The Fortified House: Warfare in late Medieval Ireland

The Changing Face of Warfare in late Medieval Ireland

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To further appreciate the emergence of the fortified house, it is necessary to examine warfare in late medieval Ireland and the impact of a developing and inchoate English nation state. Ireland at the turn of the seventeenth century was described by an observer of the ill-fated Armada in 1588, Captain Francisco Cuellar as a kingdom where there was *'no justice no law everyone does exactly what he wishes'* (Morgan 2004, 94). The evolution of England as both an Atlantic and a strong naval power with a centralized bureaucracy led inevitably to the re-conquest of Ireland in the seventeenth century. As a result of this conquest Ireland underwent a social and economic transformation with immense and tragic consequences (Porter 1994).

The principle revolution in late medieval warfare was the successful use of gun powder in siege and field artillery. The first recorded use of artillery in Ireland was in 1488, by the eighth earl of Kildare, Garret Mor Fitzgerald (Kerrigan 1995). Artillery was generally beyond the economic reach of the nobility; military technology gravitated to and reinforced the political center (Porter 1994). The Kildares controlled most of the limited amount of artillery in Ireland. As keepers of the royal ordnance, this was used to advance their own political power. In the early decades of the sixteenth century the Kildares as lord deputies attacked castles through out Ireland with the aid of artillery (Kerrigan 1999).

Towards the end of the sixteenth century they engaged in open rebellion, James Maurice Fitzgerald (1568-73), and the Earl of Desmond (1579-83), attempted a defensive course by retreating into their strongholds only to be taken by the English with their superior guns and siege work (Saunders 1989). Such weapons rendered anyone who relied on walled castles for defence vulnerable to attack. The cost and organizational effort of procuring and maintaining large stocks of artillery, or deploying infantry armed with muskets, spurred the centralization of political power. Consequently the uses of more sophisticated military operations were in effect monopolized by the Crown. The rising military power of the monarchy enabled them

to enforce internal order more effectively and quell rebellion. In Ireland unrest continued on into the seventeenth century.

English problems in Ireland were internal as well as external; internally the last decade of the sixteenth century was remarkable for the resistance of Gaelic Ireland to Queen Elizabeth's forces. Externally, there was an increased involvement by Spain in Irish affairs by assisting the Irish rebels and threatening to invade. The outbreak of war in Ulster in 1595, spread throughout Ireland after the victory at the Yellow Ford in 1598. The Irish rebellion had become more cohesive under Hugh O'Neil, second Earl of Tyrone. He had built up a disciplined Irish force armed with guns obtained from Scotland (Saunders 1989). Reconnaissance by Spanish military advisers to Ireland increased as the possibility of a landing became increasing tenable. In 1601, a Spanish force of over 3,000 landed in the town of Kinsale, Co. Cork. Months later they were joined by Irish forces and this combined Spanish-Irish force was defeated by a smaller better organized English army. The Irish were finally defeated in 1603, which resulted in mass confiscations of land, organized colonization, and a practice of rewarding loyal supporters and soldiers with estates following their military success (Prunty 2005). English law and administration began to supercede the authority of the Irish lords. According to Curl (1981), Irish social structures were undermined by changes in the bureaucracy, political, law, economic and military structures of authority.

Despite the defeat of Gaelic Ireland the Crown's authority was not secure. Many of the Irish followers of local chieftains had taken to the forests, hills and bogs where they waged guerrilla war on the colonists. Guerrilla war was nothing new to the Irish. At the close of the sixteenth century the Spanish studied Irish warfare and classified their tactics as guerrilla. '*They make war (O'Neill, O'Donnell) as the outlaws and bandits of Catalonia and Calabria do*,' Diego Brochero, the Spanish naval commander of Kinsale, wrote to the king of Spain (Morgan 2004, 96). Intermittent resistance to the colonists continued. In Britain with the accession of the Stuarts and the Union of the Scottish and English crown, there was an accommodation with Spain and a reduction of tension with Scotland.

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The only part of the kingdom where there was ongoing tension and where fortifications were still being built in large numbers during the early half of the seventeenth century was Ireland. Fortifications were constructed for the defence of colonists in Ulster, against raiding parties. These often took the form of enclosed towns, as at Coleraine, Carrickfergus and Belfast were towns surrounded by earthen ramparts and flanking bastions, while Londonderry was fortified with walls and towers. The colonists settled in and around small forts, such as Charlemont Fort, built in 1602. In the countryside there were fortified houses in abundance, often with a defensible bawn flanked by corner towers (Saunders 1989). The outline scheme for the Tyrone Plantation stipulated that the land was to be divided among undertakers in 'Proportions' and that the 'Proportions' were to be protected by a stone or brick house with a strong bawn around it (Curl 1981). It was not only in Ulster that fortifications were being built.

Fortifications and fortified houses were erected throughout the country. Ballyshannon, in Kildare is a fine example of early seventeenth-century fortifications in Ireland. The houses of the loyal Irish elite took on the plan and functions of military structures. Rectangular, central blocks with projecting corner towers were common. The towers were clearly loop holed for guns. Mallow, Ightermurragh, Dromaneen, Ballyannan and Monkstown Castles in Co. Cork show how widely disparate the plan-type of a fortified house could be in the early seventeenth century. A fine example of a fortified house is Portumna Castle built in 1618 in Co. Galway; it combines classical detail with defensive features. Rathfarnham is an early example built around 1590: it is one of a number of fortified houses built on a plan, consisting of a central block with towers at each corner.

Some fortified house owners/builders continued the Irish tradition of fortification with water and earthwork to provide an extra layer of defence and security (Kerrigan 1995). It is noteworthy that the fortified house type-plan was used in the construction of an Anglo-French mini-fort in an expedition establishing a trade settlement in modern South Carolina in 1630 (Hume 1994). A central block with corner-towers combined with wall, earth and water defence was used as a very effect fortification in the early seventeenth-century American frontier. That of Charlemont, built in 1622-4, by lord Cawfield, Master of the Ordnance in Ireland was one of the most

accomplished. The house was a domestic building of early seventeenth-century English style, consisting of three storeys and large windows on each floor. The only military detailing are its ornate battlemented parapets, it was situated within a square earthwork area with regular bastions at each corner and palisade on the counterscarp of the ditch.

Bartizan – provided flanking & covering fire
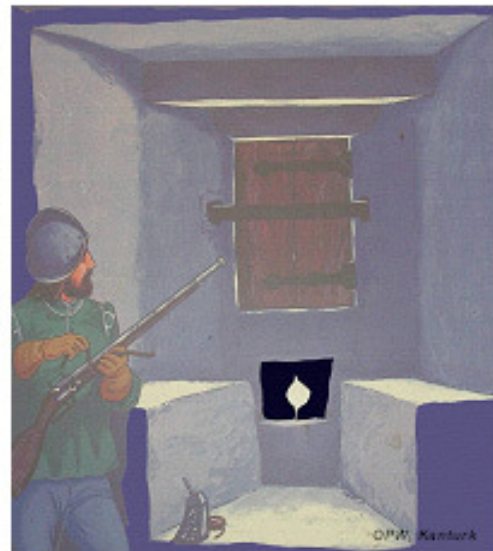
Numerous gun loop types exist on county Cork houses

As the centralization of power in Ireland was becoming more ubiquitous and efficient the main military threats to the Crown in the early decades of the seventeenth century were still an invasion from a foreign power, rebellion or localized guerrilla activity. There was considerable expenditure on coastal forts, involving rebuilding and repairs, between 1608 and 1611. A number of smaller garrisons in the midlands and those guarding important waterway routes and crossings received repairs and upgrades. The most important forts controlling the midlands were, Philipstown and Maryborough. On the Shannon the principal forts were Carrick-on-Shannon and Ballyleague (Lanesborough). To protect themselves against local rebellion and intermittent guerrilla activity, the wealthy elite built fortified residences.

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A list of ordnance in Ireland in 1611 from the Carew Manuscript provides information on the distribution of artillery at the various forts, garrisons and larger towns. It also provides information on the importance of perceived threats. The heavier caliber guns were at the primary sea ports and coastal forts, including cannon, demi-cannon of brass, culverins of brass and iron. Smaller guns such as demi-culverins, sakers, minions, falcons and falconets of brass or iron were also listed at these places and at forts in the midlands and Ulster. The latter forts were poorly armed but considered strong enough to resist guerrilla attack (Kerrigan 1995), e.g. the artillery at Philipstown was a minion and one falcon, at Maryborough two robinets. The priority for the Crown during the first decades of the seventeenth century was protection against foreign invasion. The internal threat of rebellion was ever present. Localized rebellion and guerrilla activity were an Irish reality, although both were seen as being containable by the presence of fortifications, artillery, guns and garrisons.

The 1641 the rising in Ulster against the Crown engulfed the whole country and eventually became part of the English Civil War, when the various factions in Ireland united in an alliance in favour of the Royalist cause. This lasted until 1652, and resulted in the complete conquest of Ireland. Oliver Cromwell and the New Model Army crushed all opposition in Ireland with a fervent militarism never before seen. On the rebel/royalist side many of the Irish combat soldiers involved in this campaign had seen service in the Thirty Years' War in Europe. They brought with them to Ireland experience in fortification construction and siege craft. Contemporary accounts refer to the construction of fortifications, including earthwork defences surrounding castles and fortified houses (Kerrigan 1999).

Once in Ireland the opposing armies found there was a chronic shortage of heavy artillery along with difficulty in transporting what artillery there was because of the extensive amount of woodland, bog and no roads in some parts of the country (Loeber 1999). Rivers were commonly used to transport artillery and supply garrisons. Accounts of siege tactics reveal much about the technique of warfare. Prior to the 1641 rebellion, the Irish, when attacking fortifications and fortified houses, were not always able to capture them. As most attacks would have been made without the use artillery it would have been difficult to destroy the walls and make an assault. Capture

had to depend on treachery, surprise or siege. A very well stocked and sited fortification with a resolute garrison could often put up an impressive resistance.

Following 1641, warfare had evolved, more and larger artillery was used. Fortifications could not withstand a heavy artillery attack and the majority of artillery sieges eventually led to surrender. It was the dawn of modern warfare, centralized political power and the development of a cohesive and disciplined fighting force. The important military innovations centered on organizational initiatives. This saw the rise of permanent professional armies under state control. The military revolution thus precipitate a bureaucratic revolution: governments formed war offices. Civilian bureaucracies evolved to manage military production and supply.

Finance departments were created to overhaul and rationalization the costs of war (Porter 2004). Therefore in Ireland, war was total, decisive and inevitably followed by colonization and the subsequent bureaucratic administration that this necessitated. The New Model Army became the most powerful and most modern organization in England. Cromwell's brutal campaigns against the Irish and Scottish rebels reflected the fanatical militarism of his power, but they were important steps toward the eventual territorial unification of a larger British state (Porter 2004).