

The Last Cavalier: Richard Talbot (1631–91). Pádraig Lenihan.
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Richard Talbot, Earl and later Duke of Tyrconnell, provoked strong emotions, the majority of them hostile. He was a significant political figure for more than forty years. Left for dead in the massacre at Drogheda in 1649, he was prominent in the intrigues among exiled Royalists in the 1650s and then in the convoluted and murky attempts to unpick the Restoration land settlement in Ireland. Dr. Lenihan gives due weight to these periods in Talbot's career, but the weightiest part of the book deals with his role in Ireland under James II and in the Jacobite wars of 1688–91. Whereas his attempts to reverse the land confiscations met with limited success, from 1685 he achieved a major shift in the balance of power between Protestants and Catholics in Ireland, disbanding the (Protestant) militia and ensuring that by 1688 the majority of army officers and soldiers were Catholics. There were similar changes among the judges, magistrates, and sheriffs, paving the way for the election of a Catholic Parliament. He achieved this despite the professed opposition of James II, both at the time and in his later "advice to his son." James's English advisers, both Catholic and Protestant, argued that to improve the position of Irish Catholics too quickly would provoke opposition among English Protestants that could jeopardize his plans for England. Aware that any improvement in the condition of Irish Catholics depended on James's survival (and on his leaving a Catholic successor), Tyrconnell approached French ministers about possible support for an independent Ireland. He abandoned this scheme when James's son was born

in June 1688, and sent several regiments to England later in the year. When James reluctantly came to Ireland in 1689, Tyrconnell struggled to promote what he thought was best for his service, hampered by factionalism among the king's servants and supporters.

The section on the 1680s is the strongest part of the book. It is the best documented and Lenihan has identified some new sources, notably "Mountjoy's History" in Pearse Street Library, Dublin, which gives a splendid picture of Tyrconnell purging the army in 1685–87, promising not to remove certain officers and then removing them anyway. He frequently lost his temper, but it is possible that there was method in his madness: his apparently inconsistent behavior and forceful, indeed ferocious, personality deterred many from arguing against him, and he repeatedly played on the king's sympathy for the "poor Catholics" of Ireland, loyal and misrepresented by allegedly "Cromwellian" Protestants. Lenihan makes it clear that Tyrconnell was not merely a ranting buffoon and argues that he was consistently loyal to James as long as there was any hope of his restoring his authority, sending regiments to England in 1688 that he could ill spare and favoring a "British" rather than "Irish" strategy in 1689, which put him at odds with the majority of Irish Catholics. He also did what he could to tone down the legislation of the Dublin Parliament in 1689.

Lenihan argues too that, despite the claims of some Gaelic Irish writers, Tyrconnell did not favor the Old English over the Gaels. Much of Lenihan's argument is persuasive. Dogged by serious ill health, Tyrconnell struggled to promote his master's interests despite James's own lassitude and defeatism, with limited resources in a poor and increasingly devastated kingdom. French military advisers were often more inclined to sneer at Irish disorganization than to try to make the best of what they had. Traditionally, the main strength of Irish soldiers was their fighting spirit, their loyalty to their leaders, and their ability to operate in difficult terrain, all quite alien to the French concept of a centralized military machine. To make matters worse, in 1689–90 French military aid was niggardly and offset by demands for Irish soldiers to serve on the Continent. Tyrconnell had his enemies among both the French and senior Irish officers. What emerges is a complex picture of a loyal and often seriously ill servant, living in difficult times and struggling against the odds: damage limitation could be seen as success. Previous biographers have been inclined to eulogize or demonize Tyrconnell, but here he receives the scholarly and nuanced biography he deserves.

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