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Making Ireland English: the Irish Aristocracy in the Seventeenth Century

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Patrick Little

This is a monumental book, covering 91 noble families and 311 individual noblemen in 17 chapters of 482 pages of text and 89 pages of endnotes. The supporting material includes 19 plates, ten maps, 31 tables, ten figures and six appendices. As is appropriate for one of the most prominent Irish university teachers of the period, the book is not only based on Professor Ohlmeyer's own work (notably her biography of the 1st marquess of Antrim and her projects on the statute staple, the Irish legal system and the 1641 Depositions), but also draws on a wide variety of research by other scholars and students, published as books and articles (some ancient or obscure), or unpublished as dissertations and theses. The synthesis of all this material into a comprehensive survey of the entire Irish aristocracy over a century is an astonishing achievement. It deserves to be widely read by academics and non-academics alike.

The book is divided into three parts. The first, dealing thematically with the 'reconstruction' of the Irish peerage in the early decades of the century, comprises chapters on the establishment of a 'composite peerage' by the early Stuarts and the emergence of a 'service nobility' over the century as a whole; the growth of a sense of royal service and honour, which counteracted the traditional Irish noble values of blood and social status; the importance of changing patterns of landownership; and the complications caused by

religious division within the elite. The second part provides a chronological overview of the politics of the nobility, covering the interaction between the nobility and the royal court early in the century, the peerage in parliament before 1641, the crisis caused by the wars of the three kingdoms and the Cromwellian occupation that followed, and finally the land settlement after 1660 and the politics of the restoration period, up to the 'Glorious Revolution' and the reign of William III. The third part reverts to a thematic approach, this time looking at 'the vertical bonds that sustained the peerage' (p. 14), including wealth and income, expenditure and debt, lordship, patronage and the upbringing of children, and finally the treatment of death and the importance of funerals. Together, these chapters provide a treasure trove of information, especially about the financial position of the nobility, their social and family lives, and their attitudes to allegiance, kinship and honour. Through the deft use of case studies, and the inclusion of just the right amount of context for each peer, the nobles emerge as real people, with diverse characters and concerns. Above all, the book provides a satisfying collective portrait of an often diverse noble community as it reacted to, and influenced, the upheavals of 17th-century Ireland.

The overall argument of the book, as its title suggests, is that the 17th century saw the 'Anglicisation' of the aristocracy, as part of a wider agenda by a succession of monarchs and rulers to make Ireland more like England. As Professor Ohlmeyer puts it: 'the peers, who comprised Ireland's leading developers, entrepreneurs, landlords, patrons, politicians and soldiers, were remarkably effective instruments of English imperialism', and they 'profoundly shaped the face of early modern Ireland' (p. 475). The book thus provides the aristocratic dimension to more general accounts of Anglicisation, such as Nicholas Canny's *Making Ireland British, 1580-1650*.⁽¹⁾ Ohlmeyer is certainly justified in her claim, made in the conclusion, that 'this book puts the titled peerage' at the centre of these developments' (p. 475). There is also a commendable attempt to widen the focus still further, by comparing the Irish experience with that of the Scottish and European nobilities, notably those of Bohemia and Hungary. These wider contexts enrich the book, and add to its value for teaching and further research.

In order to provide a comprehensive treatment of the whole nobility, and to allow broader conclusions to be developed, Ohlmeyer is eager to emphasise that the Irish aristocracy formed a single unit 'an aggregate of 91 families' (p. 2). Despite conceding that their stories were 'complex, and, at times, contradictory' (p. 3), and accepting that there were 'tiers of lordship' (p. 50), the basic unity of the peerage is emphasised throughout the chapters. Thus in the first half of the century, 'loyalty to the person of the king, a shared sense of honour, common landed and political interest together with social and economic interdependencies, held together a peerage of mixed ethnicity and faith' (p. 135). The unity of the Irish House of Lords in opposition to the crown during 1640-1 can be explained by the same process: 'as the peerage coalesced as a social and cultural group, the nobles became increasingly politically integrated' (p. 248). The years after the mid-century upheavals continued this process, and the aristocracy became 'a more coherent body, with a communal identity' (p. 482).

Yet this theme of growing unity sits uncomfortably with the massive and insuperable division caused by religion ? an infection which might become skinned over in times of peace, but which erupted in times of political tension or war. The peerage may have been united for a brief period in 1640?¹, but by the winter of 1641?² they were ?fracturing along sectarian lines? (p. 248). The reign of James II and the wars that followed proved equally unpleasant. Religious division gets short shrift here. It is significant that the chapter on religion is one of the shortest in the book (34 pages), and that the treatment is sparse compared with those on landholding (51 pages) or income and expenditure (59 pages in two chapters), for example. Despite the admission that ?their faith was central to the identity of many of these Catholic peers? (p. 136), and of ?fundamental importance? (p. 167) to lords of all persuasions, the underlying argument is that religious differences were not socially or politically divisive, as they were readily subsumed beneath wider aristocratic codes of behaviour. As Ohlmeyer puts it, ?notions of honour? meant that ?many lords respected the faith of their fellow peers?, and that ?by maintaining this respectful distance the peers muted some of the very real confessional animosities and sectarian hatreds that otherwise characterised this century.' In short, even when it came to matters of faith the peers managed to co-exist and operate as a ?community of honour? (pp. 167?⁸).

The direct evidence presented for such ?toleration? is in fact very thin ? being derived from the letters from the Roman Catholic Archbishop Oliver Plunkett to the Vatican, concerning the surely atypical attitude of the Moores of Drogheda after the Restoration. Religious tensions are played down in other chapters. Incidents of inter-marriage may have been ?remarkably widespread?, but that does not necessarily imply toleration, or a discounting of religious difference in favour of elevated social status (chapter six). Instead mixed marriage might well point towards a barely-concealed sectarian desire to ?save? ancient peerages from Catholicism ? to Protestantise rather than Anglicise. That was certainly the attitude of the Calvinist 1st earl of Cork. Conversely, many Catholic parents were eager to marry within the faith, and consistent failure to do so does not imply that this was an easy or comfortable choice, but one borne of economic necessity. This ties in with the evidence presented in chapters 11 and 12, on the restoration, when all but a handful of the richest Catholic peers experienced ?a period of absolute crisis? and ultimate eclipse (p. 477). Perhaps the process of ?creating a Protestant Ascendancy? (p. 357) was already in train from 1660, rather than being a product of the Williamite Wars of 1690?¹.

Such criticisms should not detract from the immense value of this rich and varied book. And Professor Ohlmeyer is surely right in her prediction that its publication will inspire a new generation of scholars not only to explore Irish society in different ways but also to engage in ?genuinely comparative ?three kingdoms? history? (p. 479).

Notes

1. Nicholas Canny, *Making Ireland British, 1580?1650* (Oxford, 2001).[Back to \(1\)](#)

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