

## Oliver Cromwell: Tyranny of 1649

*(This is the first in a two-part series on Oliver Cromwell)*

There is a street in Drogheda named after Oliver Cromwell's work there; it is called Scarlett Lane for the blood which flowed down its streets. Why was Cromwell in Ireland and why in Drogheda?



Oliver Cromwell came to Ireland in 1649 as head of the English army that was given the task of suppressing those Royalists who wanted to restore the English monarchy. The monarch, Charles I, had been beheaded in 1649 after losing a civil war to the forces of Parliament. Of course, many still had loyalty to the king and his son whom they wanted to install as Charles II, and many of those loyalists were in Ireland. Not only was there Irish support for a monarchy, but also there was hope that Charles II would repay the Irish for its support by granting freedom of worship to the Roman Catholics. The first order of business of the new Council of State which succeeded the monarchy as ruler of England was to regain control of Ireland, and Oliver Cromwell, who had proven himself an able military commander during the civil war, was sent to Ireland to reestablish suzerainty over Ireland.

Arriving in Dublin on August 15, 1649, Cromwell thrilled the crowd at his welcoming with a promise to carry on "the great work against the barbarous and blood-thirsty Irish." He chose an assault on Drogheda, north of Dublin, as a useful lesson to all of Ireland that if they resist his assertion of English control of Ireland there would be an "effusion of blood." Drogheda, located on the River Boyne, was well fortified by a wall which surrounded it. Its defenses were led by Sir Arthur Aston with 3000 Royalists. Cromwell had 8000 troops, called his Ironsides, disciplined, daring, fanatical, and papist hating, and the best artillery of the time which easily breached the fortified walls of Drogheda. As customary, Cromwell asked for the city's surrender with the promise of no reprisals. Aston refused to surrender, and the assault began on September 11, 1649. First, the Church of St. Mary was subject to bombardment and later St. Peter's Church was set afire. When found, Aston was bludgeoned to death by his own wooden leg. The defenders put up a vigorous defense but when Drogheda fell, 3500 defenders and civilians of the city had been killed. Captured soldiers were sent to Barbados, and those brought to Dublin as prisoners were assigned backbreaking and dangerous work with scant rations, no shoes, no shelter, and tattered clothes. The lucky ones were sent to the West Indies. Hence, in Drogheda there is a street named Scarlett.

After the crushing of Drogheda, Cromwell gave this characterization of his actions there: *This is a righteous judgment of God upon these barbarous wretches, who have imbrued their hands in so much innocent blood.... it will tend to prevent the effusion of blood for the future, which are satisfactory grounds to such actions, which otherwise work remorse and regret.* This speech allows the reader into Cromwell's motivations for his harsh actions in Drogheda, and indeed in Ireland as a whole. He refers to Irish hands "imbrued in blood." This is a reference to a rising in Ireland in 1641. Soon after the rising, there arose a legend in England which Cromwell, his Ironsides and most Englishmen believed that up to 200,000 English settlers in Ireland were massacred by the Irish. Stories of men being roasted and eaten alive, of women being put into leaky boats and set out to sea to drown, and of children murdered in front of their parents and such like gruesome tales were circulated and taken as truth by the general English population. From his bench, Justice John Cook declared that all Irish men and women living on October 23, 1641 or born in Ireland since that date were traitors and should be punished. Cromwell, a believer of this rubbish, addressed the Irish people in these words: *They [Englishmen] lived peaceable and honestly among you; you had equal benefits of the protection of England with them, and equal justice from the law.... You broke the union. You, unprovoked, put the English to the most unheard of and most barbarous massacre without respect of sex or age, that ever the sun beheld, and at a time when Ireland was in perfect peace, and when, through the exercise of English industry, through commerce and traffic, that which was in the natives hands was better to them than if all Ireland had been in their possession and not an Englishman in it.* Sad it was for Ireland that Cromwell believed a fiction. Atonia Fraser in her biography of Cromwell says that there is no historical evidence that a massacre took place during the 1641 rising. Legend had created a massacre and gave Oliver Cromwell justification for his vengeful assaults on Irish cities.

Parliament was so pleased with the slaughter at Drogheda that on October 2, 1649 it instituted a Thanksgiving Day: *The House does approve of the execution done at Drogheda as an act both of justice to them [the slain] and mercy to others who may be warned by it.*

Wexford fell next. 2500 Irish were killed, including 250 women and 250 children. Five Franciscan priests and two friars were burned to death when the Franciscan Friary was put to the torch. Cromwell said about Wexford: *I thought it not right or good to restrain off the soldiers from their right of pillage, or from doing execution on the enemy.* That Cromwell was unfeeling or even hostile toward Catholic clergy is evident in many of his actions and statements. When Cromwell next assaulted New Ross, the city leaders surrendered but asked for liberties of conscience. Cromwell's reply tells us

much about his attitude toward Catholics: *I meddle not with any man's conscience. But if you mean a liberty to exercise the Mass. ..that will not be allowed of.* Cromwell exemplified the anti-Catholicism of his age. Even before the Parliament which executed Charles I, Catholics were not tolerated and priests had bounties on their heads. A dead priest or a captured priest was worth twenty pounds. One priest wrote this poem in hope for a better future:

*The Gaels are being wasted and deeply wounded  
Subjugated, slain, extirpated,  
By plague, by famine, by war, by persecution.  
Then shall Erin be freed from settlers.  
Then shall perish the English tongue.  
The Gaels in arms shall triumph  
Over the crafty, thieving false set of Calvin.*

It would be many centuries before the dream of this poet was to be partly realized.

Cromwell with his Ironsides and his artillery defeated the garrison at Arklow, overthrew Inniscorty, forced Cork to capitulate, and conquered Fethard, Cashel, and Carrick and negotiated the surrender of Kilkenny. Waterford, Galway and Limerick held out but by 1652 almost all resistance was overcome and the Articles of Kilkenny signed.

As in our own time when atrocities are committed in the name of God, Oliver Cromwell often invoked God in his bloody work in Ireland. Cromwell (born 1599) experienced a conversion in his twenties. His was a conversion to a Puritan spirituality which was in the Calvinist tradition, that is, that conversion was given to the elect few. Unlike Catholics who believe that grace can be imparted from without by sacraments like Baptism, Calvinists believed that only God can confer grace and does so selectively. Cromwell, like some people in our own time, felt that his orders came directly from God. He supported the liberty to choose one's own way to God but abhorred "the tyranny of Bishops," especially the Bishop of Rome. Likewise he rejected Scottish Presbyterianism and Anglican Episcopalianism. His attitudes explain this statement: *I shall not, where I have power, and the Lord is pleased to bless me, suffer the exercise of the Mass.... nor suffer you that are Papists....* and may help a reader to understand the culture which led the great essayist Thomas Carlyle to say *Oliver Cromwell came as a soldier of God the Just, terrible as Death, relentless as Doom doing God's judgment on the enemies of God.*

Mammon, too, might be a motivating force in Cromwell's zeal in Ireland . In 1642, a group of businessmen offered to finance a war against Ireland . These investors, called the Adventurers, were to be repaid with Irish land. Oliver Cromwell was one of the investors, purchasing 2000 pounds worth of debentures in this scheme. When Ireland was conquered, the Adventurers were rewarded when Ireland was "settled."

The Physician-General of the Army of Cromwell, Dr. William Petty, estimated that *about 504,000 of the Irish perished and were wasted by sword, plague, famine, hardship and banishment between 23<sup>rd</sup> October 1641 and the same day in 1652.* Put another way, the population of Ireland in 1641 was 1,448,000 and by 1652, 616,000 perished of which 504,000 were natives and 112,000 colonists and 40,000 soldiers left Ireland to join armies on the continent.

Oliver Cromwell left Ireland on May 26, 1650. Only nine months in Ireland , Cromwell gave birth to death, exile, persecution, indentured slavery, and a form of 17<sup>th</sup> century ethnic cleansing. His name is forever associated by the Irish people with fevered anti-Catholicism and a burning hatred for the Irish people. Cromwell's Settlement plan for Ireland can be fairly judged as being even more harmful to Ireland than his blood letting in 1649.

*[Part 2 of this series will deal with the settlement of Ireland.]*

(Written by John Walsh)

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