

The Ireland Invasion

Causes of the Invasion of Ireland

The "invasion" of Ireland began theoretically many years before it actually took place. This strange turn of events began as a result of papal influence in 1155. Pope Adrian IV, the only ever English Pope, issued a papal bull ¹ which encouraged Henry II, King of England, to assume control over Ireland, in order to enforce the reforms of the Catholic Church in this country. The exact date upon which this document was drafted is not clearly defined. Although its origin is quoted in 1155, it is also noted as having existed in a document by John of Salisbury, in 1159. An excerpt from this document shows the encouragement of the papacy to intervene in State affairs of England, with concern for the salvation of a wayward country called Ireland. In a document addressed specifically to Henry, he indicates :

Now, most dear Son in Christ, you have signified to us that you propose to enter the island of Ireland to establish the observance of law among its people, and to eradicate the weeds of vice; and that you are willing to pay from every house one penny as an annual tribute to St. Peter, and to preserve the rights of the churches of that land, whole and inviolate. We, therefore, receiving with due favor your pious and laudable desires, and graciously granting our consent to your petition, declare that it is pleasing and acceptable to us, that for the purpose of enlarging the limits of the Church, setting bounds to the torrent of vice, reforming evil manners, planting the seeds of virtue and increasing Christian faith, you should enter that island and carry into effect those things which belong to the service of God and to the salvation of that people; and that the people of that land should honorably receive and reverence you as Lord; the rights of the churches being preserved untouched and entire, and reserving the annual tribute of one penny from every house to St. Peter and the most Holy Roman Church.

However Henry II was occupied at the outset of his career in securing his hold on England itself, and any plans of intervention in Ireland were delayed for several years. It is not sure if Henry would ever have taken on the recommendations of the papal bull, and launch operations to "bring the Irish to heel", but he was eventually driven to it by events which were, in fact, of his own doing.

The political climate in Ireland at the time was one of inter-tribal rivalries, as it had been for centuries. In the mid-1100's a great rivalry for the high-kingship of Ireland existed between Muirchertach MacLochlainn of Tirowen and Ruairi O'Connor [Ruadrí Ua Conchobair] of Connacht. Dermot MacMurrough [Dairmait Mac Murchada], the King of Leinster, allied himself with MacLochlainn, and Dermot's greatest foe, Tiernan O'Rourke

¹ This edict, known as the "Laudabiliter" will launch a chain of events which will last more than eight centuries, and will result in the literal enslaving of the Irish until 1922, when it was declared an Irish Free State, a dominion of the British Commonwealth..

[Tighernán Ua Ruairc], King of Breifne, allied himself with O'Connor. Dermot and Tiernan were bitter rivals contending for the middle kingdom of Meath, and at one point Dermot abducted the wife of O'Rourke, thus sealing the hatred between these two kings.

In 1166 the high-king Muirchertach MacLochlainn died. Dermot MacMurrough, losing his greatest ally and protector in MacLochlainn, saw his kingdom in Leinster invaded by O'Connor and O'Rourke. On this occasion the Ostmen (Norsemen) of Dublin also participated in ousting Dermot from his kingship in Leinster.

Dermot MacMurrough seeks help from England

Losing his powerful allies in Ireland, the ousted King of Leinster, Dermot MacMurrough, had few options available to recover his kingdom. He decided to seek help from Henry II, the current King of England. Henry II was rather absorbed with local problems at the time ², and so suggested that Dermot seek the help of one of his vassals, Richard de Clare, Earl of Pembroke (known as Strongbow). Henry gave Dermot a Letter of Patent to Dermot :

Henry, King of England, duke of Normandy and Aquitaine, and earl of Anjou, to all his liegemen, English, Norman, Welsh and Scotch, and to all the nations under his dominion, greeting. When these letters shall come into your hands, know ye, that we have received Diarmait, Prince of Leinster, into the bosom of our grace and benevolence. Wherefore, whosoever, in the ample extent of all our territories, shall be willing to assist in restoring that prince, as our vassal and liegeman, let such person know, that we do hereby grant to him our licence and favour for the said undertaking.

At this time De Clare had been denied his title, because he has displeased Henry, and so Henry thought has he would be rid of a troublesome subject by sending him off to Ireland to help out Dermot. And so did Henry set in motion a succession of events which would have repercussions for many centuries.

Dermot formed an alliance with Strongbow when he promised grants of land as well as his daughter's hand in marriage, in exchange for his help. After winning Strongbow over to his cause, Dermot visited the Welsh prince of South Wales, Rhys ap Gruffydd, to gain the freedom of Robert FitzStephen, a "Knight of great reknown," who had been held captive by Rhys. Strongbow needed support if he wished to succeed in solving Dermot's problem. At the request of Robert's half-brothers, David (bishop of St. David's) and Maurice FitzGerald, Robert was released on condition that he went to Ireland to assist Dermot MacMurrough. All was ready for the Anglo-Normans to come to the help of a bespoiled Irish King.

² Henry had been unwise in speaking about the Archbishop of Canterbury, Thomas Beckett, with who he had frequent quarrels. When his close associates heard him saying. "Will nobody rid me of this turbulent priest ", they took it to heart, and murdered Beckett. Henry was now up to his ears in trouble, as he was suspected of murder !

The Norman "Invasion" of Ireland is Under Way

In late 1168, Dermot returned to Ireland with a small force of Welsh and Flemish under the command of Robert FitzStephen. With only 30 knights, 60 men-at-arms and 300 archers ³, FitzStephen was prepared to take on Dermot's enemies. With native Irish support to regain control of his homeland, Dermot attempted to reclaim his kingship of Leinster. He was however defeated southeast of Carlow town by the High-King Ruairi O'Connor and his ally Tiernan O'Rourke, the same who had ousted him in 1166.

Shortly after, Maurice de Prendergast with a force of about 200, reinforced FitzStephen's group. Merging with a force of near 500 Irishmen under MacMurrough, the combined army marched toward the Norse-Irish seaport of Wexford, where battle began outside the walls of the town. Encountering the Norman mounted and armored knights and the deadly Welsh archers, the Norse army of about 2,000 retreated into their town. After repeated assaults on their walled city, the Norsemen called for terms of peace and were forced to recognise Dermot as their overlord. At this time, Dermot granted lands in Wexford to Robert FitzStephen and his half-brother Maurice FitzGerald, as well as to Hervey de Monte Marisco, an uncle of Strongbow.

Once that Dermot and FitzStephen realised that they had the wind in their sails, they decided to continue. They invaded Ossory (which is now Kilkenny), the most western kingdom of Leinster. Dermot had a bone to pick with Donal MacGiolla Phadriag, King of Ossory, who had previously captured and blinded Dermot's eldest son. In a battle lasting three days, the Ossorians were defeated. Encouraged by his successes, Dermot moved on to Leinster where he did battle against the O'Byrnes and the O'Tooles. However, the High-King of Ireland, Ruairi O'Connor returned to Leinster and together with the help of the Church, forced Dermot into negotiation. In a treaty of 1169, Dermot was allowed to keep the kingship of Leinster, as long as he recognised Ruairi as the High-King, and send his foreign allies back to where they came from. The Norsemen in the port of Dublin reluctantly accepted all these terms, and so Dermot now found himself in a much greater position of power.

The Arrival of Strongbow

At the close of 1169, Maurice FitzGerald arrived in two ships with more soldiers and archers. Dermot was beginning to become more confident, and asked Strongbow to send more forces. Even with a much smaller force, Dermot was now sure that it would easily quash any resistance. He even caressed the idea of even becoming High-King. Strongbow had equally high hopes for his future, seeing that he would marry Dermot's daughter Aoife and possibly become overlord in Leinster. He sent another force to

³ This may seem a rather meagre force to combat the invading forces to Dermot's kingdom, but it must be remembered that several hundred archers were more than a match against a much larger Irish army.

Ireland under control of Raymond le Gros to ensure safe landing for the main force, which he would accompany some time later. He finally arrived in August 1170, with 1000 men, near the town of Waterford. The combined forces then marched on the walled city of Waterford, and although encountering early resistance, managed to enter and capture the town. Dermot arrived soon after the capture, and immediately fulfilled his promise to Strongbow. The marriage of Aoife and Strongbow took place, and Strongbow was promised as heir to Dermot for the Kingdom of Leinster. Under these circumstances, the previous treaty was thus broken, and it was obvious that the High-King Ruari would react. Ruari was at this time responding to a rebellion by the O'Brian clan in Munster, but he began to assemble a large army to march against Dublin, which he knew to be the next target for the Anglo-Norman forces. Although negotiations had been started between the opposite forces, the Anglo-Norman army had already reached the walls of Dublin, and were successful in entering Dublin from different direction. Asculf MacTorkil the Norse King of Dublin was obliged to retreat by the only way open to him. The defeated Norse forces boarded ship and fled.

Ruari was furious that the Norse possessors of Dublin had begun discussions to leave Dublin, even before the battle, showing that they were not prepared to take on the Anglo-Norman forces. He withdrew his army from where they were, close to Dublin. Encouraged by such little resistance, Dermot then marched into Meath which he had been eyeing for some time, for it was held by one of his greatest enemies, Tiernan O'Rourke. Dermot certainly wanted revenge on the person who had defeated him twice, once in 1166, and then again in 1168.

Up to this moment, the other Irish kings were just lookers-on in a fight between Dermot and the High-King O'Connor. But the death of Dermot in May 1171, and the fact that Strongbow, a foreigner, now became King of Leinster, was too much to accept. The Irish Kings were called upon by O'Connor to drive the Anglo-Norman invaders from Ireland.

At first, and because Ruari was able to assemble large numbers, the attempt to drive out the Anglo-Normans was partially successful. Waterford was soon lost to Dermot MacCarthy of Desmond. FitzStephen was captured by the remaining Norsemen. The Norse returned by sea so as to retake the city of Dublin that they had lost. At the same time, Ruari and his army came overland to prepare an attack on Dublin. Unfortunately for the Norse/Irish association, the Norse fleet landed and attacked

Initially the Irish-Norse campaign to oust the Normans was successful. Dermot MacCarthy of Desmond recaptured Waterford. The Norsemen of Wexford captured FitzStephen. A large Norse fleet under MacTorkil returned to lay siege on Dublin, while Ruari's army was approaching Dublin by land. Unfortunately for the alliance between Norse and Irish, the Norse attacked without waiting for Ruari's land forces, and were overrun by the cavalry of Milo de Cogan and his brother Richard. Even with 60,000 soldiers which laid siege to Dublin, the Norman forces had an advantage using superior technology, especially the archers, and completely routed Ruari's forces. Ruari prudently retreated back into his kingdom of Connacht, with his credit as High-King severely undermined.

Strongbow went on to retake Wexford and Waterford, as well as to defeat the Ossorians who were being aided by O'Brien of Limerick. The other leaders in Leinster soon submitted.

By this time Henry II had noted the successes of Strongbow's forces and feared that affairs were getting out of hand in Ireland. Building an army large enough to quell Strongbow's previous initiatives, Henry arrived in October, 1171, with a large army to assume control of the situation, and to set himself up in the role of the protector against the marauding Norman barons. Strongbow, considerably intimidated by the presence of his king, immediately backed down and rescinded all his Irish conquests to Henry and paid him homage. Henry, always magnanimous, but with an eye on future events granted the kingdom of Leinster to Strongbow but kept Dublin, Waterford and Wexford for himself. The majority of the conquered Irish kingdoms agreed to the authority given to Henry by the Pope and to the peace he offered in Ireland. In truth, they were only replacing one High-King for another. As such, they literally retained all control over their territories but agreed to pay tribute to Henry, in short, a similar situation to the previous one, where they previously paid tribute to an Irish High-King. Henry was intelligent in offering them similar terms that they already accepted before, and they gratefully took advantage of the offer.

The Initial Call for Help Turns Into An Invasion.

Before leaving Ireland in April, 1172, Henry made sure that he was not leaving Strongbow to his previous devices. He granted to Hugh de Lacy, one of his close followers, the province of Meath, and appointed him constable of Dublin and justiciar (or viceroy), which meant that he would be a representant of the King himself, with nearly the same powers. With a totally free hand, De Lacy took control of the situation, killing Tiernan O'Rourke, and stopping resistance in the county of Meath. By 1175, he and Strongbow finally controlled Irish resistance, liberally using the power given by Henry, and set about sharing out conquered lands among their chief vassals⁴.

By 1175 the Treaty of Windsor recognized Ruairi O'Connor as High-King of Ireland outside Leinster, Meath and the area around Waterford. In return, Henry demanded tribute from the Irish chiefs. Ruairi's followers treated this agreement as a diplomatic victory, but its importance was later limited only to the province of Connacht, provided that tribute was paid.

In 1176, after repeated rebellions against both O'Connor and the Normans, the O'Brien king of Thomond burned the city of Limerick, leaving a gutted city in its place, of no use to the invaders. There was also continued unrest in South Munster.

⁴ History tells us that there were 13 major supporters of de Lacy who were declared Barons, and allocated large tracts of land, all paying a small knights tribute to offset the 50 knights tribute that de Lacy had to pay to Henry. Gilbert de Nogent and his brother Richard were among those who greatly benefitted from de Lacy's gesture.

After the death of Strongbow in June, 1176, control of Leinster was temporarily given to Henry II, until 1177, when he transferred all of his rights as Lord of Ireland to his son John.

In 1177, John de Courcy, recently arrived from England, and with no authority to do so, invested Ulaid (Ulster), and ruled for a time as Prince. Hugh De Lacy's charter for Meath was renewed on stricter terms, and the two Irish kingdoms in Munster, controlled by McCarthy and O'Brien, were ceded to Robert FitzStephen and Miles de Cogan, who took possession of a part of Cork and exacted tribute from McCarthy for the rest. Limerick was ceded to Philip de Braose and others, who in fact, had failed to conquer any land at all from O'Brien.

What followed in Ireland of the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries was a change from acquiring lordship over men to colonizing land. The founding of borough towns, castles and churches; the importing of tenants; and the increase in agriculture and commerce were among the changes brought on by the Cambro-Normans following the Invasion.