

CHAPTER 4

A Conflict of Loyalties

Beginning at some time in the fifteenth century a conflict showed signs of emerging between the king's law and the Pope's edicts. In Ireland the king's power waxed and waned and as it weakened the dictates of the Church engendered hatred and uncertainty. It seems clear that a constant stream of emigrants left Ireland for England and these were largely from among the king's loyal subjects. It is only sometimes clear where the loyalties of the two MacWilliam families lay during the religiously crucial sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Apart from scrapping with one another and their allies, they even occasionally married one another. Thus as early as the previous century the record tells how Edmond Bourke 'of the Beard' and of MacWilliam Oughter of Newport and Burrishoole county Mayo, succeeded his brother, Walter, and married Honoria, daughter of Ulick Roe MacWilliam of Clanricarde. He died in 1458.

But mostly, it seems, they fought one another. The Battle of Knockdoc (1504) has already been mentioned. Dudley Edwards (25) describes the complexities of the alliances in these words:-

Kildare (Gerald Fitzgerald) defeated MacWilliam of Clanricarde. The forces involved on both sides virtually comprised the resources of the outstanding political entities from Dublin to Lough Foyle and from the Shannon to Sligo... It is not easy to ascertain the causes for the struggle beyond the fact that Ulick Burke of Clanricarde, Kildare's son-in-law, appears to have threatened the balance of power in the west (of Ireland). He had allied with O'Brien of Thomond and with MacNamara. He had imposed himself on Galway city. He had intimidated MacWilliam Tochtar (ie the Mayo or Oughter MacWilliam) and thereby alienated O'Donnell... The battle was largely fought by the Scots mercenary troops, the galloglass... From the north came (various clans). From the north-west came O'Donnell. Lower MacWilliam (Oughter) and Kellys.

In spite of the Gallowglases and their battle-axes, the conflict is notable because it was the first major occasion on which guns were employed in Ireland.

It was shortly after this, the greatest battle in which the MacWilliam ancestors were directly involved, that Henry VIII came to the English throne (1509). It was of course some years later still that his conflict with the Pope surfaced as nationally significant, anyway in Ireland. Desiree Edwards-Rees (26) sums up the situation succinctly:-

By the time of Henry VIII not even a superman could have held the King's peace throughout Ireland or unravelled the tangle of alliance between chiefs or sorted out the 'mere Irish' from the Old English.

Towards the end of the reign of Henry VIII, however, much had been achieved in pacifying the country and containing the warfare between rival Anglo-Irish leaders. The monasteries' extensive lands in Ireland were taken over by the big landlords, whether Norman or Gaelic, when Henry VIII dissolved them between 1535 and 1545. By 1543 St Ledger, acting on behalf of the Crown, was able to pride himself on the

docility of the leaders of a transformed Ireland. Among the many who had submitted, there were some who had visited England and been invested with

earldoms and other royal titles. Among these in addition to the Earl of Tyrone, was Upper MacWilliam who had become Earl of Clanricarde and O'Brien who had become Earl of Thomond... (27)

One might reasonably ask by what stratagem, sleight of hand, or even magic did Henry VIII, or his lieutenant, St Ledger, achieve this seeming miracle? The answer is that he implemented a plan, already tried to some extent, but on a larger scale and applied with more care and determination. Land owners were required first to surrender their land to the King. Having done that this same land (or most of it) was re-granted to the original proprietor, but only on certain conditions. The chiefs had to acknowledge the supremacy of the English King, promise to keep their men-at-arms entirely for the King's service and use no law but English. The King in turn recognised their position as head of the sept. Thus the John McWilliam ancestor, de Burgh, was one of those to acquire not only recognition but also an earldom in the process. These leaders had been elected by means of Brehon law (ie tanistry) but held their family headships and earldoms under English law, an odd concurrence of contrary customs.

It should be noted, however, that Henry VIII, or his advisers, picked his 'victims' for this manoeuvre with discrimination and care. Margaret MacCurtain (28) points out that he commanded St Ledger, who was implementing this re-grant plan, in the following terms:-

You should know that we divide Irishmen, and the land they occupy, into two parts. The one part as O'Reilly, O'Connor, the Cavanaghs etc. we take to lie so upon the danger of our power, as you may easily bring them to any reasonable conditions, that may be well desired of them. The other sort as O'Donnell, McWilliam, O'Brien etc. we think lie so far from our strength these, as, without a greater force, it would be difficult to expel them out of their country.

In other words the King thought his power so threatened such as the O'Reillys that St Leger could be pretty firm with them, but chiefs, like the McWilliams, almost outside the power of the Government, would require persuasive inducement.

Vicary Gibbs (29) explains that Clanricarde, the country of the Bourkes, consisted of six Baronies. The Baronies were Loughrea, Dunkellin, Kiltartan (otherwise Killtaraght), Clare, Athenry and Leitrim, county Galway, all in Connaught. The Irish Earldom was conferred upon the McWilliam ancestor, Ulick Bourke or de Burgh, of Clanricarde, county Galway in 1543. This new Earl was the son and heir of Richard Bourke MacWilliam, chief of Clanricarde who had died in April 1530. The record explains that on the death of his father the future Earl 'succeeded to the vast territory of Clanricarde, and to the headship of his clan, as the McWilliam' in 1541. As already pointed out (page 12) he was the great-grandson of Ulick Bourke, 'feudal Lord of Clanricarde (1467-87)' (30)

Two points of explanation seem desirable. The article, THE, prefixing a family name was the Irish custom for denoting the head of the sept or clan. Thus, the O'Connor was the chief of the house of O'Connor; the MacWilliam was the chief of the MacWilliam clan. This custom, disliked by the English, was sometimes applied but in other ages it tended to fall into desuetude. In case the Reader is unsure of the situation, the order of seniority of the English nobility is: Duke, Marquess, Earl, Viscount, Baron and Baronet; though the last is inheritable, a holder of it is not a member of the peerage.

At about the same time the other MacWilliam house, Oughter or 'further', also received the grant of a peerage, Earldom of Mayo. Regarding the new Earl of Clanricarde, Vicary Gibbs gives a little further information. He relates (31):-

He was called by the Irish 'Negan', ie 'the Beheader'; (he) was Governor of Connaught and having surrendered in person his larger estates into the hands of the King, received a re-grant thereof, with the Monastery, De Via Nova, in the Diocese of Clonfert. He was created on 1 July 1543 EARL OF CLANRICARDE AND BARON OF DUNKELLIN (Ireland) under the designation of 'Willicus Boruck, alias Makwilliam'. He married three times and died shortly after his elevation to the Earldom on 19 October 1544.

The records show the continuing line of Earls of Clanricarde right through to 1916, though the family name of MacWilliam seems to have fallen into disuse by the head of the clan.

Ulick Bourke's successor as Earl of Clanricarde was Richard. His legitimacy was disputed by his half-brother, John (a son of his father's third wife), but Richard was finally confirmed in the Earldom, officially dated from 1544, the date of his father's death. The new Earl did not receive this confirmation of his Earldom and Barony from the Queen (Elizabeth I) until 22 June 1559. He sat as an Earl in Elizabeth's first Parliament and died on 24 July 1582.

The improved state of affairs described earlier in this Chapter continued into the reigns following that of Henry VIII, as is evidenced in the next quotation, dated 8 May 1552. Dudley Edwards (32) writes:-

Sir Thomas Cusack reported on Croft's success in stabilising the Irish lordships generally... Cusack reported equally optimistically on the west, where good relations now existed between Clanricarde and MacWilliam Iochtar (ie MacWilliam Oughter).

We must be on guard, however, against believing that the creation of de Burgh as Earl of Clanricarde was the end of the family squabbles. MacGeoghegan (33) notes that in 1553 one of the Burkes of Connaught (Richard) quarrelled with the children of Thomas Burke and was made prisoner in the ensuing battle. 'The Earl of Clanricarde, having some dispute with John Burke, laid siege to his castle,' 'but on learning that Donald O'Brien was coming to his assistance the Earl raised the siege, not thinking it prudent to wait the event of a battle.'

In this age of enlightened religious tolerance the plight of an ordinary conscientious Christian at the time of the Reformation tends to be forgotten. The Church, the mother Church, and its priests had taught the people from time immemorial to turn to it for security and comfort, for relief from the burden of a guilty conscience by confession, to look to it in times of sickness and plague, bereavement and death. Now they were commanded by the King and his ecclesiastical leaders to believe that its chief priest, the Pope, was an enemy of this land. The priests were, the people saw, being proscribed and forbidden to officiate in their churches. They heard that some tenets of the Church's teachings were now ridiculed. As a practical manifestation of the official view and of the change of allegiance, the monasteries and other institutions of the Church were confiscated and a huge number of hitherto sacred ornaments smashed. Loyalty to King and religion clashed. What was an individual to do? As head of the family should a man persuade, command, those near and dear to him to side with the King and fly in the face of the religious beliefs of his forefathers? For those who had been favoured by the King and thought themselves hoodwinked by the Church the answer was easy. There were many of these in England and Ireland in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. But there were a significant number who held to their faith and long established principles. There was a worse state of affairs, however. The situation repeatedly changed over this period of time. There was no consistency: how could the people feel secure in their spiritual life if they were being

ordered first to reject Roman Catholicism and then to accept it ?

It will be remembered that the fluctuations proceeded like this: Henry VIII broke with the Pope (1534) and he became 'Defender of the Faith'; he died in 1547. His successor, Edward VI, (or his advisers) ensured that Protestantism flourished. On his death six years later, his sister, Mary I - 'Bloody' Mary - reverted to The Church of Rome, in no uncertain manner, as her sobriquet emphasises. On her death in five years time the official line reverted to Protestantism and Elizabeth I brought a period of some constancy till 1603 and this was extended to 1625 under James I. Then again turmoil, culminating in the beheading of Charles I (a crypto Roman Catholic, perhaps) in 1649. Then the dreadful period of eleven years under Oliver Cromwell, the Puritan, who was surely more bloody than Bloody Mary, but who justified his vengefulness in the name of the diametrically opposite cause. Then (1660) the Restoration and Charles II whose Roman Catholicism was less concealed than his father's; and finally James II, for three years, avowedly espousing the ancient faith. After the 'glorious revolution' came the strong Protestant, William III (and Mary II) (1689) and the merciful end to the religious convulsions. If a citizen took the unapproved view in any of this he would be liable to suffer a range of consequences, quite apart from the prodings of his own conscience.

The plight of the inhabitants of Ireland as a result of this turmoil must be seen to be worse, far worse, than those of England, for example. In addition to the conflicts of religion and the punitive policy of the English in Ireland, the mixed ethnicity of the people of that island clearly exacerbated the burgeoning rivalries of the Catholics and Protestants there. There were those of Gaelic origin, the Celts, the 'mere Irish', the Norman-Irish, the Norman English, the Anglo-Irish, the English born in Ireland and the straight-out English. Some reacted to this turmoil by fleeing, some by fighting. One of the first acts of Queen Elizabeth I, be it noted, was to appoint ecclesiastics to vacancies created by the Protestant flight from Ireland.

Desiree Edwards-Rees (34) gives a sample of the hardships endured by the Irish because of the system of dispossession employed in Henry VIII's reign or later.

A packed jury had to find the Crown a far-fetched title to the lands; these were promptly confiscated. The tenants were evicted and in exchange given other farms, mainly bog-land and about one-third of their farm holdings in size. That left two-thirds of the land which was parcelled into moderate-sized holdings on which English subjects were invited to settle. The settlers became rent-paying tenants of the Crown; their succession had to be by strict primo-geniture and all their servants had to be English. This unjust dispossession of Irish tenants and chiefs caused a civil war that swept the two counties (Leix and Offally - Queen's and King's county) at intervals right up to the end of the reign of Elizabeth I.

The John McWilliam ancestors were spared participation in the injustices, so far as is known, in the affairs of these two particular counties, but the situation is quoted as an example of the threat that hung over them. This planting of acceptable English and Scotch Protestants in various parts of Ireland was a technique of the British government, used over a long period of time. In addition to the two counties mentioned it was tried extensively in the north and north-east and even in the province of Connacht.

Clan rivalry and uncertainly-placed loyalties are apparent at this time. R. Dudley Edwards (35) explains how the Lord President of Connacht, Fitton * by name, had

* Sir Edward Fitton from Galway. Dudley Edwards says of him: ' (he) endeavoured to maintain order among the Burkes as well as among the native Irish.' (Page 131)

difficulty in controlling Connacht.

When (he) early in 1572 accused Clanricarde of being an accessory to the illegalities of his sons, ... the Dublin Council were furious... He (Fitton) was therefore rebuked and ultimately humiliated when Clanricarde was pardoned... The corn-burning and the harrying of the sons of Clanricarde were maintained until the Earl's sons gave up the struggle... Thus Connacht was held down by force, although the Earl's sons could not be captured.

Again the tensions caused by an outmoded allegiance are seen in the next quotation which is from Sir George Bingham's Memoirs (36) which account is evidently part of the same story. It was about the year 1586 that Sir Richard Burke was manfully rounding up those rebelling against the Protestant Queen Elizabeth. These rebels included a sizable number of the Burke family, for they

gathered together on an Island in Lough Mash and defied the governor (Burke)...

But after much fighting and killing

most of them, except the Burkes of Castle Barry, were glad to sue for peace.

Of the Burkes of Barry Castle, George Bingham, who had now joined the act, wrote in the same Memoirs (37):-

Their father was the man whom they sought to make M'William, till I executed him, which although he were old, I did, for he was a notable traitor, and encourager of his sons in that action, as also to the end that his sons should be delivered of that vain hope, and so the sooner forced to submit themselves... The name of M'William, with other like titles of M's and O's was abolished after the death of Sir Richard Burke.

It seems fair to presume that the accusation of 'notable traitor' meant that 'old M'William' was on the opposite side in the sectarian conflict and had clung to an out-dated fidelity.

The last sentence in this quotation of George Bingham's suggests a date for the dropping of the name 'MacWilliam' from the titles of the Burkes, though this nomenclature was still flourishing as little as ten years before this date, as is seen from the account of his tour of Connaught in 1575 given by the Lord-Deputy (38):-

The Norman Prendergasts called themselves MacMorris, the Nagles became Costellos, the de Burgos were MacWilliam...

O'Hart (39) reports that in the next century (the seventeenth):-

This family (De Burgo of Connaught who took the name of MacWilliam) is found among the list of families in Ireland (at that time).

As pointed out on page 15 the English never did like names with leadership connotations being included in the styles of the heads of clans. Such names (and the title THE, as in The O'Connor, for example) tended to act as a rallying point for local loyalties against the government.

The above excerpt from George Bingham's Memoirs was of special interest to Neville McWilliam for, as he writes:-

Sir George Bingham was a direct ancestor, in an unbroken line, of the wife of Mr Wilfred de Beuzeville, my wife's cousin who now has the memoirs in his possession.

Since Neville recorded these words (c.1930) Mr de Beuzeville has passed on, as has his son; but the present writer had the privilege of visiting the son's widow and inspecting, and making notes from, the Bingham Memoirs.

Sir George Bingham was appointed Governor of Sligo in 1593. He died in September 1599 and is buried in Christchurch, Dublin.

The conflict of loyalties within families is further illustrated by the turmoil which the general and religious insecurity created among the clans of the Burkes. The Abbe MacGeoghegan (40) explains that in 1588, thirty years into Elizabeth I's reign, Ulick Burke killed his brother, John, in the sectarian war then raging in that area and became an ardent supporter of the English court. The other branches of the Burkes of Connaught were at loggerheads with the lordship of 'Clan Williams' (MacWilliam?). Among the Irish 'princes' who then supported the interests of Queen Elizabeth were Burke, the Baron of Castle Connell and his son Richard, and Theobald Burke, a son of Richard. He was known as 'The Naval' because he was conversant in naval pursuits. 'But', says The Abbe, 'among the ancient Irish who fought for the Catholic faith were MacWilliam and Burke.' He fails to mention which MacWilliam and Burke, but clearly some were on one side and some on the other. The story goes on (41):-

Theobald Burke, a powerful lord of Connaught of the house of MacWilliam, was deprived about this time (1594) by the English of his estates of his ancestors and confined in a dungeon at Athlone. Being rescued from his captivity, he had recourse to O'Connel, who assisted him with men to recover his patrimony. Burke, then returned to his province, besieged Bal-Life, one of his fortresses in possession of the English, and defeated George Bingham and other chiefs advancing to the relief of the besieged.

Thus, it appears, the sons of 'old M'William' obtained some revenge. The Abbe MacGeoghegan (42) continues:-

In November 1602, the Lord Deputy undertook an expedition to Connaught to quell the disturbances which agitated that province. Sir Oliver Lambert had already expelled the Burkes with their chief MacWilliam, from the county of Mayo.

This would be MacWilliam Oughter, or the further branch, not the Clanricarde group. A few pages later MacGeoghegan writes (43):-

O'Sullivan was not the only unfortunate prince who sought safety with O'Rourke. On his arrival there he met the son of William Burke, chief of the noble family of MacWilliam of Connaught and Connacht. Maguire, prince of Fermanagh, who had been dispossessed by the English... They determined to have recourse to O'Neill, and induce him to renew the war against the English... They proceeded as far as the banks of Lake Erne. They were then obliged to force several posts belonging to the English, in which they were successful.

Lake Erne consists of two large lakes, Upper and Lower, dividing in two county Fermanagh. The Upper Erne terminates on the border of Ulster.

But the McWilliam ancestors sometimes gained, more often lost, one suspects, in the process of defending their stance in the conflict of conscience. One of the 'enrolments' in favour of the '1649 lot' who received a grant of land, was Donough McWilliam. This means that he fought in the forces of Charles I or his son in the military actions in Ireland before June 1649 and was rewarded for his service by a property grant. He was one of the winners. The Abbe MacGeoghegan (44), writing of

the time towards the end of Elizabeth's reign says that those mentioned were in possession of their estates when they took up arms in defence of their faith. Some estranged themselves from the court party, at the cost of their properties and espoused the Catholic cause, (such as) Mac-William Burke.

The conflict referred to here was part of the war called the war of Tyrone because the Earl of that name was the chief leader. It lasted for fifteen years.

Burke's Irish Family Records (45) describes one of those whose personal solution of the conflict of conscience was to depart. He was Theobald ('The last of the Mac-William Bourke Oughter', ie the Mayo or further branch of the MacWilliams).

(He) fled to Spain in 1595 and was apparently created Marquis of MacVilliam Burk (or, it has been alleged, Marquis of Mayo) by King Philip II of Spain. Theobald's son, Walter, (Gualtero) was admitted as Novice Knight, Military Order of Santiago 1607.

It is interesting that a descendant of the same further (Oughter) branch of this family was received into the Anglican Church, taking Holy Orders and altering his name to Burgh. His son, Ulysses, also became an Anglican clergyman and was Rector of Grean and Killeely in 1672, and Dean of Emily in 1685. When King James II (1685-88) came to the throne Ulysses stood his ground and would not go over to the Roman Catholic side. As a consequence supporters loyal to the new King partly burnt the family seat of Dromkeen. The Reverend Ulysses Burgh supported William of Orange. When William advanced to the siege of Limerick Ulysses received him at Dromkeen. He was rewarded by the King by receiving the appointment of Bishop of Ardagh on 8 September 1692. Absorbing as this story is, it must be left for the more relevant account of the descendants of the Clanricarde, or MacWilliam Eighter, branch to which the family being described claims a closer link.

References (25) Edwards, R.Dudley, Page 35. See (13), page 13.

(26) Edwards-Rees, Desiree. Page 59. See (9), page 7.

(27) Edwards, R.Dudley, Page 56. See (13), page 13.

(28) MacCurtain, Margaret, Tudor & Stuart Ireland. Page 42.

(29) Gibbs, Vicary, Page 228. See (21), page 13.

(30) Ibid.

(31) Ibid.

(32) Edwards, R.Dudley, Page 73. See (13), page 13.

(33) MacGeoghegan, Abbe James. Page 438. See (2), page 3.

(34) Edwards-Rees, Desiree. Page 65. See (9), page 7.

(35) Edwards, R.Dudley, Page 135. See (13), page 13.

(36) Bingham, Sir George, Memoirs of the Bingham, (1915 Spottiswood & Co.Ltd, London) by Rose E McCalmont. Edited by CRB Barrett. Page 70.

(37) Ibid. Page 71.

(38) White, Terence de Vere. Page 272. See (8), page 7.

(39) O'Hart, John, Irish Pedigrees, or the Origin and Stem of the Irish Nation (James Duffy & Sons, Dublin 1887). Page 803.

(40) MacGeoghegan, Abbe James. Page 487. See (2), page 3.

(41) Ibid.

(42) Ibid, Page 536. (43) Ibid. Page 543. (44) Ibid. Page 488/9.

(45) Burke, Sir Bernard. Page 338. See (16), page 13.