turlough Luineach, and to expel or kill the sons of Shane O'Neill.[63]

Recent scholars, like sixteenth-century commentators, have pondered if O'Neill was then a government agent, or was dissembling until he could act alone. Hiram Morgan has argued that Hugh, like Shane before him, saw merit in seeking political power simultaneously under the Gaelic and the English political systems, knowing that if he should succeed under one alone a rival would seize power by the alternative route. Whatever his objectives, O'Neill was permitted in 1585 to take his seat in the upper house of the Irish parliament as earl of Tyrone rather than as baron of Dungannon, as he had done in the 1569–71 assembly. His elevation was made more formal on a second visit to court in 1587 when the queen granted him a patent for the earldom of Tyrone as this had been granted to Conn O'Neill in 1542. Independently of this O'Neill had been systematically undermining Turlough Luineach as head of the O'Neill lordship. In 1595 Turlough died and Hugh seized the position for himself. Officials looked askance at this power grab but O'Neill justified it by stating that if he had not become the O'Neill, the honour would have fallen to one of the sons of Shane.

Some contemporaries charged that what Morgan has termed the 'rise' of Hugh O'Neill had been attained by duplicity, dishonesty and even murder.[64] However, any duplicity on O'Neill's part was matched by that of a government that judiciously supported Gaelic rivals to its own protégé. Thus, when O'Neill was seated as baron of Dungannon in the 1569–71 parliament, officials invited Turlough Luineach to become processional macebearer, and when Hugh sat as earl of Tyrone in the 1585 assembly, officials considered granting Turlough a noble title together with a portion of the Tyrone lordship.

[61] Morgan, *Tyrone's rebellion*, pp 20–24, 50–51; Nicholas Canny, *The Elizabethan conquest of Ireland: a pattern established, 1565–1576* (Hassocks, 1976), pp 67–80; David Heffernan, *Walter Devereux, first earl of Essex, and the colonization of north-east Ulster, c.1573–6* (Dublin, 2018).

[62] Morgan, 'Parallel lives', p. 65.

[63] Morgan, *Tyrone's rebellion*, pp 93–102; Canny, 'Hugh O'Neill and the changing face of Gaelic Ulster'.

[64] Morgan, *Tyrone's rebellion*, pp 85–112.

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Despite such official attempts to divide and rule, O'Neill seemed to identify more closely with the English interest in Ulster when he proposed marriage to Mabel Bagenal, sister to Hugh's great rival Henry Bagenal, marshal of the army. The latter was based at Newry in an outpost established by his father, Nicholas Bagenal, and he aspired also to become president of Ulster, which position, if created, would give him oversight of O'Neill's lordship. When Bagenal spurned the proposed marriage, O'Neill retaliated in 1591 by eloping with Mabel and, as already noted, having their marriage (which endured until Mabel's death in 1594) solemnised by the Protestant bishop of Meath. An outraged Bagenal refused to pay his sister's dowry, and the resulting vendetta between Bagenal and O'Neill was not resolved until 1598 when an Ulster army commanded by O'Neill defeated the royal army led by Bagenal at the battle of the Yellow Ford. This encounter, in which Bagenal was killed, occurred when the marshal was marching from Newry to attack the castle and manor house that O'Neill had built at Dungannon.[65]

By 1598 O'Neill had been in conflict with the crown for some years and government officials believed him to be leading a confederacy, composed principally of Ulster lords, that was soliciting military assistance from Spain. The government became especially alarmed when O'Neill began to negotiate terms on behalf of the entire Catholic population of Ireland, and no longer confined his attention to Ulster.

This phase of O'Neill's career has attracted considerable recent scholarly attention, with valuable contributions from Hiram Morgan, Ruth Canning and James O'Neill. Of these, Morgan has addressed O'Neill's possible political objectives and has analysed his various demands, while Canning has appraised the response of particular individuals and sectors within the Pale to O'Neill's actions and pronouncements. For his part, James O'Neill has looked afresh at O'Neill's creation of the army that began to win the battles that enabled him to negotiate more forcefully both with the government and reluctant confederates. That author has also pondered why, after a sequence of military successes culminating in his victory at the Yellow Ford, O'Neill failed to keep his army on a winning course.[66]

Each of these authors presumes that the ambitions of O'Neill became more expansive once he saw an opportunity to augment local military resources with aid from Spain. For Morgan, as for P. F. Moran in the nineteenth century, he became confident of Spanish support once a group of Catholic clergy, including Edmund Magauran, papal appointee as archbishop of Armagh in 1592, returned to Ulster following their seminary training on the Continent. Canning contends that the zeal of these Ulster clerics was augmented by that of James Archer, a Jesuit from Kilkenny who was already versed in radical Catholic political doctrines before he became counsellor to O'Neill. These authors agree that the confederates were convinced by such advisors that financial and military support from Spain would be forthcoming if they made freedom of religion a pre-condition for any settlement with the government.[67] James O'Neill, like Gainsford, contends that Spanish

[65] Morgan, *Tyrone's rebellion*, pp 215–6; Logue, 'All things to all men', pp 280–81.

[66] Morgan, *Tyrone's rebellion*, pp 193–213; Ruth A. Canning, *The Old English in early modern Ireland: the Palesmen and the Nine Years War, 1594–1603* (Woodbridge, 2019); James O'Neill, *The Nine Years War, 1593–1603: O'Neill, Mountjoy and the military revolution* (Dublin, 2017).

[67] Morgan, *Tyrone's rebellion*, pp 141–9, 208–11; Morgan, '*Relatione della Guerra d'Hibernia*: communications, intelligence and news in the Nine Years War and its aftermath

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support was available to O'Neill and his associates from an earlier date, and refers to the return to Spain of some survivors of the Spanish Armada of 1588 who had been secretly rescued by the Ulster lords after they had been wrecked off the Irish coast. On their return to Spain, according to James O'Neill, these convinced their masters that offering military support to discontented Irish lords would benefit Spain in its conflict with England. They argued that such support would compel the English government to defend its interest in Ireland and disengage from its involvement in the Low Countries. He remains satisfied that this advice was acted upon and that Spain began to provide money and material to those in arms in Ulster, together with personnel who brought O'Neill's army up to date on the technical and strategic innovations associated with 'the military revolution'.[68] The series of victories that the Confederacy achieved during the 1590s, and especially O'Neill's victory at the Yellow Ford in 1598, were, says James O'Neill, due largely to this Spanish support.[69]

Morgan and James O'Neill allude to the extravagant political, diplomatic, religious and military agenda that the confederates defined once they had secured external support. They also agree that O'Neill was the prime mover in mobilising opposition to the crown. However, they do not entertain the possibility that O'Neill was uncomfortable with some of the positions with which his name became associated, nor do they address the contrast between the stridently confessional political stance that O'Neill adopted in the later 1590s, and the pragmatic issues that had concerned him during his earlier career. Thomas O'Connor draws attention to this contrast in analysing the political pronouncements of O'Neill during the later 1590s. Here, he posits that O'Neill's sudden 'apparent adherence to militant Catholicism', was because he had 'experienced … some sort of religious conversion'.[70] O'Connor's invocation of this *deus ex machina* seems plausible until account is taken of the settlement terms to which O'Neill agreed in 1603 first with Lord Deputy Mountjoy and then with King James, which were akin to the pragmatic ambitions of his earlier career. Then during the final phase of his life, 1607–16, when O'Neill resided in Rome as pensioner to the king of Spain, he reverted to his militant Catholic stance of the 1590s. The documents edited and appraised by Kerney Walsh provide the best evidence of this reversion. In these, O'Neill insisted repeatedly that Catholicism would be obliterated in Ireland unless King Philip of Spain came to its defence. He further contended that King Philip was morally obliged to defend Catholicism in Ireland because O'Neill and his associates had switched their allegiance from King James, who had begun to persecute them as Catholics, and to direct it instead to King Philip who had encouraged them to fight.[71]

(1593–1608)' in Igor Pérez Tostado and Declan Downey (eds), *Ireland and the Iberian Atlantic: migration, military and material culture* (Valencia, 2020), pp 361–73.

[68] Geoffrey Parker, *The military revolution, 1500–1800* (Cambridge, 1996).

[69] O'Neill, *The Nine Years War,* pp 195–223, esp. pp 199–200, 208; see also Francis Kelly, 'The rags which yet remain: survivors of the Gran Armada in Ireland' in Pérez Tostado and Downey (eds), *Ireland and the Iberian Atlantic*, pp 395–412.

[70] Thomas O'Connor, 'Hugh O'Neill; free spirit, religious chameleon or ardent Catholic?' in Hiram Morgan (ed.), *The Battle of Kinsale* (Bray, 2004), p. 71.

[71] Kerney Walsh, *'Destruction by peace'*; Igor Pérez Tostado and Ruiz Ibañez, 'Welcoming refugees in the Spanish Empire: land of milk, honey and hegemony' in *The Historical Journal,* forthcoming. I thank the authors for sight of a draft copy.

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It is easy to understand why O'Neill, like Catholic exiles from other countries who looked to Spain for support, resorted to such arguments once Spain and the papacy had become his only refuge. This, however, does not explain why in the 1590s, when other options were open to him, O'Neill adopted an extreme religious position that rendered compromise with the English government impossible. Morgan concludes that O'Neill did so for 'primarily political rather than devotional' reasons, hoping especially to put moral pressure on the leaders within the Pale to join his confederacy. Ruth Canning concludes from her examination of O'Neill's dealings with the Pale that he knew that the elite there would never become his allies, and that his purpose was to persuade socially discontented elements within the Pale that, with his help, might supplant their betters. It is also possible that, by identifying with the extreme political arguments of the Counter-Reformation, O'Neill hoped that zealous priests such as Archer would convince these discontented elements within the Pale to join his confederacy.[72]

Another contrast that requires explanation is that the young Hugh O'Neill seldom committed his thoughts to writing, whereas the man who reached the pinnacle of his power in the 1590s left a paper trail that persisted until his death in 1616. O'Neill's earlier reticence should not surprise anybody since, although he was able to communicate orally and sign letters in both English and Irish, there is no evidence that he could write with ease or that what he referred to as his 'education among the English' involved any formal schooling.[73] That O'Neill in his mature years presented documents that were written fluently in English, Irish and other languages, and in diverse idioms, should occasion no surprise since he had arrived at a position from which he, like every other political figure of his generation, could commission experts to compose letters on his behalf. It is all the more likely that he did just this because O'Neill would hardly have had the time, much less the doctrinal understanding, to formulate some of the religious demands advanced over his signature during the 1590s while he was preoccupied with recurring warfare. The most extreme of his formulations, famously described by Robert Cecil as 'Eutopia', had a decidedly clerical ring to it in that it demanded not only the reinstatement of Catholicism as Ireland's official religion but also the restoration to the church of all lands that had been confiscated at the time of the reformation, including the monastic estates granted by the crown to proprietors within the Pale.[74] This insistence was consistent with the Papal pretension to recover everything that Protestant reformers had seized from the Catholic church throughout Europe. However, it was clear in 1599, as became evident again in the 1640s when Archbishop Rinuccini advanced this same proposition, that there was no better means of consolidating the customary allegiance of landowners in the Pale to the English crown than by threatening to divest them of the former monastic lands they had received from Henry VIII.[75] O'Neill would, of course, have been aware

[72] Morgan, *Tyrone's rebellion*, p. 198; Canning, *The Old English,* pp 50–83, esp. pp 62–3.

[73] Morgan, *Tyrone's rebellion*, p. 93

[74] 'Articles intended to be stood upon by Tyrone', [Nov.] 1599 (*Cal. S.P. Ire., April 1599–Feb. 1600*, pp 279–80). Hiram Morgan, who seems convinced that O'Neill remained abreast of theological debate, concedes that some of the religious demands made by him in the 1590s where possibly 'ghosted' by others: see Morgan, 'Policy and propaganda in Hugh O'Neill's connections with Europe' in Thomas O'Connor and Mary Ann Lyons (eds), *The Ulster earls and Baroque Europe* (Dublin, 2010), pp 18–52, esp. 28–34.

[75] Tadhg Ó hAnnracháin, *Catholic Reformation in Ireland, the mission of Rinuccini, 1645–1649* (Oxford, 2002), p. 32; Brendan Bradshaw, *The dissolution of the religious orders under Henry VIII* (Cambridge, 1974).

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of this reality which makes it all the more likely that it was clerics rather than O'Neill himself who were responsible for the uncompromising demands put forward in his name in 1599. This was certainly the view of Robert Devereux, second earl of Essex, when he famously engaged in a private dialogue with O'Neill in the mid-stream of an Ulster river. Witnesses testified that their lengthy conversation appeared to proceed smoothly until they reached the question of religion, on which O'Neill's demands seemed so at odds with what Essex knew of the man who had been apprenticed in warfare by his father that he called a halt to their discussion, stating 'plainly, hang thee up, thou carest for religion as much as my horse'.[76]

If O'Neill permitted militants such as Archer to formulate the conditions that he stipulated in the 1590s he may have been doing so not so much to attract support from those within the Pale who were anxious to dislodge their social betters, but because it enhanced his chance of securing the foreign military aid that he now considered necessary to gain victory over greatly-strengthened crown forces. It is also possible that the militants had persuaded some of O'Neill's confederates and that he adopted an extreme position to keep his coalition together.

If we assume that O'Neill's negotiating position of the 1590s was really dictated by clerics, it becomes easier to understand why during the years 1603–07, when he lived at peace with King James, his demands became similar to those of his earlier career. These were that he should, with minor exceptions, retain the entire lordship that had been granted to Conn O'Neill in 1542 as King James had restored this to him in 1603, and that he should be conceded considerable latitude in maintaining order over those who resided within that lordship. Since the claims he advanced were being challenged by officials in Dublin on the grounds that they contravened fundamental principles of common law it is likely that the letters in which O'Neill defended his ambitions had been composed by lawyers (probably from within the Pale) who were familiar with the intricacies of English common law and who were being retained by O'Neill.[77]

If we can suppose that O'Neill employed experts to represent his interests when he was in Ireland, it is even more reasonable to imagine that he engaged others to plead on his behalf after 1607 when he became a refugee in Catholic Europe where he was unfamiliar with the languages of the places in which he resided or through which he passed. Since, as was noted, the compositions that O'Neill and his associates then addressed to the relevant authorities were similar to the formulaic petitions to the Spanish monarchy, of Catholic exiles from other countries, it seems reasonable to assume that their authors were Irish priests who, having been established for some time on the Continent, were conversant with the languages and the diplomatic niceties required to address overtures in the names of the exiles to the king of Spain, to the papal court and to the court of the archdukes in Flanders.[78]

[76] Fynes Moryson, *Itinerary* (London, 1617), pt 2, p. 75.

[77] Three relevant documents are 'To the King's Most Excellent Majesty: The Humble petition of Hugh, earl of Tyrone' (T.N.A., S.P. 63, vol. 219, nos. 153, 154, f. 230); Tyrone to the king, 23 Jan. 1607, (T.N.A., S.P. 63, vol. 221, no. 9, f. 26); 'The answer of the earl of Tyrone to the bill of complaint of Donall Ballagh O'Cahan, 23 May 1607 (T.N.A., S.P. 63, vol. 221, no. 54, f. 136). I also think it possible that the document entitled 'Tyrone's Declaration of Grievances' submitted after the Flight of the Earls and printed in Meehan, *Fate and fortunes*, pp 128–9, was a version of what had been drawn up by lawyers on behalf of O'Neill in anticipation of his planned visit to London.

[78] Pérez Tostado and Ibañez, 'Welcoming refugees in the Spanish Empire'.

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The alternative to accepting that O'Neill habitually commissioned experts to write on his behalf is to conjecture, as did Froude, Mitchel, O'Faolain and others, that O'Neill had been so well educated either in England or within the Pale that he was equipped to plead his case in the many different circumstances in which he found himself. This assumption was carried to its furthest extreme by Cardinal Ó Fiaich in imagining how O'Neill 'more than any other Irishman of the sixteenth century [had become] an amalgam of Gaelic chieftain and Renaissance prince' whose 'vision of politics' extended from Ulster alone 'to include the whole of Ireland and ultimately embraced a keen awareness of its European dimension as well'.[79]

VI

If we are to dispense with such wild speculation we must concede that O'Neill commissioned people with particular competencies to compose documents on his behalf to meet particular needs. Acceptance of this raises the fresh challenge of disentangling what were O'Neill's actual views from those of his various surrogates. The one consistent thread is that O'Neill was always concerned to make his way in the world and to ruthlessly eliminate any who stood in his path whether these came from within the Gaelic system or were agents of the crown.

During the years 1603–07, which have received scant attention from historians, O'Neill, although defeated in war, seemed concerned principally to establish an acceptable working arrangement with the crown.[80] This required him to acknowledge the government's authority and to cease corresponding with foreign powers in return for which he was reinstated in his lordship on the terms that best suited him. Once he had achieved this he advanced a series of arguments — presumably devised by his lawyers — to counter those of the Dublin officials who strove incessantly to discredit the settlement at which he had arrived with King James on the advice of Mountjoy, by now earl of Devonshire. O'Neill's claimed that his patent, based on that granted in 1542 to Conn O'Neill, first earl of Tyrone, made him the outright owner of the entire lordship. This, he argued, entitled him to decide who should hold leases of property as tenants-in-chief, regardless of any claims deriving from Gaelic custom and practice that might be advanced by previous occupiers, even where these were members of his own kin. O'Neill claimed also to enjoy power of martial law over people of lowly status but he supported the conduct of sessions of assize in the three counties of his lordship (Tyrone, Armagh and Coleraine), while he opposed the appointment of any president of Ulster to oversee his conduct.

What he was claiming came close to the palatinate status that Thomas Butler, earl of Ormond, had enjoyed over much of the lordship of Ormond during the sixteenth century. This arrangement, as O'Neill and his advisors would have known, had been criticised continuously by officials, but Ormond had prevailed because he enjoyed favour with Queen Elizabeth. O'Neill seems to have expected similar

[79] Ó Fiaich, Preface to Kerney Walsh, *'Destruction by peace',* p. xi.

[80] Besides John Mc Cavitt, whose work is cited below, David Edwards seems the only other recent historian who has looked closely into these years: Edwards, 'The plight of the earls: Tyrone and Tyrconnell's "Grievances" and the crown after Kinsale' in O'Connor and Lyons (eds), *The Ulster earls and Baroque Europe*, pp 53–76.

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support from King James, and seemed satisfied that the relative autonomy to which he aspired was not unlike that enjoyed by many noblemen in Scotland. O'Neill's alleged attempt to negotiate a marriage alliance for Hugh, his eldest son, with a daughter of the earl of Argyll looks as if it was designed to consolidate his position with King James, as was his hint that he would consider taking up residence at court and leaving it to his heir to manage the lordship.[81] This is consistent with O'Neill's pre-war ambitions and his only extra expectation (perhaps as a consequence of the conversion experience suggested by Thomas O'Connor) was that he should have priests celebrate Mass in his residence at Dungannon. This did not mean that O'Neill was opposed to Protestantism being the official religion of the state, and the disputes he pursued with Protestant bishops during those year concerned their claims to lands within his lordship that exceeded what, he contended, had customarily been available for clerical support.

What seemed a stable arrangement became suddenly uncertain after 1605, first because Devonshire, who was its guarantor, died in that year, and then because the Guy Fawkes plot at Westminster on 5 November 1605 eroded the credibility of all Catholic lords, and especially those, like O'Neill, who had consorted with foreign enemies.[82] These developments exposed O'Neill to a fresh barrage of legal challenges, spearheaded by Sir John Davies, attorney general for Ireland from 1606.[83] However, what is not always acknowledged by scholars (although it was so by contemporaries) is that O'Neill — or at least his legal team — advanced a vigorous defence and won the major concession that a resolution of the many issues being pursued by Davies would be arbitrated upon by the king himself rather than tried by the courts of law in either Dublin or London.[84] When preparing for this arbitration, O'Neill went to Slane in County Meath late in August 1607 to confer with the governor, Sir Arthur Chichester, concerning arrangements for the planned expedition to London. While he was there word reached him there that his kinsman and former accomplice Cuconnacht Maguire had arranged a vessel to convey Maguire, Rory O'Donnell (earl of Tyrconnell) and their closest family from Ireland to Spain. It seems also that some in the governor's company at Slane suggested to O'Neill that if he were to proceed to London the king would arrest and imprison him there.

Neither piece of information is likely to have taken O'Neill by surprise. He was certainly aware that Maguire and Rory O'Donnell were intent on seeking their fortunes abroad since even government officials expected that outcome. Both lords were known to be seriously in debt and unable to maintain their positions within their lordships. However these same officials were satisfied that O'Neill was in control of his property and determined to argue his case before King James. On the question of possible arrest, O'Neill, like most Irish lords who had had direct dealings with the government over the previous century, was alert to the possibility that he might be deprived of his liberty on some trumped-up charge. However, O'Neill would likely have calculated that this was would not happen since his arrest would have sullied the king's honour. Therefore, it seems that neither communication alone would have persuaded O'Neill to abandon the legal battle he was engaged

[81] Davies to Salisbury, 12 Sept. 1607 (T.N.A., S.P. 63., vol. 222. 113–16).
[82] Chichester to Privy Council, 22 Jan. 1607 (T.N.A., S.P. 63., vol. 221, 34–5).
[83] Humble petition of Donald Ballagh O'Cahan, chief of his name, 2 May 1607 (T.N.A., S.P. 63, vol. 221, no 42a, p. 113).
[84] King to Chichester, 16 July 1607 (*Cal. S.P. Ire., 1606–8*, p. 220).

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in. However, the coincidence of these communications (one true and the other probably false) seems to have panicked the usually cautious O'Neill into assembling those of his family he could reach and forcing them to accompany him to Rathmullen to join his former confederates who were already bent on Continental exile.[85] His decision meant that what would have been a mundane departure of yet another group of Irish people to become exiles in Continental Europe — similar to the recent departure of the family of O'Sullivan Beare from Munster — was transformed into the episode that is remembered historically as the Flight of the Earls.[86]

My suggestion on what precipitated O'Neill's 'flight' modifies what I first proposed in 1971, and remains at odds with Kerney Walsh's opinion that O'Neill's departure was a strategic and planned decision. Her argument falters because the documents in her book reveal that the Irish priests on the continent who had been in contact with happenings in Ireland were unprepared for the arrival of this party of exiles. The Spanish authorities were similarly taken aback and moved quickly to deny the exiles permission to remain in Flanders or to travel to Spain, lest this would disturb the peace with England. John McCavitt has suggested that the Ulster lords (including O'Neill) had, after 1605, become involved with some 'alienated elements of Catholic Old English society' in 'treasonous activity' because of the renewal of religious persecution. McCavitt further holds that it was when O'Neill was led to believe that his underhand dealings had been discovered that he underwent a type of 'passion' which led to his 'precipitate decision' to flee to the Continent rather than proceed to the English court.[87]

What is known of O'Neill from the moment of his departure from Ireland until he arrived in Rome comes principally from the narration compiled by Tadhg Ó Cianáin who accompanied the refugees. Information on their dealings thereafter comes from a combination of Kerney Walsh's edition of their correspondence, from reports by English agents and from statements by those Irish priests on the Continent who interacted with the exiles. Of these three elements, the coincidence of views between the petitions of the exiles to their potential benefactors in Flanders and Spain, and the political pronouncements of the Franciscan priests Florence Conry and Hugh McCaughwell suggests that these priests were the authors of the petitions.

Conry and McCaughwell were co-founders of the Irish College at Louvain, and McCaughwell had once been tutor to O'Neill's sons. The opinions and activities of the two have been analysed independently by Benjamin Hazard and Mícheál Mac Craith, and each shows how the two priests, like the authors of the correspondence, emphasised that further significant military support from Spain was necessary to preserve Catholicism in Ireland. The priests and the letter writers also alluded repeatedly to the Irish regiment of the Spanish army that was based in Flanders

[85] Canny, 'The Flight of the Earls, 1607'.

[86] The text by Tadhg Ó Cianáin, an Irish language diarist who accompanied the refugees, has been most recently published and appraised in Nollaig Ó Muraíle (ed.), *Turas na dTaoisigh nUltach as Éirinn: from Ráth Maoiláin to Rome* (Rome, 2009). On the other, frequently ignored, flights, see Ciaran O'Scea, *Surviving Kinsale, Irish emigration and identity formation in Spain, 1601–40* (Manchester, 2015), pp 41–54.

[87] John Mc Cavitt, *The Flight of the Earls* (Dublin, 2002), pp 2, 4, 73, 91; Mc Cavitt (p. 86) also believes that O'Neill considered 'menacing' the 'summons' he had received to visit the king.

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and commanded by O'Neill's second son Henry. This regiment, like the Irish College at Louvain, had been established at the instigation of Conry out of Spain's military budget.[88] Given the commonality of views between the exiles and the priests it is unsurprising that Conry became 'interpreter and advisor' to the exiles from the moment they arrived unexpectedly in Flanders. Thereafter, Conry and McCaughwell, like the exiles in their petitions, lobbied in vain to secure O'Neill an audience with Philip III in Spain, and they, again like the authors of the petitions, called relentlessly on Spain to disregard its peace with England and send an invading force to Ireland.[89]

In this, Conry and McCaughwell were parting company with Peter Lombard, who, notwithstanding his call to Pope Clement in 1598 to declare the conflict in Ireland a holy war, now wanted Catholics in Ireland to recognise King James as a legitimate secular ruler, expecting that this would secure them greater religious tolerance.[90] This seeming cleavage between the views of Lombard and those of Conry and McCaughwell may have been more apparent than real as the latter pair were offering solace to O'Neill who, having taken stock of his position as an exile, cherished the notion that he might still recover what he had squandered by his rash action of 1607. That the priests were but holding out some forlorn hope for O'Neill is suggested by what Mícheál Mac Craith has learnt of their political views in their theological writings. Mac Craith's investigation reveals that each considered it appropriate for Catholics to offer allegiance in most secular matters to a Protestant monarch.[91] Moreover, after O'Neill had died in 1616, their disagreement with Lombard evaporated as, in the words of Mac Craith, these too accepted that 'rapprochement with the English crown' best served 'the interests of the Irish Catholic church'.[92]

VII

Recent academic writing on O'Neill leads to three conclusions. The first confirms that O'Neill was a forceful, determined and unscrupulous individual, who would allow nothing, and certainly not loyalty to Gaelic institutional life, to hinder his ambitions. O'Neill's disregard both for tradition and his wider kin, which became most apparent during the years 1603–07 when he set about reconstituting his lordship in the aftermath of war, would explain why members of the Gaelic learned orders of his own generation, and subsequently, expressed little admiration of him. However, the loyalty to Catholicism that O'Neill pronounced during all later phases of his career suggests that the religious commitment he professed when he had been at the height of his power was genuine. The fact

[88] Hazard, *Faith and patronage*, pp 27–54; Mícheál Mac Craith, 'The political and religious thought of Florence Conry and Hugh McCaughwell' in Alan Ford and John Mc Cafferty (eds), *The origins of sectarianism in early modern Ireland* (Cambridge, 2005), pp 183–202.

[89] Hazard, *Faith and patronage*, pp 54–126; quotation at p. 56. For the remoteness of the possibility that the Spanish would offer further military support, see O'Scea, *Surviving Kinsale*, esp. p. 137.

[90] Mac Craith, 'The political and religious thought', p. 188.

[91] Ibid., pp 191–2, 195.

[92] Ibid., p. 202.

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that his religious views were less dogmatic during the interlude 1603–07 than during the 1590s hints at the possibility that it was his clerical sponsors, rather than O'Neill himself, who were responsible for the Catholic rigidity of the 1590s. Recent scholarship confirms the opinion of earlier authors that O'Neill's claim to fame rested on his prowess as a military leader. The attention that James O'Neill has given to the Spanish contribution to O'Neill's military prowess is a timely corrective to earlier appraisals that attributed O'Neill's relative precociousness in military matters to his apprenticeship in the Elizabethan army. This corrective must, however, be set against the judgement of English contemporaries such as Sir James Perrot who pronounced that the 'education' O'Neill had received from Sidney and Walter, earl of Essex, consisted of being 'brought up in military exercises and employments'. Another anonymous English contemporary similarly bewailed how O'Neill 'educated in our discipline and naturally valiant [had become] worthily reputed the best man of war of his nation' with command of 'followers' who were 'well-trained soldiers, using our weapons'.[93]

We noted how such appraisals by English contemporaries provided these contemporaries, as it did a succession of authors writing in the unionist tradition, with a ready-made explanation for the reverses that the Elizabethan army had suffered in Ireland previous to its decisive victory at Kinsale. We noted also how O'Neill's military accomplishments, frequently identified by unsympathetic authors, brought him to the attention of the Abbé MacGeoghegan, whose rehabilitation of O'Neill's reputation in the eighteenth century contributed to him being subsequently hailed as a national hero. This adulation, for which John Mitchel was principally responsible, obliged authors who considered Catholicism to be the defining characteristic of Irish nationalism similarly to embrace O'Neill as an exemplary hero, and to follow Mitchel's example by sustaining their case by a selective deployment of evidence. Authors who approached the subject from different perspectives were, therefore, engaged in what the psychologist Elizabeth Loftus would describe as the creation of 'false or fictional memories' to supply moral endorsement from the past for the causes they championed in the present.[94] What they were engaged upon was repeated by those creative writers who have given attention to O'Neill.[95]

It will be clear from what has been said that academic scholars of recent vintage have been less present-minded than authors of earlier generations. This does not save them from being cast as revisionists whenever they discredit myths concerning O'Neill's career, even when there has never been an accepted orthodoxy to revise. Despite such reprimands, the endeavour of these scholars to fathom the ambitions, achievements and disappointments of O'Neill have sustained interest in the subject even when they express frustration over what little O'Neill revealed of his inner self and of what motivated him at several turning points in his career. Therefore, unless they uncover some fresh evidence that has a direct bearing on the career of Hugh O'Neill, scholars of the future are as likely to remain as hesitant as those of the present about making pronouncements

[93] Morgan, 'Parallel lives', p. 65; 'Author acquainted with Ireland twenty years', *Cal. Carew Ms., 1589–1600*, pp 105–08.

[94] Elizabeth F. Loftus, *Memory: surprising new insights into how we remember and why we forget* (Boston, 1980).

[95] Brian Friel, *Making history* (London 1989).

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concerning a character who, for much of his career, wished to remain enigmatic. It is this scholarly hesitancy that distinguishes most modern scholars from those of earlier centuries who were seldom reluctant to enlist Hugh O'Neill to serve their preferred grand narrative of Ireland's history.

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