

Cromwellian Ireland: English Government and Reform in Ireland, 1649-1660

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Peter Gaunt

It is a pleasure to welcome back into print Toby Barnard's detailed study of what the back-cover blurb refers to as 'the constructive side of English policy in Ireland during a formative period'. First published in 1975 and widely praised at the time, it had long been out of print. Available once again, it comprises in the main a straight reissue of that first edition, with its original text unchanged and unrevised. However, a completely new foreword has been added, a 'historiographical essay', which in twenty, heavily footnoted pages seeks to reflect 'on how work in the intervening period might modify or correct the original'. In the mould of other, recently reissued studies of the mid seventeenth century - one thinks of John Morrill's *Revolt of/in the Provinces* and Ronald Hutton's *The Royalist War Effort*, for example - this work is, then, something of a hybrid of old and new, with a freshly-propagated bloom grafted onto the trusty old stock, rather than a completely revised text. This begs a number of related questions - principally about the strengths, limitations and importance of the original text, returning to it anew a quarter of a century after it first appeared, but also more briefly about how well and how fully the new introductory chapter brings the volume up to date.

There is no doubting the enormous strengths and qualities of the original work. Despite the limitations of surviving primary source material, caused especially but not exclusively by the destruction wreaked in Dublin in 1922, Barnard was able to hunt down and to draw upon a very varied and now widely scattered range of evidence to produce a clear, coherent and generally convincing account of some aspects of English government policy in and towards Ireland during the interregnum, with an emphasis on the often traditional and positive nature of that policy. But it is important at the outset to recognise that Barnard's coverage was neither full nor even. Because of the limitations of the surviving sources and/or of time and space, some very extensive fields were largely or wholly omitted from the book.

Although the reactions to English policy of many of the landed, mercantile, religious and military elites are studied and form a core theme, Barnard acknowledges at the outset that there is very little here about how the ordinary Protestant and Catholic Irish responded to governmental initiatives, regretting that lack of sources precluded an assessment of 'lower-class' reactions. There is material aplenty, albeit incomplete, on the various land seizures and resettlements which occurred in Ireland during these years, and which saw Catholics dispossessed and relocated in favour of Protestant soldiers and civilians, but Barnard chose not to cover this huge subject here, presumably on grounds of space and because it had been extensively explored in other published works, including the closing chapters of Karl Bottigheimer's *English Money and Irish Land*, which had appeared shortly before in 1971. Whilst this deliberate omission is understandable, it left this study of English policy towards Ireland incomplete, 'a *Hamlet* without the prince', as one of the reviewers of the 1975 edition put it. Similarly, there is little here on land management, farming and agriculture. The focus throughout is upon the nature and application of English governmental policy and the reaction of power-groups in Ireland to it, rather than upon the administrative process itself. Thus there is little on the practice and operation of the governmental process, on how the commissioners, councillors and other officials, from the lord lieutenant or lord deputy downwards, operated on a day-to-day basis and ran the Irish government and administration.

There is also an uneven temporal coverage of the interregnum. Military campaigns are almost entirely excluded, so there is nothing here on the campaigns of Oliver Cromwell and Henry Ireton, nothing on the storming of Drogheda and Wexford, the sieges of Clonmel or Limerick, or, indeed, on the more limited military operations later in the decade. Understandably, therefore, there is a fairly thin coverage of the years 1649-51, when the emphasis was upon military reconquest rather than civilian government and administration. But there is also little here on the closing year of the decade, from the enforced resignation of Henry Cromwell in spring 1659 to the Restoration, a period which at one point Barnard rather unfortunately likens to the 'anarchy of Fleetwood's regime' - though elsewhere this study successfully demonstrates that, whatever its limitations and failures, 'anarchy' is hardly the right word for Fleetwood's governorship. Aidan Clarke's *Prelude to Restoration in Ireland: The End of the Commonwealth, 1659-60* (1999), which appeared shortly before this volume was reissued and which is noted and briefly discussed in the new opening chapter, now provides a compelling and detailed account of Ireland over precisely this period, picking up in spring 1659 where Barnard acknowledges his own study 'tails off'. At the heart of Barnard's assessment is a thematic study of the policies adopted and applied during the governorships of Ireland of Charles Fleetwood from summer 1652 until his departure in September 1655 and of Henry Cromwell from then until he, too, left Ireland in spring 1659. Cromwell's governorship is explored rather more deeply than Fleetwood's, probably a reflection of the richer and more detailed surviving source material of the latter half of the 1650s and perhaps also of Barnard's tendency to see Cromwell as the more successful of the two, arguing that while radicalism, militarism and imposition marked the Fleetwood years, moderation, civilianisation and greater sensitivity to the needs of the established Protestant Irish population characterised Henry Cromwell's period in charge.

After two preliminary chapters, summarising the treatment of Ireland by England down to 1649 and charting the changing structure and personnel of the English government in Dublin during the interregnum, the 1975 text embarks upon a series of substantial accounts of different aspects of policy - state finance and commerce, the treatment of the boroughs, propagation of the gospel, ecclesiastical reform, education, the advancement of learning, and the administration and reform of the law - most of which are strongly analytical, persuasive and draw upon a wealth of primary source material. All these principal chapters are broken down into half a dozen or more sub-sections, exploring particular periods or sub-themes.

A number of recurring features emerge from these assessments. Firstly, Barnard demonstrates the very mixed results of English policy for Ireland during the 1650s, much of which he portrays as rather cautious, the application of traditional early Stuart policy in a new context and sometimes with a new vigour, rather than of completely new initiatives. In some areas, there were considerable achievements, some transitory, others more lasting and setting the tone for Ireland during the Protestant ascendancy - an improvement in corn production and in sheep and cattle stocks during the 1650s; the reestablishment from 1656 of civilian

urban administration under new charters, creating or cementing an enduring Protestant monopoly of town government; the marked recovery of Dublin and its increasing dominance of Irish trade, laying the foundation for Dublin's prosperity and pre-eminence in the post-Restoration era; the conservative religious settlement sought or achieved by Henry Cromwell after 1655, which entailed reorganising and amalgamating parishes to increase the salaries of incumbents (a reorganisation renewed and repeated after the Restoration), breaking the power of the Baptists and ending their dominance, seeking in the late 1650s a broad Protestant settlement based upon a tithe-maintained ministry organised on semi-Presbyterian lines, and conciliating the Ulster Presbyterians, so bringing a stronger if still fragile peace and security to that part of Ireland; and the restoration from 1655-6 of the established central judicial system, based on the Four Courts, and the established forms of local justice and administration, based on the commission of the peace. It is noticeable that many of these achievements were secured or became apparent during the latter half of the 1650s, after Henry Cromwell had replaced Fleetwood in Dublin. But against this, Barnard produces a long and, at times, rather depressing list of failures - the continuing and unresolved inadequacy of government income during the interregnum, portrayed here as 'the foremost reason for the failure of much of the Cromwellians' reforming programme' in other areas; continuing official restrictions upon Irish trade and manufacture lest they undermine England's interests, and a failure to regulate or reform the debased coinage of Ireland; the weakening of many provincial towns caused by the physical expulsion of Catholics or at least their exclusion from trade and administration, and the failure to attract to the towns substantial numbers of Protestant planters to replace them; the rise of Baptism in English garrisons and amongst the army in the first half of the 1650s, bitterly dividing Protestants in Ireland and encouraging the spread of sentiments hostile to the Protectorate, creating for a time 'a major political danger'; the continuing divisions amongst and between many of the Irish Protestant groups through the later 1650s and the failure of the English administration to launch any real effort to win over the majority Irish Catholic population, torn instead between persecution or persuasion, between attempting to crush the Irish language or using it to try to convert the native Irish Catholics; and the failure to advance education in Ireland, with the often good intentions of the English administration stymied by lack of resources. As Barnard summarises it in the closing words of the book, in most respects the Cromwellians' Irish policy 'continued in its conventional pattern, occasionally improving on the record of the Stuarts and the Church of Ireland, more often falling short'.

Secondly, Barnard exposes the sharp differences between the key individuals and groups who were involved or who wished to be involved in running Ireland during the 1650s. He shows that little love was often lost between the various Protestant sects and leaders in Ireland, and brings out the differences and antagonisms between the religious figures Samuel Winter and Edward Worth, between the administrators William Petty and Benjamin Worsley, even between different members and cliques within the Irish council of state. But most obviously and most importantly, he ably demonstrates the deep divisions between Charles Fleetwood and Henry Cromwell as governors of Ireland, seen in the very different approaches and policies which they adopted, and also seen in the hostility, if not between the two men themselves, at least between their supporters and allies. Where Fleetwood was tolerant of the spread of Baptism in the English army in Ireland, an approach which one contemporary claimed made him 'not fit for government', a judgement Barnard sees as 'harsh but true', Cromwell quickly broke from the Baptists and, after a year-long struggle, succeeded in breaking their hold on the army and as a political force. In the process, he moved away from the often novel and semi-military administration favoured or allowed by Fleetwood, and moved to a return to traditional, civilian forms, even where in the process promising reforms were stifled. For example, Barnard praises the judicial reforms introduced early in the interregnum by John Cook, often springing from the period of Oliver Cromwell's campaign, and says that 'the chance of radical reform receded' when in the mid 1650s Henry Cromwell restored the traditional forms of central and local justice and administration. Indeed, Henry Cromwell's general approach to Ireland is portrayed as moderate, conservative - witness his plans to restore something approaching a national church directly funded by tithes - and more sensitive to the needs of Ireland than to English ideologies. His aim, partly achieved, was to win the trust and support of the established Irish Protestants and to tie them more closely to the Cromwellian Protectorate, altogether very different from Fleetwood's approach, loyal Cromwellian though he appeared. Thus in many key areas of policy, 1655 marked a clear turning point in the interregnum regimes' treatment of Ireland.

Thirdly, Barnard shows how the continuing control of the London-based regimes over the Dublin administrations and over Irish policy often hindered or undermined the government of Ireland. Early in the interregnum legislation covering various secular and ecclesiastical areas of government in Ireland was not initiated or passed in the unrealised expectation that a comprehensive Act of Union would be produced. Repeated requests from Dublin that the English government take action to reform the debased Irish coinage and to protect Ireland and its shipping from pirates fell on deaf ears. Even worse was the ambiguity in the government of Ireland that the Lord Protector created in the mid 1650s. Although in summer 1655 Henry Cromwell effectively replaced the departing Fleetwood as governor of Ireland, the latter remained lord deputy until September 1657 and even then Cromwell was not immediately commissioned lord deputy in his stead. He was thus denied full authority at a time when he badly needed it to overcome the Baptist threat, while Fleetwood retained some powers and served as a focus and rallying point for Henry (and Oliver) Cromwell's opponents in Ireland. Barnard justifiably describes this situation, created by the Lord Protector's failure fully to grasp the nettle and support his son, as 'one of his least satisfactory compromises'.

All these points are clearly and convincingly made and have rightly won broad support and acceptance; the reviews of the 1975 edition were all strongly or overwhelmingly positive. We might regret the absence here of a (re)assessment of the landownership and land settlement issue during the interregnum, and the results of the various policies so ably detailed by Barnard do not always appear as 'constructive' as some of the broader statements might imply, but few significant weaknesses are apparent in the 1975 text.

Very occasionally, but particularly in regard to religious affairs, Barnard seems to push the boat a little too far out, to suggest that, given rather more time or slightly different circumstances, Henry Cromwell could have achieved really great things. For example, he implies that the alliance which Cromwell was forging near the end of his time in Ireland with the mainly Presbyterian ministers in Ulster and a powerful group comprising many former Anglicans in Munster might have prepared the way for and made possible a broad settlement of the Protestant church in Ireland, much broader than that imposed by the returning Church of Ireland at the Restoration - 'great things might have been achieved, had Henry Cromwell not fallen so soon'. Similarly, he suggests that if Henry and his predecessor had adopted a more sympathetic and evangelistic policy towards the majority Catholic population, mass conversion may have been possible - the Cromwellian conquest had afforded 'a unique opportunity' and 'had the Cromwellians followed their harsh measures by vigorous evangelisation in Irish the hold of Catholicism might have been loosened'. He returns to this theme in the concluding chapter, asserting that evidence 'suggest[s] that Ireland, even in the 1650s, was not yet lost to Protestantism and that Cromwellian policy could have succeeded' in mass conversion. However, other accounts, and indeed some of the sources cited here by Barnard himself, indicate that even with more time at his disposal, the deep divisions between the various Protestant groups in Ireland would have prevented or wrecked the sort of broad Protestant settlement towards which Henry Cromwell may have been moving in 1658-9, and that Catholicism was so deeply entrenched in mid seventeenth century Ireland that even an earlier and more vigorous programme of conversion, beginning as soon as the military reconquest was complete and undertaken sympathetically and in the vernacular tongue, would have fallen well short of loosening the hold of Catholicism.

Amidst these tightly analytical chapters, sharply focused on English policy for Ireland and on its application and consequences, Barnard includes a more speculative chapter, on 'The Advancement of Learning', which seems to be moving away from the main theme of the book, and along an interesting if somewhat inconclusive tangent. This chapter explores the reception and spread of a new scientific spirit among a small group in interregnum Ireland, tracing the role and work of a circle of men around Samuel Hartlib who had imbibed a new scientific and intellectual approach and who were able to put those ideas into practice via public or private employment in Ireland during the 1650s. The lives, work and achievements of half a dozen or so of these figures are explored and recounted here. Many were for a time employed by the state - most obviously William Petty - and some were personally close to Henry Cromwell, but the evidence that the Dublin government in general or Henry Cromwell in particular was deeply involved in or committed to the new intellectual ideas is far from compelling, Barnard himself confessing that 'there is no evidence that in using Hartlib's friends he [Henry Cromwell] was endorsing their schemes of intellectual reform'. The whole

chapter seems a little airy and speculative, semi-detached from the tightly focused and rigorous analysis of government policy found in the adjoining chapters.

The brief concluding chapter to the 1975 text covers a number of themes, stressing that the English government in Dublin was not a free agent but was itself always controlled by Whitehall and Westminster, exploring briefly the different historical interpretations of the handling of Ireland during the interregnum, and reflecting upon the strengths and weaknesses, successes and failures of English policy for and in Ireland over these years. However, at the heart of the conclusion is an attempt to weigh up Charles Fleetwood and Henry Cromwell as governors. Fleetwood gets rather short shrift. Barnard does not contradict the traditionally low opinion of him - that 'he was an unfortunate choice for lord deputy. popular only among the extremists who made him their tool' - and suggests that, although in the main he was merely continuing policies already laid down before he came to Ireland, his 'conventional ideas' and lack of interest in formulating proposals for reform in Ireland ensured that little positive was achieved during his time in power. Barnard's assessment of Henry Cromwell is more substantial and warmer, though not as positive as that of some historians. The changing context of the governorships, with growing peace and stability, allowed Cromwell more room for manoeuvre than his predecessor, and permitted him to restore some more traditional forms of government which in turn contributed to 'greater stability and prosperity'. Barnard dismisses the portrait of Cromwell as a crypto-royalist as a distorted image peddled by himself and his friends after the Restoration and is also far from convinced by C H Firth's assessment that he had 'governed Ireland in the interest of all classes of colonists and all sections of Protestants', suggesting instead that his desire to break those allowed undue influence by Fleetwood pushed him into an unhealthy close alliance with one group in particular, the Old Protestant settlers, which 'damaged him in England', made it likely that further reforms would be 'cautious' though 'better attuned to Ireland's needs', and 'ultimately undermined his political position'. Moreover, like Fleetwood, Cromwell had few new answers to the problems of governing Ireland and, although there were some 'useful' if limited reforms, like his predecessor he largely continued existing policies and so left fundamental problems at best unresolved, at worst more complex and pressing. These assessments are strong and convincing and spring from valuable analysis contained in the body of the book. However, Barnard might have gone rather further here, and devoted more space to pulling material together, to assessing the two governors at greater length, to comparing and contrasting their characters, styles, approach and achievements. After all, there had been (and still are) no full-length studies of Henry Cromwell more recent than R W Ramsey's pleasant if rather uncritical biography of 1933 and there were and are none of Fleetwood. The conclusion to this study might have gone further towards filling this gap by providing fuller and deeper assessments of the two governors.

Lastly, what of the new foreword, the historiographical chapter added to bring the volume up to date? Barnard suggests that the few relevant primary sources and collections which have become available or more accessible since the original research and writing serve to strengthen and amplify rather than to change or correct his 1975 assessments. He notes and briefly summarises considerable new historical work on aspects of interregnum Ireland largely or wholly omitted here - the changing landownership and land settlements of the mid seventeenth century and the Cromwellian military campaign of 1649-50 - as well as Clarke's major study in *Prelude to Restoration* of the period after Henry Cromwell's departure that he had covered only sketchily. Apart from these works, which do not impinge greatly on the areas explored by the 1975 text, Barnard argues that 'Cromwellian Ireland has not attracted many new explorers'; unlike many other periods in Irish history, it 'has not been turned into a historiographical battlefield since 1975'. Assuredly, new work on medieval, early modern and modern Ireland, Britain and Europe has altered our perspectives on Ireland in the 1650s, in some ways, Barnard suggests, making that decade seem less unusual or pivotal and placing many of its key trends in firmer as well as longer contexts, though in other ways, he feels, it confirms the importance and 'idiosyncrasies' of the 1650s in Ireland. But, overall, he presents a strong case for the original text standing up pretty well at the close of the millennium, with its detailed exploration of some aspects of English policy in Ireland little affected by specialist new research and writing of the past quarter century. Instead, Barnard closes by pointing towards fruitful new areas of research which could change or are already changing the ways in which Ireland in the 1650s may be approached and interpreted - work on the 'British' nature of the mid seventeenth century, opening up new perspectives on how Ireland and the Irish were

viewed and viewed themselves, on local history and localism, exploring how different regions and groups within Ireland were affected by or exerted 'contrasting centrifugal and centripetal forces', on religion, religious groups and beliefs, and on the origins and nature of republicanism and the history of ideas in Ireland. Such work will undoubtedly change the context of Cromwellian Ireland, perhaps substantially, but it is most unlikely to supersede or to render redundant this outstanding study of the English government of Ireland in the 1650s. It is a pleasure to welcome it back.

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