

Class divisions and the 'mere Irish' of colonial Ulster

by
Gerard Farrell

Abstract

This article seeks to delineate the class structure of indigenous society in Ulster in the period between the beginning of large-scale colonisation at the start of the 17th century, and the 1641 rising. This has been attempted in order to see what insights can be gained from an analysis, in terms of class-struggle, of a society that has often been viewed solely in terms of ethnic or confessional conflict. Use has been made of primarily English sources, bearing in mind the requisite caution that needs to be employed when using sources that were often hostile and disparaging of Gaelic society. The 1641 depositions, for example, were taken with the expressed intention of recording Irish crimes and the sufferings of colonists; while in this sense biased in intention, they have nonetheless proved of particular value in the evidence they supply of social relations and contemporary perceptions of those relations, at the endpoint of the period under discussion. The evidence thus gleaned about class divisions among the Irish, and the way in which the plantation transformed this class structure, are used to examine several key questions about early colonial Ulster, such as to what extent the plantation represented a transformation of the economy of the province, and offered greater economic opportunities to the landless class; also examined is the hotly-disputed question of whether or not the plantation was a primary cause of the 1641 rising which, it is here argued, can be resolved by a consideration of divergent class interests among the native population.

In the early decades of the 17th century, Ulster, hitherto the part of Ireland which had remained most free of government control and effected least by anglicising influences, was subjected to the most ambitious colonisation project yet seen in the country. This was made possible by the defeat of the Irish in the Nine Years War and the departure, in 1607, of the most resistant element among the native elite. The following paper will consider the early decades of colonisation in Ulster leading up to the 1641 rising from the perspective of the indigenous population, known in the parlance of the time as the 'mere Irish,'¹ with particular reference to the class structure of that society, both before and at the conclusion of the period in question. The application of a class-based analysis can enhance our understanding of this time and place, one normally discussed in terms of ethnic or confessional conflict, in several ways.

Firstly, by comprehending the development of the class structure of Gaelic society in this period, the changes wrought by colonisation upon that society can be understood in a more concrete way. There is some disagreement about the extent and nature of these changes in Ulster as a whole; Raymond Gillespie writes of 'the replacement of a Gaelic lordship economy by an English-style market economy' in this period, whereas Nicholas Canny and Aidan Clarke argue that the extent of this transformation has been overestimated by historians.² The aforementioned authors have generally attempted to gauge these changes based on measures of economic activity such as grain exports and agricultural efficiency. While such statistics measure the degree of transformation in the economy of the province, we can gain an enhanced insight into what colonisation meant to the majority, non-elite element of the native population by looking at changes in the lives of those who were forced

1 Derived from the Latin *merus* for 'pure,' the designation 'mere' seems to have meant both a group of people who had not intermixed with another, and also to have had the more derogatory meaning with which it is today associated. Joseph Leerssen, *Mere Irish and fíor-ghael: studies in the idea of Irish nationality, its development, and literary expression prior to the nineteenth century* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Pub. Co, 1986), 39.

2 Raymond Gillespie, "Explorers, Exploiters and Entrepreneurs: Early Modern Ireland and its context, 1500-1700," in *An Historical Geography of Ireland*, eds. B.J.Graham and L.J.Proudfoot (London: Academic Press, 1993), 136. Canny has referred to this notion of a 'dramatic transformation in every aspect of life' as a 'myth,' arguing that the kind of colonist attracted to Ulster 'brought little knowledge of agricultural methods that was not already familiar to the native population in Ulster.' Nicholas Canny, "Migration and Opportunity: Britain, Ireland and the New World," *Irish Economic and Social History* 12 (1985): 27 and "A Reply," *Irish Economic and Social History* 13 (1986): 98, n.3. Aidan Clarke likewise asserts that 'the economic activity of the region was not dramatically transformed by the plantation. There was a quickening, and an increasing commercialisation, but the aim of replacing Gaelic pastoralism by a more civilised arable economy was not quickly achieved.' Aidan Clarke, "The Plantations of Ulster," in *Milestones in Irish history*, ed. Liam De Paor (Cork: Mercier Press, in collaboration with Radio Telefís Éireann, 1986), 66.

to adapt to the transition from living as followers of Gaelic *tiarnaí*, to rent-paying tenants.³

Distinguishing the classes of Gaelic society from one another further develops the historiography of the period, because historians often overlook the fact that 'native Irish' does not represent one uniform class of people with common interests. References to the 'native Irish' can mask the fact that class divisions existed within this category which could have profound implications, as will be seen in the case of the 1641 rising. It is with regard to the rising that this class-analysis can add, in one further sense, to our understanding of the period. The causes of the 1641 rising continue to be debated by historians of the period. As Aidan Clarke notes, the debate has generally been between those who argue that the rising was a direct (albeit belated) result of the plantation, and those who posit more proximate causes.⁴ In the final part of this paper it will be seen that, while these two positions have the appearance of being irreconcilable, an appreciation of the class divisions amongst the native Irish population offers a possible resolution of this dialectic.

The structure of Gaelic society

One of the most succinct descriptions of Gaelic society is that given by Jane Ohlmeyer, of a 'fighting and feasting' culture.⁵ These two activities were the main means by which the elite of this society articulated itself, and were the mechanism by which surplus produce (which they were too busy fighting and feasting to produce themselves) was redistributed. Rather than being sold for a price determined on a market, goods were distributed by local rulers to their retainers in return for their loyalty and services. These rulers had appropriated this surplus agricultural produce as tribute, paid to them by a landholding class (sometimes referred to in English sources as 'freeholders') who possessed a form of collective ownership of the land and supervised production. The production was itself carried out by a peasantry which, while it constituted the largest proportion of the population, is largely invisible in

3 *A tiarna* was a local Gaelic sovereign, usually translated as lord, but characterised by some peculiarly Gaelic features which necessitate distinguishing the role from that of a lord in Britain or on the continent.

4 Aidan Clarke, "The genesis of the Ulster rising of 1641," in *Plantation to partition: essays in Ulster history in honour of J.L. McCracken*, ed. Peter Roebuck (Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 1981), 32.

5 Jane Ohlmeyer, "Civilizing of those rude partes: colonization within Britain and Ireland, 1580s-1640s," in *The Oxford History of the British Empire, Vol.1: The Origins of Empire*, ed. Nicholas Canny (Oxford University Press, 1998), 127.

the sources.

From the foregoing, the following model of four classes can be usefully employed in an analysis of Gaelic society in its pre-colonial state:

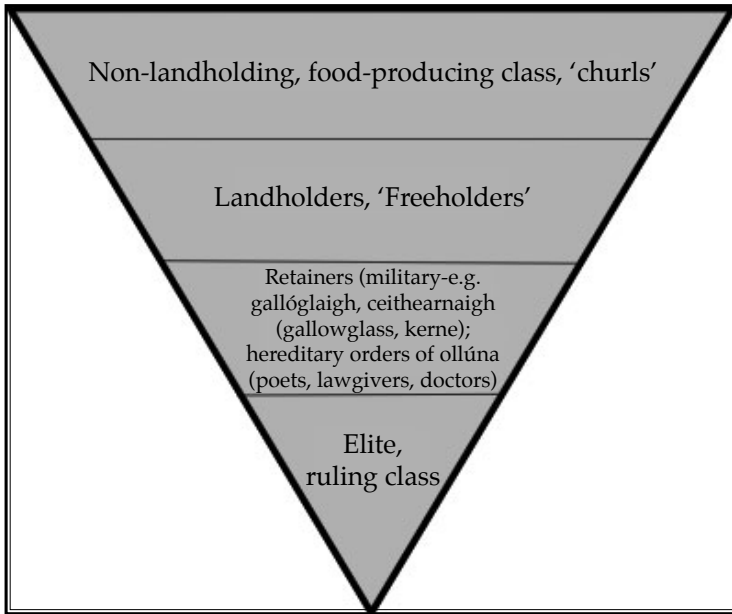


Fig. 1: Model of four classes in pre-colonial Gaelic society

It must be stressed that this is not to give the impression of a 'pure' state in which Gaelic Ulster had existed from time immemorial up until its conquest and colonisation. At the same time it is true that Ulster remained relatively untouched by anglicising influences up to the end of the sixteenth century, in comparison with the rest of the island; even the Anglo-Norman settlement had not penetrated far beyond the coastal regions of what is today County Down. While it thus exhibited features that had disappeared elsewhere, it should be borne in mind that, like all societies, this was a society in flux. Profound changes were indeed taking place throughout the sixteenth century; Kenneth Nicholls, for example, writes of 'a general increase in violence everywhere, leading to a decline in material conditions and economic life' from around the middle of the century onwards.⁶ Katharine Simms has

⁶ Kenneth Nicholls, *Gaelic and Gaelicized Ireland in the Middle Ages* (Dublin: Lilliput Press, 1972), 5; Katharine Simms, "Nomadry in medieval Ireland: the origins of the creaght or caoraigheacht," *Peritia, Journal of the Medieval Academy of Ireland* 5 (1986): 383-4.

convincingly depicted an increasingly pastoral and mobile economy in the late middle ages; the raising of cattle—a food source which could be moved with relative ease compared to crops, which could be easily destroyed by invading forces—simply made more sense under these circumstances.⁷ Prior to these developments, there is evidence to suggest that the cultivation of wheat had been widespread in Ulster; by the time observers like John Davies (who had only observed Gaelic society on a heightened war-footing or in the aftermath of a devastating conflict) came to write, he could claim, however, that the land would ‘lie waste like a wilderness’ if left in the possession of its native inhabitants.⁸

Given that Ulster was changing under the impact of such pressures, the portrayal that follows should be understood in the nature of a snapshot of a culture on the eve of colonisation, rather than a static situation that was eclipsed overnight by the plantation. As will be seen, in many areas of Ulster, colonisation did not represent any wholesale overturning of pre-colonial society at all. Gaelic *tiarnaí* acted as regional foci for an inward flow of surplus produce in the form of tribute, prior to its redistribution in the form of largess and hospitality. The payment of such tribute was not the only means by which the ruling elite appropriated the labour of its subjects. Military billeting known as *buannacht* was another pivotal institution by which the subjects of a *tiarna* were compelled to feed and lodge his soldiers. It may be asked what the landholders and their labourers received in return for such impositions. Hostile English observers asserted that they received nothing, that these subservient orders were simply the victims of the ‘tyranny’ of their rulers. It would be misleading to accept this assessment uncritically. The most obvious advantage of this arrangement was that the *tiarna* offered military protection. In one sense, this was in the nature of a ‘protection racket,’ in that a subject would no doubt suffer dearly for his refusal to accept the ‘protection’ of the *tiarna* in question. When seen in context, however, an element of reciprocity can be discerned; due to the incessant warfare of the ruling elite, engaged as it was in an almost-constant struggle to expand at the expense of, or defend itself against, neighbouring territories, adherence to one warlord or another was unavoidable for the purposes of protection from the others.

⁷ Katharine Simms, *From kings to warlords: the changing political structure of Gaelic Ireland in the later Middle Ages* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: The Boydell Press, 1987), 9.

⁸ Nicholls, *Gaelic and Gaelicized Ireland*, 131-2; John Davies, letter to Salisbury concerning the state of Ireland, 1610, reproduced in *Historical tracts* (London: John Stockdale, 1786), 288.

It is difficult to determine to what extent social mobility was possible in the Gaelic world. Certainly, the consciousness of noble lineage was acute, as evinced by the meticulously-preserved genealogies compiled by the learned classes. There were various restrictions placed on entry to the aristocracy; those eligible to succeed to the position of *tiarna* for example (power was not hereditary but subject to the approval of other powerful figures in the locality), had to come from within the sept, a predetermined number of generations back — often four, a unit known as the *derbfine*. A member of Gaelic society was born into a role relative to his peers. This might take the form of a hereditary position (soldier, poet, doctor) in the service of a *tiarna*, or a position within a sept that was perceived to be following another sept. Judging by the ease with which traditional leading families of Gaelic Ulster were able to raise troops in 1641, it would seem that such hierarchies endured throughout the early colonial period.

The 1643 deposition of Nicholas Simpson provides an insight into these hierarchies at work. Simpson described the arrival of a group of Mhic Uaid in the town of Glaslough (northern Monaghan) at the outset of the rising. They first entered the town under the pretense of searching for thirty lost sheep belonging to Toirdhealbhach Óg Ó Néill (a younger brother of the 1641 leader Féilim), whom the deponent mentions as having been fostered by the Mhic Uaid. Fosterage, which created a traditionally strong bond in Gaelic society, had clearly not lost its socially-cohesive power even after three decades of colonial acculturation. Having ransacked the town, Simpson deposed that the colonists, while accepting their incapacity to defend themselves, 'refused to yelde to those mcwades untill some gentleman of qualitey in the Cuntrye Came to us.'⁹ Only with the arrival of Toirdhealbhach Óg shortly afterwards were they prepared to surrender.¹⁰ Not only does such evidence suggest that the hierarchy of Gaelic Ulster was understood by the colonists, but that perceptions of some septs being subordinate to others were still strong. Contemporary Irish sources demonstrate that these traditional hierarchies were, at the same time, perceived as being undermined by colonisation. For example, the anonymous *Pairlement Chloinne Tomáis*, is suffused with the resentment of a ruling elite that had lost its privileged position and was confronted with the social climbing of people (both native and newcomer) whom it considered upstarts.¹¹ Such evidence would suggest, therefore, that

⁹ Deposition of Nicholas Simpson, TCD MS 838, ff.182r-184r.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Anonymous; *Pairlement Chloinne Tomáis*, ed. and trans. N.J.A. Williams (Dublin: Dublin

colonisation destabilised the traditional hierarchy of Gaelic society, but not to the extent that, by 1641, it had overturned it.

In the pre-colonial *milieu*, opportunities for social climbing of any description must have been very limited. The general trend towards the close of the sixteenth century was in fact in the opposite direction, that is, for dominant ruling sept to expand at the expense of the freeholders below them and to acquire their lands.¹² As a consequence of this, the landholders could be relegated to the level of the landless peasant. This group, often referred to in English sources as ‘churls,’ represented the productive element in Gaelic society, who worked on the lands of the above-mentioned classes.¹³ While English writers sometimes portrayed the condition of this class as tantamount to serfdom, once again we must be wary of such generalisations, mainly because they represent an attempt to apply English terminology to concepts that were peculiar to Gaeldom. Fynes Moryson, a secretary to lord deputy Mountjoy who spent time in Ulster at the close of the Nine Years War, claimed that this labouring class were ‘reputed proper to those lands on which they dwell,’ and that Gaelic *tiarnaí* vied with each other, not so much to conquer lands as the people who were tied to them.¹⁴ John Davies decried Aodh Ó Néill’s attempts, in the aftermath of the war, to secure the return of people who had fled to the Pale from his territories, claiming that Ó Néill aspired to be ‘master both of their bodies and goods.’¹⁵ It would appear, however, that this is another example of the kind of innovation that accompanied the growing autocracy of Gaelic *tiarnaí* in the specific war-torn period during which Moryson and Davies were writing. Kenneth Nicholls observes that the contrary was in fact the norm during the sixteenth century, and that this labouring class had in fact been free to wander ‘from place to place and master to master, apparently driven not by want, but by restlessness and the inducements held out to them.’¹⁶ This relative freedom was largely due to

Institute for Advanced Studies, 1981).

12 Nicholls, *Gaelic and Gaelicized Ireland*, 11-13.

13 For examples of the term in use, see Thomas Smith, *A Letter sent by I. B. Gentleman vnto his very frende Maystet R. C. Esquire*, (London: By Henry Binneman for Anthonhson [i.e. Anthony Kitson], 1572).

14 Fynes Moryson, *Shakespeare’s Europe: unpublished chapters of Fynes Moryson’s Itinerary, being a survey of the condition of Europe at the end of the 16th century*, ed. Charles Hughes (London: Sherratt & Hughes, 1903), 194.

15 John Davies to Cecil, 19 April 1604, in CSPI, *James I, 1603-1606*, 160.

16 Kenneth Nicholls, “Gaelic society and economy,” in *A New History of Ireland, volume 2: Medieval Ireland 1169-1534*, ed. Art Cosgrove (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), 409; Duffy likewise attests to a ‘tendency for tenants and labourers to abandon oppressive and war-torn lordships’ in Patrick J. Duffy, “Social and spatial order in the MacMahon lordship of Airghialla,” in *Gaelic Ireland*,

underpopulation and a chronic shortage of labour. It may indeed have been partly due to the problems associated with such a shortage that Gaelic lords began to claim their subjects were *not* free, but were bound to the soil. Such were the vicissitudes of class struggle as played out in Gaelic Ireland.

Rather than simply being free or unfree then, the extent of freedom and mobility of the productive class in Gaelic society fluctuated with shifts in their strength relative to the other classes. In this, it was no different to the bargaining power, likewise linked to demands on the labour supply, enjoyed by the wage-labourer in a market economy. While a low population gave these labourers a relative advantage in this sense, on the other hand, allusion has already been made to what Kenneth Nicholls describes as ‘the expansion of the ruling or dominant stocks at the expense of the remainder,’ a process by which, within a few generations, the propagation of these ruling families could displace subjects who had previously held land beneath them.¹⁷ It might be expected that the onset of large-scale colonisation in Ulster would alleviate this pressure on the landholding class. In fact, the opposite would appear to have been the case. While loyal elements of the Gaelic elite were deemed ‘deserving’ of land-grants in the plantation project, no provision was made in these plans for the middle, landholding class. What followed was an accelerated squeezing-out of the middle landholding class of Gaelic society. This is a relatively unexplored theme of the plantation, and to understand the mechanics of how it happened necessitates a consideration of how colonisation transformed the social structure of indigenous society in Ulster.

Colonisation and the class structure of Gaelic Ulster

When reflecting upon the fate of the smaller landholding class, it is instructive to recall that John Davies, the primary legal architect of the plantation scheme, had claimed in 1606 that these people ‘were not tenants at will, as the lords pretended, but freeholders, and had as good and large estate in their tenancies as the lords had in their seignories.’¹⁸ Seeking to buttress this class

c.1250-c.1650: *land, lordship and settlement*, eds. Patrick J. Duffy, David Edwards and Elizabeth FitzPatrick (Dublin: Four Courts Press for the Group for the Study of Irish Historic Settlement, 2001), 122.

¹⁷ As examples of the rapidity of this displacement, Nicholls has shown how the Mag Uidhirs, whose reign as rulers in Fermanagh began in 1282, had by 1607 come to possess at least three-quarters of the entire county. Such expansion is not surprising when we consider that Pilib Mag Uidhir alone, who died in 1395, had two sons by eight different mothers, and at least fifty grandsons. Nicholls, *Gaelic and Gaelicized Ireland*, 11-12.

¹⁸ Davies to Salisbury, 12 November 1606, in *CSPI James I, 1606-1608*, eds. C.W. Russell and John

as a means of weakening large landowners like Aodh Ó Néill (who were still suspected of pretensions to regional sovereignty), such a recognition had been expedient from the government's point of view at the time. A year later, however, with the Flight of the Earls, increasingly-ambitious colonisation plans depended upon the confiscation of the attainted individuals' lands. This in turn depended upon the redefinition as tenants of those previously described by Davies as freeholders. Davies thus completely reversed his previous assessment of the situation. When confronted by the claims of the inhabitants of Cavan in 1610 to be freeholders, he wrote that 'they never had any estates, according to the rules of common law, but only a scrambling and transitory possession, as all other Irish natives within this kingdom.'¹⁹ By this legal sleight-of-hand, a class of people who regarded themselves as heirs to the land, in a collective sense, were dispossessed, and their lands handed over to colonists, both English and Scottish, or to members of the former ruling elite to whom they had previously owed merely tribute and services, but who were now deemed to constitute the new native landowning class.

These latter 'deserving Irish,' as well as the 'servitors' with whom they were to live side by side, are represented in white on the following map; in these areas the native Irish were to be allowed to remain living as tenants. In those grey areas which were exempt from plantation, conditions varied from place to place; sometimes they were left in the possession of Irish owners, in other cases (such as grants made before the official plantation to James Hamilton and Hugh Montgomery in Down) it was stipulated that the grantee introduce English or Scottish settlers.²⁰ The areas earmarked for English and Scottish undertakers (hatching), as well as those of the London companies (black) were to be cleared of native inhabitants altogether.

P. Prendergast (London: Longman & Co., 1874), 19.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 498.

²⁰ The King to Arthur Chichester, 16 April 1605, in *CSPI James I, 1603-1606*, 271. The impression sometimes given that these non-escheated counties were not subject to colonisation is quite misleading. Indeed, in the case of east Ulster, the opposite would appear to be the case; Perceval-Maxwell has estimated from the muster roll of 1630 that Antrim and Down contained at that point 'more Scottish families than all of the escheated counties combined.' Michael Perceval-Maxwell, *The Scottish migration to Ulster in the reign of James I* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973), 251. The greater proportion of respondents professing a British identity in the eastern part of Ulster, according to the 2011 census, also bears out the long-term consequences of this: John Burn-Murdoch, "National identity mapped for Northern Ireland," *The Guardian*, 12 December 2012, accessed 15 December 2013, <http://www.theguardian.com/news/datablog/interactive/2012/dec/12/northern-ireland-census-national-identities-mapped?guni=Data:in%20body%20link>.

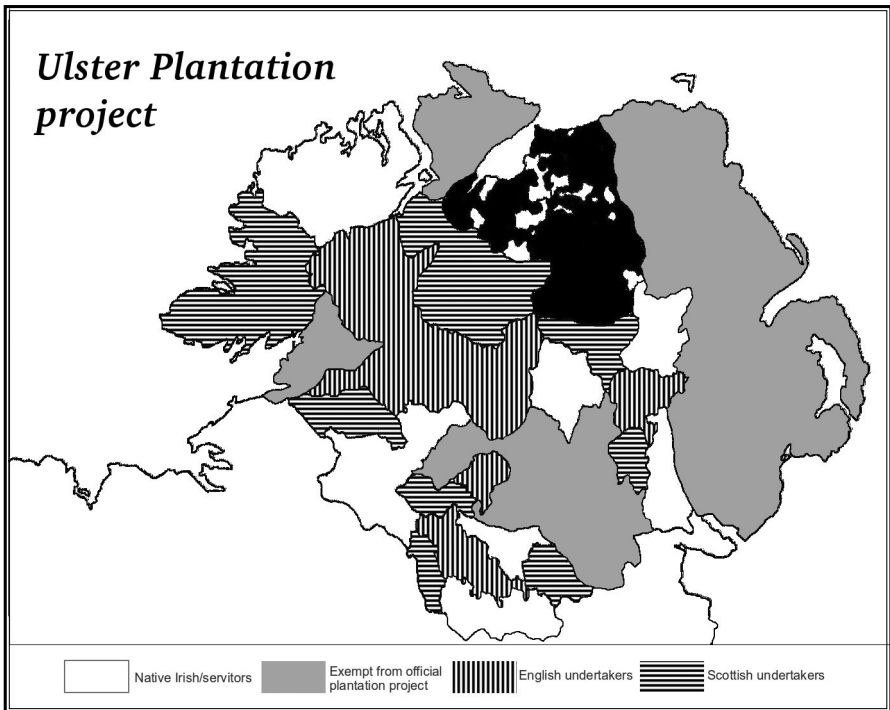


Fig. 2: Plan of Ulster plantation, map based on the work of T.W. Moody and Robert Hunter, in *A New History of Ireland 3, Early modern Ireland, 1534-1691*, eds. F. J. Byrne, F. X. Martin, T. W. Moody (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991) 198.

While useful to bear in mind the dramatic population displacement involved in the *plan* of plantation, it must be remembered that such plans were never fully realised for several reasons. Firstly, undertakers and the London companies soon realised that, due to deficiencies in the plantation surveys, they had far more land at their disposal than they could possibly farm with the few colonists they could attract over from Britain. It was also found, moreover, that natives, desperate to stay on their ancestral lands, were willing to pay far higher rents than colonists. Therefore, instead of the division envisaged in the map above, what evolved was a colonial society in which native and newcomer lived side-by-side. This was a society characterised on the natives' part, by adaptation to the economic system of these newcomers. In this system, property relations—backed up by the common law—predominated, and the market mediated the flow of goods and services, replacing the reciprocal and

redistributive economy, dominated by personal ties of loyalty and kinship that had previously been in operation.

As T. W. Moody has remarked, instead of being simply physically expelled, the former proprietors of the land were degraded to the status of tenants, 'for the most part remained on their former lands.'²¹ Living in proximity to outsiders who now occupied positions of status and wealth, they were often reduced to working as servants or cowherds for the same people who had taken their place. Even more so than if they had been expelled, this was a recipe for resentment and eventually, violent retaliation. The 1641 depositions offer abundant evidence that a widespread perception existed among the insurgents that they (or the generation before them) had been unfairly dispossessed of their lands by force and legal chicanery. Dorothy Moigne in Cavan, for example, reported that her attackers told her that she and her family had 'enjoyed wrongfully the said Landes too longe.'²² Not content with repossessing these lands, the insurgents were also said to have claimed 'the areres of rent of the said landes duringe the undertakers possession.'²³

The economic consequences of colonisation from the point of view of the landless class are somewhat more difficult to quantify. Given that this class had less to lose in the way of property, it might be thought that the plantation offered them an opportunity to improve their economic situation. The sparse population of the province, even more pronounced after the scorched-earth tactics employed by the English in the latter stages of the Nine Years War,²⁴ resulted in an acute labour shortage that empowered the landless class to a certain extent in their relations with a class of landlords that was eager (despite, in the case of colonists, being forbidden) to attract tenants. It has been seen, however, that this had already been the case earlier in the sixteenth century. In this sense, it could be said that the plantation represented a turning-back of the clock to this earlier, more favourable (from the peasants' point of view) demographic balance in their relations with landowners, the difference now being that many of these landowners were now English and

21 T. W. Moody, "The Treatment of the Native Population under the Scheme for the Plantation in Ulster," *Irish Historical Studies* 1:1 (1938): 63.

22 Deposition of Dorothy Moigne, TCD MS 833, f.36r; John Brooks, TCD MS 832, f.193r likewise reported that the instrugents had 'said that they had longe paid rents to the English but they would make them pay it back againe.'

23 Ibid.

24 For examples, see Chichester to Cecil, 22 November 1601, in *CSPI Elizabeth I, 1601-1603*, ed. Robert Pentland Mahaffy (London: H.M.S.O., 1912), 175, and Chichester to Cecil, 8 October 1601, *ibid.*, 111.

Scottish colonists.

Nicholas Canny writes of the 'general erosion of the customary dependency of Irish tenants' that, in plantation Ulster 'found themselves in a more powerful position to negotiate an improvement in their social and economic conditions than ever before.'²⁵ While this dependency had certainly grown increasingly heavy in the war-economy of the late sixteenth century, to describe it as 'customary,' given what has already been said about their relative freedom of movement in earlier periods, would be somewhat misleading. The idea therefore, that the plantation freed the 'churls' from an immemorial thralldom is a false one. It is just as likely that what brought about opportunities for economic improvement was the coming of peace after a long and destructive conflict rather than anything intrinsic to the new dispensation.

Canny also shows how the initial appearance of economic opportunity offered to this class was something of a false dawn; the advantage of a sparse population and resultant competition among landlords for tenants and labour was nullified by a rapid demographic recovery. This, coupled with the steady migration of tenants from England and Scotland, who were increasingly favoured over native tenants, gradually thrust them off the better-quality lands.²⁶ The growing indebtedness of Irish tenants and craftsmen to colonist creditors in the period up to 1641 is testified to throughout the depositions.²⁷ Several years of bad harvests further curtailed possibilities for economic recovery. The growing hostility towards the plantation was acknowledged by some of the more perceptive administrators throughout the period. Even at the outset of the plantation project, observers less starry-eyed than John Davies, such as Chichester, acknowledged that the Irish merely awaited the opportunity to cut their landlords' throats.²⁸

25 Nicholas Canny, *Kingdom and colony: Ireland in the Atlantic world, 1560-1800* (Baltimore, Maryland: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988), 44.

26 For one of the best accounts of this, more gradual, displacement of the Irish to areas of poorer-quality land, by economic forces rather than the dictates of the plantation project itself see Clarke, "The Plantations of Ulster," 67.

27 A deponent reported Féilim Ó Néill as including, amongst the insurgents' war-aims, the forgiveness of debts incurred to the colonists, Deposition of Robert Maxwell, TCD MS 809, f.7r.

28 Davies appears to have believed that the 'common people' would welcome the arrival of English sheriffs and landlords, claiming that "albeit they were rude and barbarous... [they] did quickly apprehend the difference between the tyranny and oppression under which they lived before, and the just government and protection which we promised unto them for the time to come." John Davies, "A discovery of the true causes why Ireland was never entirely subdued," in *Historical Tracts*, 210. Chichester to Salisbury, November 1610, in *CSPI James I, 1608-1610*, 526. Over the course of the following decades, such warnings continued to be made, belying, incidentally, the notion that the rising came as a bolt from the blue; Francis Blundell wrote in 1622

The reputed opportunities opened up to the landless by the 'free' market were thus largely illusionary. Certainly, compared with a system in which tribute and services were established by custom, a market-economy offered opportunities to those with capital and entrepreneurial know-how. Most of the Irish, however, lacked both these advantages. The economic decline of the 'deserving' grantees and their descendants through inexperience with an unfamiliar economic system has long been acknowledged.²⁹ Additionally, it has often gone unremarked that the advantages with which contenders in a market economy start out often play a decisive role in determining success or failure. A lack of capital as well as experience therefore usually determined the failure of the Irish in the market from the outset, even if this was not initially perceived.³⁰ Indeed, the plantation no doubt *appeared* to offer some of the landless Irish the opportunity of improving their lot in its early years. Life as a servant in the household of a colonist may have represented greater access to manufactured and imported goods for an individual whose previous lifestyle had consisted of tending to cattle and living in a wattle hut on a windswept hillside.

In reality, however, the only significant difference in the lives of the majority of natives who lived side-by-side with colonists, compared to when they had lived under the thumb of their fellow Gaels, was that whereas once they had earned the right to subsist on these lands by exchanging a part of their labour power directly, this labour was now to be converted into a cash form with which they were to pay their landlord a money rent. A survey of native Irish tenants living on colonists' estates in 1624 reveals that many of these tenants still lived by grazing cattle.³¹ The lives of such people cannot have differed very much from what they had been before, apart from the necessity of finding a market in which to sell their goods. Even then, it is highly likely that landlords often received rents in kind instead of cash. Certainly they often

that the Irish would 'rather choose to die in rebellion than live under such a government where their lands are taken from them upon bare pretences or obscure titles at the best.' Francis Blundell, "On plantations," c.1622, BL, Harl. MS 3292, ff.40-45.

29 Clarke, "The Plantations of Ulster," 67.

30 The colony, established primarily to offer economic opportunities to the undertakers, presented other disadvantages to the Irish; possible benefits opened up by the existence of markets in which to sell their produce were offset by the difficulty of accessing such markets. Philip Robinson has noted that while 90% of British-owned farms were within a five-mile radius of a market, Irish farms, 'occupying marginal lands,' were often 'outside the effective ranges of the markets.' Philip Robinson, *The plantation of Ulster: British settlement in an Irish landscape, 1600-1670* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1984), 166.

31 Armagh: SP 63-238-1, ff.139r-144r; Fermanagh: SP 63-238-1, ff.57r-83r.

paid their employees in forms other than money. A 'heardseman to Mr John Hamilton' in Armagh named Eoghan Modartha Ó Néill was allowed to graze three cows on his employer's land in return for his services.³² Such figures would appear to remain outside the market economy entirely, and their economic relationships with the colonists to be strikingly similar to those they had had with their 'betters' in the Gaelic order. Under these circumstances, the bitterness towards social upheaval evinced in *Pairlement Chloinne Tomáis* may have as much to do with the decline of the ruling elite than an upturn in the fortunes of the lower orders.

Class and the causes of 1641

Given the number of contemporaries who testified to the discontent of the native Irish towards the plantation and the likelihood of their rising up against it, not to mention the many examples of insurgents in the depositions citing their dispossession as motivating their actions, it is curious that several leading authorities on the period have been reluctant to accord the plantation a leading role as a cause of the 1641 rising. Raymond Gillespie argues that the rising was a 'conservative affair initiated by those who benefited from the plantation scheme and, in the short term at least, had little interest in overturning that world.'³³ Aidan Clarke reasons that the Irish gentry (socially and politically acceptable, propertied) that planned the rising cannot have been motivated by disaffection towards the plantation *per se*, and that it had other, more proximate, causes.³⁴ While the economic decline and indebtedness of this class is not discounted by these writers, stress is laid upon political and religious factors, such as the growing threat of the Puritan element in the London parliament, the failure of Wentworth's government to honour the 'Graces,' by which the Irish Catholics had hoped to relieve the pressure of legal disabilities. In light of such anxieties, it is argued that the conspirators hoped to emulate the success of the Scots, who, in the recent Bishops' war, had succeeded in getting the government to address their grievances by

32 SP 63-238-1, f.139v. Even domestic servants remained attached to the pastoral lifestyle by means of such payments in rights to graze land. Eoghan Mac Gafraidh, for example, living on the proportion of Charles Waterhouse in Fermanagh, was a 'howse servant' who also took care of 'his master's cattle,' services for which he was allowed in return to graze one cow on his employer's land. Aodh Mag Uidhir, a servant to one Robert Montgomerie, was similarly paid in grazing for his cows until the following May. SP 63-238-1, f.59r.

33 Raymond Gillespie, "Success and failure in the Ulster Plantation," in *The plantation of Ulster: ideology and practice*, eds. Eamonn Ó Ciardha and Micheál Ó Siochrú (Manchester University Press, 2012), 98.

34 Aidan Clarke, "Ireland and the General Crisis," *Past & Present* 48 (1970): 89.

recourse to arms.

Claims that the rising was rooted in problems particular to the late 1630s would appear to contradict those who have posited a direct link between the dispossessions resulting from plantation and the outbreak of violence in 1641.³⁵ Essentially, two different risings are being portrayed here: one, planned by a small group of conspirators, relatively conservative in its aims, seeking to seize a few strategic forts and towns and negotiate from a position of strength; the other, a less centrally-directed outburst of violence by an oppressed colonial underclass that sought the complete overthrow of the existing dispensation. An awareness of divergent class interests within the ranks of the Irish suggests that the co-existence of both risings is in no way contradictory. The more limited rising of the conspirators, as portrayed by Clarke and Gillespie, makes sense if understood as relating to the Irish gentry alone. Confusion has arisen from the tendency to conflate this group (who constituted, after all, merely a small minority of the native population in Ulster) with the whole. In this way, the majority has to some extent been written out of the history of this period. It was in fact this landless majority which seized the initiative in October 1641 and determined the character of the rising, especially in Ulster, where it was particularly bloody.

It is not surprising that an event as divisive as the 1641 rising has provoked such debate. It would indeed be perverse to ignore the context in which explanations other than the plantation have been stressed. To play down the role of dispossession and colonisation was a necessary corrective to earlier historians who, Clarke rightly points out, 'admitted the significance of nothing else' besides these factors as a precondition for revolt.³⁶ This revision took place in the polarised atmosphere of the Northern Ireland Troubles, at a time when some historians may have felt that history should serve a conciliatory role rather than fuel sectarian divisions. In the context of the times, such an irenic aspiration was understandable, even laudable. It would appear, however, to veer somewhat from the originally-stated endeavour of 'revisionist' history to be the 'scientific study of Irish history.'³⁷ Bradshaw warns that the writing

35 Brendan Bradshaw, writing in 1994, found it 'dismaying to find Raymond Gillespie still hammering home Aidan Clarke's thesis that the Ulster Rising came as a bolt from the blue,' and that the Irish had 'reconciled themselves to making the most of the crumbs that came their way.' Brendan Bradshaw, "The invention of the Irish: Was the Ulster rising really a bolt from the blue?" in *The Times Literary Supplement*, 14 October 1994 (1994): 9.

36 Clarke, "The genesis of the Ulster rising of 1641," 32.

37 R. Dudley-Edwards, T. W. Moody, "Preface," in *Irish Historical Studies* 1:1 (1938) 2.

of history with such an aim in mind had in effect led to a 'normalisation' and 'tacit evasion' of the 'catastrophic dimension of Irish history,' designed to rid that history of its legacy of bitterness.³⁸ To posit a rising *not* caused by the plantation is a prime example of this, as it implies a colonial society that was largely harmonious, suddenly destabilised by political crisis and harvest failure. Given that the maintenance of this harmonious appearance necessitates the elision of the majority of Irish in Ulster, who had been 'undeserving' of lands in the plantation scheme, Bradshaw's concerns would appear, in this case, to have been warranted.

In summary, an appreciation of the divergent class-interests among the Ulster Irish offers a more rounded picture of colonial society on the eve of the 1641 rising. Seeking to problematise a view of the rising which sought the overthrow of the plantation, historians have sometimes cited cases in which native landowners such as Féilim Ó Néill consolidated or even increased their holdings, and participated fully in the political and social life of the colonial power.³⁹ It is important to recognise that such cases were the exception rather than the rule. A more nuanced picture of the Irish element in colonial Ulster reveals this view of the rising to be in no way problematic, in that the vast majority of the Irish had little to lose and much to gain from such an attempt. Such recognition enables the historian to reconcile a rising initiated by those with a more limited reformist agenda, with the more revolutionary character of the rising as it transpired.

While not wishing to give the impression of fixed and impermeable barriers between the classes as outlined above, the transformation from a society divided into four classes (elite, retainers, landholders, landless) to one divided into two (landed and landless), is a useful model for further analysis of the effects of plantation on the indigenous population of Ulster. In this model, the great losers were the retainers and the landholders. In the former category, the remnant of the Gaelic warrior caste was either killed, deported or driven to remote woodland or mountain areas in the years after the Flight of the Earls; while some of the bardic poets received land grants in the plantation scheme, they were, as a class with the hereditary function of legitimising the Gaelic ruling order, doomed to extinction. The latter category of landholders, meanwhile, treated for the purposes of plantation as tenants of the former

³⁸ Bradshaw, "The invention of the Irish," 8.

³⁹ Clarke, "Ireland and the General Crisis," 89.

ruling elite, were subsumed into an economic role indistinguishable from the landless class. It is from this class that much of the consciousness of dispossession attested to by the 1641 depositions has its origins.

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