

Rebellion & The Nine Years War:



King Hugh Maguire, the first of the Irish lords to rebel in 1593. Conjectural drawing by D. Warner. Copyright of Fermanagh County Museum.



Maguire Castle, Enniskillen. Conjectural drawing by D Warner. Copyright of Fermanagh County Museum.



An attack on a crannog. From an illustrated map by Bartlett, circa 1602A.D.

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Alone, the story of the rise of Hugh Maguire to the chieftom of Fermanagh has guaranteed his status in the mythology of the Gaelic order. In 1586, he killed Conn O'Neill in single combat to advertise his warrior mettle. Later, he displayed the statesmanship required of his aristocratic rank by marrying the daughter of Hugh O'Neill, the Earl of Tyrone – and this despite being a cousin of Red Hugh O'Donnell!

Though Hugh Maguire was consummate in the prized skills of warrior and diplomat, he was the last Maguire to know dominion of Fermanagh. Scarcely a century after his ascent in 1589 to the chieftom, the Maguires were scattered to the four winds, victims of the irrepressible tide of English and European politics.

The first loss of Maguire power came after a failed Rebellion of the Gaelic aristocracy – the Nine Years War (1594 – 1603). The Gaelic order in Ulster had remained aloof from the creeping colonialism of the English Crown, perhaps to the point of self-deception, since Ulster had been brought into the English fold by the division of the Province into shires and the overlay of a colonial administration. In the 1580s a statesmanlike embrace of the English masked preparations to rebel and challenge the Elizabethan ascendancy. The figurehead of this rebellion was Hugh O'Neill, the Earl of Tyrone. He embodied the complex and often contradictory character of the Gaelic order. Reared in England, he understood the English Crown but he turned his face to Catholic Europe, where he was a supporting player on the vast stage of European politics.

It was Maguire who inaugurated the Rebellion by harbouring his fugitive cousin, Red Hugh O'Donnell, expelling Fermanagh's sheriff, Captain Willis, and invading Sir George Bingham's Connacht territory. Ironically, Hugh O'Neill was employed by Elizabeth I to appease Maguire and then ordered to march with Bingham against him. Maguire's army was put to flight at the Battle of Belleek, though this was something of a mock battle, with O'Neill's men fighting on both sides!

In February 1594, an English army took and garrisoned Enniskillen. The fort was promptly besieged by Hugh Maguire, Red Hugh O'Donnell and Cormac McBarron O'Neill (Hugh O'Neill's brother). A relief army with Sir Henry Duke

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Siege of Enniskillen Castle, 1594 by John Thomas. From later copy of the original map which is in the British Library.

at its head was ambushed on the Arney River and routed by Maguire in the Battle of the Ford of the Biscuit: a poignant title which commemorates the sight of English rations floating down the Arney. By now the Rebellion was in full swing with Hugh O'Neill at its head and victories followed for the Ulster armies. In 1597 came the inevitable English backlash with major campaigns against Ulster, but a year later, at the Yellow Ford on the Blackwater River, Hugh Maguire led the Irish cavalry in a stunning victory against the English. With this rout the Rebellion caught fire throughout Ireland.

In 1600, Hugh O'Neill went on the campaign trail through Ireland canvassing support for the Rebellion. At Cork, Hugh Maguire made a speculative raid against the English and was met by Sir Warham Saint Leger and Sir Henry Power. He was killed in combat with Saint Leger and is buried in Cork.



The Defence of Enniskillen Castle 1594. Conjectural drawing by D. Warner. Copyright of Fermanagh County Museum.

Maguire's death precipitated an internecine feud for the succession in Fermanagh. Conor Rua was pitched against Cúchonnacht Og. O'Donnell supported Cúchonnacht Og and Conor Rua promptly went over to the English. The network of alliances within the Gaelic order which had sustained and extended the Rebellion was beginning to fragment in 1601 when the army pledged to the cause by Phillip II of Spain disembarked at Kinsale. Hugh O'Neill marched the length of Ireland through a winter landscape to relieve the pitifully supplied Spanish army of 4,000 men. The Battle of Kinsale, fought on Christmas Eve 1601, ended the all-Ireland Rebellion and the Ulster Gaelic chieftains headed home. O'Neill surrendered to the English at Mellifont in March, 1603.

Meanwhile, as the Rebellion disintegrated, battle for the Maguire chieftainship was joined between Conor Rua, sponsored by the English, and Cúchonnacht Og. Cúchonnacht, now alone, became dispirited with the contest and left Ireland for a journey to continental Europe. He returned fleetingly with the boat which carried the upper echelons of the Gaelic aristocracy to exile in Europe – the Flight of the Earls. Cúchonnacht died in Genoa.



Fallen Irish soldier from Derricke's Image of Ireland.

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