

CHAPTER 3

The Warring MacWilliams

The policy of the English kings of attempting to do no more than prevent Ireland developing into a security problem and leaving it unsubdued spelt trouble for the future. Unconquered the country was without a coherent court and legal system. This in turn ensured that there was continued warfare between rival Irish chieftains and Norman barons without any decisive result. The further consequence was, as Cecil King puts it (12):-

The Anglo-Norman families became in many ways Irish and the Gaelic chiefs no doubt became Anglicised to some extent.

As time went on and in the absence of any effective interference from England, the de Burgos, or Burkes, having obtained grants in various parts of Connacht, as already recorded, seemed to be happy to join in the local warfare. They fought with the O'Connors, 'Kings of Connaught', in particular, and other chiefs. They made considerable conquests in this province and were styled 'lords of Connaught.'

This unauthorised enterprise was noticed with some apprehension by members of the English government. R.Dudley Edwards (13) writes:-

Edward I's son's administrators feared that Ireland might become independent, perhaps under a Hiberno-Norman lord like Richard de Burgh, earl of Ulster, lord of Connacht ...

Their fears were not without substance for, writes John O'Hart (14):-

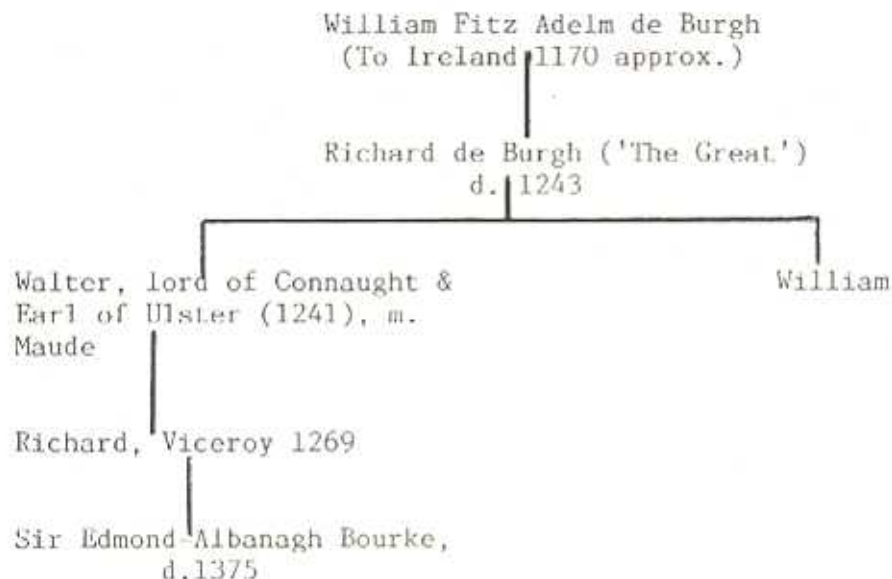
it appears that in the fourteenth century, several Chiefs of the Bourkes renounced their allegiance to the English Government and some of them took the surname (sic) of 'MacWilliam', and adopting the Irish language and dress, identified themselves with the ancient Irish in customs and manners. One of them took the name of MacWilliam Eighter or MacWilliam the Upper, who was located in Galway, the upper part of Connaught; and another MacWilliam Oughter or MacWilliam the Lower, who was located in Mayo or the lower part.

The date of this name assumption following divergence of the family into two branches comes after a critical series of events taking place from 1333, ie the fourteenth century, as O'Hart says. But first an explanation and elaboration of the meaning of this passage seems desirable.

Eighter, meaning Upper in fact refers to the geographical position of the more southerly county which was the seat of that de Burgh family member who eventually became Earl of Clanricarde. These were the Galway and Roscommon MacWilliam Burkes and the branch from which the John McWilliam family derives. Oughter connoting Lower is associated with the county of Mayo which is in the more northerly geographical location. It seems that the 'Upper' and 'Lower' in this context mean nearer and further rather than referring to seniority or compass points. Whatever the correct explanation of the significance of these words, there is ample evidence to corroborate the splitting of the family into two and the use of Eighter and Oughter to differentiate between them.

* Edward I reigned from 1272 to 1307, his son, Edward II, from 1307 to 1327.

Burke's Genealogical History (15), in listing the descent of Viscount Bourke of Mayo ('Tochtar', was another distinguishing name for the Oughter MacWilliams) suggests the following family tree. Note that except for the last, all lived and died before the 1333 family bifurcation. Therefore all the rest come within the ambit of our John McWilliam research.



The story is told in the formal style of the genealogist by Burke (15). It is from this description that the above chart is derived.

Sir Edmond-Albanagh Bourke, fourth in descent from William Fitzadelm, and great-grandson of Richard de Burgo, Lord of Connaught and Trim, who died in 1243, was ancestor of the Mayo Bourkes, and, by the law of tanistry*, became elective head of that family, with the title of Lord MacWilliam Bourke, five years after the murder of his kinsman, William de Burgo, (the 'Brown') Earl of Ulster, by Sir John Mandeville in 1333. Sir Edmond died 'well stricken in years' in 1375, leaving one son ... by his wife Sabina ... Sir Thomas succeeded his father as Lord MacWilliam Bourke and died in 1402 leaving five sons ...

The following entry in Burke's more modern Records (16) confirms the above account and adds a little more detail. At the same time it provides further evidence of the penchant of the McWilliam family for the battle. The Reader must, however, be indulgent of spelling variations (as ever in this period of Irish history).

Sir Edmund Burke, styled Albanach, MacWilliam Bourke Oughter, (was) the second son of Sir William De Burgh, surnamed Liath, Custos of Ireland 1308, won the battle of Athenry 1316 (and) died (in) 1324. (Sir Edmund) died in 1375, leaving issue. This was Sir Thomas Bourke, MacWilliam Bourke Oughter, Justiciar of Connaught who married in 1397 a daughter of the O'Connor and died in 1402 leaving (an extensive) issue.

At the risk of being repetitious further references are collected together of this divergence of the de Burgh family into MacWilliam Eighter and MacWilliam Oughter

* Tanistry was the Celtic mode of tenure according to which a lord's successor was chosen from his family by election. It was abolished in Ireland under James I (1603-25).

because the event was of lasting significance in the family's history and was the cause and origin of the MacWilliam name.

The Abbe James MacGeoghegan relates the same event (17) with one or two differences in detail.

William de Burgo, Earl of Ulster, and chief of that family, having been assassinated in 1333, without leaving any male heirs to succeed to the possession of his estates in Connaught, two noblemen of his name and family made themselves masters of all his lands in that province, and formed two powerful families, distinguished by the names of MacWilliam Eighter and MacWilliam Oughtier, a distinction which continued for a long time.

It was the junior relatives of William de Burgh, third Earl of Ulster, who claimed the lands in Connacht and called themselves son of William, ie MacWilliam, de Burgh. It is well put in the 1978 re-print of Burke's Peerage (18):-

On the murder of William, 3rd Earl of Ulster, his kinsmen seized such portions of his daughter's inheritance as lay in the Irish districts, and adopted Irish names and habits, as it was only thus they could hope to hold them adversely to the heir-general, who according to Norman, but not to Irish notions, had a better right to them than the cadets of the De Burgos.

The Abbe MacGeoghegan (19) expresses it this way:-

In 1333 William Burke, Earl of Ulster, was assassinated (on 6th June) by his servants on the road to Carrickfergus*... There were, however, two noblemen of the name of Burke, apparently of the family of the Earls of Ulster, who took possession of some of the estates, which they kept for a length of time contrary to the spirit of the law, and gave origin to different branches of this noble family which is still (ie 1844) in being in Connaught. To supply want of a legal title, they sought support from the friendship of the ancient Irish, joined their leagues, adopted their language, manners and customs, and even went so far as to change their name by placing the article 'Mac' before it, like the Irish. From them is derived the name Mac William.

The Abbe goes on:-

The assassination of the Earl of Ulster caused a great sensation in Ireland (in) 1334. The viceroy being determined to take revenge on the murderers, and having consulted with his parliament, set sail on 1st July for Carrickfergus, where he put them to the sword.

The Reader will perceive differences in detail between this and other accounts which precede and follow it, but in substance the general sequence of events are in accord.

The real crux of the whole trouble was that the Earl died without a direct male heir. It was, as has been shown, by this same situation that the de Burghs had come by the Earldom in the first place. The consequence of there being no male heir was more, much more far-reaching than ordinary and for two reasons. The first was that the Norman-English system of inheritance was unquestionably that of primo-geniture. That is to say, the eldest surviving male became the heir; failing a male heir a daughter could inherit, or in most cases her husband could succeed to the title. Not

* Carrickfergus is about 15km NNE of Belfast on the shores of Belfast Lough.

so, among the Irish and those families of English descent who had adopted the Celtic Irish system of tanistry. As explained in the footnote on page 9 this meant that the successor of a deceased clan leader was elected by members of the family. It was not open for anyone to nominate, of course, but only male candidates who were of certain defined acceptable status. The fact is that it suited leading members of the de Burgh family to claim that the system to be used following the death of the 'Brown' Earl should be that of tanistry. Their action was consonant with this law perhaps, but certainly 'contrary to the spirit' of the English law. If the English system of primogeniture was applied it would have meant the loss of much of the lands in the possession of the de Burgh family as well as the prestige of holding the succession. But, and this made it profoundly significant, the claimants under the other system were no other than the Royal house of the Throne of England.

The English claim came about in this way. The 'Brown' Earl's countess promptly fled to England following her husband's assassination, taking with her their only child, a daughter, Elizabeth de Burgh. In England she married the second son of the King, Edward III (r.1327-77), Lionel, Duke of Clarence. Now, under English law, by the process of jure uxoris, the title of the Earl of Ulster and the lands of the de Burghs should have passed to Lionel. Incidentally he died even before his ill-fated brother, the Black Prince, in 1368, but left a daughter, Philippa, 'Countess of Ulster'. She married Edmund Mortimer, Earl of March, whose son, Roger, is part of the direct royal line to Edward IV (1461-83) and on to Henry VII (1485-1509) and Queen Elizabeth I (1558-1603). The Abbe is quoted again:-

The Countess (of William Burke, Earl of Ulster), alarmed by this outrage (the assassination of her husband), sailed to England with her only daughter, who was afterwards married to Lionel, Duke of Clarence, son of King Edward III, by whom she had an only daughter, who was married to Edmund Mortimer, Earl of March. This was the reason why the titles of Earl of Ulster and Lord of Connaught were annexed to the Crown.

This is the point in the story to take this digression a little further even. William McWilliam (b.1844) married Rosina Barnett who claimed she was a direct descendant of Roger Mortimer, Earl of March. It is interesting that William and Rosina McWilliam named one of their sons Mortimer. Unfortunately he died in infancy. Neville McWilliam, another of the sons of Rosina, and one who did of course live to maturity, wrote:-

My mother often told me that her family of Barnett was directly descended from Mortimer, Earl of March. In fact, her great aunt and cousins, whom she remembered as a child, were named Mortimer, a family of the Roman Catholic faith. My mother likewise informed me that there was a tradition in both her own and my father's families that at some distant period they had previously been united.

Further mention is made of this matter on page 57.

Reverting to the clash of interests between the royal Plantagenets and the de Burghs, here is a quote from R.Dudly Edwards (20):-

In 1333, the death of the Brown Earl of Ulster brought about a situation in which the conflict of central and local interests weakened the Norman ties and contributed to the expansion of Gaelic lordships.

Or in the words of Vicary Gibbs (21):-

Since that extinction (of the Brown Earl) 'the two next male branches of the family took possession of the lands and, supported by the national

feeling in favour of the succession of heirs male, retained the greater part of them in defiance of all the efforts of the Crown. Lionel, Duke of Clarence, who had married the heir general, was sent over as Lord Lieutenant of Ireland (1361-67), for the avowed purpose of enforcing his claims; but found the feeling of the country too strong to give him any chance of success. The Crown at length had the good sense to give up the contest, and to ennoble these two branches, by conferring upon them the peerages of Clanricarde and Mayo.*

In other words the English (Norman) government lost out on the issue of local property ownership. It did, however, win the title to the earldom - both Earl of Ulster and lord of Connaught. Be it noted that Philippa, daughter of the Duke of Clarence and Elizabeth de Burgh, appears in modern history books with the formal title of Countess of Ulster. Dudley Edwards goes on:

As a result of this, the de Burgh territory was fractured into a number of minor political jurisdictions and the Norman influence in Ulster was driven east of the Bann. The collateral male de Burghs rejected the territorial pretensions of the Plantagenets and established virtually independent lordship in Connacht.

As has already been pointed out these 'minor political jurisdictions' included MacWilliam Eighter around Galway and MacWilliam Oughter further north in Mayo. The river Bann is in the east of Ulster, flowing into the sea in the north at Port Stewart.

G.A. Hayes (22) sums up the history of the next couple of hundred years, in all the period's belligerent notoriety, as follows:-

The two centuries which followed (1318) saw much bickering... The English lordship contracted to the area around Dublin known as the English Pale. Outside of this and the (few) towns... the rulership of the island was in the hands of many lords, Anglo-Irish and Gaelic. The most powerful of them were the Fitzgeralds... and Butlers... and the Burkes, who were still more independent and more Gaelicised and who had made their own of the plains of Connacht.

And then again (23):-

On the periphery of this warfare and destruction other struggles took place... Felim O'Connor, King of Connacht, turned against the de Burghs, and in the biggest battle yet fought in Connacht, was defeated by William de Burgh and Richard de Bermingham at Athenry in August 1316 ...

Then he goes on (24):-

By the middle of the fourteenth century (the Galloglasses*) had spread to Connacht, where the O'Connors, and later the Mayo and Clanricard Burkes and the O'Kellys employed them ... The greatest battle fought by these professional axemen (the Galloglasses) was Knockdoe. The protagonists in the contest were Gerald Fitzgerald, the Great Earl of Kildare, on the one side and his son-in-law, Ulick de Burgh, or Burke, of Clanricard on the other... The battle was fought on 19 August 1504...

The de Burgh, or Burke family, the greatest Anglo-Norman house in Connacht, had been long divided in two branches, that of MacWilliam of Clanricard, with territory in Galway and the branch of MacWilliam of Mayo.

* Mercenary soldiers who came mainly from the islands of the Hebrides, but also from Scotland.

Like many Irish lords who were neighbours the two MacWilliams were intermittently hostile the one towards the other. In 1503, on the death of the leader of the Mayo branch, Ulick Burke, lord of Clanricard, attacked his neighbours, the O'Kellys who were in alliance with the Mayo Burkes.

Incidentally it was at least a little before this splitting of the family into two early in the fourteenth century, that the phrase 'of Clanricarde' or 'lord of Clanricarde' seems first to have appeared.

There is a plentiful supply of further evidence of the warring proclivities of the Eighter and Oughter families of MacWilliam. One more example will suffice. 'MacWilliam Bourke', says the source,

gave MacWilliam Oughter (Richard Oge) a great overthrow in the town of Athleathan, in which MacJordan Dexter, lord of Athleathan, and John Dexter were slain.'

To designate them as 'the warring MacWilliams' was clearly no misnomer !

References

- (12) King, Cecil. Page 31. See (6), page 7.
- (13) Edwards, R.Dudley, Ireland in the Age of the Tudors. Page 18.
- (14) O'Hart, John, Irish Landed Gentry when Cromwell came to Ireland or a supplement to Irish Pedigrees. Irish University Press 1884/1969. Page 849.
- (15) Burke, Sir Bernard. Page 66. See (3), page 7.
- (16) Burke's Irish Family Records, 1976 American Edition. Page 338.
- (17) MacGeoghegan, Abbe James. Page 263. See (2), page 3.
- (18) Burke, Sir Bernard, Page 91. See (3), page 7.
- (19) MacGeoghegan, Abbe James. Page 328. See (2), page 3.
- (20) Edwards, R.Dudley. Page 19. See (13), this page.
- (21) Gibbs, Vicary, The Complete Peerage of England, Scotland, Ireland, Great Britain and the United Kingdom, extant, extinct or Dormant by G.F.C. New Edition. Vol. III. 1913. Page 414.
- (22) Hayes, G.A., Irish Battles, McCoy. Page 7.
- (23) Hayes, G.A., Page 40. See (22), this page.
- (24) Hayes, G.A., Page 50. See (22), this page.