

A Fractious and Naughty People: The Border Reivers in Ireland

By Trevor Graham



King James the Sixth faced a serious problem in 1604. He had just become the King of England the previous year, in addition to already being the King of Scotland. He had recently ordered the border between Scotland and England pacified of the “Border Reivers”, warlike families whose activities of raiding and pillaging had been encouraged (and in some cases, funded) by the Scottish and English governments during times of war. Armies were hard to maintain, but entire families of marauders were cost effective and deadly. But now, with the countries united under a single monarch and supposed to

be working together, their wanton destruction was no longer tolerated and was swiftly punished by the English and Scottish March Wardens with “Jeddart justice” (summary execution). He couldn’t hang all those responsible, so James decided to relocate the troublesome families. Recently, rebellious earls in Ireland had fled the country, and plans were set up to settle that land with loyal Protestants from Great Britain. But there were not enough settlers, and many native Irish still lived on that land in the northern part known as Ulster. Hoping to solve both problems at once, James and his government sent many Border families to the plantations around Ireland. Instead of being productive and keeping the peace however, they instead caused a sectarian split within Ireland. This led to nearly 400 years of bloodshed, leaving a scar that has remained to this day in Northern Ireland.

To find out how all this fury and bloodshed began, we go back to 1601, when the combined forces of Hugh O’Neil, Hugh O’Donnell, and a Spanish force were defeated by the English at Kinsale. Ireland was at this point, a vassal state under the control of the English crown. England had been trying to wean the Irish away from Catholicism and Gaelic ways, which had been one of the reasons for the recent rebellion. The rebels defeat at Kinsale caused O’Neil and O’Donnell to leave Ireland and all their land in Ulster two years later, which was promptly taken by the English government. The English had tried to Anglicize Ireland, but had failed to do so in the previous centuries. Their new plan would be to send loyal Protestant settlers to the land taken from Gaelic chieftains (specifically in the counties of Armagh, Cavan, Coleraine, Donegal, Fermanagh, and Tyrone) and have them live in fortified settlements to keep out the local Catholic Irish.

There weren't enough settlers who were willing to risk moving away with their families to a hostile region filled with people who spoke a different language, so the landlords of the plantation (known as Undertakers) would occasionally fill the gaps with native Irish (which was explicitly prohibited), provided they were Protestant and English speaking. There still wouldn't be enough, but another problem the English (or technically, now British) government had could provide a solution.

Along the border of England and Scotland, there lived a group of people known as the Border Reivers. Centuries of warfare had led to them developing a warlike ethos: consisting of reiving (raiding) and pillaging their neighbors. Those who farmed and raised livestock usually had their fields burned and livestock stolen by invading Scottish or English armies, so reiving was often the only real way to make a living. A Borderer's allegiance was to their family, for being an Armstrong, Elliot, or Bell would provide more protection than any promises by the governments in Edinburgh or London. Borderers' national allegiance was so fickle; it was not uncommon for them to change sides in the midst of a battle, such as Solway Moss and Ancrum Moor. When it came to religion, the Reivers were even less committed. Richard Fenwick spoke of them in 1597, "If Jesus Christ were amongst them, they would deceive him, if he would hear, trust, and follow their wicked council!" This was many years after the Archbishop of Glasgow publicly put a curse on the Reivers and threatened to excommunicate all who associated with them. But eventually, the kingdoms eventually came under the rule of a single king, and the days of raiding between two hostile nations ended. King James needed to dispose

of these ruffians, but realized it would be a waste to hang all of them. All the Reivers needed was a new enemy, which would be found in the Catholic Irish rebels of Ulster.

Border Reivers in Ireland were not an unfamiliar sight. During the Nine Years war against the O'Neil's, the English employed the Reivers whose "skirmishing skills made them the perfect choice for operations in the unfriendly mosses of Northern Ireland, where conventional horse and foot struggled on the unfavorable ground." The Reivers were effective against the infantry-based Irish rebels, even against the heavy Gallowglass mercenaries. Even the Reiver's light horses, known as Hobilars, were imported from Ireland itself. Elizabeth the 1st said after meeting the famed Warden and reiver Walter Scott of Buccleuch, "With ten thousand such men, James VI could shake any throne in Europe." Border Cavalry were not considered a point of pride, as they were ill disciplined and known for plundering the camps of their own allies, as they did at the Battle of Flodden (in addition to being criminals).

Even before the official plantation of Ulster started, Borderers were imported to various plantations around Ireland. A servitor named Sir Ralph Sidley took the infamous Grahams of Esk to his plantation in Roscommon, with the hopes that they would take to the land easily. The situation was a disaster from the start. Whereas the soil back on former Graham lands was fertile, the land at Roscommon "proved to have gone to waste." The Grahams had been forced to pay for their own settlement (most of which was pocketed by Sidley), and could not afford tools or laborers (laborers who spoke Irish Gaelic, not English) to replace most of their able bodied kin, who had been sent to fight

in the Low Countries in the “Scot’s Brigade”. Unsurprisingly, within two years, most of them had dispersed from the plantation. Not wanting them to return, laws were passed forbidding any Grahams returning to Britain. Arthur Chichester, the Lord Deputy of Ireland at the time, did not pursue them, but concluded, “They are now dispersed, and when they shall be place upon any land together, the next country will find them ill neighbors, for they are a fractious and naughty people.”

Ralph Sidley had noted in his opinions about the Grahams, that “the more enterprising of the natives suspect that the Grahams might be more than a match for them at fighting and rustling.” And indeed, many Border folk as shown before were not farmers, but closer to being thieves and killers. When the Irish rebelled violently in 1641, it shocked most of the Protestant community, but they responded in Reiver feud fashion with massacres of their own, in some cases supported by an army of Scottish Covenanters sent to support them. The descendants of the fractious Borderers fittingly couldn’t agree on who to side with during the War of the Three Kingdoms, those of English stock (such as the Reeds and Hetheringtons) taking the side of Parliament and those of Scottish ancestry (like Cranstons and Crosers) generally siding with King Charles I and the Royalists. Later during Cromwell’s conquest of Ireland, some Protestant settlers assisted his (Cromwell’s) New Model Army in the bloody battle of Scarrifholis, where the settlers chased after the fleeing Irish Confederate army like their ancestors of old, cutting them down as they ran.

The Borderer-inspired violence continued after Cromwell left. During the 1st Jacobite Uprising, Reiver descendants in County Fermanagh checked the Jacobite advance at the

battle of Newtownbutler, and held out until William of Orange brought over his Scots Brigade, full of the descendants of Reivers who had been forced to go to Holland, to crush the Jacobites. In 1915, the King's Own Scottish Borderers killed four people when they opened fire on a crowd in Dublin who they feared were armed with German weapons. Even today, descendants of the Border Reivers are amongst the Ulster Volunteer Force, the Protestant militant group that has repeatedly ignored calls to disarm, and still causes disruption throughout Northern Ireland. Though it is much quieter than it was before, Ireland was never pacified in the way James the 6th had hoped. The Border Reivers, banished from their homes in Britain, found a new home in Ireland, which they shaped with fire and blood.

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