

### **Hugh O'Neill: religious chameleon, free spirit or ardent Catholic?**

Most agree that the Nine Years War (1594-1603) was at least partly religious in motivation. Curiously enough, while we do know something of the religious issues which protagonists claimed as inspiration, we know little of their own religious practice or convictions. This is especially the case of Hugh O'Neill, earl of Tyrone. Religious conviction is, of course, a notoriously dangerous field of historical enquiry but given that O'Neill propaganda presented him as a Catholic crusader and taking into account the doubts some of his contemporaries raised regarding the sincerity of his religious convictions, it might not be amiss to enquire, in so far as the sources permit, what O'Neill's Catholicism was like.

Traditionally, the question of the nature and quality of O'Neill's Catholicism has been refracted through the prism of his political commitments. While more recent commentators recognised the importance of O'Neill's exploitation of the 'faith and fatherland ideology', the faith component, understood as personal commitment, has remained largely unexamined.<sup>1</sup> Inevitably, this rather non-critical attitude towards his religion had fed the undefended assumption that some sort of 'natural' link existed between early modern Gaelic opposition to Elizabeth I and Counter-Reformation Catholicism. Whatever else he did for O'Neill's reputation, Seán Ó Faolain recognised the reductionist potential of nationalist plaudits that tended, he believed, to simplify O'Neill as 'an island patriot ... denying him the long series of results that could otherwise be traced back to his inspiration'.<sup>2</sup> For Ó Faolain, the heart of O'Neill's achievement was that he 'realized the absolute necessity of conforming swiftly to [the] trend of world affairs – or of going under'. More controversially, he believed that Tyrone was broken 'not by England but by Ireland: by its deep atavism and inbreeding, so characteristic of abortive and arrested cultures in all ages of the world's history.'<sup>3</sup> This is a harsh judgment on the Gaelic system and pays scant attention to the political, religious and personal dilemmas faced by O'Neill but at least

---

<sup>1</sup> Hiram Morgan, 'Hugh O'Neill and the Nine Years War in Tudor Ireland' in *Historical Journal*, xxxvi (1993), p. 17.

<sup>2</sup> Seán Ó Faolain, *The Great O'Neill* (Dublin, 1942), pp 278-9.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

Ó Faolain's criticism provokes a re-examination of some of the assumptions which fail to do justice to Tyrone's complex, elusive character.

With regard to his religious commitment, there is surprisingly little to go on. We know that in 1584 he celebrated Easter according to the new Gregorian calendar but on trip to Dublin he attended Protestant services with the English governor.<sup>4</sup> O'Neill himself left no personal record of his religious convictions, a stark fact which throws us back on his political and diplomatic correspondence, propaganda pieces he commissioned and the testimony of his contemporaries. O'Neill had certainly adopted at least the political rhetoric of militant Catholic Reform by the mid 1590s. In January 1596, he discomfited the Dublin government by demanding liberty of conscience. In July of the same year he sent out a circular letter in Irish addressed to the lords of Munster requesting their adherence to a military alliance 'for Christ's Catholic religion'. A month later O'Neill and O'Donnell wrote to Pope Clement VIII, apologising for their previous silence but assuring him that their war was in defence of the catholic faith which they had imbibed with their mother's milk, *quam lacte nutricis hausimus*.<sup>5</sup> The reference to ancestral faith is significant, diverting attention away from the present state of their religious conviction and practice to a rather misty, inchoate, traditional faith. Later in the letter they draw the attention of His Holiness to the need for good bishops in Ireland, well bred, educated and steady handed. With politeness, but not coyly, they request the *jus patronus* or the right to present to ecclesiastical offices, citing received custom in other Catholic countries as precedent.

O'Neill was capable of modulating counter-reformation diplomatic jargon for different audiences. In 1597, in his negotiations with the government, he demanded as 'Item first that all the inhabitants of Irland may have free libertie of conscience, or at least wise the benefit of her majesties positive lawe, without being combired with the law of [t?]reason'.<sup>6</sup> More explicit, in this context, is his manifesto to the Catholics of the towns of Ireland two years later, on 16 November 1599.<sup>7</sup> Here he accuses his audience of being the 'means whereby wars are maintained against the exaltation of the Catholic faith' and assures them that if he had to be king of Ireland, without

---

<sup>4</sup> PRO, SP 63/206/100, Loftus and Wallop to Walsingham, 26 Mar. 1584.

<sup>5</sup> *Archivium Hibernicum* ii (1913), pp 280-1.

<sup>6</sup> PRO, SP 63/201/114, 'The humble petition of hugh Erle of Tirone to the lord lievtenaunt generall of her majesties army.'

<sup>7</sup> For a text see J. P. Meehan, *Fate and fortunes of Hugh O'Neill, earl of Tyrone and Rory O'Donnell, earl of Tyrconnel* (3<sup>rd</sup> edition, Dublin, 1886), pp 21-23.

having the Catholic religion, he would not accept the honour. He refers them to the example of the neighbouring kingdom of France in the following words

Take you example by that most Catholic country of France whose subjects, for defect of Catholic faith, did go against their most natural king, and maintained wars until he was constrained to profess the Catholic religion and maintained wars till he was constrained to profess the Catholic religion duly submitting himself to the holy see of Rome to the which doubtless we may bring our country, you putting your helping hand with me to the same.

Here O'Neill uses political vocabulary current among adherents of the Catholic League in France. He distinguishes between legitimacy of the monarch and his religious profession but makes clear the necessity of the king's conforming to Catholicism in order to be accepted as king by his people. As O'Neill sees it, Henry IV's conformity to Catholicism was the necessary condition for the return to peace and prosperity in the kingdom.

There was more than mere rhetoric to O'Neill's increasingly explicit espousal of militant Catholicism. He also had a practical programme in mind, which centred on the reform of the clergy. In his 'Articles intended to be stood upon by Tyrone' of late 1599 this programme has broadened and deepened but it is still centred on the formation of a new clergy for the Irish church. His first demand is freedom to preach the 'Catholic, apostolic and Roman religion' throughout all Ireland 'by bishops, seminary priests, Jesuits and other religious men'. Spiritual authority is to be vested exclusively in the pope and the Church of Ireland is to be supported by the returned tithes and church lands 'now in the hands of the English'. No cleric or lay person is to be detained by the government on account of religion, freedom of movement is to be granted to clerics, a Catholic university is to be founded and no church offices is to be granted to Englishmen. On 31 December 1599 he wrote to Philip III, pleading for assistance for the seminary at Douai.<sup>8</sup> The country, he argued, had need of seminary priests to disseminate God's word, instruct the people and eradicate errors. The formation of seminary priests is a stock theme in reformed Catholic rhetoric but its use here suggests O'Neill realisation that a thoroughgoing catholic reform in Ulster would demand the establishment of an educational infrastructure based on the seminary.

It is interesting to speculate on the source of the militant Catholic rhetoric in O'Neill's communications with Dublin and Madrid. Was he using the rhetoric of

---

<sup>8</sup> Meehan, *op. cit.*, p. 83.

religious war to garner support for political objectives? Or were his rhetoric and demands the outward, political expression of a personally appropriated religious faith? It is hard to say though a few useful hints are included in the main piece of international propaganda produced by the O'Neill regime at this time, the *Commentarius insulae Hiberniae*, prepared for Pope Clement VIII in 1600 by the Waterford-born theologian, Peter Lombard. As part of O'Neill's charm offensive in Rome, Lombard presented his patron as a model Catholic whose aim it was to return Ireland to the Catholic faith by extirpating heresy. In the process he adroitly fused Old English constitutional thought with counter-reformation militarism. Curiously, however, when it comes to his treatment of O'Neill's religious commitment, Lombard begins, not with a description of O'Neill's personal piety but rather with two prophecies, which, he claims, demonstrate that O'Neill is the providentially appointed champion of religious orthodoxy in Ireland and that 1600 is the propitious moment for papal intervention there. The first prophecy he talks about was allegedly made to St Patrick in the fifth century. The second was purportedly made by St Malachy sometime before 1148.

Lombard takes the account of the Patrician prophecy from Jocelin of Furness's twelfth-century life of St Patrick, where the author speaks of a vision of the future of Ireland accorded the saint.<sup>9</sup> The vision was a terrible one and appalled Patrick. Then an angel told him to look to the north where the saint 'first saw a small light coming forth from Ulster, which fought long with the forces of darkness and, having put them to flight, filled the whole island with its radiance'.<sup>10</sup> Lombard acknowledges that interpretations of Jocelin's account have varied. Indeed, Jocelin himself tells how the twelfth-century Gaelic Irish regarded the Norse invasion as the disaster to which the vision referred and St Malachy as the rising light alluded to in the vision. Those of Norman extraction, he explained, disagreed and held that the vision told of the decline of the Irish Church in Gaelic Ireland and its renewal by *Laudabiliter* and Henry II. While Jocelin preferred to leave the final solution to divine judgement, Lombard states that the affliction to which Patrick was privy was neither the Norse devastation nor the Irish Church's decline but the nefarious effects of the royal supremacy of

---

<sup>9</sup> Jocelin, *Vita S. Patricii*, c. 175. On the use of ancient prophecy in the 1590s see Morgan, *Tyrone's rebellion*, (Woodbridge, 1993), p. 143.

<sup>10</sup> Peter Lombard, *De regno Hiberniae, sanctorum insula, commentarius*, (hereafter, *Comm.*) ed. P.F. Moran (Dublin, 1868), p. 133: 'vidit modicam prius lucem in Ulidia exorientem, diu cum tenebris concertare, tandem iisdem effugatis sua fulgore totam insulam illustrare.' See Edmond Swift, *The Life and acts of Saint Patrick the archbishop, primate and apostle of Ireland*, (Dublin, 1809), p. 234.

Henry VIII. This, he argues, is the darkness of which the prophecy speaks, a pall so dense that ‘not only are the conquerors themselves blinded but they are trying to drag the body entrusted to them into darkness as well.’<sup>11</sup> The light rising for Ulster, he continues, is neither St Malachy nor Henry II but Hugh O’Neill. For Lombard, the realisation of the Patrician prophecy centres on this Ulster nobleman.

The Patrician prophecy is only one part of Lombard’s justification of O’Neill’s providential role as saviour of true religion. Decisively, he connects the Patrician vision with the alleged prophecy of Malachy concerning the papal succession. In his interpretation of 12<sup>th</sup>-century list of future popes ascribed to Malachy, Lombard believes that the pontificate of Clement VIII corresponds to that of the *crux romulea* (roman cross), mentioned in Malachy’s list. Lombard interprets this as a reference to Clement’s coat of arms, which features an embattled bent or roman cross, surmounted, on either side, by three stars. He explains

No sooner was the Roman cross, by which emblem St Malachy, that great reformer of Ireland, is said to have foretold, about 450 years ago, the pontificate of Clement VIII, of the Aldobrandini family, set upon the Chair of St Peter, than, as from the coronet of six stars with which [the roman cross] gleamed on both sides, a refulgence seemed to radiate to dispel the darkness of heresy and schism which for the last sixty years the English governors and oppressors of Ireland have been endeavouring to spread over that land, and there began to appear that faint light, which, as already mentioned, was foreshown to St Patrick, the first founder of religion here, nearly 1200 years ago, and which after a somewhat prolonged struggle against the darkness, at last dispelled the shadow and illumined this whole island with its own splendour.<sup>12</sup>

For Lombard, these are not the only propitious signs. On the continent, he remarks, the Irish colleges at Salamanca, Lisbon, Louvain and Douai have begun to produce their missionary clergy. From Belgium, he has heard that a company of Irish soldiers under English command in Belgium refused to aid heretics and later declared openly for the catholic cause.<sup>13</sup> Ulster nobles, he says, have risen up against Elizabeth I for the Catholic cause. Providence, Lombard argues, has chosen O’Neill as the instrument for an assault on European Protestantism.

It is only at this stage that Lombard descends from the heights of prophetic rhetoric to the lowlands of O’Neill’s personal religious conviction. It is interesting to note how palpably defensive his tone suddenly becomes. It is reasonable to assume

---

<sup>11</sup> *Comm.*, p. 134. ‘...ut non tantum ipsi sint effecti coeci, sed corpus totum, quod deberent lumine suo dirigere, conentur excoecare.’

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 149.

<sup>13</sup> This is a reference to the betrayal of Deventer to the duke of Parma by two of Leicester’s commanders in February 1587. The town was retaken by the Dutch rebels in 1591.

that critics of O'Neill had access to the pope and it is likely that in presenting his account of O'Neill's piety to Clement VIII Lombard was actually refuting anti-O'Neill propaganda, then current in Rome. Lombard, in fact, makes explicit reference to English Catholics who have blackened O'Neill's name, questioning his Catholicism and accusing him of flouting Church teaching, particularly on marriage. Although Lombard does not explicitly say so here, English Catholics were not the only ones objecting to O'Neill and his politico-religious agenda. In November 1599, Christopher Nugent, Lord Delvin, who was reluctant to join O'Neill, instructed his agents 'you are to tell him[O'Neill] (if he pretend he doth the same of the advancement of the Catholic religion, as commonly he giveth out) that all the inhabitants of the English Pale, for the more part, and specially myself, are Catholics, and were when he was not thought to be one'.<sup>14</sup>

Lombard takes up the charges concerning O'Neill's religious past, referring, it would seem, to accusations that O'Neill was at least religiously indifferent. He insists that his patron was born into and raised in the Roman Catholic faith. He remained a Catholic even 'during his tutelage under the English in court and camp and never thought or professed anything other than what was orthodox in religion.'<sup>15</sup> O'Neill was also accused, it would seem, of failing to support Catholic clergy and Lombard counters this charge by claiming that after he reached his majority O'Neill maintained priests in his own house and it was, in fact, because of this that the English first thought of bringing charges concerning religion against him. We know that O'Neill made provision for the Armagh friars at Brantry, outside the city, a gesture that in no way suggests lack of support for the clergy.

Lombard, in his memorandum to the pope, does not deny that O'Neill began the present war for political reasons that has little to do with the defence of religion. He candidly reports that O'Neill 'although always a Catholic was not yet always equally solicitous, earnest and zealous in the cause of religion.'<sup>16</sup> But when he entered the war in 1594-5, O'Neill, according to Lombard adopted religion as 'his chief and abiding aim'. It was the test of war, apparently, and the providential nature of his success, which, according to Lombard, changed O'Neill into a pious, militant

---

<sup>14</sup> Cited in Hiram Morgan, 'Faith and Fatherland or Queen and Country' in *Historical Society* 9 (1994), p. 25.

<sup>15</sup> Matthew J. Byrne (ed.), *The Irish war of defence 1598-1600: extracts from the de Hibernia insula commentaries of Peter Lombard...* (Cork, 1930), p. 35.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

Catholic. From this time, Lombard, says, O'Neill attended daily Mass, even when on the field and oftener when possible. He confessed and received communion frequently and prayed regularly. Nor was his new religious conviction of a purely private variety. Lombard observes that O'Neill insisted on the highest standards of Christian morality among his men and in his territories and was especially vigilant against theft, pillage, drunkenness and concubinage. In a possible reference to negative opinion in Rome regarding clerical celibacy, especially in Gaelic areas, Lombard insists that O'Neill had made it his special concern to root out concubinage among the local clergy. Aware of papal sensitivity to the independence of ecclesiastical jurisdictions, Lombard adds that at no stage, however, had O'Neill, even in the pursuit of his noble objective, trespassed on the independence of the Church. Recognising the limits of his secular authority in correcting this abuse, O'Neill moved first against the priests' concubines with the sternest prohibitions. In cases of recidivism, he punished them by exile, whipping or deforming their faces by branding or slitting.

Perhaps Lombard is merely telling the pope what he wants to hear. However, when he says that O'Neill's soldiers were shrived before battle he is on firm ground. This detail is corroborated by James Archer SJ who was in Ulster from before August 1598 and maintained contact with the society's General in Rome. On 10 August 1598 he wrote to Rome that 'I have administered the sacraments in the camp since I am not able to work among the subjects in the cities'.<sup>17</sup> Lombard is also on firm ground, when he claims that in negotiations with the government, O'Neill's first demand was for liberty of religious observance though he diplomatically omits that in the peace negotiations of early 1596 O'Neill was ready to jettison this demand. Lombard also declines to examine why O'Neill decided abruptly in 1596, to the surprise of the Dublin government, to include the question of religious liberty in negotiations with the government, a matter that concerned him little up to that.<sup>18</sup> The influence of Spanish agents like Cobos, Cisneros and Medinilla, the advice of priests like Archer and the exigencies of broadening his appeal were probably all factors in O'Neill's increasingly explicit espousal of the Catholic cause. No doubt the Franciscans were an equally significant influence. After all, it was they who provided pastoral and spiritual counsel to the Gaelic aristocracy in Ulster and also acted as translators, scribes and

<sup>17</sup> Cited in Thomas Morrissey, *James Archer of Kilkenny* (Dublin, 1979), p. 19.

<sup>18</sup> See Hiram Morgan *Tyrone's rebellion*, pp 198, 204. Morgan sees O'Neill's use of the religious issue as politically motivated, first as a ploy to force other government concessions and second as an attempt to widen his support base.

intermediaries in dealings with Spain, France and Rome. If Lombard cites O'Neill's sentiments at the parley of Dungannon (1599) accurately, there is evidence to support a real religious conversion

I confess to you that this was not the cause which first moved me to think of war, but I call God to witness that neither was it ambition, nor any other unlawful desire, as you would persuade or rather palm off upon the world, but besides those which threatened or aimed at my own destruction I have, as you know, many other just causes of war, for example intolerable oppression and servitude of the whole of my country. A passionate desire to liberate it was the first stimulus which urged me to make this war. Since however I have entered up it I will never acknowledge that I have received such Divine aid that so far I have had glorious success therein against the most powerful and insolent heretics of all Europe, surpassing my hopes or your fears, or anything the world could have expected or perhaps even yet believes. Therefore as an act of thanksgiving I have vowed to the God of heaven, and now confirm with an oath before you that the sword which I have drawn for the liberty of my native land I shall never sheath until all heresy and schism has been expelled from every corner of Ireland and the free exercise of the one only true Roman Catholic and Apostolic religion, which I know is the crown and the surest foundation of this liberty, has been restored and established throughout the whole of this Island.<sup>19</sup>

This passage, if it reflects the true state of O'Neill's inner life in 1599, is suggestive of a conversion experience, triggered by the scale of his military success and interpreted as evidence of divine favour. Particularly significant in this passage is O'Neill's candid admission of his baser, more secular motives on entering the war. This is classic conversion discourse that makes a virtue of initial human baseness to stress the scale and effectiveness of subsequent change. We know that O'Neill's military success against the 'greatest heretical power' in Europe impressed others but they also stirred O'Neill himself, at least according to this testimony. As Lombard presents it, O'Neill's resolve to rid Ireland of heresy and to re-establish true religion there is a thanksgiving sacrifice to God who has providentially granted him victory.

Most significant in this passage, perhaps, is O'Neill's description of Catholicism as 'the crown and surest foundation of this liberty' of his country from 'intolerable oppression and servitude'. This linking of the pursuit of liberty (understood as release from oppression and servitude) and the combat against heresy has the ring of authenticity to it. Here O'Neill links the question of religious liberty to the defence of local, 'secular' freedoms against government centralisation. As he understands it, religious freedom is a liberty, the expression of the local autonomy against outside interference. Undoubtedly, the inclusion of religion as one of many liberties to be defended by his military campaign not only helped integrate religion

---

<sup>19</sup> Byrne, *op. cit.*, pp 39-41.



into O'Neill's early and quite secular set of objectives but also served to broaden his appeal in Ireland and to make his quarrel with Elizabeth's government comprehensible to potential European supporters. It also durably associated the question of the freedom to practice the Catholic religion with opposition to the Dublin government.

It would seem that that O'Neill's conversion, alluded to by Lombard, was real and sincere even if used for propagandistic purposes. To be fair to O'Neill, he had to inhabit two different worlds, that of his Gaelic lordship and of encroaching government power. He negotiated this difficult double life with intelligence and patience, relying on the tactics of delay and equivocation to test and tire his enemies, on all sides. He was probably no saint but he possessed the plasticity of mind to realise that remaining strong in his lordship entailed coming to terms with a changing outside world which was impinging more and more on the territories he influenced. The Dublin government was more demanding, Ireland was increasingly a part of broader European developments and some things, like religion, which had been taken for granted in the past, now demanded fresh attention. His realisation that religion was part of this changing environment was only one element of the overall development of his political intelligence and undoubtedly came on him gradually. Unlike most saints, but like most modernisers, O'Neill did not have much time to consider what was happening to the traditional, loosely organised religious world he had inhabited up to the 1590s. Maybe Lombard's rhetoric said more than O'Neill himself actually believed but consistency between rhetoric and personal belief is a rare thing, even in saints. Counter-reformation clergy like Lombard might reasonably believe that in O'Neill they had found 'a human mould to hold their ideas'<sup>20</sup> Of course, not everyone agrees. Ó Faolain, in his complex picture of O'Neill, saw a calculating, almost Machiavellian element in the man

When the idea of a war for (among other things) religious liberty struck Tyrone's imagination it must have struck the man's consideration even more forcibly. His secular bent would have humanized it... Tyrone was like the eighteenth-century Daniel O'Connell – both Renaissance figures, calculating, whorled with reservations, a humming conch of *arrière-pensées*. He may have thought to use the cry of a religious war as a pennant. It blew out into a banner. The idea ended by taking possession of him as all germinating ideas do, by happy contagion.<sup>21</sup>

---

<sup>20</sup> Ó Faolain, op. cit., p. 206.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 175.

The image of the pennant of religious war blowing out into a banner is not a bad one to help understand O'Neill's religious evolution after 1594. O'Neill, on his own and on Lombard's admission, began the war by using the religious issue as a political instrument but found that it had a life of its own, one which affected not only his cause but also the man himself. Ó Faolain was sensitive to this element in his character's personality too.

Men's minds, for centuries completely at sleep, content with a patriarchal, indeed primitive convention in which force and physical fear and lust for power had been the sole criterion, were beginning to move towards a definite philosophy of life and a hitherto unheard of objectivity in relation to themselves and the world about them. No doubt Tyrone did not see all this clearly, but he must have seen at least that religion was a coagulant, and that he would do well to wait while it worked its inspiration on his people.<sup>22</sup>

Lombard's account suggests that religion may also have worked its inspiration on O'Neill himself. Unfortunately, after Lombard's testimony, O'Neill's religious conscience falls out of our historical sights and we have only fleeting glimpses to guide us. O'Sullivan Bear tells us that O'Neill went on pilgrimage to Holy Cross 'to see the piece of the Holy cross' during his visit south in 1599 to persuade Munster nobles to join him.<sup>23</sup> Even though O'Sullivan Bear was writing some time after the events and from an explicitly counter-reformation viewpoint, this is evidence of a genuine devotional dimension to O'Neill's religious faith. We also know, from the State Papers, that when O'Neill submitted to Mountjoy in 1603 he blessed himself and uttered a prayer, evidence, surely, of a personally appropriated piety, consistent with reformed Catholicism. Further, it is possible to interpret O'Neill's decision to leave his lordship in 1607 as a religiously motivated act. Certainly his Franciscan supporter Florence Conry said that O'Neill left to obtain freedom to practice his religion and to escape calumny.<sup>24</sup> His view is supported by the testimony of Henry Mellan, a priest, who, writing from Dundalk on 31 January 1607 declared that there were fourteen friars living in O'Neill's house in Dungannon and that O'Neill himself, in conversation with a 'heretic', declared that he might have ceased to wage war but

---

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., pp 176-7.

<sup>23</sup> See Matthew J. Byrne (ed. and trans.) *Ireland under Elizabeth...being a portion of the history of catholic Ireland by Don Philip O'Sullivan Bear*, (Dublin, 1903), p. 130.

<sup>24</sup> Meehan, op. cit., pp 195-7.

that he would never abandon his faith.<sup>25</sup> His declaration of grievances to the king, after his departure tends to confirm this. He complains, in the first article

That it is by public authority proclaimed in his manor of Dungannon that none should hear Mass upon pain of loosing his goods and imprisonment and that no curate or ecclesiastical person should enjoy any cure or dignity without swearing the oath of supremacy.<sup>26</sup>

Not all historians read this as support for a religiously motivated flight. Micheline Kerney Walsh for instance, held that ‘the so-called Flight of the Earls was neither a panic decision nor a journey into voluntary exile, but a planned, tactical retreat and an attempt by O’Neill to secure military aid by presenting his case in person to King Philip.’<sup>27</sup>

However, there are other hints of something more than politics and strategy to O’Neill’s religious faith. Tadhg Ó Cianáin, in his account, reports an intriguing detail of O’Neill’s departure, to wit that during the sea voyage, when assailed by storms, ‘a cross of gold which O’Neill had, and which contained a portion of the Cross of the Crucifixion and many other relics, being put by them in the sea trailing after the ship, gave them great relief.’<sup>28</sup> There is as much superstition as counter-reformation religion in this incident but it suggests that his visit to Holy Cross in 1599 was more than a gesture to reassure Munster Catholics and very likely a genuine expression of religious devotion.

We know a little of O’Neill’s journey to Rome from Ó Cianáin’s account.<sup>29</sup> It reveals that on the road to Rome, O’Neill and his retinue visited many religious sites and there is no doubting the deep impression they made on the author. It is difficult to gauge the effect on O’Neill of his first sustained experience of counter-reformation Catholicism.<sup>30</sup> We learn that he invoked and besought the Holy Virgin Mary and her wondrous son in that Holy Chapel [of Loreto] and that he diligently performed the pilgrimage according to the regulations of the church, but beyond this formal statement, there is no insight into O’Neill’s religious sentiment or conviction. The earl’s visit to St Peter’s, his audience with Pope Paul V, his pilgrimage to the seven churches of Rome, his assistance at the canonisation of Saint Francesca Romana in

---

<sup>25</sup> Edmund Hogan, *Hibernia Ignatiana...* (Dublin, 1880), p. 208.

<sup>26</sup> Meehan, op. cit., pp 122-3.

<sup>27</sup> Micheline Kerney Walsh ‘*Destruction by peace: Hugh O’Neill after Kinsale* (Armagh, 1986), p. 143.

<sup>28</sup> Tadhg Ó Cianáin, *The flight of the earls* (ed. Paul Walsh), (Maynooth, 1916), p. 10 (11).

<sup>29</sup> Tadhg Ó Cianáin, op. cit.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 99.

May 1608 and his men's participation in the *Corpus Christi* procession of the same year are passed over, by Ó Cianáin, with frustrating rapidity.<sup>31</sup> Meehan probably pushes the evidence too far when he fancifully describes O'Neill in front of the unfinished façade of St Peter's and muses, 'who can describe the devotion with which [he] thanked God for his goodness to [him] or the rapture with which [he] beheld that vast miracle of art – that most wonderful development of man's genius.'<sup>32</sup>

In any case, O'Neill's stay in Rome was dominated by concerns over the worsening situation of his dependents and property in Ireland. He considered a return to Ireland and, in 1608, was on the point of applying for a pardon to James I. As part of the deal, he hoped to secure toleration of Catholicism in Ulster and Connaught at least.<sup>33</sup> Naturally he was devastated by the confiscation of his lands in Ulster and his anxieties grew when news came through that a new parliament had been called to meet in Dublin. He feared that the assembly would approve the confiscation of his lands and pass draconian, anti-Catholic legislation. It would appear that some in Ireland considered armed resistance at this stage. A document, which was in the possession of Castro and was passed on to Philip III spoke of a new Catholic league in Ireland, set up at a meeting presided by the archbishop of Cashel.<sup>34</sup> The league was supposed to have a Roman agent called Don Guillermo Miagh, whose news, the document claimed, cheered the earl. Like so many other plans for a return to Ulster, it came to nothing.

When O'Neill died on 20 July 1616 his cause was in tatters. In the end, his lasting significance on the religious plane was the association he forged between religious freedom and political liberties. This appealed to a wide constituency in Ireland, most particularly the constitutionally-minded Old English legal and ecclesiastical elite. While it is true that few Old English came over to his side and deserted him when his star began to fade it is also true that O'Neill's idea of Catholicism as a liberty, had potential to channel political and cultural discontent in Ireland, as the Confederate Wars demonstrated. The problem, however, with the consequent politicisation of Catholicism and its relativisation as another aspect of lost liberty was that Irish Catholicism became politically potent without being pastorally

---

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., pp 169, 171, 175, 185, 189.

<sup>32</sup> Meehan, op. cit., p. 169.

<sup>33</sup> Micheline Kerney Walsh, *Irish Sword*, vii (1965-6), pp 6-7. De Aytona to Philip III, 11 November 1608; O'Neill to Philip III 4 January 1609, *ibid.*, pp 8-9.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, pp 331-2. De Castro to Philip III 8 December 1611.

organised. True, there was pastoral care in the Gaelic areas, at least among the aristocracy and their immediate dependents, assured in large part by the Franciscans. But the absence of a parochial structure was a brake to the preaching of reformed Catholicism to a larger audience. There was a danger that outside the pastorally privileged Gaelic elite, a religious formalism at best and superstition at worst, would characterise the religious experience of the mass of the people. It might be argued that this set of circumstances exaggerated an existing quality of European Catholicism that tended to stress the efficacy of the formal celebration of the sacraments without enquiring very deeply into the spiritual effect on either the celebrating priest or the assisting laity.<sup>35</sup> Would it be possible to suggest that Catholicism, understood as a personally appropriated piety, a consistent moral code and a culturally integrated commitment was less widespread in Ireland than either Protestant critics or Catholic propagandists liked to believe? No pastoral infrastructure existed to provide the environment in which religious conversion could be facilitated and, once achieved, maintained and nurtured. Could it be argued further that the principal consequence of this was that the form of Catholicism which came to be associated with the preservation of liberty and opposition to the Dublin government and its agents, secular and ecclesiastical, tended to be formal rather than personal, external rather than internal, practical rather than theological? Certainly, Irish Catholic reformers had the cards stacked against them as they struggled, with slender resources, to pay at least lip service to the ideals of the counter-reformation while at the same time defending practices of traditional Catholicism that Irish Protestants ridiculed.

Although it may be difficult, in the end, to describe O'Neill as an 'ardent figure of the counter reformation'<sup>36</sup> without some qualification, there is strong evidence that O'Neill did undergo a religious conversion in the mid 1590s. This explains, at least in part, his political rhetoric and suggests that it was sourced not only in the counsel of his clerical advisors but also in personal, religious conviction. The romantic image of O'Neill as a floating spirit, constantly changing into something else and caught in a political and cultural whorl greater than himself is attractive but it must be earthed in his very unromantic political agenda and balanced by his personal commitment to counter-reformation Catholicism.

---

<sup>35</sup> See Leszek Kolasowski, *Chrétiens sans Église* trans. Anna Posner (Paris, 1969), pp 23-31.

<sup>36</sup> Tomás Ó Fiaich, in his introduction to Micheline Kerney Walsh, *'Destruction by peace' Hugh O'Neill after Kinsale* (Armagh, 1986), p. xii.

Thomas O'Connor

NUI Maynooth

17 Oct. 02