The history of late-medieval Ireland is not exactly littered with dates that command general recognition, so it is surely suggestive that two which have achieved a degree of notoriety concern the fortunes, or rather misfortunes, of Ireland’s earls and earldoms: the murder of William Burgh, the ‘brown’ earl of Ulster, in 1333; and the rebellion in 1534 of Thomas Fitzgerald (‘Silken Thomas’), soon-to-be tenth earl of Kildare. These are dates of demarcation. In the broadest terms, 1333 has been understood to mark the end of the expansion of royal power under the Plantagenets, 1534 the start of its vigorous reassertion under the Tudors. What occurred between these chronological bookends? For Goddard Orpen (d. 1932), writing in 1920 when the Anglo-Irish tradition he cherished seemed imperilled by the prospect of Irish secession from the United Kingdom, the murder of the earl of Ulster in 1333 was a moment of dark, almost metonymic, significance: ‘the door was now closed on a century and a half of remarkable progress, vigour, and comparative order, and two centuries of retrogression, stagnation, and comparative anarchy were about to be ushered in’. In the

\[\text{1} \quad \text{I am grateful to Brian Coleman, Seán Duffy, Robin Frame, Katharine Simms and Brendan Smith for their assistance in the preparation of this essay, the research for which was funded by the Irish Research Council.}\]

year after the creation of the Irish Free State in 1922, a contrasting, but equally foundational, interpretation was published by Edmund Curtis (d. 1943), who described ‘the great Earls’ as the ‘head and hope of Irish, and even of Gaelic culture’, and confided in the resident earldoms the power to bring order to Ireland at a time when the English crown had become too weak to direct ‘national’ affairs.\(^1\) In the ninety-odd years since these authors wrote, their interpretations have been recurrently rejected and revised, and occasionally revivified.\(^2\) What is not in dispute—although the subject has not had the benefit of sustained analysis—is that the two centuries between 1333 and 1534 witnessed a striking growth in the status and power of the English settler aristocracy in Ireland, and especially the resident earls.

Of the earldoms created in Ireland in the early fourteenth century, three are notable for their longevity:\(^3\) the earldoms of Kildare (1316– ) and Desmond (1329–1582), created for two

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\(^3\) *CP*, 10: appendix C, pp. 35–9. For the circumstances in which these three earldoms were created in the first half of the fourteenth century, see Robin Frame, *English Lordship in Ireland, 1318–1361* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), esp. pp. 13–18.
branches of the famous Geraldine family that descended from Maurice fitz Gerald (d. 1176);\(^1\) and the earldom of Ormond (1328– ), created for James Butler, whose progenitor, Theobald I Walter (d. 1205), had first come to Ireland in the entourage of the future King John in 1185.\(^2\) A fourth earldom of Louth was created in tail male for John Bermingham in 1319 as a reward for his slaying of Edward Bruce at the battle of Faughart in 1318, but lapsed with Bermingham’s murder in 1329 leaving only daughters.\(^3\) If we add to these the existing earldom of Ulster (1205),\(^4\) the later creations of Cork (c.1395) and Waterford (1446), plus the

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1. *CChR 1300–26*, p. 307 (Kildare); *CChR 1327–41*, p. 123 (Desmond). I follow the numbering of the earls of Desmond in *CP*, vol. IV, pp. 243–8, rather than *NHI*, 9: pp. 168, 233 (in which Maurice son of Gerald is listed as *de facto* fifth earl of Desmond). For the argument that this Maurice was not recognized as earl, see Peter Crooks, ‘James the Usurper and the origins of the Talbot–Ormond feud’, in *Princes, prelates and poets in medieval Ireland: essays in honour of Katharine Simms* ed. Seán Duffy (Dublin: Four Courts, 2013), pp. 169–70.

2. *Report*, 5:, p. 20; *CChR 1327–41*, p. 94. The Latin text of this charter is given from another copy among the Ormond deeds, NLI, MS 11,044, in Adrian Empey, ‘The Butler lordship in Ireland, 1185–1515’ (PhD, University of Dublin, 1970), appendix 6, pp. xxxvi–xxxvii. An earlier charter of 1 September 1315 granted to Edmund Butler (d. 1321), father of the first earl of Ormond, the *feodum* of the castle and manors of Carrick Macgriffyn (=Carrick-on-Suir) and Roscrea ‘by the name and honour of earl of Carrick’, together with the return of royal writs in the cantreds of Oremon, Ely Ogerth and Elyokarwyl, co. Tipperary (*CChR 1300–26*, pp. 284–5). The charter seems not to have been effective in creating Edmund as earl, but the second earl is on one occasion styled ‘James, earl of Ormond and Carryk’ in English letters patent dated 12 Nov. 1367 granting him certain lands in Co. Waterford ‘that he may the more fittingly maintain his estate and name of earl’ (*CPR 1367–70*, p. 30).

3. The grant was made ‘in consideration of the good service of John de Bermyngeham in Ireland in a conflict between him and certain lieges of those parts, of whom he was captain, and Edward de Brus, a rebel, who had caused himself to be crowned king of Ireland, to the king’s disinheritance’ (*CPR 1317–21*, pp. 334–5). For the circumstances of the creation, see Brendan Smith, *Colonisation and Conquest in Medieval Ireland: the English of Louth, 1170–1330* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 114; and for Bermingham’s murder, see James Lydon, ‘The Braganstown massacre, 1329’, *Journal of the County Louth Archaeological and Historical Society* 19 (1978), pp.5–16.

4. For which, see Crouch, above pp. 000.
special case of the earldom of Ossory (1528–38), we arrive at a total eight Irish comital titles in the Middle Ages. Of these there were normally four, and never more than five, active in Ireland at any one time in the late Middle Ages. This is a modest number compared to the average of twelve earls in fifteenth-century England and 9.4 in Scotland between 1310 and 1460, but it is not inconsiderable given the relatively small size of the English-dominated territory within Ireland. Moreover, at times—famously during the so-called ‘ascendancy’ of the earls of Kildare between c.1470 and 1534—the Irish earls attained a preponderance of power quite out of proportion to their numbers. If ever it is appropriate to speak of ‘comital Ireland’, the late Middle Ages was surely its era.

But the phrase ‘comital Ireland’ rather begs the question. To put the matter plainly: how Irish was ‘comital Ireland’? One point is so obvious that it risks being overlooked. Comital Ireland was a closed elite in ethnic terms. It was not until the creation of Conn Bacach Ó Néill (d. 1559) as earl of Tyrone on 1 October 1542 that a member of the Gaelic aristocracy was admitted to the ranks of the ‘Irish’ earls. Before 1542, all those who drew their comital titles

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1 For the creation of Piers Ruadh as earl of Ossory on 23 February 1528 see CP, 10: pp. 13–6. The circumstances are discussed below, pp. 000.

2 See the figures supplied in Alistair Ross chapter; A. H. Grant, ‘Earls and Earldoms in Late Medieval Scotland (c. 1310–1460)’, in John Bossy and Peter Jupp (eds.), Essays presented to Michael Roberts (Belfast, 1976), p. 25.

3 Cf. the term ‘comital Scotland’ in Michael Brown, ‘The Scottish Earldoms in the Late Middle Ages: survival and transformation’.

4 CP, 12: pt 2, p. 129; Foedera, 15: p. 7. On 1 July 1543 Murchadh Ó Briain (d. 1551) was created earl of Thomond for life (CP, 12, pt 1, pp. 702–3; Foedera, 14, p. 799). Some Gaelic lords had already been created barons by patent: see Christopher Maginn, ‘The Gaelic peers, the Tudor sovereigns, and English multiple monarchy’, Journal of British Studies, 50 (July 2011), pp. 566–86.
from Ireland were English, whether they were born in Ireland or in England.¹ To refer to
‘Irish’ earls and earldoms is, then, to make a geographical distinction, not a political or
cultural value judgement. The Irish earldoms were part of the land of Ireland, itself a parcel
of the English crown. As such the political allegiance of the Irish earls was unequivocally to
the English ruling dynasty. The local habitat of the resident ‘Irish’ earls was, however, a
hybrid of Gaelic and English institutions, and this affected how the earls came to exercise
power and how they had that power represented. The third earl of Ormond, who had an
English-born wife in Anne Welles, is described during Richard II’s expedition to Ireland of
1394–5 as being ‘well learned in the Irish language [L. in lingua Hibernica bene eruditi]’.²
Not only was Ormond able to translate the submissions of several Gaelic lords into English
for the king, but by recitation he had tutored Brian Ó Briain (O Brien) of Thomond in the
words of the submission he was to take.³ Evidently, their knowledge of Gaelic Ireland made
the ‘Irish’ earls a crucial conduit between the authority claimed by the English crown in
Ireland, and the real exercise of power at a local and regional level. But it was precisely in the
localities that the niceties of political allegiance tended to blur. The dilemma is expressed in
the poetry of Ormond’s brother-in-law, Gerald ‘the Rhymer’ third earl of Desmond (d. 1398),
an amateur author of Gaelic verse. In a poem addressed to the Munster lord Diarmaid Mac

¹ For the assertion that both the English born in England and those born in Ireland ‘are true English’, see
Henry F. Berry (ed.), Statutes and ordinances, and acts of the parliament of Ireland, King John to Henry V
(Dublin: HMSO, 1907), p. 417. For discussion, see Robin Frame, ‘ “Les Engleys nées en Irlande”: the
English political identity in medieval Ireland’, in Frame, Ireland and Britain, pp. 000.
² Curtis, Richard II in Ireland, instrument XVIII (p. 93).
³ Curtis, Richard II in Ireland, pp. 179–81. Froissart also reports that the third earl of Ormond understood
p. 415.
Carthaigh (Mac Carthy), the earl of Desmond states that he would not attack the Irish were he not under pressure to do so from the ‘king of the English’.\(^1\)

In an attempt to probe these complexities further, I propose to develop two themes that grate against each other in a manner that may prove productive: first, the degree of continued interaction between the earls and earldoms of England and English Ireland in the late Middle Ages; and, second, the development in Ireland of a more sharply-defined and regionally-based comital power. These themes are clearly in tension, but this reflects the awkward social realities rather better than the zero-sum model, familiar from Irish historiography, in which ‘aristocratic autonomy’ grows at the expense of English royal power.\(^2\) The earldoms of late medieval Ireland were dynamic, not static, and the precise balance between curial interactions and regional autarky varied across time and according to circumstance—not least the vagaries of English politics and the favour of the crown itself.

**A DIVIDED ARISTOCRACY?**

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\(^1\) ‘Fuilngim tír na nÉireannach | nach rachainn i gceann Ghaoidheal | mina tiosadh éigeantas | ó ríogh Shaxan dom laoidheadh’ (Gearóid Mac Niocaill (ed.), ‘Duanaire Ghearóid Iarla’, *Studia Hibernica* 3:(1963), p. 18 [poem V, stanza 6]).

To what extent and in which respects were the earls and earldoms of Ireland set apart from their counterparts in England and Wales? R. R. Davies was forthright in his opinion that after the murder of the earl of Ulster in 1333,

the bonds which had tied the aristocratic communities of England and English Ireland became increasingly attenuated and frayed, even if they did not cease altogether … English Ireland was no longer normally part of the mental map, physical circuit and political ambitions of the higher aristocracy of England. The aristocracies of England and English Ireland would henceforth largely go their own ways.¹

Much of this is unobjectionable, although the chronology and causation might be better located later in the fourteenth century. A geographical distinction between the aristocracies of England and English Ireland is enunciated in the ordinance issued at Guildford in 1368 to tackle the problem of absenteeism: there it is recorded that the ‘prelates, earls, barons and other lords’ of Ireland had complained to Edward III that the troubles afflicting his land of Ireland could only be remedied by the ‘continuous residence of the earls, nobles, and others of his realm of England, who have inheritance in the land of Ireland’.² Exactly a century later, in 1468, the dichotomy was expressed in cultural terms by a Gaelic annalist reporting the execution of Thomas seventh earl of Desmond by the chief governor Sir John Tiptoft earl


of Worcester: Desmond, a ‘foreign youth [Ir. Gallmacamh]’, was killed in treachery ‘by an English earl [Ir. le hIarlă Saxanach]’.

While the general orientation of individual earls towards either Ireland or England may be obvious enough, it is the modifying clause in R. R. Davies’s comment on the bonds between the aristocracies—‘even if they did not cease altogether’—that is in most pressing need of investigation. Unless we attend to countervailing trends we risk foreshortening the history of interactions across the Irish Sea or, worse, encouraging a form of cultural determinism. J. R. S. Phillips, for one, surely exaggerated when, observing a ‘growing detachment from England and from their fellow nobility across the water’ dating from the early fourteenth century, he concluded that ‘Ireland was just as much a part of Outremer as the European colonies in Syria and the Holy Land’. The earls of late medieval Ireland did not evolve like the giant Galápagos tortoise, steadily diverging in isolation from related species in the archipelago. The briefest glance at Tables 1 and 2 reveals what a tangled web was woven by intermarriage between the titled nobilities of England and Ireland. Moreover, at no point in the late Middle Ages was comital Ireland the exclusive preserve of earls who could claim an Irish title.

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1 Annals of Ulster 3: pp. 218–21 (s.a. 1468). The annals of Connacht distinguish between Tiptoft, described as the ‘English justiciar [Ir. Giustiss Saxanach]’ and Thomas earl of Desmond, described as ‘unique among the earls of Ireland [Ir. aenIarlă an hErenn]’: Annála Connacht: the annals of Connacht (A.D. 1224–1544), ed. A. Martin Freeman (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1944), pp. 538–9 (s.aa. 1467.20, 1468.2). The distinction between the Gaill (‘foreigners’) and the Saxain (‘English’) is discussed in Art Cosgrove, Late Medieval Ireland, 1370–1541 (Dublin: Helicon Press, 1981), ch. 5, ‘Saxain, Gaedhil and Gaill’.


3 See tables 1 and 2.
Consequently the idea of a ‘divided aristocracy’ is problematical.¹ Separate paths of historical development may have opened up in the fourteenth century, but they continued to abut each other and intermittently intersect well into the age of the Tudors. The development of the Irish parliamentary peerage usefully illustrates these ambiguities. To the end of the Middle Ages, the ‘earl’ remained the highest dignity summoned to the Irish parliament, whose temporal lords numbered only eleven or twelve in the late fifteenth century.² Still inchoate in the early fourteenth century, the idea of a ‘peer’ in the Irish parliament was clearly discernible a century later in the Irish redaction of the Modus tenendi parliamentum—a somewhat slap-dash accommodation of the English original to the peculiar circumstances of Ireland. In the form in which we have it, the Irish Modus dates from 1418, although its English exemplar had been carried to Ireland by the 1380s at the latest.³ Whole sections of the English text, including the clause specifying that the value of an entire earldom was £400


³ The text of the Irish Modus survives in an inspeximus under the great seal of Ireland dated 12 January 1419 (Huntingdon Library (San Marino, California), MS E.L. 1699, whence CIRCLE, Patent Roll 6 Henry V, no. 15), though the treatise was certainly in existence on 26 June 1418 when it was discovered on the person of Sir Christopher Preston (d. 1422) of Gormanston. I discuss the date in Peter Crooks, ‘The background to the arrest of the fifth earl of Kildare and Sir Christopher Preston in 1418: a missing membrane’, Analecta Hibernica 40 (2007), pp. 8–9. Editions of both the English and Irish versions are provided in Parliamentary texts of the later Middle Ages ed. Nicholas Pronay and John Taylor (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980). The date of composition of the English Modus is uncertain, and has been placed variously in the 1320s or early in the reign of Edward III. See Parliamentary texts, p. 22; PROME, General Introduction; Kathryn Kerby-Fulton and Steven Justice, ‘Reformist intellectual culture in the English and Irish civil service: the Modus tenendi parliamentum and its literary relations’, Traditio 53 (1998), esp. 192–6.
p.a., are regurgitated verbatim in the Irish version, where their correspondence to reality is even more remote than is the case for England.¹ There are, however, a number of noteworthy variations, among them a semantic shift in the use of the word ‘peer’. Whereas the English Modus uses ‘peer’ to refer to all those bound to attend parliament, except officials and servants,² the Irish Modus keeps pace with English developments later in the century and reserves ‘peer’ for the lords alone. In the celebrated clause asserting that without the commons there shall be no parliament, the Irish Modus (c. 15) asserts that ‘each peer of parliament is in parliament for himself’, where the corresponding phrase in the English original refers to ‘magnates’.³ While the idea of a ‘peer’ in the Irish parliament is here clearly in evidence, there is a danger of reifying the ‘peerage of Ireland’ as a discrete institution at too early a stage of its development. In emulation of English developments, the later fifteenth century saw the development of an elongated hierarchy of degree in Ireland, with the creation

¹ Irish Modus, c. 2 (Parliamentary texts, p. 128, trans. p. 139); English Modus, recension ‘A’, c. 3 (ibid., p. 68; trans. p. 81).

² The senses in which parli- es is used in the English Modus are discussed in M. V. Clarke, Medieval representation and consent: a study of early parliaments in England and Ireland, with special reference to the Modus tenendi parliamentum (London: Longmans, 1936), p. 11. An example of the later English usage comes from 1388, when Sir John Beauchamp, despite his creation as baron by patent in 1387, was refused the right to be judged by the peers because he was not considered one of them: Chris Given-Wilson, ‘Richard II and the higher nobility’, in Richard II: the art of kingship, ed. A. Goodman and Gillespie (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 119.

³ Irish Modus, c. 15 Parliamentary texts, p. 133; trans. p. 143); cf. English Modus, recension ‘A’, c. 23 (ibid., p. 77). This adaptation is noted in V. H. Galbraith, ‘The Modus tenendi parliamentum’ Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes, 15 (1953), p. 98. The shift in the meaning of ‘peer’ is also discernible in the Irish Modus, c. 8, which describes the fourth grade of parliament consisting de comitibus, baronibus et eorum paribus (Parliamentary texts, p. 130), unlike the English Modus, recension ‘A’, which has de comitibus, baronibus et aliis magnatibus et proceribus, tenentibus ad valentiam comitatus et baronie (ibid., p. 79).
of three barons by patent in the 1460s,\(^1\) and a viscount in 1478.\(^2\) Ireland was not, however, always a step or two behind English developments. In quick succession, Richard II created his favourite Robert de Vere, earl of Oxford, first marquess of Dublin (December 1385) and then duke of Ireland (October 1386).\(^3\) ‘Marquess’ was in its origins a Frankish title signifying command of a frontier, a march or borderland.\(^4\) It may be (as Henry IV was informed without irony in 1402) that marquess was an ‘alien title’ in England;\(^5\) but there was a certain, albeit unwitting, logic to its deployment to Dublin given that the southern parts of that county were frequently described in English and Irish chancery letters as being situated ‘on the marches of the Irish enemy’.\(^6\) It was, however, in the English, and not the Irish, parliament that Richard

\(^1\) Two under the English seal in March 1462 to Robert Barnewell as baron of Trimleston, and Roland fitz Eustace (d. 1496) as baron of Portlester (Report, 5: p. 361; CPR 1461–7, pp. 178, 188. See also CP, 10: pp. 598–9; CP, 12: pt 2, p. 35); and another under the great seal of Ireland in 1468 for Robert Bold (d. 1479) as baron of Ratoath (CIRCLE, Patent Roll 8 Edward IV, no. 6; Stat. Edw. IV, pt 1, pp. 622–4). See also CP, 10: p. 744.

\(^2\) CPR 1476–85, p. 120. Richardson and Sayles considered that these new creations by patent were evidence ‘that the peerage of Ireland had by then been assimilated to the peerage of England’, by which they meant that the Irish peerage had adopted the most recent innovations of the English peerage. See Richardson and Sayles, Irish Parliament, p. 134. On the distinction in Ireland between ‘administrative’, ‘feudal’ and ‘parliamentary’ baronies, see the pithy comments by Kenneth Nicholls, ‘Media taken in by bogus baronies’, History of Ireland 4:3 (1996), 7–8.


\(^5\) For the unappreciated irony of the remark, see Crouch, Image, p. 75.

\(^6\) On 13 November 1386, an Irish chancery letter issued in the name of the marquess of Dublin appointed watchmen (L. vigilatores) to make watch and ward for the security of the marches of co. Dublin (CIRCLE, Patent Roll 10 Richard II, no. 227). For other references in the Irish and English chancery to the marches of county Dublin, see CIRCLE, Close Roll 1 Richard II, no. 97 (8 July 1377); CPR 1385–9, p. 533 (27 Nov. 1388).
II specified that de Vere should sit in the higher ranks between the dukes and the earls.¹ Had de Vere travelled to Ireland either as marquess or duke (and he did not), the writs of parliamentary summons would have been issued in his name, and he would have taken the place in parliament of the king.

Robert de Vere’s Irish titles illustrate how the partition between the titled nobility of England and English Ireland, which was becoming more fixed in theory, tends to blur or evanesce upon closer inspection. The point emerges with still more force when we turn to another innovation of Richard II, whose expedition to Ireland of 1394–5 was the occasion for the creation of a new title—earl of Cork created for Edward earl of Rutland (d. 1415), son of the duke of York, and later duke of Aumale.² Rutland appears to have received his title before 5 January 1395, when he is styled in a charter witness list as ‘earl of Rutland and Cork’.³ Following the pattern established in the early fourteenth century the entire county of

¹ Report, 5: p. 77. It was as marquess of Dublin that Robert de Vere was summoned to the ‘wonderful parliament’ of October 1386, and as duke of Ireland in the writs of summons issued in Dec. 1387 to the ‘Merciless Parliament’ of Feb. 1388: see Chris Given-Wilson, PROME, October 1386, ‘Introduction’; ibid., February 1388, ‘Introduction’.


³ CIRCLE, Patent Roll 18 Richard II, no. 66. This is ten days before the earliest reference to the earldom of Cork in Curtis, Richard II in Ireland, pp. 225 (15 January 1395). The normal order of precedence for the compound style appears to have been ‘Rutland and Cork’ (ibid., pp. 181, 199), but the order is reversed on at least one occasion: on 21 April 1395 he is styled ‘Edwardus comes de Corke et de Ruttlelande’ (ibid., p. 63, trans. p. 155). A nineteenth-century fair copy survives among the Talbot MSS (now in the Bodleian) of letters patent of ‘Edward of York, earl of Rutland and Cork, admiral of England and Ireland’, dated 27 October 1396, appointing William Shareshull as his deputy in the office of the admiralty in the port of Dublin, and thence by the coasts of the sea to Malahide (Medieval History Research Centre, Trinity College Dublin: Unpublished calendar of Talbot MSS by A.J. Otway-Ruthven, no. 43).
Cork was granted to him to hold ‘with the franchises of a county palatine’. By the first year of Henry IV, however, letters appointing a sheriff (rather than a seneschal) for Co. Cork indicate that the liberty had been suppressed, presumably when Rutland was stripped of his other dignities (including the dukedom of Aumale). There is one further tantalizing but problematical crumb of evidence concerning the earldom of Cork. The corrupt text of an undated petition survives from the ‘kinges pore subjects within the county of Cork’, who addressed their complaints to the ‘Lorde of Rutlande and Cork, the kinges deputye’. The flourish with which the letter closes—a request for military aid from the king’s poor subjects of the city of Cork and the towns of Kinsale and Youghal—has often been quoted: ‘if yow do not [provide the requested aid] we be all cast awaye, and then farewell Mownster for ever’. The document was transcribed in full by Edmund Campion (d. 1581) into the second ‘boke’ of his manuscript Histories of Ireland, composed in ten weeks towards the end of his visit to Ireland of 1570–1. Campion was a contemporary at Oxford of the Dubliner, Richard Stanihurst (d. 1618), whose father James (d. 1573)—sprung from a line of Dubliners who had careers in the Irish administration since the late fourteenth century—played host to Campion

1 A memorandum of 1399 states that ‘le contee de Cork ovek toutes choses est donez as autres ovek franchises de Conte Palois’ (James Graves (ed.), A roll of the proceedings of the king’s council in Ireland for a portion of the sixteenth year of the reign of Richard the Second, A. D. 1392–93 (London: Rolls Series, 1877), p. 266).

2 CIRCLE, Patent Roll 1 Henry IV, no. 33.


4 Two Bokes, ed. Vossen, pp. 104–6
during his Irish sojourn, providing access to his library and introductions to those in Ireland who could provide access to state records.¹ Campion described the document as a ‘lettre from Cork, copied out of an old record that beareth no date’, which he received from Francis Agard (d.1577), a member of the Irish privy council.² This portion of Campion work was first published in Holinshed’s Chronicles, including the Cork petition, which is rehearsed again in full.³ While in Ireland, Campion had also met with Sir Christopher St Lawrence (d. 1589), baron of Howth, and a third version of the petition to the ‘Lord of Rutland and Corke’ found its way (though without any attribution to Campion) into St Lawrence’s work of historical compilation known as the ‘Book of Howth’.⁴ These writers all followed Campion in attributing the undated petition to the reign of Henry IV,⁵ but it seems more likely to belong to the mid-fifteenth century, when Richard duke of York (d.1460) held office as lieutenant of

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¹ For Campion’s use of historical sources, see Colm Lennon, ‘Edmund Campion’s Histories of Ireland and reform in Tudor Ireland’, in The reckoned expense: Edmund Campion and the early Jesuits. Essays in celebration of the first centenary of Campion Hall, Oxford, ed. Thomas M. McCoog S.J. (Woodbridge, Boydell and Brewer, 1996), ch. 4, esp. the comment at p. 69: ‘his research of original records is perhaps a facet of which Vossen [Campion’s modern editor] could have been more commendatory.’ For the early Stanihursts, see Colm Lennon, Richard Stanihurst: The Dubliner, 1547–1618 (Dublin, 1981), ch. 1.

² Two Bokes, ed. Vossen


⁴ Two versions of the petition survive among the Carew MSS, now at Lambeth Palace, both of which have been calendared: Calendar of Carew MSS, iv, pp. 441–2; Calendar of Carew MSS, v, pp. 23–4 (‘Book of Howth’). For St Lawrence’s use of Campion’s Histories in his own compilation, see the analysis in Valerie McGowan-Doyle, The book of Howth: the Elizabethan Re-Conquest of Ireland and the Old English (Cork: Cork University Press, 2011), esp. p. 71, where the letter from the inhabitants of Cork is mentioned (though McGowan-Doyle accepts the date of 1407).

⁵ Two bokes, ed. Vossen, p. 104
Ireland. York’s second-surviving son, Edmund Plantagenet, bore the style earl of Rutland from boyhood.\(^1\) The petition to the ‘Lorde of Rutlande and Cork’ describes the addressee as the king’s deputy, that is chief governor of Ireland. Although Edmund never held office as chief governor, he was appointed under the Irish seal as chancellor of Ireland in 1460.\(^2\) It may be going too far to suggest that the style ‘earl of Rutland and Cork’—let alone the franchise of the county—was revived as an additional courtesy title for Edmund earl of Rutland. But, at the very least, the evidence of the petition suggests that memory of the earldom of Cork and the linkage with the holders of the title earl of Rutland survived into the mid-fifteenth century and beyond.

Ephemeral though may have been, the compound title of ‘Rutland and Cork’ was a straw in the wind. The vesting of multiple titles in a single person is one of the more distinctive developments in ‘comital Ireland’, and a sign that the patterns of transmarine landholding, so characteristic of the period before 1333, did not altogether disappear thereafter. Sir John Talbot (d. 1453) exemplifies the possibilities still open to a newcomer to

\(^{1}\) *CP*, 11, p. 252 n.

\(^{2}\) Rutland was appointed chancellor of Ireland on 24 February 1460 (CIRCLE, Patent roll 38 Henry VI, no. 2), but he is not styled ‘earl of Cork’ here, nor in another reference in *Statute rolls of the parliament of Ireland, reign of King Henry the sixth*, ed. Henry F. Berry (ed.), (Dublin: HMSO, 1910), p. 729. Otway-Ruthven follows J.T. Gilbert in dating the document to c.1449, during York’s first Irish expedition (*History of medieval Ireland*, p. 381). Curtis favoured a slightly later date of 1460: Edmund Curtis, ‘Richard, duke of York, as viceroy of Ireland, 1447–1460’, in Crooks (ed.), *Government, war and society*, p. 247. To add to the confusion, another version of the petition—this time with no mention of the earl of Rutland and Cork, but instead addressed to ‘Henry lord Grey of Ruthin’ and with the date of 1470—appears in a manuscript dating from the first half of the seventeenth century: West Yorkshire Services, Bradford Archives, MS 32D86/14 (Hopkinson of Lofthouse Antiquarian Papers, vol. xiv), a short description of which appears in Brian Donovan and David Edwards, ‘British sources for Irish history before 1485’. *Analecta Hibernica* 37 (1998), 218. There may be some confusion here with Henry Lord Grey of Codnor, who was deputy lieutenant of Ireland in 1478 (*New history of Ireland*, ix, 478). I am very grateful to Professor Michael Bennett for sharing his knowledge of this document with me.
Ireland in the late Middle Ages. Talbot ended his career as earl of Shrewsbury (cr. 1442) in England, and earl of Waterford (cr. 1446) in Ireland. He began less auspiciously as the second son of Richard, fourth Lord Talbot (d. 1396). A good marriage to Maud Nevill, heiress of Thomas Lord Furnival of Hallamshire (d. 1407), brought John a title. As Lord Furnival, Talbot inherited lands across the Irish Sea at Loughsewdy (modern Co. Westmeath), a fragment of the Verdon inheritance that had been divided among co-heirs in 1332. Talbot was also closely involved in promoting the Irish fortunes of his elder brother, Gilbert, fifth Lord Talbot (d.1418). Gilbert claimed the liberty of Wexford by descent from John Hastings, earl of Pembroke, who had died without heirs in 1389. The Talbot title to Wexford was contested by Reginald, third Lord Grey of Ruthin (d.1440). Much to the outrage of Lord Grey, Sir John Talbot used his tenure as lieutenant of Ireland from 1414 to assert his family’s rights and, after the death of Gilbert Talbot in 1418, the lieutenant seized Wexford into the king’s hands. Gilbert’s heir was a short-lived daughter Ankaret. After her death in 1421, the Talbot claim to Wexford passed to her uncle, Sir John, now sixth Lord

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1 CP, 11: p. 701 (Shrewsbury); 12, pt 1: p. 620 (Talbot); 12, pt 2: p. 419 (Waterford).
2 Pollard, John Talbot and the war in France, pp. 7–8; CPR 1408–13, p. 167.
5 R. Ian Jack, ‘Grey, Reginald, third Baron Grey of Ruthin’, ODNB, s.n.. Reginald Grey had served as justiciar of Ireland at the death of Roger Mortimer, earl of March and Ulster, in July 1398 and he held pleas on 21 Aug. 1398 (Cambridge University Library, Add MS 3104, fo. 74).
6 TNA, SC 8/191/9544.
Talbot. This entrenchment of the Talbot family in Ireland—which was to be acknowledged on 17 July 1446 by Sir John’s advancement to the title ‘earl of Waterford’, to be held in tail male by service of being ‘steward of Ireland’—suggests that Sir John himself was more than simply ‘one of the more important absentee landlords’. He had, in fact, joined the ranks of the colony’s aristocratic elite, and his proximity to the Lancastrian dynasty posed a challenge to the hitherto pre-eminent magnate in Ireland, James Butler, the fourth earl of Ormond.

Herein lay the seeds of the rivalry between Talbot and Ormond that was to dominate Anglo-Irish affairs between 1420 and the mid-1440s. After Talbot’s death in 1453, the family’s links with Ireland became more attenuated, but the earls continued to exercise administrative oversight of the liberty of Wexford. John second earl of Shrewsbury had married Elizabeth daughter of the fourth earl of Ormond in 1445, and served nominally in the office of chancellor of Ireland. At his death in 1460 the earldom passed to his son John (d. 1473), the third earl, whose younger brother Gilbert held the custody of the liberty of Wexford from


3 Pollard, ‘The family of Talbot’ (Ph.D.), p. 106. Edmund Curtis came closer to the mark when he described Talbot as ‘a returned absentee on a large scale’, adding pointedly that, ‘[r]eturned absentee were never popular’ (Curtis, Medieval Ireland, 2nd edn., p. 292).

1473 after his brother’s death and during the minority of the fourth earl, George (d. 1538). \(^1\) In 1521 George Talbot appointed an English seneschal to manage his affairs in the liberty of Wexford; and in deeds dated July 1521 and July 1532 he appears under the compound style ‘George, earl of Shrewsbury, Wexford and Waterford … steward and constable of Ireland’. \(^2\)

In the case of Ireland’s oldest earldom, Ulster—created in 1205 for Hugh II de Lacy (d. 1243) and revived in 1263 by the Lord Edward for Walter de Burgh (d. 1271)\(^3\)—the distinction between ‘resident’ and ‘absentee’ earls is still more artificial. \(^4\) After the murder of

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\(^1\) Statute rolls of the parliament of Ireland, twelfth and thirteenth to the twenty-first and twenty-second years of the reign of King Edward the Fourth (being vol. IV. of the Irish Record Office series of early statutes) ed. James F. Morrissey (Dublin: HMSO, 1939), pp. 384–6, 756–8. The confirmation by the Irish parliament in 1476 (ibid., pp. 384–6) recites the English royal letters patent of 12 July 1473 granting the custody to Gilbert Talbot. The Irish parliament confirmed that Gilbert might lawfully occupy or appoint a deputy in the office of seneschal of Wexford. It is clear that Gilbert did not serve in person because the local landowner, David Keating, is named as seneschal of Wexford in records of 1473 and 1476–84: see Brian Coleman, ‘Lords and ladies of Wexford, AD 1247–1536’, *Journal of the Wexford Historical Society*, 24 (2012–13). I am very grateful to Brian Coleman for bringing this to my attention.

\(^2\) These deeds were registered on the Irish chancery rolls of Henry VIII: *Calendar of the patent and close rolls of chancery in Ireland, of the reigns of Henry VIII., Edward VI., Mary, and Elizabeth* ed. James Morrin (Dublin: HMSO, 1861), pp. 153–4, 286. See also the appointment of James Sherlocke as treasurer, receiver-general and bailiff of ‘the lordship of Wexforde, the estate of George Earl of Shrewsburie’ dated 7 December 1537 (ibid., p. 37). His style is reversed in a record of 1537, in which he appears as ‘George Talbot Erle of Waterford and Saloppe’ (*Statute rolls ... Richard III–Henry VIII*, p. 167). An extent of the lands of the earl of Shrewsburie in Co. Wexford, made in 1540–1, is printed in *Crown surveys of lands 1540–41, with the Kildare rental begun in 1518* ed. Gearóid Mac Niocaill (Dublin: Irish Manuscripts Commission, 1992), pp. 15–18.

\(^3\) For an edition of the French abstracts of the Lord Edward’s charter to Walter de Burgh, which appear in the ‘Ultionia’ list of Mortimer muniments in BL, Add. MS 6041, see Robin Frame, ‘A register of lost deeds relating to the earldom of Ulster, c.1230–1376’, in *Princes, prelates and poets*, pp. 91–2 (nos. 1–5).

\(^4\) A modern examination of the earldom of Ulster in the late Middle Ages is lacking, but see Edmund Curtis, ‘The medieval earldom of Ulster, 1333–1603’, *Proceedings and Reports of the Belfast Natural History and Philosophical Society* (1930–31), pp. 67–80; and D. B. Quinn, ‘Anglo-Irish Ulster in the sixteenth century’, *Proceedings and Reports of the Belfast Natural History and Philosophical Society* (1933–4), 56–
Walter de Burgh’s great-grandson William in 1333, Ulster passed through William’s daughter Elizabeth to her husband Lionel of Antwerp, son of Edward III, and upon Lionel’s early death in 1368 through his daughter Philippa to Edmund Mortimer earl of March (d. 1381). The earldom proved to be a damnosa hereditas, as three successive generations of Mortimers died in Ireland while holding the office of king’s lieutenant. Their careers may have been brief, but the Mortimers made their presence felt in Ireland, and their Irish estates and exploits feature prominently in the historical and genealogical confections of their family chronicle. Another source of image-making was the Welsh bard Iolo Goch, who displays a detailed knowledge of Irish topography and the challenges facing his patron Roger Mortimer (d. 1398) in Ireland:

Through confidence from the height of breeding
Boldly wilt thou conquer Connacht [Gonnach].
Go over the sea, and destroy Meath [Mydd]
To the furthest parts of the unruly country;
The town of Trim [Trum] is from thine own father:
Thine are castles fair of shape […]
Make an ambush—may 300 be struck down—
Mighty lad, upon Mac Morwch [Mac Morwech].
Cut, rend and strike, straight ahead,

78. The work of Katharine Simms on Gaelic Ulster is also indispensable, esp. Katharine Simms, ‘Gaelic lordships in Ulster in the later Middle Ages’ (Ph.D., 2 vols., University of Dublin, 1976).

1 A detailed study of the Mortimer family in Ireland after 1368, when they inherited the earldom of Ulster and lordship of Connacht, is long overdue. For an earlier period, see Paul Dryburgh, ‘The career of Roger Mortimer, first earl of March (c. 1287–1330)’ (Ph.D., University of Bristol 2002).

2 Monasticon, 6, pt 1, pp. 351–5. For discussion, see Davies, Lords and lordship, pp. 34–9.
Yonder to Kellistown [Galys] through its heart.

Make haste, and claim completely

The land of Ulster (Wlster), thou of Elystan’s fame.¹

These multiple interests were also displayed in the compound titles in which the Mortimers revelled: a writ issuing from the chancery of the liberty of Trim in Ireland in the name of Edmund Mortimer (d. 1425) styles him ‘earl of March and Ulster, lord of Wigmore, Clare, Trim and Connacht’.² After 1425, Ulster passed to Richard duke of York (d. 1460), who visited Ireland twice and provided a focus of loyalty for the otherwise fractious Irish earls.³ In 1449, when the future duke of Clarence, George (executed in 1470), son of Richard of York, was born at Dublin and the ‘earls of Ormond and Desmond stood sponsors at the font’.⁴ The earldom passed to the crown in 1461, and although at this point aspirations to exercise lordship directly disappeared, and accommodation was made with native lords, Ulster remained a prestigious title—‘the third moost Rialle Erldo me in Christante’, as the ‘trwe liege people of Therldome of Vlster’ reminded Edward IV in the late 1460s.⁵ English kings

²  Northamptonshire Record Office, Stopford Sackville MS 2215 (writ dated 27 September 2 Henry VI).
⁴  The evidence concerning this episode is analyzed in Peter Crooks, ‘Dynasty and destiny: the Geraldines under Lancaster and York’, in Geraldines, ed. Crooks and Duffy.
remained sensitive to the importance of the title, and when Conn Bacach Ó Néill petitioned
Henry VIII for the title ‘earl of Ulster’, he was rebuffed with the remark that Ulster was ‘one
of the great earldoms of Christendom and of the King’s inheritance’. Ó Néill had to make do
instead with the less prestigious title ‘earl of Tyrone’.¹

Of the Irish earls who are normally counted among the ‘residents’, the Butlers of
Ormond were the most influential between c.1356 and 1461, and the best placed to maintain
and capitalize upon links with the English court and titled nobility. The link between curial
connections and accelerated career advancement is obvious in the case of James Butler first
earl of Ormond, who received his comital title in 1328 in the same Salisbury parliament at
which Roger Mortimer was created earl of March.² Butler’s visit to England was also the
occasion for his marriage to a granddaughter of Edward I—Eleanor, daughter of Humphrey
de Bohun earl of Hereford (d. 1322), as a consequence of which subsequent earls of Ormond
were addressed by the king as dilectus consanguineus.³ History came close to repeating itself
in the autumn of 1385, when James third earl of Ormond ‘received the belt of knighthood’
from Richard II during the same controversial Westminster parliament at which the king was
to create Robert de Vere as marquess of Dublin.⁴ As it was in 1328, so it was to be again in

¹ TNA, SP 60/10, f. 187 (whence Letters and Papers, foreign and domestic, of the reign of Henry VIII, vol.
XVII, no. 249, p. 119).
² Frame, English lordship in Ireland, p. 185.
³ For instance, National Library of Ireland, D 1213 (English letters patent dated 6 Feb. 1375), whence
CIRCLE, Patent Roll 49 Edward III, no. 291; a calendar of the same deed is provided in Calendar of
Ormond deeds, vol. II, no. 199. On 20 Nov. 1347, English letters patent confirming the prisage of wines to
the second earl of Ormond ‘pro eo quod ipse de sanguine nostro existit’ (Lynch, View of the legal
institutions, p. 83, quoting from the original English patent roll subsequently calendared as CPR 1345–8, p.
421).
⁴ Westminster chronicle, pp. 140–1.
1386, when the third earl of Ormond returned to Ireland newly-wedded to an English wife and with confirmation of £40 yearly from the fee farm of the city of Waterford.\(^1\) It was through such links and auspicious marriages that the Butlers had acquired additional English landholdings in the late thirteenth century. The inquisitions \textit{post mortem} conducted upon the deaths of the second (1382) and third (1405) earls of Ormond record that they held manors scattered across ten English counties worth in excess of £150 p.a.\(^2\) These holdings expanded dramatically in the second quarter of the fifteenth century. When James fourth earl of Ormond succeeded as a minor in 1405 he became a ward of Thomas of Lancaster, who arranged his marriage with Joan, daughter of William Beauchamp and Joan Lady Abergavenny. The issue of that marriage was another James, born in 1420 and sent to be raised in England, where his star rose as a companion of the boy-king Henry VI. When his doting grandmother, the dowager Lady Abergavenny, died in November 1435 she bequeathed her personal lands in trust to the young James Ormond (as he was known),\(^3\) providing him more than twenty manors in nine English counties, worth well over £300.\(^4\) This income was further augmented in 1438, when the maternal inheritance of Humphrey fitz Alan duke of Touraine passed to his half-sister Avice Stafford, who had recently married James Ormond.\(^5\) The result of these windfalls was that, by the 1440s, James Ormond’s


\(^3\) As, for instance, in letters patent of ‘James de Ormond, knight, son and heir of the earl of Ormond’ in Dryburgh and Smith (eds.), ‘Calendar of … ancient deeds’, 60.


income was approaching £1000. In 1449 he was created earl of Wiltshire,¹ and three years later he succeeded to his father’s Irish title as well.²

The final two Irish comital houses, the Geraldines of Desmond and Kildare, never acquired tenurial interests in England on anything like this scale. Nonetheless, as Robin Frame has emphasised, ‘the upward climb of the branches [of the Geraldines] that eventually gained the earldoms of Kildare and Desmond was marked by royal service and advantageous marriages’.³ Marriage remains a useful index of interaction in the later Middle Ages, especially because the nuptials of the two Geraldine houses reveal them to have been moving in contrary motion. In the mid-fourteenth century, the first earl of Desmond was sufficiently well-connected to conclude a notable match on behalf of his son Maurice fitz Maurice. Ralph Stafford—created earl of Stafford the following year—agreed a marriage contract by which his daughter Beatrice would marry the future second earl of Desmond, bringing with her a marriage portion of £1000 and a jointure of £200, as well as the demise of his purparty of the liberty of Kilkenny for a term of ten years.⁴ Later earls of Desmond found their wives within English Ireland and, after 1468, within their provincial supremacy in the south-west,

¹ See CP, 10:, pp. 127–8; John Watts, ‘Butler, James, first earl of Wiltshire and fifth earl of Ormond’, ODNB, s.n.
² He is styled ‘earl of Ormond and Wiltshire’ in a deed dated at London in 1452 (Calendar of Ormond deeds, 3: no. 183); and ‘earl of Wiltshire and Ormond’ in an indented charter of 10 April 1458 (‘Calendar of … ancient deeds’, 54).
³ Frame, ‘Historians, aristocrats and Plantagenet Ireland, 1200–1360’, in War, government and aristocracy, p. 139.
⁴ McFarlane, Nobility, p. 85. For the demise, see CIRCLE, Close Roll 32 Edward III, no. 60. The marriage is placed in the context of the first earl’s career in Keith Waters, ‘The earls of Desmond in the fourteenth century’ (PhD, University of Durham, 2004), p. 90.
including from the Gaelic Úi Bhriain (O Brien) and Mic Charthaigh (Mac Carthy) dynasties. While the marital horizons of the earldom of Desmond were narrowing in the late fifteenth century, the marriages of the eighth, ninth and tenth earls of Kildare drew them closer to court, even as they were becoming ever more autonomous within Ireland itself. The eighth earl of Kildare married Alison (d. 1495), daughter of Roland FitzEustace, first baron Portlester and a leading local landholder in Co. Kildare. His second marriage to Elizabeth St John, a cousin of Henry VII, brought with it a dowry of £600 plus a further £200 in lands in England and Ireland. Gerald the future ninth earl of Kildare was educated in England at the court of Henry VII, where he was an exact contemporary of Arthur prince of Wales (born in 1486), at whose funeral in 1502 Gerald served as a man-at-arms in the climax of a heraldic ceremony at Worcester cathedral. The ninth earl also married twice: first (1503) Elizabeth Zouche, daughter of Sir John Zouche of Codnor; second (1522) Henry VIII’s cousin Lady Elizabeth, daughter of Thomas Grey marquess of Dorset. Kildare played on his resultant proximity to the crown through marriage. ‘My first wife was your poor kinswoman’, the earl reminded Henry VIII in 1525 in an effort to outmanoeuvre his critics at court, ‘and my wife


2 Steven G. Ellis, *Tudor Frontiers and Noble Power: the making of a British state* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 117, where the values provided are in Irish pounds, generally reckoned at two-thirds of the pound sterling after the establishment of a separate coinage for Ireland in 1460.


4 Steven G. Ellis, ‘Fitzgerald, Gerald, ninth earl of Kildare (1487–1534), lord deputy of Ireland’, *ODNB*, s.n.
now in like manner; and in all my troubles before this, by untrue surmises against me, ye were good and gracious unto me'.

The world into which these English countesses stepped was no ‘little England across the sea’, but their attitudes to it—insofar as we can assess them—varied markedly. Some were later remembered for their efforts to accommodate themselves to a new environment. Elizabeth Zouche is said to have set about learning the Irish language after coming to Ireland in 1503 with her husband the future ninth earl of Kildare, and ‘in a short time she learned to read, write, and perfectly speak the tongue’. Others seem never to have felt quite at home in Ireland. Two pieces of anecdotal evidence, which occur conveniently at the chronological limits of this chapter, indicate that the cause of their estrangement was not, or at least not only, the Gaelic population. The first comes from 1333, when the Dublin annalist provides a vivid image of Maud of Lancaster countess of Ulster scuttling on board a ship bound for English parts with her infant daughter (the heir to the earldom) immediately upon hearing rumours of her husband’s assassination at the hands of his own English tenants. The second anecdote comes from 1535, when the Spanish ambassador reported that, amid the Kildare rebellion in Ireland, Silken Thomas, who had recently succeeded as tenth earl of Kildare, had

1 Letters and papers, foreign and domestic, of the reign of Henry VIII, 4 pt 2 (1526–8): no. 2404.


repudiated his English-born wife, Frances daughter of Adrian Fortescue (d. 1539), and packed her off to England ‘because he will have nothing to do with English blood’.\(^1\) The fact that Thomas was himself born in London in 1513 is not the least of the ironies associated with his ill-considered actions in 1534–5, which brought about the destruction of his family and its regional hegemony.

**REGIONAL POWER**

This brings me to my second theme: the quality of the regional power exercised by the resident earls of Ireland. A pressing question here is how exceptional within the longer history of comital Ireland since 1333 was the much-vaunted ‘Kildare ascendancy’—a term used in Irish historiography to denote the dominance achieved by three successive earls of Kildare between 1470 and 1534 as the king’s representative in Ireland and as a power-broker between the English crown and Ireland’s resident English and Gaelic lords.\(^2\) If we leave aside the Kildares’ near-monopoly on the chief governorship of Ireland in this period, and focus

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instead on their growing territorial interests and wider connection, then the Kildare ascendancy still emerges as a big beast, but not necessarily *sui generis*. The key difference may be rather one of scale than of kind. The rise of the house of Kildare was chronologically a late development, contingent upon the eclipse of rivals and the preoccupation of England’s kings with affairs outside Ireland. Since the second quarter of the fourteenth century, the resident earls—especially Desmond and Ormond—had jostled for primacy at regional and provincial level in southern Ireland, and, when circumstances allowed, attained an influence across much, though never all, of the island. The ‘territorial ambitions’ of Maurice fitz Thomas, first earl of Desmond, which have attracted so much attention, set the tone of acquisitiveness and consolidation in Waterford, Kerry, Cork, Limerick and Tipperary which was to be typical of the Desmond earls until the last third of the fifteenth century. In like manner, Adrian Empey has estimated that the Irish estates of the Butlers of Ormond

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¹ The expansion of Kildare power in the late fifteenth century is analysed in Ellis, *Tudor Frontiers*, ch. 4; Lyons, *Gearóid Óg Fitzgerald*, pp. 9–21. The key primary texts on which knowledge of the extent of Kildare power is based are available in *Crown surveys of lands 1540–41*, pp. 104–357.

² On aristocratic faction, see Crooks, ‘Factions, feuds and noble power’.

increased by some 595,000 acres between 1328 and 1430—a dramatic expansion, notwithstanding their mid fourteenth-century territorial losses in northern Tipperary and Connacht.¹

The accumulation of power by the resident comital houses cannot be adequately explained solely by reference to the weakening position of the central government in Ireland. Less often remarked, but surely as or more important, was the degree of internal stability enjoyed by the comital houses themselves.² In the century after its creation in 1328, the earldom of Ormond passed from father to son in five successive generations between 1328 and 1461—a record later matched by the house of Kildare, which passed in the direct male line through five generations between c. 1454 and the execution of Silken Thomas in 1537. The stability of comital Ireland did not, however, rest solely upon smooth father-to-son succession. If we apply McFarlane’s famously-restrictive definition of ‘extinction’,³ we discover that on average the Irish comital families failed in the direct legitimate male line every third generation—a fate that befell the Geraldine earls of Kildare in 1331, 1432 and 1537, and their kinsmen the earls of Desmond in 1358, 1420, 1487 and 1529. This, however, gives a misleading impression of discontinuity. Of the Irish earldoms, only Ulster was held in fee simple, passing by marriage to three families which successively failed in the male line in 1333, 1368 and 1425. Most of the new creations of the fourteenth century were granted in tail


male. Sometimes—as with the earldom of Louth in 1329 and, more arguably, the earldom of Cork in 1415—the failure of male heirs extinguished the title within a single generation. This was exceptional. In most cases, the titles simply passed to the next male heir without much ado. Such squabbles as arose—for instance the usurpation of Desmond in 1411 by the uncle of the young fifth earl—were not normally of the crown’s making. On the contrary, when the crown was presented with an opportunity to eliminate an Irish earldom, its policy tended in a quite different direction. The earldoms of Desmond, Kildare and Ormond were each in turn rescued from oblivion during the late Middle Ages. When Maurice second earl of Desmond (d. 1358) drowned in the Irish Sea leaving as heir an idiot brother, Edward III pragmatically transferred title to the earldom of Desmond together with its appurtenant estates to the next brother Gerald (d. 1398), whose career as third earl of Desmond provided a focus for English lordship in the south-west during four challenging decades. A century later the basis of the Kildare ascendancy was laid c.1454 by the government of Henry VI, which recognized as earl Thomas fitz Maurice (d. 1478), grand-nephew of the fifth earl. The fortunes of a cadet branch of the Butlers were promoted when the main line came to an end with the death of its last male representative in 1515. The title was claimed (and recognized within Ireland) by

1 Frame, English Lordship, pp. 13–14.
4 CP, 7: pp. 228–9; Ellis, Tudor Frontiers, p. 112.
Piers Ruadh of the Butlers of Pottlerath, but disputed by Thomas Boleyn (d. 1539)—father of Anne and the other Boleyn girl—whose mother Margaret was the second daughter and co-heir general of Thomas seventh earl of Ormond. In 1528, a compromise was reached by which Boleyn was created ninth earl of Ormond (1529) with the English estates, while Piers Ruadh took the title earl of Ossory with control of the Irish lordships. When the Boleyns fell from grace a decade later, Piers reclaimed the title earl of Ormond. The new line of earls (and, from 1661, dukes) of Ormond he established was to remain a force in Anglo-Irish politics long after the Tudor dynasty itself had expired.

The impression of stability is reinforced by taking another measure, average career length, using as our sample the thirty-eight men with Irish comital titles active in Ireland between 1316 and 1534. Calculating the lengths of their careers is less straightforward than it might seem from successions lists because Irish earls frequently received livery of their inheritances while still in minority, and earls who were proprietor on both sides of the Irish


3 Erring on the side of inclusiveness, this sample of thirty-eight persons includes the eight earls of Ormond to 1539 (including Piers Butler earl of Ossory and eighth earl of Ormond, but excluding his rival Thomas Boleyn, ninth earl of Ormond); the ten earls of Kildare to 1534; the eleven earls of Desmond to 1534; the earl of Louth (1319–29); the earl of Rutland and Cork (1395–1415); the first earl of Shrewsbury and Waterford; and the six holders of the earldom of Ulster between William de Burgh and Richard of York inclusive. In the case of new creations, I have included their whole adult careers in the count rather than solely shorter period from their creation as earls.
Sea—such as the third and fourth earls of March—sometimes had livery of their Irish estates while they awaited release from wardship in England.\(^1\) By taking livery of inheritance as the start of an adult career, we can, however, arrive at some rudimentary statistics. The longest career is that of Maurice fourth earl of Kildare, who succeeded his brother Richard in 1331 at the age of nine, gained livery of his inheritance in 1342, and died forty-eight years later in 1390.\(^2\) At the other extreme is the career of John fourth earl of Desmond, who drowned in 1399 just one year after inheriting his father’s title.\(^3\) The average active career lasted around two decades, with a mean of just under 20 years and a median of 24 years. Of these, sixteen earls (42%) had adult careers of only ten years or less.\(^4\) But the truly striking statistic is how many of the Irish earls were long-lived. Twelve earls (or 31% of the sample) enjoyed careers of three decades and upwards. Of the earls of Kildare, the fourth, fifth and eighth had careers of 48, 42 and 35 years respectively; the first, third, sixth and ninth earls of Desmond had

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\(^1\) Edmund Mortimer third earl of March had livery of the inheritance in Ireland on 20 May 1368 while still of nonage (CPR 1367–70, p. 114). The Irish lands of Roger Mortimer fourth earl of March were released on 18 June 1393, the remainder of the inheritance not until 25 February 1394 (CPR 1391–6, pp. 284, 375).

\(^2\) Robin Frame, ‘Fitzgerald, Maurice fitz Thomas, fourth earl of Kildare (c.1322–1390)’, ODNB, s.n.

\(^3\) ‘Annales Galfridi Hogain’, in K. W. Nicholls (ed.), ‘Late medieval Irish annals: two fragments’, Peritia, 2 (1983), p. 92. Technically shorter again was the career of John fitz Thomas as first earl of Kildare: he died four months after receiving his earldom in 1316, but his adult career began c.1288, so for the purpose of this survey his career has been calculated as having lasted for 28 years.

\(^4\) In ascending order of career length (given in parentheses), these ten persons are as follows: John fourth earl of Desmond (1398–9); Silken Thomas (succeeded as tenth earl of Kildare September 1534; attained in May 1536 and thereby retroactively deprived of his title); John sixth earl of Kildare (1432–4); Maurice second earl of Desmond (1356–8); Richard third earl of Kildare (1328–31); John sixth earl of Ormond (restored to title 1475; died c.1477); Maurice fifth earl of Desmond (livery, 1405; expelled by uncle in 1411); Thomas eleventh earl of Desmond (livery, 1405; expelled by uncle in 1411); Thomas eleventh earl of Desmond (livery, 1405; expelled by uncle in 1411); Thomas eleventh earl of Desmond (livery, 1405; expelled by uncle in 1411); Thomas eleventh earl of Desmond (livery, 1405; expelled by uncle in 1411); Thomas eleventh earl of Desmond (livery, 1405; expelled by uncle in 1411); Thomas eleventh earl of Desmond (livery, 1405; expelled by uncle in 1411).
careers of 42, 40, 40 and 33 years; and the second, third and fourth earls of Ormond careers of 44, 33 and 41 years. Sir John Talbot’s career took him far beyond Ireland, but his connection with the country was of long-standing: his first lieutenancy was in 1414–20, his last in 1445–7. All this lies in stark contrast to the earls of Ulster, who were blighted by a succession of early deaths and protracted minorities.

However we crunch the numbers, the resident Irish earls come away with a strong actuarial rating for longevity, one made still more secure by the manner of their deaths. Of the same sample of 38 earls, a majority (22 earls, or 57%) died a death that was non-violent or, at least, accidental. Murders—a fate that befell the earl of Louth in 1329 and the earl of Ulster in 1333—did not occur again in the next century and a half. That is not to suggest that the earls were anything less that bellicose. Factional conflict periodically brought the earls to blows, and as firearms became more common in Irish warfare, several earls came to bear the marks of the new technology. The great earl of Kildare was shot and wounded by one of the Ui Mhórdha (O Mores) of Laois at Kilkea while watering his horse, dying some days later on 3 September 1513. His son, Gerald ninth earl of Kildare, was besieging Birr castle in 1533 when he was ‘shott in-to the bodye with a handgone and n ey slayne, but he wase never holl a-

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1 Thomas seventh earl of Ormond (d. 1515) also had a career of c.38 years, but I have not included him as he was not normally resident in Ireland.


3 See Table 3, ‘Causes of death of the Irish earls’.

4 No earl died as a result of factional conflict, but the brothers of two earls were killed: Thomas brother of the third earl of Ormond in 1396; and another Thomas, brother of the future ninth earl of Ormond in 1532, on which occasion the future ninth earl of Ormond also narrowly escaped being killed (David Edwards, ‘Butler [Bocach], James, ninth earl of Ormond and second earl of Ossory’, ODNB, s.n.).

5 Steven G. Ellis, ‘Fitzgerald, Gerald, eighth earl of Kildare’, ODNB, s.n.
gaine the more pittie’. ¹ The Spanish ambassador, who met James tenth earl of Desmond, in 1529 described him as ‘cool and confident in battle’, and noted that he was lame from a gunshot wound. ² But only one earl died while actually engaging the Irish in battle, namely Roger Mortimer, who was hacked to pieces by the Uí Bhroin (O’Byrnes) of Leinster at Kellistown (Co. Carlow) in 1398. ³ Nor were the comital houses particularly dogged by internal violence. In the 1490s a bitter rivalry between the resident and non-resident branches of the Butler family reached a climax when Piers Ruadh Butler (later earl of Ossory) chanced upon the illegitimate son of John sixth earl of Ormond near Kilkenny on 17 July 1497 and ‘with a couragious charge gored the Basterd through with his speare’. ⁴ But no holder of the title of earl of Ormond was actually murdered during the Middle Ages. ⁵ Rather more fissiparous were the fifteenth-century earls of Desmond; but although Thomas sixth earl of Desmond was supplanted by his uncle, he was banished in 1411 and later imprisoned on his

¹ Alan J. Fletcher, ‘The earliest extant recension of the Dublin Chronicle: an edition, with commentary’, in John Bradley, Alan J. Fletcher and Anngret Simms (eds.), Dublin in the medieval world: studies in honour of Howard B. Clarke (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2009), p. 405 (I have hyphenated words written separately in the MS but which are now considered as single).


⁴ Calendar of Carew Manuscripts, 5: p. 177.

⁵ The circumstances in which James ninth earl of Ormond died in 1546, together with seventeen followers, after attending a London banquet have raised suspicions that the company was deliberately poisoned, but the weight of historical evidence tends to the opinion that their deaths were accidental: the evidence is considered in David Edwards, ‘Malice Aforethought? The death of the ninth earl of Ormond, 1546’, Butler Society Journal 3:1 (1987), 30–41; and David Edwards, ‘Further Comments on the Strange Death of the ninth earl of Ormond’, Butler Society Journal 4:1 (1997), 58–64.
return to Ireland between 1414 and 1417; he was not killed. Thomas eventually died in exile in France in 1420, where his funeral was reputedly attended by Henry V.\(^1\) It was not until 1487 that an earl of Desmond was murdered by one of his own kindred,\(^2\) and that instability can be attributed in some part to the disruption wrought by the execution of Thomas, seventh earl of Desmond, by Sir John Tiptoft in 1468.\(^3\)

The seventh earl of Desmond was in fact only the second of three Irish earls to die by execution. Sir James Ormond, earl of Wiltshire and fifth earl of Ormond, was executed shortly after the Lancastrian defeat at Towton in 1461; and Silken Thomas was hanged and beheaded at Tyburn in 1537 while his five uncles suffered the full barbarities of a traitor’s death and their quartered remains were set up about the city of London.\(^4\) These were episodes of exceptional severity on the part of the crown, and their effect on each occasion was to curtail the extent of royal power in Ireland. The more general tendency, which persisted under the ‘centralizing’ Tudors, was for the crown to be forgiving.\(^5\) The Butlers were attainted in England in 1461 and Ireland 1462, but John Butler was recognized as sixth earl of

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5. Ciaran Brady has noted how between 1536 and 1588, ‘each of the great houses was permitted at least one overt denial of the Dublin government’s authority and most got away with a good deal more’ (Brady, The Chief Governors: the rise and fall of reform government in Tudor Ireland, 1536–1588 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 170).
Ormond in 1474 and the attainder was annulled in 1475.1 Similarly, although the suppression of the Kildare rebellion in 1534–5 was calamitous for the family, Gerald, a half-brother of Silken Thomas, was later restored as eleventh earl (1554–80).2 It was not until the reign of Elizabeth I and the rebellion of the house of Desmond in 1582 that an earldom was expunged.3

This is not to suggest that relations between the crown and the earls, or more particularly between the earls and individual chief governors of Ireland, were uniformly harmonious. Far from it. But the king was by no means inveterately hostile to the regional power of the earls. In the ordinances made at Westminster for the governance of Ireland in 1357 we glimpse the official mind at a moment when it was disposed to attend to the grievances of the English settler community in Ireland, quite possibly brought to the attention of the crown by the second earl of Ormond.4 The ordinances associate the earl of a given region with the chief governor and prelate of those parts in taking annual inquisitions upon the good offices of the king’s ministers.5 The important place accorded the earls in the

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4 For the context, see Frame, English Lordship, p. 319.

5 Statutes ... of Ireland, King John to Henry V, p. 416 (‘taking unto him a prelate and an earl of the parts nearest to those where the inquests following ought to be made [L. uno comite de viciniotibus partibus ubi subsequentes inquisiciones fieri debent’]). Similarly the following chapter provides that the justiciar and other officers shall call unto them ‘certain prelates and earls whom he shall deem meet, when he shall be in the Parts contiguous to them [L. ac quibusdam Prelatis & Comitibus, quos evocandos noverit cum in vicinis partibus fuerint’].
governance of English Ireland is also indicated by a minor verbal adaptation in the Irish Modus Tenendi Parliamentum. In the clause dealing with the procedure to be adopted in the eventuality of the king’s absence from parliament, the English Modus (c. 13) states the king shall commission ‘the archbishop of that place, the steward, and his chief justice’ to continue parliament in his name. In the Irish version, the place of the steward of England is given instead to the ‘the earls of the land [of Ireland]’. An approximation of this procedure was followed in July 1385, when the king’s lieutenant, being unable to attend a great council summoned to Kilkenny, appointed the earls of Desmond and Ormond, together with two bishops, to preside in his place.

While more work is required on the internal organization of the Irish earldoms, it is not entirely fanciful to compare their institutional development in the later Middle Ages to the contemporaneous growth of territorial principalities of Europe, which witnessed significant internal ‘consolidation’ and ‘coordination’ across the fifteenth century, bringing them into structural antagonism with superior powers. Among the factors that spurred on this process of regional consolidation in Ireland, two stand out as differentiating the resident

2 Irish Modus, c. 9 (ibid., p. 131, trans. p. 141). Sayles insisted on the reading comes terre (G. O. Sayles, ‘Modus tenendi parliamentum: Irish or English’ in Lydon (ed.), England and Ireland, p. 144), and understood ‘land’ to refer to the local territory of the earl in question. This reading is not borne out by the MS, and Maude Clarke was surely right that comitibus terre is the better reading because ‘in Ireland no one earl had precedence over the rest’ (Maude Clarke, ‘The manuscripts of the Irish “Modus tenendi parliamentum”’, EHR 48 (1933), 585).
Irish earls from their counterparts in England: the extent to which their jurisdictions (whether officially licenced, or otherwise) were untrammelled by royal interference; and the sheer size of the military forces at their command. An ode to the tenth earl of Ormond, written in the 1590s at a time when liberty jurisdictions had become comparatively scarce, boasts of the jealousy that the liberty of Tipperary enkindled in earls across the known world from Britain, France and Spain to ‘the earls of Syria, [and] the renowned earls of Egypt’.¹ As David Crouch discusses above, the franchises enjoyed by the fourteenth-century Irish earls were more prosaic, being penetrated by the royal government from outwith because of the reserved crown pleas and hollowed out from within by the erection inside the boundaries of the liberty of the ‘county of the crosses’ to which the royal government appointed its own sheriffs.² Indeed, royal ministers moved with celerity to resume some of the newfangled liberties created for the Irish earls, and return them to the status of royal shires: Louth in 1329 and Kildare in 1345.³ Elsewhere, despite occasional ministerial complaints, the trend was towards perpetuation and extension of franchises, rather than restriction and suppression. In the


² See Crouch above, p. 000; see also Frame, ‘Lordship and Liberties’, pp. 131–2, the latter part of which essay (pp. 133–8) sets liberties in the context of other manifestations of ‘real’ power. The important of discussion of liberties in A. J. Otway-Ruthven, A History of Medieval Ireland (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1980), pp. 181–7, emphasizes that the ‘franchise holder was in effect a royal official’, but does not explore the divergence of political reality from constitutional theory in the later Middle Ages.

1290s, Geoffrey Geneville (d. 1314) had been in a unique position among the English lords in Ireland in that he was empowered to hear the four pleas of the crown within his liberty of Trim.¹ When Edmund Mortimer (d. 1425) came of age in 1415, he had a series of charters extending back as far the original grant of Meath in 1172 to Hugh Lacy I (d. 1186) inspected and registered in the Irish chancery. The king then confirmed that Trim was to be held by Edmund with all the liberties exercised by his ancestors, including the four pleas.² Likewise the earls of Desmond, whose grant of Co. Kerry as a liberty in 1329 included the standard reservations,³ seem later to have legitimately claimed cognizance of the four pleas: the inquisition post mortem of John fourth earl of Desmond (d. 1399), taken in December 1420 at Tralee, claims that the earl had ‘a liberty and regal jurisdiction [L. libertatem et regale iurisdicionem] within the same county [Kerry] in chief, viz. to have cognizance and jurisdiction of all pleas both royal and personal before his seneschal and justices’.⁴ Less is known about the liberty of Wexford, but as late as the early sixteenth century, George Talbot fourth earl of Shrewsbury and Waterford, was jealously protective of his franchise, as emerges from the defensive tone of a letter written by Gerald ninth earl of Kildare in 1519, who denied having infringed Talbot’s liberty when, as deputy lieutenant, he had entered Co. Wexford in pursuit of one Sir Richard Brown and to ‘reform the enormities and variance


³ CChR 1327–41, p. 123.

⁴ Calendar of Ormond deeds, 3: no. 45 (p. 35).
between the Earl’s [i.e. Talbot’s] tenants and the Irish’.\(^1\) Without doubt, the most remarkable expression of regional jurisdiction in this period is found in the seigniorial ordinances issued by the fourth earl of Ormond in the second quarter of the fifteenth century. The ordinances issued at Fethard, probably in 1428, assert that that the community of Kilkenny and Tipperary ‘shall be one patria under one rule or one lordship’—an assertion of authority not only over the liberty of Tipperary but also Co. Kilkenny and the crosslands, to which the crown had customarily appointed royal sheriffs.\(^2\)

The purpose of these seigniorial ordinances was in part to regulate the imposition of ‘coign’ (Ir. *coinnmheadh*) within the Butler lordship, a system of forced billeting and exactions that supported military forces. As with their counterparts in Britain, service in arms was one of the defining attributes of the Irish earls. Battle achievements, including the occasional exploit in the Hundred Years War,\(^3\) feature prominently in the Gaelic bardic poetry they commissioned.\(^4\) Similar concerns are manifest in the English translation of the *Secreta Secretorum*, entitled the *Governance of Prynces*, commissioned by James fourth earl


\(^2\) BL, Additional ms 4797, fo. 123v, printed in C. A. Empey and Katharine Simms, ‘The ordinances of the White Earl and the problem of Coign in the later Middle Ages’, *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy* 75:C8 (1975), p. 186. The MS offers a date of 1428 or 1435, but Dr Elizabeth Matthew suggests that 1428 is the more likely because Ormond spent 1435 in England: (Matthew, ‘Governing of the Lancastrian lordship of Ireland’ [Ph.D], p. 230 note 41).


of Ormond. The translation offers the earl much conventional advice about the cardinal virtues of Prudence, Justice, Temperance and Fortitude; but it also stresses militarism to a degree more typical of a chivalric handbook than a ‘mirror’ for a prince. This was not inappropriate given that the ‘prince’ in Ireland was of necessity an active military commander. The unusual degree of emphasis placed on martial prowess may, however, also reflect disgruntlement, as is suggested by the carping aside of the translator on the subject of vainglory:

The iiiie cause why that this nobill erle [the fourth earl of Ormond] sholde not haue vayne glory of this forsayde proesses is, the lytill thanke that he had of ham that hym shuldyn best haue rewardid and commendid.1

The fact was that the exercise of arms in Ireland was literally a thankless task, offering little prospect of gain, whether in material wealth or reputation. The eighth earl of Kildare was unusual to the point of being unique in being elected to the Order of the Garter as a reward for his major victory at the battle of Knockdoe, Co. Galway, in 1504.2 More commonly, Ireland was not a venue for chivalric glory, and service in arms in France was the prerequisite for election to the Garter.3


2 Bryan, Gerald Fitzgerald, the Great Earl of Kildare, p. 251. He was installed on 4 May 1505 by proxy (CP, 2: appendix B, p. 547).

3 John Talbot, who was a vigorous commander in Wales and later Ireland, was only elected to the Garter in 1424 after service in France (Hugh E. L. Collins, The Order of the Garter, 1348–1461: chivalry and politics in late medieval England (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 127).
While the fourth earl of Ormond may have felt ‘little thanked’ for his military endeavours in Ireland, the forces that the Irish earls had at their disposal for service within Ireland far outstripped the private military capacities of their contemporaries in England.¹ The first earl of Desmond, for instance, had an enormous private army, known to his enemies as the ‘rout of MacThomas’, which dominated much of the southwest in the first half of the fourteenth century. The exactions required to support these forces provoked much hysterical complaint—the monastery of Graiguenamanagh, Co. Kilkenny, surpassed most with its vivid description of the white earl of Ormond as ‘more cruel than Pharaoh’²—, but the armies themselves did not necessarily work to the destruction of the English colony. In 1423 James sixth earl of Desmond brought a ‘great multitude of horse and foot to the number of 5000’ from Munster against two midlands lords who had been harassing the men of Co. Meath.³ Such a figure is not altogether implausible. By the late fifteenth century, a government report on the size of Desmond’s army stated that he had 400 horsemen, eight battles of galloglass (professional warriors of Scottish descent), one battle of crossbowmen and gunners, and some 3000 kern (Gaelic foot soldiers) at his disposal—a total of perhaps 4120 fighting men.⁴

¹ For a tabulation of troops raised to fight for the king in campaigns both within and beyond Ireland between 1296 and 1352–3, see Frame, English lordship, p. 40 (table 2), where the three largest retinues of horse and foot are those of Richard Burgh earl of Ulster (1,511); James Butler second earl of Ormond (660); and Maurice fitz Thomas first earl of Desmond (651). As Frame notes, however, ‘they could put more men in the field when fighting in their own localities or for ends that touched them personally (ibid., p. 40).


³ CIRCLE, Patent Roll, 1 Henry VI, no. 124.

⁴ A battle consisted of 80 galloglass. An early version of this tract, ‘A disruption [sic] of the Power of Irishmen’, has now been edited from Hatfield House Archives, Herfordshire, Cecil Papers MS 144, fo. 6v (Christopher Maginn and Steven G. Ellis, The Tudor Discovery of Ireland (Dublin, 2015), p. 83). The figures for the forces of the earl of Desmond are the same as those found in a briefer version of the same tract dateable to the reign of Elizabeth I (BL, Cotton MS Domitian Ax XVIII, fos. 100–104, edited in L. Price (ed.), ‘Armed forces of the Irish chiefs in the early 16th century’, Journal of the Royal Society of
eighth earl of Kildare was able to recruit a large force of Gaelic kern, reputedly 4000, for the invasion of England that resulted in the battle of Stoke (1487).¹ At the battle of Knockdoe, the forces that Kildare ranged against Burke of Clanricard have been estimated at 6000:² the annals of Ulster report the ‘heaps of slaughter’ on the vanquished side and state that of the nine battalions of galloglass ‘there escaped not alive of them but one thin battalion alone’.³ Three decades later, at the time of the Kildare rebellion, one estimate put the numbers mustered by Silken Thomas to besiege Dublin in 1534 as high as 15,000, and if this is an exaggeration he was certainly able to put two separate armies of 2500 and 1000 men into the field in addition to a smaller force outside Dublin.⁴

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² This figure, which is speculative, is given in G. A. Hayes-McCoy, Irish Battles: a military history of Ireland (Belfast: Appletree, 1990), pp. 61–2.

³ Annals of Ulster, 3: p. 471. The annalist also reports that ‘there fell there multitudes of the forces of the earl [of Kildare] on the other side’ (ibid.).

Taken together, the jurisdictional and military power enjoyed by the Irish earls suggests qualitative difference between the exercise of comital power in fifteenth-century Ireland as against neighbouring Britain, where the power of the earls was becoming increasingly hedged about by royal government in both England and Scotland, and the ‘earl’ took its place in an extended hierarchy of aristocratic rank. In Ireland, by contrast, the ‘earl’ survived as a unique distinction, and the earldoms of Desmond, Ormond and Kildare grew in territorial extent, as well as jurisdictional autonomy, military strength and political reach.

Commenting on this phenomenon, Kenneth Nicholls has suggested that if we are searching for parallels then the diffused power structure of medieval Germany may provide a better model for understanding late-medieval Ireland.1 ‘Every nobleman however modest his standing, is king in his own territory’, runs a Germany epigram of the fifteenth century inspired by the Romanist maxim, rex in regno suo est imperator.2 It finds an echo in the sarcastic comment attributed to Cardinal Wolsey on the ninth earl of Kildare: ‘The earle, nay, the kinge of Kildare. For when yow are disposed yow reigne more like then rule in the lande’.3 Accusations of regal pretensions on the part of the Irish earls are found as early as the fourteenth century, doubtless nourished by the conceits of the Gaelic bards who praised the earls by referring to their worthiness for kingship.4 But we do not need to credit the


2 Arnold, Princes and Territories, p. 284.

3 Two Bokes, ed. Vossen, p. 122.

4 For such a charge levelled against Maurice first earl of Desmond, see G. O. Sayles, ‘The legal proceedings against the first earl of Desmond’, Analecta Hibernica 23 (1966), 7; and for the suggestion that the accusations ‘may have had their origin in bardic propaganda which spoke of Desmond as king-worthy’, see Robin Frame, ‘Fitzgerald, Maurice fitz Thomas, first earl of Desmond (c.1293 1356), magnate and justiciar
notion that any Irish earl literally harboured designs to make himself a king of Ireland\(^1\) to recognize that, in cultivating an elevated concept of their own status, the earls drew on imagery and concepts that owed only so much to the overarching legitimation of the English crown, and which often implied or explicitly stated their autonomy. The poem *Cá mhéid ngabháil fuair Éire?* [‘How many conquests did Ireland endure?’] by Torna Ó Maolchonaire, for instance, places the Geraldines of Desmond in a historical continuum stretching back to the mythical Fir Bolg, and the poet describes Thomas seventh earl of Desmond as ‘both a king and an earl’.\(^2\) For yet another Gaelic poet of the fifteenth century, the very title ‘earl’ was enough to evoke a brazen flouting of the English king’s authority:

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\begin{align*}
\text{The law of the Saxon’s Kings has often been broken;} \\
\text{the Goill [foreigners] set no store by legal document;} \\
\text{none of them obeying the King’s law,} \\
\text{each of them is an Earl for himself.} \\
\text{About Éire the principle of them all is respect for the strong man.}\(^3\)
\end{align*}
\]

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3 *Aithdioghlaim dána*, vol. II, no. 38, p. 90.
This image of the ‘Earl for himself’ is a far cry indeed from the idea resurrected in England by Bracton of the earls as the king’s companions or fellow-travellers—his *comites*.

**EPILOGUE**

In the foregoing discussion of comital Ireland, the Gaelic aristocracy has perforce been all-but invisible. So it is appropriate, by way of conclusion, to note that the new phase in the historical development of the ‘earl’ in Ireland, which begins in 1542, was coincident with the final chapter in the history of the Gaelic order itself. In the aftermath of the Kildare rebellion, a series of Gaelic lords surrendered their lands to Henry VIII and received them back with officially-sanctioned titles—a halting policy known to Irish historiography as ‘surrender and regrant’. From the perspective of the Middle Ages, the admittance of Gaelic lords to the ranks of the English titled nobility marks a break with the past of even more lasting significance than the suppression of the house of Kildare in 1535. In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, it was not uncommon for the English government to accord Gaelic leaders titles such as *princeps* or *dux*, as, for instance, in the submissions and letters received by Richard II in Ireland during 1395. These titles did not signify an hereditary dignity. Rather

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1 See Crouch above, pp. 000; and also Crouch, *Image*, p. 46.


they were a means of fixing provincial hierarchies within the Gaelic lordships without recognizing the Gaelic leaders as ‘kings’. It was only later that this usage of ‘prince’ came to be interpreted as an overt denial of the sovereignty of the English crown, as when the chief governor Sir Anthony St Leger (d. 1559) informed the English privy council on the occasion of Conn Bacach Ó Néill’s creation as earl of Tyrone that ‘yt can not be knowen that ever any Oneile repaired in person before this in to England to any of his noble progenytours, but hitherto usurped to call them selffes Prynces of Ulster, as adversaries to his regally and monarchie’.  

For some Gaelic lords, a peerage provided not a position so much as a predicament. The scornful response of a Gaelic poet has often been quoted: ‘Ó Néill of Oileach and Eamhain [Macha], the king of Tara and Tailte, has exchanged in foolish submission his kingship for the Ulster earldom’. The problem was how to reconcile the expectations of

1  In a further letter to Richard II, dated 21 April 1395, Turloch Ó Conchobhair Donn complains that his rival, Turloch Ruadh, ‘has aspired to the name and title by which I am called in Irish fashion, that is to say “O’Conor” ’ (anelavit ad vocacionem qua vocatus sum et appellationem nomine more Hibernicorum OChoncubuyr). This is a relatively early example of the use of a surname as a title, as was to become widespread by the sixteenth century (Katharine Simms, From Kings to Warlords: the changing political structures of Gaelic Ireland in the later Middle Ages (Woodbridge: Boydell, 1987), pp. 34–40).

2  TNA, SP 60/10, f. 262; State Papers, Henry VIII, 3, pt 3: no. 416.

comportment, service and ‘civility’ demanded by an increasingly intrusive Tudor regime with the incompatible expectations of Gaelic society. Some among the new Gaelic peers fared well, surviving whether through pragmatic acquiescence, surface compliance or willing adaptation.¹ The Gaelic panegyric for Donnchadh Ó Briain fourth earl of Thomond (d. 1624) boasts how for ‘forty-four years he has been aiding the Crown without being willing to do anything dishonourable—such is the excellent service of our good Earl’.² The earls of Tyrone, by contrast, struggled to negotiate the contradictions inherent in their possession of an English title, with all the obligations this entailed, while attempting to maintain their pre-eminence in Gaelic Ulster. The contradictions proved intractable, provoking rebellion, warfare and ultimately self-exile in the enigmatic episode known as the ‘Flight of the Earls’.³ In September 1607 Aodh Ó Néill earl of Tyrone embarked for the continent, accompanied by another earl, Rudhraighe Ó Domhnaill, recently-created earl of Tyrconnel (cr. 1603), and over 90 other persons.⁴ In an eyewitness record of their journey overseas, the author Tadhg Ó Cianáin in effect imposes his own hierarchy of degree upon the nobles of Gaelic Ulster by referring consistently to the earl of Tyrone by his Gaelic title, ‘the Ó Néill’, while using the


inferior title ‘earl’ in reference to Ó Domhnaill.¹ As an instrument of Anglicisation, then, the ‘earl’ had misfired. The title had been readily assimilated; the earls themselves had not.²

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