



James O'Neill. *The Nine Years War, 1593-1603: O'Neill, Mountjoy and the Military Revolution.* Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2017. 336 pp. \$70.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-84682-636-8.

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Commissioned by Margaret Sankey (Air University)

The Nine Years War (1594-1603) was one of the most transformative events in the history of Ireland, which saw the passing of the old Gaelic political order and the beginning of English control over the whole island. Yet a complete narrative of the war has elicited very little scholarly attention. Most recent scholarship deals only with specific episodes, such as the Battle of Kinsale, or the role of key individuals, such as Hugh O'Neill, Earl of Tyrone.[1] James O'Neill is the first historian, since Cyril Falls in the 1950s (*Elizabeth's Irish Wars* [1950]), to cover the whole war. Like his mentor, Hiram Morgan, O'Neill views the Earl of Tyrone as the chief architect of the rebellion and the chief progenitor of a military revolution in Ireland. In fact, the key question that permeates the whole book is to explain why the rebellion failed after so many years of success. O'Neill's book is divided into eight chapters. The first six cover various stages of the conflict, and are in turn subdivided into specific topics, or categories. The last two chapters depart from a narrative framework to cover Tyrone's military revolution and to explore the rebellion in a larger European context.

Writing a history of the Nine Years War is difficult because historians disagree over when it began. While O'Neill acknowledges the traditional date, he actually begins his study in 1593, with

Hugh Maguire's rebellion in Fermanagh. O'Neill sees the period 1593-94 (chapter 1) as a proxy war, with Tyrone being the prime mover. By remaining officially loyal, the earl was able to use the time to consolidate his authority in Ulster and to create a modern army to challenge the English Crown. The scale of his subterfuge even involved him taking great risks, such as taking the field against Maguire in 1593 and visiting Dublin in 1594 to demonstrate his loyalty, all the while secretly funneling troops and arms to the rebels. The proxy phase did not officially end until January 1595, when Tyrone, feeling strong enough, suddenly attacked and seized the Blackwater Fort in Ulster.

Once committed, Tyrone's strategy was to defend the roads that led into southern Ulster, while stirring up trouble elsewhere in Ireland (chapter 2). It was a strategy that was greatly abetted by the Crown's maintenance of isolated outposts that required constant resupplying. Tyrone's victory over the Crown forces at Clontibret in 1595, for instance, came after the English army had returned from re-victualing the garrison in Monaghan. The success of the Ulster rebels shocked Sir John Norreys, who remarked that their manner of fighting was different from earlier rebellions. Tyrone's success opened up the possibility of Spanish military assistance to the Ulster confederates. By Sep-

tember 1595, he had assumed the Gaelic title of “O’Neill” and was now prepared to recognize Philip II of Spain as ruler of Ireland. While he awaited Spanish support, he made a truce with the English Crown, which allowed him to bring in the harvest, refresh his army, and buy “arms and munitions for the next stage of the war” (p. 63). Unfortunately, Philip II proved to be an unreliable ally. At the last minute, he diverted the armada from Ireland to Brittany. Its subsequent wreckage in a storm off the coast of Galicia helped to mask an obvious Spanish betrayal.

In chapter 3, O’Neill charts the evolution of the rebellion in 1596-98 from an essentially northern affair to a war to expel the English from Ireland. The Crown responded in the spring of 1597 by appointing Thomas, Lord Burgh, as the new lord deputy. His plan was “to take the war to Tyrone’s heartland” (p. 66). Yet his aggressive foray into Ulster accomplished little beyond saddling the Crown with the burden of resupplying another isolated fort, and Burgh himself would die of a sickness a few months later. Bereft of leadership and facing serious rebellions in the provinces of Leinster and Connaught, the English Crown agreed to Tyrone’s offer of a second truce in December 1597, which would last until May 1598. Once again, Tyrone was able to rebuild his forces, garner new supplies, and “coerce uncommitted lords to ally with him against the crown” (p. 71).

It was only after Burgh’s death that the English began to reconsider their military strategy. Plans were now drawn up to land an amphibious force at Lough Foyle “to draw disaffected lords away from Tyrone” and “be a constant bridle on the Ulster lords’ southern operations” (p. 73). But before they could implement this, disaster struck the English in August 1598 when Sir Henry Bagenal, leading an English army to resupply Burgh’s Blackwater Fort, was ambushed and killed at Yellow Ford. The ensuing loss of nearly two thousand soldiers, killed and missing, left the English Pale virtually defenseless, postponed the Lough Foyle

expedition, and provoked a major uprising in Munster (p. 78). As O’Neill asserts, “the rising in Munster gained a momentum of its own” as the Irish peasantry turned on the settlers of the Desmond Plantation (p. 83). By the end of the year, all of Ireland’s provinces were in revolt, and Tyrone’s ascendancy was its peak. In the midst of such turmoil, Queen Elizabeth appointed her favorite, Robert Devereux, the Second Earl of Essex, as lord lieutenant of Ireland (chapter 4).

O’Neill largely concurs with the vast majority of scholars who see the viceroyalty of Essex as an utter failure, stating that the earl “was out of his depth in Ireland” (p. 85). They accuse Essex of squandering the 16,000 infantry and 1,300 horses that the queen had dispatched to Ireland in a series of fruitless campaigns in Munster and Leinster. Yet this figure has misled many into thinking that Essex arrived in Ireland with a vast army. O’Neill is not one of them, as he recognizes correctly that it merely represented “an expansion of the army list in Ireland” (p. 88). Yet a few pages later, he clouds the issue by stating that “Essex was in command of the largest English army deployed during the war” (p. 95). Most of the above-mentioned troops were already in Ireland before Essex’s arrival and were scattered in garrisons, making the size of any field army less potent. O’Neill argues that Essex possessed enough troops to embark on an immediate campaign in Ulster, and that his decision to postpone it, to fight elsewhere, ended up dissipating the strength of his army. He also dismisses two of the excuses that defenders of Essex often cite: the threat of a Spanish invasion in Munster and lack of carriage horses.

Ultimately any assessment of Essex comes down to whether or not one thinks he could have undertaken a campaign in Ulster in conjunction with an amphibious landing at Lough Foyle. O’Neill is largely silent on the Lough Foyle issue. Essex, writing in April 1599, had originally requested 4,000 infantry and 100 cavalry to under-

take the landing.[2] The Privy Council, however, responded on May 8 by refusing to furnish him any shipping, “thinking that his Lordship cannot be so unprovided with barks in Ireland, as to be driven to fetch all shipping from England for such service.” The only thing they were prepared to concede was to make up any shortfall in shipping, the bulk of which was to come from Ireland. Moreover, they asked how he intended “to provide about the matter of Lough Foyle (the forces for which must come out of his 16,000 foot and 1,600 horse).”[3] From this interchange we can see the impossibility of undertaking the Lough Foyle expedition that spring. It explains why Essex chose, with the full backing of the Irish Council, to campaign elsewhere. Moreover, it is well to remember that when the Lough Foyle expedition did get underway in 1600, all of the shipping, as well as much of the manpower, came over directly from England. O’Neill does raise the issue but only in the context of Essex’s abortive advance into Ulster at the end of August, and concludes that “without the amphibious landing on the Foyle,” Essex would be outnumbered by Tyrone, and “that if he tried to place a garrison at the Blackwater or Armagh, it would only repeat the mistakes of previous deputies, whose efforts got bogged down in a cycle of fruitless resupply convoys” (p. 94).

Essex, did in fact, march north, stung by the criticism from London of his alleged inaction. He made little progress as he was continually menaced by Tyrone’s larger army. It did not help that on the eve of his advance, Sir Conyers Clifford, the lord president of Connacht, was ambushed and killed in the Curlew Pass (August 15), with the loss of much of his army. O’Neill covers the battle in detail, and makes several trenchant observations about how it resulted in the near collapse of morale and also caused many Irish troops “who had been employed and trained by [Clifford]” to defect “to the confederates” (p. 92). Yet he does not relate its impact on Essex’s campaign in Ulster. The destruction of Clifford’s army left Essex

unsupported by any parallel move from Connacht and meant that he would face the full brunt of Tyrone’s forces. This is why Essex ultimately became receptive to Tyrone’s offer of a truce. O’Neill, however, criticizes the earl for making the truce, stating that “Essex had fallen for Tyrone’s use of ceasefires and dissimulation to neutralize the crown’s military strength” (p. 94). Nevertheless, Essex had few other alternatives. Either he could fight Tyrone at a disadvantage or retreat to Dublin. Essex’s biggest mistake was not in making the truce but in meeting alone with Tyrone at the Ford of Bellaclynthe, and then compounding it fatally by leaving Ireland without authorization. Moreover, any assessment of Essex must take into consideration how brief his stay was in Ireland (less than six months).

O’Neill ultimately attributes English success in the war to the appointment of Lord Mountjoy as lord deputy (chapter 5). He not only restored the army’s morale by “reinstating many officers who had been dismissed the previous year” but also improved the fighting performance of the English army “by abandoning the burden of carriages” and “slow-moving supply trains”; by forsaking the heavy musket for the lighter caliver; and by making use of specialized swordsmen, or targeteers, “to force passages and support loose shot” (pp. 123, 124, 125-126). In addition, O’Neill credits Mountjoy for choosing Sir George Carew as his lieutenant in Munster. He views Carew as “possibly the finest” of the officers who accompanied Mountjoy to Ireland (p. 132). Although heavily outnumbered, Carew exploited the internal divisions among the rebels, which “involved propagating a sense of mistrust and uncertainty between senior figures in Munster and raising divisions and doubts between local troops and the bonnaughts from Connacht” (p. 133). O’Neill also credits Carew for implementing a lenient amnesty policy, which caused many rebels to defect, and for only resorting to so-called scorched-earth tactics as a last resort.

Although O'Neill credits the turnabout in the war to the leadership of Mountjoy and Carew, he later offers a different explanation in his conclusion, blaming the Irish loss on the inability of Tyrone "to dispel the self-interest and localism that dominated the thinking of many of the Irish lords" (p. 250). Unfortunately, he does not explore this as fully as he could have in the body of the text. It is, however, likely that Irish disunity played the key role in facilitating Mountjoy's military successes in Ulster. At the onset of Mountjoy's campaign in Ulster, Tyrone still had sufficient military power to repel his advance at the Battle of the Moyry Pass (October 2-5, 1600) and Mountjoy "only pushed through the pass on 17 October after Tyrone withdrew north" (p. 140). O'Neill gives no explanation for his withdrawal, but it was almost certainly due to the defection of Niall Garve O'Donnell.[4] To overcome the fractious nature of the Irish political world, Tyrone attempted, without success, to foster a "faith and fatherland ideology" (p. 167). It never resonated either with the Gaelic Irish or the Old English. Once the defenses of Ulster were breached, Tyrone's leadership over the Irish rebellion waned and led to what O'Neill has termed "a loss of command and control" (p. 166). Tyrone was now forced to recall many of his troops serving in the other provinces. Without the presence of Tyrone's professional soldiers (bonnaughts), the rebellions in the other provinces quickly collapsed.

O'Neill covers the final period of the war from 1601 to 1603 in chapter 6. By this point it was evident that without the assistance of the Spanish the rebellion was doomed. O'Neill does not dwell on the controversy surrounding why the Spanish landed at Kinsale; instead, he focuses on why Tyrone's forces suffered a catastrophic and decisive defeat in the battle of the same name. His account largely concurs with the interpretation advanced by Morgan in his book *The Battle of Kinsale* (2004). The Irish and Spanish had agreed to link up on December 24, but Tyrone, for reasons that O'Neill never really explores, inexplicably pulled

back from the designated rendezvous point on Ardmartin Hill to redeploy behind a stream two miles to the west. In the ensuing clash with Mountjoy's forces, Tyrone's army lost its cohesion due to the poor performance of the Irish cavalry, which fled in disorder into the ranks of their infantry, causing a general panic to ensue. O'Neill believes the defeat was catastrophic but suggests that Tyrone and O'Donnell might have regrouped, and remained in Munster, to menace Mountjoy. Later, when analyzing Tyrone's military revolution, O'Neill attributes the defeat to Tyrone's decision to employ his infantry into massed infantry formations, forsaking the more flexible, hybridized formations of pike and shot that he had used with such success in previous campaigns.

Tyrone continued fighting in Ulster until March 1603, despite the English use of scorched-earth tactics. O'Neill goes out of his way to exonerate Mountjoy from the charge of waging a deliberate war of extermination in Ulster, and he takes issue with those who believe that Mountjoy's "scorched-earth" campaign was "exceptional in scale and violence" (p. 176). O'Neill argues that the "extermination of the native population was never a matter of policy for the crown during the conflict" (p. 179). Instead, he states that "famine had long been part of warfare" (p. 176). Moreover, Mountjoy greatly lamented "the killing of civilians" and "allowed refugees to cross south over the river Blackwater" (p. 177). O'Neill also believes that the depopulation of the countryside "did not necessarily mean that the people had been killed or died from famine or disease"; many simply migrated to other regions (p. 179). Although English captains committed atrocities, they were less motivated by an anti-Irish ideology than by feelings of vengeance for dead comrades or frustration over the tactics of their Irish opponents. The fact that the English offered Tyrone and other confederate lords generous terms is further proof that the scorched-earth tactics employed in Ulster were done to win the war rather

than carry out a program of ethnic cleansing and extermination.

As for the violence committed by the Irish confederates, O'Neill argues that confederate raids were not of the scorched-earth variety but were an economic means to support the war effort. The raids rarely involved killing or laying complete waste to the land. The only exception, O'Neill states, was the revolt in Munster in 1598, which did see many horrendous acts of violence perpetrated against the English colonists. Yet the perpetrators were not Tyrone's men but the local inhabitants, settling old scores with those who had run them off their lands. In fact, O'Neill plays down any ideological motive for the rebellion, whether ethnic or religious, stating that, outside of the rebellion in Munster, there were no organized attempts to remove English settlers from Irish territory, and that many of Tyrone's closest associates were Englishmen or men of English descent. Even being a Protestant, O'Neill informs us, was no bar "on recruiting non-Irish or non-Catholic troops" (p. 187).

O'Neill then departs from his narrative framework to examine Tyrone's "military revolution" (chapter 7). Although the earl modernized the Irish military, "he was not creating an analogue of his English adversaries" but creating formations that "had a much more pronounced dependence upon firepower, with a ratio of one pike to every four or five shot" (pp. 202-3). By contrast the English "ratio of shot to pike varied between one-to-one and one-to-two" (p. 202). O'Neill believes that this process of modernization began only after 1588, and was connected to the presence of numerous Spanish Armada survivors, who trained the armed retainers of various Irish lords, including those of Tyrone. The confederates also relied on expatriate Irish officers and soldiers serving in the Spanish Netherlands as well as a large number of Welsh and English soldiers. O'Neill also dispels the old notion that Irish warfare was synonymous with "guerrilla or hit-and-run warfare," by

giving examples of the many occasions when confederate forces successfully engaged English forces in the open (p. 212). He also dismisses the view that the Irish were incapable of capturing fixed positions, particularly well-defended towns and forts, and cites the capture of Enniskillen and the first Blackwater Fort as evidence. Yet O'Neill ignores an obvious weakness: the inability of the confederates to capture any major cities in Ireland or to eject the English from such bridgeheads in Ulster as Carlingford, Newry, and Carrickfergus.

Finally, O'Neill argues (chapter 8) that the Nine Years War, with its emphasis on skirmishing and low-intensity combat greatly resembled other small-scale wars in the sixteenth century, such as the Dutch Revolt and the French Wars of Religion. The confessional nature of these conflicts also bore a resemblance to the Irish war. Catholic clergy were politically active in all stages of the conflict, and one of Tyrone's aims was to restore Catholicism to the island. Yet the level of confessional violence in Ireland was far less than in France or the Netherlands. Although there were a few isolated cases of attacks on churches or clergy in Ireland, "there was little orchestration of or policy for violence towards priests or ecclesiastic property" (p. 242). O'Neill also argues that sexual violence in Ireland was practically nonexistent, with few attacks on women, in contrast to the lurid accounts of violence against Huguenot women, or the many rapes committed during the Dutch Revolt.

O'Neill has undoubtedly made a major contribution to our understanding of the Nine Years War, particularly in his analysis of the military organization, tactics, and strategy of the Irish confederates, and its place in the wider context of the Military Revolution of the sixteenth century. His study is easily the best and most definitive account of the Nine Years War. Yet if there is a weakness, it is in ignoring the other major figure in the rebellion: Red Hugh O'Donnell. Recently Darren

McGettigan has argued in *Red Hugh O'Donnell and the Nine Years War* (2005) that O'Donnell's contribution to the war effort was just as critical as Tyrone's. Indeed, the two men appear to have been quarrelling about strategy on the eve of the Battle of Kinsale. O'Neill, however, only hints at this in passing when he states that O'Donnell "found the earl's progress irritatingly slow" southward (p. 163). Nonetheless, when it comes to answering the question of why the rebellion failed, O'Neill cites three major points: the military strategy of Mountjoy and Carew, the political divisions among Irish lords (as well as within Gaelic lordships), and the tendency on the part of Tyrone to carry out too much military experimentation. O'Neill ultimately credits the second as the most important, concluding that "in the end, this defect enabled the crown to bring the edifice of Irish military power crashing down" (p. 250). Yet it was a close-run affair. What would have happened if the Spanish Armada had landed in Ireland in 1596 or if the Irish had managed to break the siege of Kinsale? The outcome might have turned out differently.

Notes

[1]. See, for instance, John Silke, *Kinsale: The Spanish Intervention in Ireland at the End of the Elizabethan Wars* (Liverpool: Manchester University Press, 1966); and Hiram Morgan, *Tyrone's Rebellion* (New York: Boydell Press, 1993).

[2]. Essex to the Privy Council, April 28, 1599, Dublin, *Calendar of State Papers Ireland, Elizabeth, 1599-1600*, vol. 8 (London, 1899), 19.

[3]. Privy Council to Essex, May 8, 1599, London, *Calendar of State Papers Ireland, Elizabeth, 1599-1600*, vol. 8 (London, 1899), 28.

[4]. This is suggested by G. A. Hayes-McCoy, *Irish Battles: A Military History of Ireland* (1969; repr., Belfast: Appletree Press, 1990), 141-142.

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