BRITISH HISTORY IN PERSPECTIVE

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IRELAND IN THE MIDDLE AGES
Seán Duffy

Perhaps the single most formative development in Irish secular affairs was the English invasion which took place in the late 1160s, and which, in the space of a few short years, transformed the face of Ireland and permanently altered the course of Irish history. Unlike some earlier works, which either start or end with the invasion, this book places the arrival of the English as its centrepiece. It examines society and politics in pre-invasion Ireland, in particular the role and powers of kings and kingship, and the manner in which these were altered in the aftermath of the invasion. The arrival of the English and the reaction of the Irish are discussed in detail, as are the motives of those involved, and the consequences of their actions. Emphasis is placed on the affairs of the native Irish, in an effort to subvert the convention of viewing the history of later medieval Ireland through the eyes of the English colonial community alone. By the end of the Middle Ages the English attempt at conquering Ireland had remained unsuccessful: this book seeks to explain why.

Adopting a broad narrative sweep, spanning over five centuries, the book offers a reinterpretation of medieval Irish history, harvesting the fruits of recent research, and should be of interest both to experienced students of the subject and to those previously unacquainted with it.

Seán Duffy was awarded the degree of M.Litt. from Trinity College, Dublin, in 1987 for his thesis on 'The Date and Authorship of *Cath Fhochairte Brighite*', and a Ph.D. in 1993 for his study of 'Ireland and the Irish Sea Region, 1014–1318'. From 1990 to 1993 he was a Research Scholar at the Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies and has since lectured in medieval Irish and British history at Trinity College, Dublin. Among his research interests are the history of the English colony in medieval Ireland, Irish relations with Wales, Scotland and the isles, and medieval Dublin.

The design incorporates a map of Europe *c.* 1200 from *Topographia Hibernae* by Geraldus Cambrensis (courtesy of the National Library of Ireland).

ISBN 978-0-333-60620-9
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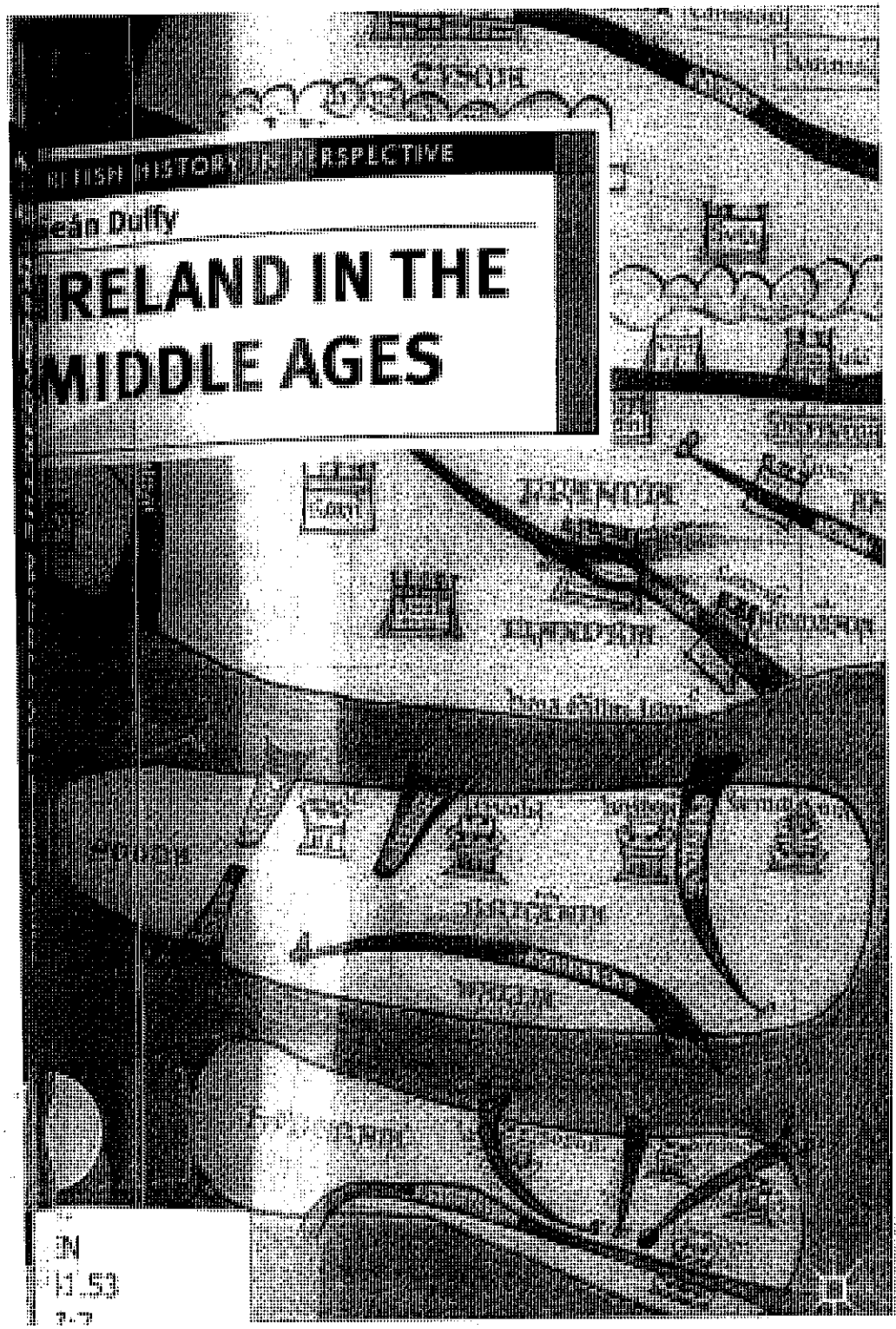

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SEÁN DUFFY

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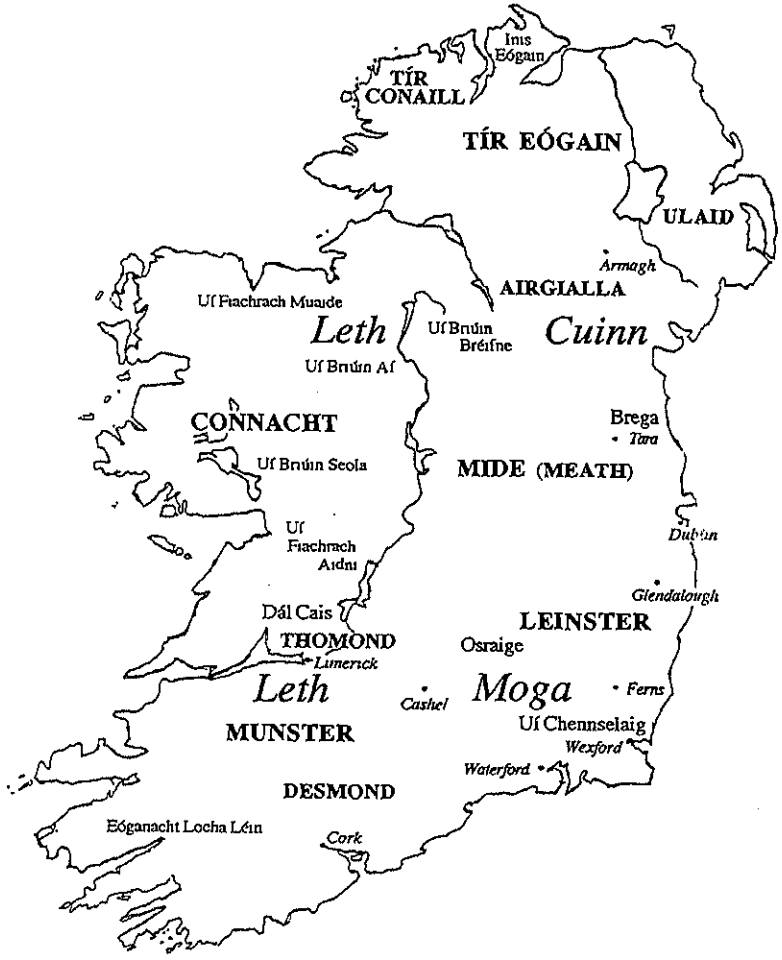
of the ideas that one thinks are one's own are the product of reading other people's work over the years, or of attending their public lectures, or of conversations with them. Where my theft has gone unacknowledged below I apologize here. Several scholars have had a more direct involvement. Professor James Lydon, Dr Ailbhe Mac Shamhráin, Dr Máire Ní Mhaonaigh, Ms Linzi Simpson and Dr Brendan Smith have read drafts of the book in whole or in part and made many helpful comments. As I have in many instances stubbornly refused to take their advice, the exoneration normally pronounced at this point needs to have even greater force than usual.

The dedication expresses a debt of another kind.

SEÁN DUFFY
Dublin, January 1996

MAPS



Ireland *c.* 1000 AD

(includes the main place-names and population names mentioned in the text)

study, by Marie Therese Flanagan, of the English invasion, entitled *Irish Society, Anglo-Norman Settlers, Angevin Kingship. Interactions in Ireland in the Late Twelfth Century* (1989), and considerable insights on late medieval Ireland provided by Art Cosgrove and, in many challenging and important publications, Steven Ellis.[7]

With this generation of scholars the earlier barrier between Anglo-Ireland and Gaelic Ireland may with confidence be said to be breaking down. It is no longer acceptable to treat the affairs of one in a vacuum. Both natives and newcomers in medieval Ireland mingled in their daily lives; they must mingle too on the pages of history.

1

DWELLERS AT THE EARTH'S EDGE[1]

Surely the most incisive commentary on Ireland and on Irish life ever produced is *Topographia Hiberniae*, an account written by a man called Gerald de Barri, better known as Giraldus Cambrensis or Gerald of Wales, as a consequence of two visits which he made to the country in 1183 and 1185.[2] Gerald, a strong advocate of church reform, was partly Anglo-Norman and partly Welsh, and his family were among the first to settle in Ireland after the invasion of the late 1160s. His commentary on Ireland is therefore not an unbiased one, and in many respects resembles what a European settler in the Americas or Australia in more recent centuries would have said about the indigenous inhabitants there. It is the defence produced by an agent of an invading and conquering army to justify its actions in dispossessing the native peoples, seizing and colonizing their lands, and, if necessary, bringing their way of life to an end. There is not much room here for objectivity. Above all else, Gerald and the countless others like him through the centuries have had one task: that is, to call attention to the deficiencies of the host society and to demonstrate the benefits that will accrue to the aboriginal population as a result of their conquest. The invader, in fact, is doing that population a favour. He is sharing with them that one thing they lack – civilization.

So it is with Gerald of Wales.[3] His description of the Irish way of life has many of the characteristics common to the genre the world over. The Irish are a barbarous race. They have a primitive lifestyle. Although the island they inhabit is rich in pastures, good fishing and hunting, enjoying an excellent climate free of disease and infestation, the inhabitants are too lazy to exploit its potential. They have no interest in commerce, they have no interest in building towns, they have no interest in the hard work involved in arable farming. Their clothes, their appearance and fashions, are odd, to say the least. Their customs and practices, especially in matters sexual, are barbarous, and repugnant to all civilized people. It is a familiar picture and one which need not surprise us.

Gerald, of course, for all his Welsh blood, saw himself (at least at this stage in his career, before disillusionment set in) as an *Anglicus*, as a product of that fusion of cultures that flourished in England after the Norman conquest. He was a member of a conquering race, clearly a rung or two higher on the evolutionary ladder than the mere Irish. The Normans were, after all, renowned for their military discipline; the Irish ran, as Gerald put it, naked into battle in a disorganized rabble. The Normans were famous for their castles; the Irish, in the high Middle Ages when Gerald was writing, showed no great interest in such ostentation. The Normans had fine-tuned the business of administrative organization, financial regulation, and governmental order; the Irish did not keep administrative records, had only begun to experiment with sealed charters, and were a long way from the cult of the civil servant which was in danger, in Gerald's day, of taking root in England. Naturally, therefore, Gerald thought that they were backward and uncivilized, and a lot of what he has to say about the Irish rings true. But they can perhaps be defended from his charge of barbarism.

This accusation stems from Gerald's failure – or, more accurately, his refusal – to understand Irish society. It was, of course, a failure common to many people outside Ireland throughout the Middle Ages. As far as most were concerned, Ireland stuck out in the sea on the furthest edge of the known

world: the belief was that one could go no further west without the risk of falling off. In the early eighth century the great historian of the English, Bede, described the Irish as a 'little community, isolated at the uttermost ends of the earth'.[4] He was writing before the discovery of Iceland and Greenland, but, nearly seven hundred years later, a Catalan pilgrim to St Patrick's Purgatory at Lough Derg recorded his achievement in having 'arrived at the end of the earth, in Ireland, which is the most remote province of the western world'.[5] When St Bernard of Clairvaux wrote to the fateful Leinster king Diarmait Mac Murchada, in or around 1148, to congratulate him on having founded a Cistercian abbey at Baltinglass in co. Wicklow, he felt compelled to point out that 'in our opinion it is really a great miracle that a king at the end of the earth, ruling over barbarous peoples, should undertake with great generosity such works of mercy'.[6]

All share the view that Ireland was a place apart – remote, isolated, and, inevitably therefore, different. This was understandable. It was natural to expect that people living in the furthest extremity of the earth would be wild and uncivilized – one would be surprised, perhaps disappointed, if they turned out to be anything else. The Irishman Johannes Scotus Eriugena was arguably the greatest scholar in ninth-century Europe. Yet, one can still appreciate the surprise of the papal librarian Anastasius when, having viewed Eriugena's translation of the writings of Pseudo-Dionysius, executed at the request of the Frankish king, Charles the Bald (grandson of Charlemagne), he remarked:

> It is a wonderful thing how that barbarian, living at the ends of the earth, who might be supposed to be as far removed from the knowledge of this other language [Greek] as he is from the familiar use of it, has been able to comprehend such ideas and translate them into another tongue [Latin]: I refer to Johannes Scotigena, whom I have learned by report to be in all things a holy man.[7]

It seems from this that the thing which surprised Anastasius most was that a place of such obvious isolation as Ireland

could nurture a society that produced such scholarship; that it could be, in spite of its many and obvious peculiarities, part of the European mainstream, open to external influences, and capable of making an important contribution to European civilization. And yet it undoubtedly was part of the mainstream and besides producing a substantial corpus of Latin literature, it has left us the most extensive and wide-ranging body of vernacular literature in early medieval Europe. So how was this brought about, what sort of society was it, and how did it come to earn the opprobrium of men such as Gerald?

Ireland, now one of the most treeless regions in Europe, was densely forested in the Middle Ages, and woodland was heavily exploited as an economic resource, with laws to protect the forests from unauthorized use or damage.[8] Forest clearance, we know from the scientific evidence, was underway from the early historic period, a process of deforestation which continued into modern times.[9] The island had a network of roads, and the word used for a road, *slige*, meaning 'a felling', indicates that they were paths cut through the forests. For many people, travel by boat on the rivers and lakes, and navigating the seas around Ireland's shores, must have been the preferred option, though – in spite of the fact that the *Navigatio Sancti Brendani*, recounting the alleged transatlantic voyages of Brendan the Navigator, became one of the most popular works in medieval Europe – the evidence would suggest that the Irish did not enjoy a particularly strong seafaring tradition until the Viking Age, and it was only at this point that naval warfare became significant. It was in this period too that several Viking coastal settlements developed into towns, hitherto unknown in Ireland, although there were settlements of some sort around many of the larger ecclesiastical centres.[10]

While few traces survive of the lives of ordinary people, the rich and powerful inhabitants of early medieval Ireland have left behind the remnants of their civilization. The countryside is dotted with the remains of tens of thousands of ring-forts, the farmsteads of early Ireland. Ring-forts were usually constructed in places where the land was worth farming, often at or near the top of a hill with a good view of the surrounding

countryside. Ringed by as many as three ditches up to two metres deep and sometimes filled with water, with banks made from the earth taken from the ditches, and perhaps a palisade on top, they had a strong defensive capacity. Such an earthen ring-fort is known as a *rath* and the area inside it where the occupants lived is a *lios*. In parts of the country where the land is stony, ring-forts are generally constructed of stone and known as a *caiseal* or *cathair*, the word *dún* usually being reserved for exceptionally large examples. The farmhouses and buildings would have been at the centre, with perhaps a milking-yard outside, a mill for the corn (if the owners were wealthy enough to afford one), and servants' huts, and stretching beyond them would have been the fields of crops and pastures for grazing animals. The lake-dwelling, or *crannóg*, is another form of habitation surviving from early medieval Ireland, though far less common than the ring-fort. Many of these are man-made islands, and thus more difficult and more expensive to build than a ring-fort, but providing better defence since they were harder of access. Being so costly to build, we can be fairly sure that they were the well-defended homes of powerful people, and some the palaces of kings.[11]

Until the late Viking Age Ireland was a coinless society where cows were a common medium of exchange (a *sét* being a unit of value equal to a heifer or half a milch cow), an indication of both their prevalence and their economic importance.[12] Land was measured in terms of the number of cows it could sustain, while fines and rents and dues were also calculated in cows. A well-off farmer was a *bóaire*, a 'lord of cows'. All the evidence from the surviving literature, both from the annals and the sagas, indicates that cattle-raiding was an everyday occurrence. It is interesting to note too that whereas elsewhere in Europe in the early Middle Ages it was common to make manuscripts from sheep-skin, in Ireland calf-skin was preferred.[13] Dairy-farming was at the heart of the Irish agricultural system. In summer it was normal to live on milk and dairy products such as butter, cheese, curds and whey, while in autumn some cattle were killed, their beef being salted to eat

in winter. From what we can tell (largely as a result of archaeological excavation), meat from pigs was also quite common, the latter being fed on the mast from the forests. Sheep, it would appear, were kept more for their wool than their mutton, while the native horse was small, perhaps not unlike the Connemara pony of today, and horse-meat, though occasionally consumed, was generally frowned upon.[14]

Some arable farming was done in all parts of Ireland, but it was generally not as important as pastoral farming; the latter, of course, was also less time-consuming and less energy-sapping and the Irish preference for it was something upon which foreign writers were wont to comment derisively. That said, the surviving written sources indicate that extensive crop-cultivation took place in early medieval Ireland, though obviously the situation varied from region to region in accordance with landscape and climatic variations. Ploughing and sowing were carried out in spring, the former with oxen rather than horses, though the possession of a full plough-team of four to six animals was beyond all but the most prosperous farmers. Harvesting was done, using the sickle, by a team known as a *meitheal* and, once harvested, kilns were used to dry the newly threshed grain, though again less well-off farmers might only rent, or possess a share in, a drying kiln and a barn for storing the grain. Grain was milled in horizontal water-mills, which were elaborate affairs served by an artificially diverted mill-race, and the mill-wright was a craftsman of some stature in early Irish society. Here again, mills seem to have been jointly owned and the subject was contentious enough for a law to exist to regulate their shared use.[15] The main crops were oats, barley and wheat, used for making bread (wheaten bread being the preserve of royalty and nobility), porridge, gruel and, in the case of the barley, for brewing beer. We know that vegetable patches and apple orchards were cultivated and bees kept.[16]

It is very difficult to assess the relative prosperity of early medieval Ireland, but since the economy was largely agrarian and the population (in so far as it is possible to tell) low, the evidence would seem to suggest that conditions for many com-

munities were prosperous, other than at times of famine and disease. If weather conditions were right and cattle were free of murrain, the food supply was guaranteed. This made for a relatively stable economy, with no undue pressure for land, and with such land as was in use being carefully husbanded and properly regulated by law. The surviving sources, and the archaeological and artifactual evidence in particular, point to the existence of a considerable amount of disposable wealth in early Christian Ireland. This is represented today by the extant vellum manuscripts, some of which, it is estimated, would have required the skins of several hundred cattle, and by the great array of precious metalwork objects which survive from the period, some of them secular (such as brooches and ring-pins), many others ecclesiastical, such as altar vessels, ornamental book-covers, bishops' crosiers, and shrines for sacred relics. These, in turn, are the relics of a society that was well organized and, in certain quarters at least, wealthy, and that must have compared favourably with other parts of western Europe.

We are not dependent on archaeologists alone to piece together this picture of early Irish economy and society. In fact, our mental picture of Ireland in, for instance, the seventh and early eighth centuries is clearer and far more detailed than that available for almost any country in Europe. This is because it was at that point that the Old Irish law texts were set down (the Brehon laws as they are often called, from the word *brithemain*, meaning 'judges'), many of which still survive in later manuscripts. These give a remarkably detailed and intricate picture of Irish society at the time of their composition. A number of caveats are necessary, however. The law tracts were composed before the Viking incursions, before the church reform of the late eleventh and early twelfth centuries, and before the English invasion, an event which, next to the introduction of Christianity, has been the most formative external influence on Irish history. Irish society changed over the course of time, and we must be careful not to present a picture of a society that is static and fossilized by falling into the trap of using texts which antedate these events to describe

their aftermath. Furthermore, the law tracts present a highly schematized and symmetric picture of society; this obviously appealed to the early jurists' quest for precision but cannot frequently have matched reality. If we complement the law tracts with other sources of varying composition dates and intended to serve a different purpose – texts such as the annals, the genealogies, the Saints' Lives, the great sagas, origin-legends, praise-poetry, and so on – we get a much rounder picture, one which proves that, as in today's world, the theory of the law is often contradicted by the reality of practice.

The greatest influence on the formation and development of Irish law was the Christian church. Until quite recently, scholars believed that the Old Irish laws were collections of ancient oral and pre-Christian custom, later written down by members of a secular legal caste which, after the introduction of Christianity, adapted itself reluctantly to the new regime and became Christian and literate. One frequently reads that the Old Irish laws were the preserve of the druids, and that, in spite of their Christian veneer, we can use the laws (and the sagas) as evidence for the pre-Christian pagan past, to provide us with (to borrow from the title of one now outdated work on the subject) 'a window on the Iron Age'.[17] More recent work, however, has suggested that the writings of the period, including the law texts, were not pagan but Christian, and were not written by secular descendants of the druids but by churchmen, learned Christian jurists, who drew not just on native sources but on foreign sources, and the Old Testament in particular, in order to lay down the law proper for a Christian society.[18]

The churchmen who came to christianize Ireland in the fifth and sixth centuries brought into the country copies of the great works of learning produced by the early church fathers, men like Augustine, Gregory the Great, Jerome, Ambrose, and many others. In the late sixth and the seventh centuries the church-run schools of Ireland became great centres of learning in such Christian literature, and in time made a significant contribution to both church and society in

Britain and Europe. A caste of scholars emerged who were lawyers, canonists, historians, poets and grammarians, who wrote in Latin and Irish and who were very often churchmen and who functioned in a society that was predominantly ecclesiastical (though, of course, much of what we know of that society we derive from churchmen, and to a large extent we view it through their eyes). While not everyone would accept that all the lawyers and all the poets were clerics, the fact is that the environment in which they worked was ecclesiastically dominated, and the men at the upper ranks of the profession were churchmen – literate, church-trained, and in holy orders.

When these men were drawing up rules for governing society, let us say, the proper punishment for theft, they looked to the Old Testament and adopted the biblical precept as their own, adapting it perhaps to suit particular Irish circumstances. The society that they helped to mould was one that was intensely aristocratic. The leading churchmen themselves were often aristocrats. St Colum Cille, for example, is said to have been a great-grandson of Niall Noígiallach (Niall of the Nine Hostages), eponymous ancestor of the Uí Néill, the most powerful dynastic federation in early medieval Ireland. Being an aristocratic society it was by its nature hierarchical. Status and honour (*enech*, literally 'face') meant everything. To offend against a person of high status, to outrage his honour, incurred a greater penalty than a similar crime against a person of lower status. Status was measured in terms of one's 'honour-price' (*lóg n-enech*), which had to be paid, in whole or in part, in restitution for major offences against him, and these were considerably higher for a king than a cottier. Likewise, an individual could forfeit his honour-price if he broke certain rules: a king should not do manual work, default on an oath or tolerate a satire; a lord should not refuse hospitality, shelter a fugitive or eat stolen food.[19] The law made a basic distinction between those who were *nemed* ('sacred'), including kings, clerics and poets, and those who were not, and then a further distinction among the latter between those who were *sóer* ('free') and those who were *dóer* ('unfree'). But there were essentially three grades of society –

kings of one kind or another, lords of varying degrees of status, and various classifications of commoners. In the latter two groups there was a certain amount of mobility, some upward but even more downward mobility as people at the lower grades of the nobility sank over time to become high-ranking commoners. In the highly stratified and rather rigid world of the law tracts, a person's exact position in this arrangement was vital.

Ireland was a land of many kings. According to the law tracts, there were three grades of kings. At the bottom of the scale was the king of a small local kingdom or *túath*, and he was known as the *rí túaithe*. Then came the 'overking' or *ruiri* who was king not only over his own *túath* but over several other petty kingdoms. Finally, there was the 'king of overkings' or *rí ruirech*, who effectively ruled a whole province, though even his power was rooted in his own core territory.[20] The annals and sagas frequently accord individuals the title of king of Ireland, but in the law tracts a king of all Ireland, while not unheard of, is an extremely rare bird.[21] That, therefore, was the theory of it, and it may also have been the practice at the time when the classical law tracts were being put together (though some legal historians would doubt it), but the fact of the matter is that kings lower than the *rí ruirech*, the province-king, hardly mattered. Over time, many of these lesser individuals were no longer called a king (*rí*) at all. By the eleventh and twelfth centuries, the *túath*, the old tribal kingdom, was no longer a 'kingdom', and it was not ruled by a king but by a man described in Irish documents as a *toísech* (which originally may have meant a leader of a war-band) or more often by a *tigerna*, a 'lord' (indeed, from as early as the eighth century the Latin *dux* is frequently used for such people). It seems clear that the refusal to call such a man a *rí* reflects a distinct erosion in the status of petty kings subsequent to the time when the law tracts were compiled, and a corresponding increase in the power of the province-kings who came from the ranks of the dominant dynasties.[22]

If we examine the actuality of royal power, we can see the same sort of change taking place. Clearly, Irish society

revolved around the figure of the king, and great symbolism was attached to his inauguration, his mating with the goddess of the land from which would come fertility to man and beast throughout his reign,[23] the alleged practices at which ceremonies earned Gerald de Barri's condemnation in a famous passage in his *Topographia*.[24] Yet, if one were to take the law tracts at face value, kings had relatively few powers. While stress was laid on a king's justice, from which flowed peace and prosperity, and from whose injustice sprang famine, plague and infertility, the king, it is clear, did not make the law and he did not enforce justice, save in exceptional circumstances. According to the text known as *Críth Gablach*, a king could pass a legal ordinance only in an emergency, such as in a time of plague, after defeat in battle, or, curiously, 'for expulsion of a foreign race, i.e. against the Saxons'.[25] But we know that, despite what the law tracts say, kings played a prominent role in enforcing ecclesiastical law and ensuring the collection of church taxes.[26] Increasingly, as time went by, they also began to raise secular taxes, one of the better-known instances being the tax of 4000 cows levied by Ruaidrí Ua Conchobair on 'the men of Ireland' in 1166 which he gave to the Hiberno-Scandinavians of Dublin in return for their acknowledgement of his claim to the high-kingship of Ireland.[27] By then too we find kings passing secular legislation. In 1040 the Munster king Donnchad, son of the great Brian Bóruma, legislated against theft, while a decade later he passed a law prohibiting injustices of any kind, while his nephew and successor Tairdelbach Ua Briain passed a law in 1068 which caused an annalist to remark that 'no better law had been enacted in Munster for a long time'.[28] Apparently, then, kings were far from powerless as legislators, particularly in this later period.

Under the law, the king was not the ultimate owner of the land of the tribal territory in a way that kings elsewhere claimed to be. These lands were owned by the free families over whom he was the chosen leader, though the king was, however, owed the loyalty of freemen, and could convene an *óenach*, or assembly. Where kings *were* granted considerable powers under the law was in the field of external relations. It

was he who made peace or war on behalf of his kingdom, and he might summon his men at any time to take part in a *slógad*, or hosting, to attack a neighbouring kingdom or defend his own from attack. It was he who entered into negotiations with other kingdoms. It was he who decided if the kingdom should submit to another more powerful neighbour (which might involve the acceptance of a ceremonial gift, and the handing over of tribute and/or hostages) or if they should attempt to force a weak kingdom into submission. Technically speaking, an overkingdom had no right to annex another *túath* and to expel its dynasty, but the cold fact of life is that from quite an early period the dominant dynasties in the island were busy interfering in power struggles among their neighbours, ejecting their inferiors from kingship, and appropriating their territories to themselves.[29]

It is this activity which has given the impression that Ireland was a country where anarchy, indeed, chaos, reigned in the body politic, if we may call it that. Goddard Orpen, for instance, the great historian of Anglo-Norman Ireland, described pre-invasion Irish politics as 'a maze of inter-provincial and inter-tribal fighting'.[30] To an extent, it was that; but it was not purposeless. It goes without saying that most people in early medieval Ireland were simple land-dwellers, farmers who spent their lives peaceably, living off the produce of the land. By comparison, only small numbers lived as fighters and warriors. The problem is that we learn most of what we know about the politics of the period from the various compilations of annals, and annalists, when not simply recording church news, concentrate their writing on recounting the activities of kings and warriors, the people who did most of the fighting.

Perhaps the major weakness in the Irish body politic was that there was no definite law for choosing a king. In any kingdom, whether a tiny *túath* or a whole province, a man might make himself king so long as he was brave enough, popular enough, and powerful enough to do so. If he was the son or close relative of a previous king, his chances were all the better. However, a king during the course of his life might have several wives and many sons by each. In a short time a

royal family was divided into several rival branches, with cousins and second cousins all trying to push the others out and make their leader king. It was when they did not manage to do so that they invaded the lands of another kin-group or sept and set themselves up as kings there.

The point can best be illustrated by picking one province, let us say Connacht, and comparing how it stood in the eighth century with how it stood in the twelfth. At an earlier point in history the dominant dynasty in Connacht had been the Uí Fiachrach. In common with most Irish lineage names, this is a patronymic and means, in effect, that the Uí Fiachrach either were, thought they were, or wanted others to think they were, all descended from one man, Fiachra. What happened in the course of time was that the family split up into two main branches, who fought with each other for supremacy. The Uí Fiachrach Muaide ended up, as their name suggests, in the valley of the river Moy in north-west Connacht, while the Uí Fiachrach Aidni ended up in the south of the province.

To make matters worse, the Uí Fiachrach were not only fighting themselves. They faced competition for the control of Connacht from another dynasty. These were the Uí Briúin and, as their name implies, they all claimed to have sprung from a man called Bríon. About the year 700 the Uí Briúin were based around Carnfree in the modern co. Roscommon. Over the years, they too began to splinter. The first branch, the Uí Briúin Aí, stayed in the original homelands. As they grew, they also produced new segments and, after the eleventh century when the Irish septs generally resorted to the precocious device of adopting surnames, the best-known of the Uí Briúin Aí was the famous line of Uí Chonchobair (the O'Connors), kings of Connacht throughout the high and later Middle Ages. The second branch of the Uí Briúin was the Uí Briúin Seola, who were pushed out by the others and settled in new lands east of Lough Corrib. They later split up again and the famous Uí Flaithbertaig (O'Flaherty family) was their most successful branch. Finally, there were the Uí Briúin Bréifne, who moved north-east, dispossessed other weaker septs from their lands in what is now Cavan and Leitrim, and set them-

selves up as kings there. Later, their chief family was the Uí Ruairc (O'Rourkes).

So it went on over the centuries, one dynasty rising in power, another falling. That is what most of the fighting in native Irish society was about. As dynasties grew, they made war on their distant relatives to try to grab the kingship, and they spread out into the lands of other septs. Not everyone can be a winner, however, and in time many families faded into insignificance. Like the lesser kings they fell down the social ladder, and they let others compete for the top prize of the provincial kingship. The theory of the law books was cast aside. In the eleventh and twelfth centuries the half dozen or so great kings ruthlessly expelled whole dynasties, partitioned the weaker kingdoms and appointed either their own sons or their favourites as puppet rulers over them, and granted away sections of them to their own vassals or to the church. As a result, these province-kings were dominating huge territorial lordships, and operating within structures of power and lordship that were not very far removed from those which pertained in the so-called feudal kingdoms of Europe.

Below the rank of kings stood the noblemen, and below the nobles the commoners. A nobleman or lord (*flaith*) was obviously distinguishable from a commoner by virtue of his birth and wealth, but, in early medieval Ireland, it was the possession of clients (*céili*, literally 'companions') which conferred the status of lordship. Clientship was the Irish equivalent of the feudal bond. It was the institution which bound the lord and his dependant together in a relationship which had mutual benefits, but was, of course, more favourable to the lord. In essence, the lord granted the client a fief (*rath*) of land or stock, and in return the client bound himself to make specific payments to the lord: he might provide a food rent in the form of part of his produce, or hospitality to the lord during winter, or some such service. It was part of the duty of the lord to provide physical defence for the client and to protect his rights from outside encroachment. A lord who failed in his duty to a client could, according to the Introduction to the great legal compendium known as the

Senchas Már ('the Great Tradition'), be demoted to the rank of a commoner.[31]

There were two kinds of clients – the free client (*sóerchéile*) and the base client (*céile gíallnae*). The free client was often quite a wealthy nobleman himself and had to pay a high annual rent for his fief, and the bond with his lord (which he was free to terminate at will) seems to have involved him undertaking to perform military service, to accompany the lord on military expeditions and raids, for which he might obtain a share of the plunder. Free clientship, therefore, provided Irish lords with their military retinues. But somebody had to remain at home, to work the land, to produce transferable wealth, and this is where the base clients came in. The lord advanced the base client his fief – cows, land, farm implements, and so forth. It was a system whereby the lord could lease surplus stock to the client, and get a share of the produce that resulted. For instance, the law tracts dictate that the well-off farmer, known as the *bóaire*, paid his lord an annual food rent of a milch cow, while the less well-off *ócaire* paid a two-year-old bullock. The client could not afford the stock himself, and needed the lord to finance the deal, while the lord could not have survived without the client doing his share of the manual work, motivated, of course, by that most basic instinct, the pursuit of profit. The base client also provided hospitality for the lord and his entourage, performed military duties and, we are told, had to help in the construction of the rampart about the lord's *dún* (or fort).[32] Because of the base client's role as 'provider of food[rent]', later sources call him a *biatach*, who became in turn the *betagh* familiar to students of Anglo-Norman Ireland, native Irish manorial tenants some of whom may have had a status similar to that of an English villein, others of whom were substantial farmers.[33]

Although the clients were free men, that is not to say that early Irish society was in any sense egalitarian; quite the reverse. The family, or kin-group (*fine*), rather than the individual, was the legal unit recognized under the law. It was the family which owned property, which came into an inheritance, which was held responsible for the misdemeanours of its individual

members. If a man was murdered, it was the prerogative of the family to seek revenge or to claim compensation in the form of a 'body-fine' (*éraic*) from the culprit. The family group that mattered most in the early period (to judge from its ubiquity in the law tracts) was the *derbfine* or 'true kin', made up of all those descended from a common great-grandfather in the male line. (The female line was not recognized because, when a woman married, though she retained some links with her own kin, her children were normally part of her husband's *fine*.) It seems quite likely, however, that at a relatively early point (though to date these matters is notoriously difficult) the *derbfine* was being replaced by the nuclear family as the most significant legal grouping, and was no longer the primary property-owning kindred group.[34]

Today's nuclear family would be rather surprised by its medieval equivalent. Modern Ireland, for so long a divorce-free bastion, could not be more different from its earlier self, in that, while divorce was being stamped out by reforming churchmen all over Europe, it remained commonplace in Ireland, at least among the royalty and aristocracy for whom records survive.[35] This was not in defiance of Irish law, it was part and parcel of it. Divorce was permitted in many circumstances. A full law tract survives on the subject, *Cáin Lánamna*, which concentrates on how the couple's property should be divided at the divorce. The law adopted a very severe attitude to women regarded as having left their husbands without due cause. Such a woman, the law says, has no rights in society, and cannot be harboured by anybody. With few exceptions, women could not buy or sell or make any form of contract or transaction without the consent of those who had authority over her: her father when she was a girl, her husband when she married, her son when she was a widow. This is an illustration of the way in which the claims sometimes made as to the degree of freedom and power enjoyed by women in early Irish society have been exaggerated.[36] In the sagas, it is true, women are frequently very powerful – one only has to think of Queen Medb in *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, who was the real leader of Connacht rather than

her weak husband, Ailill. But in real life it was otherwise and the power of women was much more circumscribed. The annals are our primary source for politico-military history, and it is hard to find in them a single example of a female political or military leader. The image of women portrayed in 'wisdom-texts' such as 'The Triads of Ireland' is very different.[37] Here, the qualities one finds being lauded are reticence of speech, virtue, and industry in the home. Frequently too one finds that sexual promiscuity by women is condemned (admittedly by men and usually clerical men at that), as are other bad habits such as making spells, composing or commissioning illegal satires, and stealing.[38]

As might be expected, sexual promiscuity in men was not frowned upon to the same extent. Medieval Ireland was, in fact, a country in which polygamy seems to have been rife. The author of one law tract, *Bretha Crólige*, claimed that there was disagreement in Irish law as to whether polygamy was proper, but justified the practice by reference to the Old Testament, claiming that God's chosen people enjoyed a plurality of unions.[39] The laws allowed for different forms of sexual union – formal unions, which were obviously what we would call a marriage, but also less permanent arrangements where the woman would have fewer property rights and entitlements than the chief wife. However, the children of either arrangement had rights of inheritance, and this is obviously one of the most frequent causes of succession disputes, since the brothers fighting to succeed to the kingship were very often born of different mothers and lacked much in the way of personal attachment to each other. This situation was made worse by the practice of fosterage, whereby the upbringing of children was entrusted to others, normally political allies, the result being that individuals sometimes developed stronger ties with their foster-family than with their own family.

The church, of course, looked with disapproval on these multiple marriages. The most frequent causes of external complaint about Irish society in the eleventh and twelfth centuries were the irregularities in marriage law. Those comment-

ing on Ireland, the likes of Gerald de Barri, St Bernard of Clairvaux, and more than one archbishop of Canterbury, even the popes, continually condemned Irish marriage laws and the sexual licentiousness which they believed to be rampant in Irish society. They may have exaggerated the situation. In a society where aristocrats married aristocrats, and where the pool of prospective spouses was so limited, it was inevitable that marriage would take place within what the church viewed as the forbidden degrees of consanguinity (marriage even to one's distant cousins). Irish kings and nobles in so doing were technically guilty of incest. If one adds to that the prevalence of divorce and the presence of polygamy and serial monogamy (the practice of putting several wives aside in turn and replacing them with another), there was, relatively speaking, a high proportion of half-siblings and step-siblings, and complicated personal entanglements were bound to occur. The rather severe clerics of the Gregorian reform frowned on this, needless to say. But in some respects the Irish were only doing formally what kings and nobles all over Christendom did informally, while maintaining a pretence of adherence to church law on the subject. Kings sought above all an heir. When they failed to produce one by their first wife, irrespective of what the church said, more often than not they found a method of putting her aside and trying again with a new wife. Kings, too, sought alliances. They married not out of love or desire but out of political expediency. That does not mean that they did not love or experience desire, merely that they often did so with someone other than their wife, and to these illicit sexual liaisons, and their offspring, the church usually turned a blind eye.

However, by making formal provision for the divorced wife, or the children of a second wife, or a concubine and her offspring, the Irish kings and their legal system by the late eleventh century stood condemned abroad. Archbishop Lanfranc of Canterbury, writing in 1074 to Tairdelbach Ua Briain of Munster, listed a number of what he regarded as the ills bedevilling church and society in Ireland: these included faults as serious as the improper consecration of bishops; the

conferral of holy orders in return for money; and irregularities in the provision of that most basic of sacraments, baptism. However, his first, most detailed and most severe criticism was reserved for marriage practices which he described as 'a law of marriage which is rather a law of fornication'. He added that 'certain reports have reached us ... that in your kingdom a man abandons at his own discretion and without any grounds in canon law the wife who is lawfully married to him, not hesitating to form a criminal alliance ... with any other woman he pleases, either a relative of his own or of his deserted wife or a woman whom somebody else has abandoned in an equally disgraceful way'.[40] When Lanfranc's successor, Archbishop Anselm, wrote to Tairdelbach's son Muirchertach, again marriage topped his list of complaints: 'It is said that men exchange their wives as freely and publicly as a man might change his horse'.[41] Marriage practices were among the issues addressed at the first Irish reforming synod for which a record survives, that of Cashel in 1101, although apparently without much success.[42] When Bernard of Clairvaux in his 'Life of St Malachy' was depicting in colourful language the sort of challenge that faced his subject, he described how Malachy 'had been sent not to men but to beasts', adding that they 'were Christians in name, in fact pagans; there was no giving of tithes or first-fruits; no entry into lawful marriages; no making of confessions'.[43]

This unacceptable sexual laxity was something for which the Irish paid dearly, to the extent that in 1155 Pope Adrian IV gave legal sanction for an invasion of their country by a neighbouring king, Henry II of England, allegedly for the purpose of eradicating such evils. It was more than a decade before the English invasion of Ireland took place, but when Pope Alexander III wrote to Henry II in its immediate aftermath, he began his letter by expressing his joy at how Henry had

> extended your majesty's power and wonderfully and magnificently triumphed over the disordered and undisciplined Irish, a people, we have heard, the Roman rulers, conquerors of the world in their time, left unapproached, a people unmindful of the fear of God which, as if unbridled, indiscriminately turns

> aside from the straight road for the depths of vice, throws off the religion of Christian faith and virtue, and destroys itself in internecine slaughter,[44]

and then added, as the first item on his list of complaints against the Irish, that they 'openly cohabit with their step-mothers and do not blush to bear children by them; a man will misuse his brother's wife while his brother is still alive; a man will live in concubinage with two sisters, and many have intercourse with daughters of mothers they have deserted'. This, then, is the justification for the invasion. When the English court chronicler Roger of Howden condemned the Irish it was because they had 'as many wives as they wished',[45] and when Ralph of Diss reported on the Irish agreement at the synod of Cashel in 1171–2 to conform to the usages of the English church, he claimed that it was 'above all else, in matters relating to marriage'.[46]

The view that the conquest of Ireland was brought about by the immorality of the Irish was not confined to outsiders. The Annals of Connacht, in recording the events of the year 1233, preserve a story to the effect that the pope offered the last high-king of Ireland, Ruaidrí Ua Conchobair, six wives and the title of high-king if he 'would renounce the sin of adultery henceforth'; but, because he would not, 'God took the rule and sovereignty from his seed for ever, in punishment for his sin'.[47] This same story is preserved in a slightly different form in the Scottish chronicle of John of Fordun:

> The kingdom of Ireland ... came to an end with the lustful King Roderic (begotten, forsooth, of the stock of our own race), who would have six wives at once, not like a Christian king, and would not send them away, in spite of the loss of his kingdom – though he had often been warned by the whole church, both archbishops and bishops, and chidden with fearful threats, by all the inhabitants, both chiefs and private persons. He was therefore despised by them all; and they would never more deign to obey him – neither deign they to obey any king to this day. Besides, as thou seest, that kingdom, so renowned formerly, in our forefathers' time, is now miserably split up into thirty kingdoms or more.[48]

A version of it found its way into the text known as *Trí Biorghaoithe an Bháis* ('The Three Shafts of Death') written by the seventeenth-century antiquarian Geoffrey Keating, in which the fate of Ua Conchobair and of his enemy Diarmait Mac Murchada are tied together, the latter's downfall being blamed on his rape of the wife of Tigernán Ua Ruairc of Bréifne, Ua Conchobair's on his lust for all the women of his kingdom, married or single.[49] It is not the accuracy of the story that matters so much as the implication: that the Irish brought conquest upon themselves by their refusal to conform to the norms of society elsewhere in twelfth-century Europe.

2

A Kingdom Unique to Itself?

Geoffrey Keating's lasting achievement is his monumental *Foras Feasa ar Éirinn* ('Foundation of Knowledge on Ireland'), compiled around 1634, one of the aims of which was to refute what he regarded as the long-standing denigration of Ireland by foreign, mainly English commentators, and to assert its right to sovereign status. Ireland is, he says, a 'kingdom unique to itself, like a little world'.[1] However sincerely he may have held that view, Keating's analysis, which has been shared by many others down through the centuries, has only served to perpetuate the notion that there was something immutable and archaic about early Irish society, an 'enduring tradition' (to borrow from the title of one recent work on the subject),[2] which merited preservation in its own right, and which prevailed in spite of the country's repeated subjection to external assault. This view does not do justice to its subject, in that it fails to recognize that Irish society was an evolving entity which was not only responsive to external stimulus but had within itself the capacity to change. One of those external stimuli, the Viking incursion, was thought by one scholar to have brought about 'the passing of the old order',[3] since he viewed the political, social, and economic changes which seemed to be taking place in its aftermath as a product of that cataclysm; it is, however, possible to argue that those changes would have

taken place, or were taking place, anyway, and that it was not Irish society that adapted to cope with the Vikings so much as the reverse.

That is not to say that the Vikings were not, from the Irish perspective, a pernicious force and that the Irish did not have to develop a means of surmounting the challenge they represented. The first recorded Viking raid on Ireland took place in 795. While it is wrong to paint the Vikings as mere pirates, their early raids were certainly very damaging and unquestionably the fabric of Irish society – both church and lay society – suffered greatly as a result of the destruction of property, the seizure of moveable wealth, and the increased expenditure on arms and armies which the Viking wars necessitated. There may even have been moments in the ninth century when they appeared capable of conquering the whole country. Instead, though, over a period, they became part of everyday life, just one more violent group in a society that was already very violent. A great deal has been written about the destruction of the monasteries by Viking raiders, and they did, of course, raid the church; but so too did the Irish.[4] The medieval church was an intensely political institution. In Ireland, every dynasty had its favoured church, and every province had its major ecclesiastical showpiece. Rival dynasties and the kings of neighbouring provinces had few qualms about attacking such centres, since by impoverishing an ecclesiastical settlement which was the hub of economic activity in their enemy's land, they were impoverishing the enemy himself. The Vikings acted similarly. Since 841 their main centre of power had been Dublin. If the Vikings were destroyers, pillagers of the church, the area around Dublin which they came to control should have been denuded of ecclesiastical wealth, property, and influence. However, this was anything but the case and the churches and church property at places like Clondalkin, Glasnevin, Kilmainham, Lusk, Shankill, Swords and Tallaght remained important focal points in the diocese of Dublin for centuries to come.

Dublin, and the other main Viking enclaves at Waterford, Wexford, Limerick and Cork, came to resemble other Irish

kingdoms, and were open to attack from the armies of other kings. The Irish found it hard to unite against them and Irish kings often fought alongside the Vikings against other Irish dynasts. Perhaps the earliest notable example of this collaboration occurred in 850 when the Vikings, who had recently established a base at Dublin, joined their neighbouring Irish king, Cináed mac Conaing of North Brega, in despoiling the lands of the then high-king, Máel Sechnaill mac Maíl Ruanaid.[5] This form of cooperation was to become a common feature of Irish politics in the years that followed. The Vikings (or Ostmen as they called themselves) had large fleets which Irish kings hired for use against their own enemies. The economic potential of their towns and the trading networks they had established were recognized and exploited by the Irish who, by the eleventh or early twelfth century, had even established royal residences within their walls.[6]

One thing that is noticeable about the main Ostman towns is that they were all in the southern half of Ireland. The northern kings were able to prevent the growth of Viking power in the north of the country, but ultimately this may have been to their own disadvantage since, by denying themselves access to Viking trade, they were stunting their own economic development. That there was extensive Viking settlement in the southern half of Ireland is an indication of the weakness of the kings of Munster, who were unable to prevent them gaining a foothold there. From the seventh century to the mid-tenth century Munster was ruled by the Eóganacht kings: the Meic Carthaig (Mac Carthys), who were later kings of Desmond (*Desmumu*, 'south Munster'), were descended from the Eóganacht. One of the weaknesses from which the Eóganacht suffered was that the kingship of Munster tended to rotate arbitrarily between several competing branches, unlike some other provinces in which a narrow group of families retained the right to succeed to the kingship. Therefore, no one group emerged from the Eóganacht to dominate the kingship and no one centre of power developed within the dynasty. In fact, instead of Munster developing as a kingdom, with one dominant dynasty, it was really a confederation of lesser dynasties. In this period its king was not particularly powerful. He exercised little control over the lesser dynasties within Munster and, with few exceptions, played a very small part on the national stage, frequently suffering defeat at the hands of other more powerful province-kings.[7]

It was because of the weakness and fragmentation of the Eóganacht dynasty that a rival force rose to power in Munster in the tenth century. This was the Dál Cais, whose centre of power was in the basin of the lower Shannon, and whose new power stemmed partly from the fact that they controlled this strategic waterway. The first of their kings to obtain real power was Cennétig mac Lorcáin who, when he died in 951, was called in the annals *rí Tuadmuman*, king of Thomond (literally 'north Munster'), proof that Cennétig's status was such that he could with justification claim to rule not just his core territory of Dál Cais but a large part of the ancient province of Munster. He was succeeded by his son Mathgamain, who gained control over North and East Munster, including the Ostmen of Waterford, whose support he enlisted in obtaining mastery over the other most important Ostman city in Munster, Limerick. When Mathgamain was murdered in 976 he was succeeded by his brother, the illustrious Brian Bóruma.[8] Brian too asserted control over the Ostmen of Limerick and over the rival Eóganacht to make himself king of all Munster in everything but name. As king of Munster Brian was a figure of national importance because now he found himself in conflict with other province-kings; and by far the most important of these was Máel Sechnaill mac Domnaill, king of the Southern Uí Néill.

The Uí Néill were the most important royal dynasty in Ireland.[9] They dominated the northern half of the island, which was known as *Leth Cuinn* ('Conn's Half'), called after Conn Cétchathach (Conn of the Hundred Battles), from whom the province Connacht takes its name. The Uí Néill took their name from Niall Noígiallach (Niall of the Nine Hostages) who was a descendant of Conn, or so the early historians would have us believe. By tradition, some of Niall's

sons settled in the north-west of Ireland. One of them, Conall, gave his name to Tír Conaill ('the land of Conall', consisting for the most part of modern co. Donegal), and the people who inhabited this area became known as Cenél Conaill ('the race of Conall'). The name of another son, Eógan, is preserved in Inis Eógain (the Inishowen peninsula). Later, descendants of Eógan spread southwards and gave their name to Tír Eógain (modern Tyrone), the people themselves being called Cenél nEógain. These two dynasties have an important place in Irish history. In later centuries, the main grouping among the Cenél Conaill was the family of O'Donnell, and the main branch of the Cenél nEógain was the line of O'Neill. Collectively, Cenél Conaill and Cenél nEógain are known to historians as the Northern Uí Néill. Other alleged descendants of Niall Noígiallach, whom historians call the Southern Uí Néill, lived in the north midlands, in what are nowadays counties Meath, Westmeath, part of Longford and part of Offaly. The most important segment among them was the Clann Cholmáin ('the family of Colmán'), descended from Colmán Már who lived in the mid-sixth century. It is to this branch that the Uí Maíl Sechnaill (O'Melaghlin) belonged, who were kings of Mide (literally meaning 'the middle [of Ireland]', which became Meath) in the eleventh and twelfth centuries.

The high-king over all the Uí Néill, Northern and Southern, was entitled to call himself *rí Temrach*, king of Tara. There is considerable debate among historians as to what precisely the kingship of Tara implied. The title itself was very ancient and it was certainly not a normal tribal kingship. While it is not true to say that to be king of Tara was to be high-king of Ireland, there was undoubtedly some special prestige attached to it, and the Uí Néill did their best to convince people that by virtue of the fact that they were kings of Tara they were *ipso facto* high-kings of Ireland. They commissioned propaganda to that effect, claiming that Tara was the ancient capital of Ireland. The learned classes fabricated a pre-history of the country which linked all the dynasties and all the various peoples inhabiting the island by descent from a common set

of ancestors. This allowed the belief to take hold that the Irish were a separate nation and that Ireland was a separate country. The law tracts taught that things should be done 'according to the custom of the island of Ireland' and, of course, the best reason that such writers had for the belief that the Irish were one nation was the fact that they all spoke the same language. Hence, the idea grew that in the past the Irish had one king, one set of laws, and one capital; and in time the Uí Néill were able to convince most people that that ancient capital was Tara.[10]

Of course, the Uí Néill themselves believed this propaganda, believed that they were the rightful kings of Ireland, since they were descended from a man, Niall Noígiallach, who had been, so they thought, high-king of Ireland before the dawn of Irish history. Brian Bóruma, in their eyes, was an upstart, a man whose grandfather had been a minor chieftain in what is now east co. Clare, who belonged to a dynasty which came from nowhere in the tenth century to challenge the great Uí Néill supremacy. In a country which was so aristocratic and so conscious of rank and status, this was unheard-of presumption. It meant that Brian was heading for trouble with the reigning overking of the Uí Néill, Máel Sechnaill mac Domnaill, once he began to assert himself outside Munster in the early 980s. Máel Sechnaill invaded Brian's core kingdom, the territory of Dál Cais, and cut down the sacred tree where the kings of Dál Cais were inaugurated, an act not without its symbolism: Máel Sechnaill was clearly intent on denying Brian any claim to kingship. This, however, did little to stop Brian and the two kings spent several more years trying to get the better of each other. In 997 they held a royal meeting near Clonfert and reached an agreement whereby Máel Sechnaill would be king over the northern half of Ireland, *Leth Cuinn*, and Brian would be king over the southern half, *Leth Moga*. But the king of Munster was not content with this for long and soon restarted the war. Eventually, in 1002, Máel Sechnaill was forced to give hostages to Brian as a sign of his submission, effectively acknowledging that Brian was entitled to call himself high-king of Ireland, and in the process ending a tra-

dition of Uí Néill claims to the high-kingship that had lasted for six centuries. Brian forced all other province-kings to submit to him as overlord and in 1005, when he made a ceremonial visit to Armagh, he had his secretary inscribe a record of the occasion in the famous *Book of Armagh*, an inscription in which he was given the unique title *Imperator Scotorum*, 'emperor of the Irish'.[11]

Historians have placed great emphasis on Brian Bóruma's achievement, and not without reason. To begin with, he ended the supremacy of the Eóganacht within Munster. Then he brought to an end the hegemony which the Uí Néill claimed to hold over the Irish body politic. They had sought to be masters of the Irish political scene, and believed the high-kingship of Ireland to be theirs by exclusive right, but by intruding himself into the high-kingship Brian brought that to an end. There was nothing illegal about this. There was no law that said that the overking of the Uí Néill *had* to be king of Ireland. It was a supremacy which depended for its continuance on the force of tradition, and it was this tradition which Brian broke. In doing so, he created a new situation. He demonstrated to the other province-kings who had been denied any claim to the high-kingship of Ireland for so long, that it was theirs for the taking, that they could make themselves master over the whole island if they were powerful enough to do so. As a result, the history of Ireland in the eleventh and twelfth centuries is one largely shaped by Brian Bóruma and is, in short, the story of the struggle between the various province-kings to realize this ambition.

Brian's achievement was obviously due to his own personal ability as a political leader and a military commander. He was also a clever manipulator of the church, whose support he won by a show of generosity and by filling the leading ecclesiastical offices with friends and relatives.[12] Brian also exploited the economic wealth and military might of the Ostman towns better than any of his predecessors. Limerick and Waterford were cities whose contingents of heavily armed and armoured soldiers were at his beck and call. He also gained control over Dublin which, ultimately, led to his

downfall. However, perhaps the most important explanation for Brian's success lies in divisions among his opponents. Connacht, for instance, was prevented from offering effective opposition to Munster under Brian by the fact that two rival branches of the Uí Briúin, the Uí Chonchobair (O'Connors) of Uí Briúin Aí and the Uí Ruairc (O'Rourkes) of Uí Briúin Bréifne were too preoccupied with fighting each other to unite in opposition to the king of Munster. The same was true in Leinster, where Brian was able to exploit internecine divisions for his own purposes. Most important of all, however, since it was they whom he toppled from the high-kingship of Ireland, were divisions among the Uí Néill. Time and geography had driven the Northern and the Southern Uí Néill so far apart from each other that the days were well and truly over when they might be able to unite in defence of their prerogative of retaining the kingship in Uí Néill hands. Not only that, but the Northern Uí Néill were split, as already mentioned, between the Cenél nEógain and the Cenél Conaill. These two branches opposed each other more than their common enemies and waged war so vehemently against one another that to join forces against Munster was ordinarily out of the question. Similar divisions were to be found among the Southern Uí Néill, to such an extent that Máel Sechnaill, who had once been high-king of Ireland himself, became, when Brian reigned supreme, just one of his subordinate allies.

Máel Sechnaill stayed loyal to Brian when a revolt broke out against him in Leinster in 1012. The Ostmen of Dublin, who were often closely aligned with the Leinstermen, joined this revolt. Brian led his armies to invade Leinster, and laid Dublin under a siege that is said to have lasted for three months, until Christmas 1013. At that point Brian and his men returned home, but the Leinstermen and the Ostmen of Dublin took the opportunity to send messengers to the Isle of Man and the Scottish Isles, and gathered together a vast Viking fleet, ready for Brian's next move. On Good Friday 1014 they fought Brian's forces in perhaps the most famous battle in Irish history. By normal standards Clontarf was a long and bloody

battle, and it ended in the defeat of Dublin and Leinster, though in the hour of victory Brian himself was assassinated.[13] The Vikings, of course, who had been called to fight Brian, then sailed off to their homes, but the Ostmen of Dublin stayed on as rulers there. It is true that within a few generations legend had it that Clontarf was a contest to see whether the Vikings or the Irish would rule Ireland, and that the Vikings lost; and this is a view which has persisted. However, that is not really what Clontarf was all about. Rather, this battle was the last episode in Brian Bóruma's attempt to force all the other province-kings and all of his lesser rivals to acknowledge him as high-king. It was successful to the extent that his forces won the battle and vanquished the Leinster–Ostman alliance, but because Brian lost his own life, ultimately his dynasty lost out and it was to be another half century or more before the Dál Cais achieved dominance again in the person of Brian's grandson, Tairdelbach – by then sporting with pride the surname Ua Briain ('descendant of Brian', literally 'grandson').

After the death of Brian, Máel Sechnaill was able to regain the kingship of Ireland, and he died in 1022. It is at this point that the real sea-change in Irish politics occurred, because, for a full half-century after 1022, there was no recognized high-king of Ireland, none of the province-kings being dominant enough to impose his rule. Brian's son Donnchad liked to think of himself as king but he never managed to fill his father's boots, and could not even overcome internal opposition within the Dál Cais.[14] In fact, for much of the mid-eleventh century the most powerful king in Ireland was another upstart in the same mould as Brian Bóruma. His name was Diarmait mac Maíl na mBó and he was a Leinsterman.[15] Just as the Dál Cais to which Brian belonged were newcomers to power in Munster, Diarmait mac Maíl na mBó's dynasty, the Uí Chennselaig, had been excluded from the kingship of Leinster for three centuries until he came along. The Uí Chennselaig were from south Leinster and had their capital at Ferns in co. Wexford, whereas the other reigning Leinster dynasties dominated the area from co. Kildare

eastwards to south co. Dublin and north Wicklow. These north Leinster dynasts were suffering from the attacks of the Uí Néill in Mide, and from the growing power of the Ostmen of Dublin, and it was this weakness which Diarmait mac Maíl na mBó exploited. Furthermore, so far as we can tell, his dynasty, the Uí Chennselaig, had complete control over the Ostman town of Wexford. Wexford had important trading connections across the Irish Sea and Diarmait mac Maíl na mBó was probably able to harness the economic wealth that this trade generated in order to finance his own expansion.

In 1052 Diarmait even managed to do what Brian Bóruma and Máel Sechnaill had failed to accomplish: he seized Dublin and made himself king.[16] Shortly afterwards he bestowed Dublin on his eldest or most favoured son, Murchad, ancestor of the famous line of the Meic Murchada (Mac Murroughs). It seems that at that time the ruling Ostman dynasty of Dublin also controlled the Isle of Man and, to a lesser extent perhaps, the Western Isles of Scotland. This is a region which Irish sources call *Inse Gall* ('the islands of the foreigners'), and it is where Echmarcach, the exiled Ostman ruler of Dublin, took refuge after his expulsion by the Leinstermen in 1052. Gaining control of Dublin, one of the most important trading centres in western Europe, meant an enormous increase of the power of King Diarmait and his son Murchad. But they were not content with it, and in 1061 Murchad invaded the Isle of Man, defeated Echmarcach in battle, and took *cáin* or tribute from the inhabitants as a sign of his overlordship. From then until his death in 1070 this Leinster prince reigned as both king of Dublin and of the Isle of Man, and when Diarmait himself was killed two years later at the head of an army that included many hundreds of Ostman warriors, among the titles he was given by an annalist was 'king of the Isles (*rí Indsi Gall*)'.[17]

That same set of annals describes Diarmait as 'king of Wales'. This, of course, is a gross exaggeration, but it is worth noting that the Welsh chronicles accord him an unusually long obituary notice, saying that he was 'the most praiseworthy and bravest king of the Irish – terrible towards his foes and

kind towards the poor and gentle towards pilgrims'.[18] This is evidence of a very elevated status and probably indicates that he had close contacts with Wales. Most probably this is connected with the control he had over Dublin from 1052 onwards since many of the Irish contacts with Wales in this period were channelled through Dublin.[19] The Ostmen had a powerful fleet and were in the habit of raiding and trading in Wales. The most famous king of Dublin in the eleventh century was Sitriuc Silkenbeard, and when his son was captured in 1029, Sitriuc paid for his release by handing over a ransom of 120 Welsh horses. As to raids by the Dubliners on Wales, there was one in the very next year. Furthermore, when Sitriuc was banished from Dublin in 1036, he almost certainly took refuge in Wales, since the next entry in the annals records that Sitriuc's son was murdered in Wales by another member of the family.[20]

The Ostmen had, in fact, a very close involvement in Welsh affairs. Cynan ab Iago, the would-be prince of Gwynedd or North Wales, married a member of Sitriuc's family and took refuge in Dublin when he was forced into exile in the mid-eleventh century. From Dublin he made several attempts to recover power in Wales, but was always unsuccessful. However, his son was more fortunate. A remarkable and unique biography of Gruffudd ap Cynan, which may have been written within a generation of his death in 1137, still survives.[21] It describes a quite extraordinary story. Gruffudd ap Cynan ruled Gwynedd for over half a century, yet he was born near Dublin, and was reared in Swords in north co. Dublin. When he grew to manhood he enlisted Irish support, invaded Anglesey, and conquered North Wales from his enemies. From time to time he got into difficulty in Wales, whether at the hands of Welsh enemies or of the Normans, who were gradually starting to penetrate Wales from England, and on each occasion, according to the evidence of his biography and of the Welsh chronicles, he took refuge in Ireland, enlisted Irish and Ostman support, and managed to recover his grip on Gwynedd. His life-story is a remarkable tale of constant to-ing and fro-ing across the Irish Sea, and if even part of it is true,

then the relationship between Ireland and Wales in the eleventh and early twelfth centuries was one of the utmost intimacy.

Diarmait mac Maíl na mBó played a part in fostering that relationship most probably, as already noted, because of his association with Dublin and of the presence there of the exiled Cynan ab Iago. We know that the Anglo-Saxon earl of Wessex, Harold Godwinesson, spent the winter of 1051–2 in Ireland with Diarmait 'under the king's protection', and that after the battle of Hastings Harold's sons again fled to Diarmait. He then supplied them with a fleet of sixty-six ships for one of their unsuccessful attempts to overturn the Norman conquest of England, one source commenting that the failure of this invasion 'filled Ireland with mourning'.[22] Diarmait mac Maíl na mBó was thus a man who offered protection to exiled dynasts from Britain and who provided them with military and naval support in the attempt to secure their reinstatement. Therefore, after he gained control of Dublin, he presumably became the protector of the exiled Cynan ab Iago of Gwynedd and sponsored his unsuccessful attempts to recover North Wales, in return for some acknowledgement of suzerainty. Presumably this lies behind the generous words of his Welsh obituarist and the colourful claim of the Irish annals that he was entitled to call himself 'king of Wales'.

From this newly won position of power, Diarmait mac Maíl na mBó supported Tairdelbach Ua Briain against his uncle Donnchad, and eventually in 1064 Donnchad was forced to abdicate, by going on pilgrimage to Rome, where he died. When Diarmait mac Maíl na mBó himself died in battle in 1072, he was described, admittedly by the partisan *Book of Leinster*, as *rí hErend co fressabra*, 'king of Ireland with opposition', and that is not far off the mark. It is an important title which gained currency in this period to describe these men who were claimants to the kingship of Ireland and generally regarded as such, but who were never, or hardly ever, entirely unopposed (*cen fressabra*, 'without opposition'). The phrase *rí hErend co fressabra* is thus used in the annals to describe an individual who styled himself high-king of Ireland, and who had managed

to get most of the other province-kings to acknowledge him as such, but for whom there were always one or two who simply refused to do so, or who did so only under duress. The eleventh and twelfth centuries were, therefore, a period that witnessed great warfare in Ireland, but not senseless violence. What we find is that the man who was high-king of Ireland *with* opposition was trying to become king *without* opposition, by forcing all the other province-kings to acknowledge his claim to the kingship. These have been called 'the wars of the circuits', because kings found themselves locked into a circuit of campaigns, moving from province to province, each forcing his rivals into submission, taking hostages from them to try to ensure their future good behaviour, then going on to the next province and repeating the exercise there, all the time keeping a weather-eye on the situation back home, since his rivals within his own province (and his own family) often took advantage of his absence on campaign to instigate a revolt.

Diarmait mac Maíl na mBó was succeeded as the most dominant province-king by his protégé Tairdelbach Ua Briain of Munster, grandson of Brian Bóruma, who died in 1086. Ua Briain was a man of very considerable stature both within Ireland and abroad. He corresponded with one of the greatest of the medieval popes, Gregory VII, and with Lanfranc, one of the most illustrious of Canterbury's archbishops. He also established his capital in the wealthy trading city of Limerick. What is more, in 1072, as part of his campaign to get all other province-kings to acknowledge his claim to be high-king of Ireland, Tairdelbach marched his armies on Dublin and accepted the kingship of the city-state from the inhabitants.[23] That he did so is an indication of the way in which the assertion of power over Dublin was becoming part and parcel of the race for the high-kingship. A year later two unidentified kinsmen of Tairdelbach were killed in the Isle of Man, proof that in gaining power in Dublin the Uí Briain royal house, like the Leinstermen before them, were keen to assert their dominance in the Irish Sea region as a whole. Then in 1075 Tairdelbach followed the precedent set by Diarmait mac Maíl na mBó and appointed his son and successor, Muirchertach,

as king of Dublin. Tairdelbach too involved himself in Welsh politics, and assisted in the succession to power of his own Welsh allies in both the kingdom of North Wales and the kingdom of South Wales. It may have been as a result of this Welsh activity that he got himself into trouble with the new Norman king of England, William the Conqueror: the latter died in 1087, and the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* says that had he lived a short while longer he would have conquered Ireland without any weapons.[24] We cannot be certain what this refers to, but it serves to emphasize the point that as the kings of Ireland grew in stature and in international reputation in the eleventh and twelfth centuries they got sucked into the international arena.

This is true to an even greater extent in the case of Muirchertach Ua Briain, who succeeded his father in 1086. This man's career is a microcosm of all that was good and bad in Irish politics in the period.[25] If Muirchertach's control of Dublin – a town with which he was to be associated for forty years, where he most likely had one of his royal palaces, and whose military might and economic wealth he exploited to great personal benefit – was an indication of all that was 'good', all that was progressive and innovative in Irish politics, the events of 1086, following the death of his father Tairdelbach, were all too typically damaging, negative and self-destructive. Tairdelbach Ua Briain left three sons: Muirchertach, Tadc and Diarmait. All three sought power, and Munster was divided between them. Tadc died at this point but his sons carried on the struggle to get their share of power, while the other brother, Diarmait, was to be a thorn in Muirchertach's side for the rest of his life. In spite of the considerable concessions that Muirchertach made to him – he appears, for instance, to have been appointed governor of the important Ostman town of Waterford – Diarmait consistently tried to undermine his brother and eventually, after Muirchertach's death, it was Diarmait's children who reaped the reward: they inherited the kingdom of Thomond, and the descendants of the great Muirchertach ended up as petty chieftains in West Clare.

This succession dispute illustrates all that was 'bad' about the Irish polity. Power was very much a personal thing; it withered away very quickly at a king's death if he did not leave an heir strong enough to beat off the challenge of near relatives and enemies. Because there was no fixed law of dynastic succession, the path to kingship in Ireland was potentially wide open.[26] A person had to have ability and charisma and needed to command authority, and while royal blood helped it could always be invented: it was probably Muirchertach Ua Briain who commissioned the marvellous piece of pseudo-history known as *Cogad Gaedel re Gallaib* ('The war of the Irish with the foreigners') in order to convince contemporaries of his entitlement to rule Ireland by virtue of the fact that his great-grandfather, Brian Bóruma, had, almost single-handedly (so the *Cogad* claims) saved the country from Viking oppression.[27] More so than anything else, what paved the way to power in eleventh- and twelfth-century Ireland, however, was not personal virtue, and not blue blood, but access to the levers of power – to manpower, resources and arms. To be a king's eldest or favourite son was a help, of course, because such a person had the opportunity during his father's lifetime to build up a powerbase, ready to ease himself into the succession when his father died. But arms and armies were not exclusively the possession of any one man: hence the ubiquitous power struggles; hence the fact that the enmity within dynasties was often as great as that between them; and hence the opposition that Muirchertach Ua Briain faced from his brothers and his brothers' sons.

Owing to this opposition, Muirchertach hardly set foot outside Munster for several years after 1086. During this period he lost control of Dublin and it was taken over by an Islesman called Godred Crovan (Gofraid Mérânach), the founder of a dynasty that ruled over Man and the Isles, in whole or in part, for the next two centuries. His seizure of Dublin from his base on the Isle of Man is further proof that Dublin and Man were treated by contemporaries as a single political entity: the ruler of one was entitled to seek to add the other to his domain. Godred died in 1095, having been banished from Dublin by Muirchertach Ua Briain in the previous year, and then, according to the *Chronicle of the Kings of Man*, the chieftains of the Isles sent an embassy to Ua Briain, asking him to provide a regent to govern their kingdom until Godred's young son came of age.[28] Muirchertach willingly complied, appointing his nephew, Domnall mac Taidc, to rule over them. This story sounds somewhat fanciful, but we know from the Irish annals that Domnall's brother Amlaíb (Olaf) was killed in the Isle of Man in 1096,[29] presumably in pursuit of Domnall's ambitions there. This is another indication of how rapidly Irish kings began to dominate the Irish Sea region once they laid hands on Dublin.

This new Irish hegemony was not, however, to everyone's liking and the famous Norse king, Magnus Barelegs, the last great Viking warlord, led two western expeditions in 1098 and 1102 to stop it in its tracks.[30] Magnus based himself in the Isle of Man and during the second campaign Dublin was his target, and there is evidence to suggest that he gained control of the city.[31] This put him at loggerheads with Muirchertach Ua Briain, but they compromised by arranging a marriage between Muirchertach's daughter and Magnus's young son Sigurd, who was to rule as king of the Isles with Muirchertach's blessing after King Magnus's return to Norway. The whole project collapsed, however, when Magnus was unexpectedly killed raiding in Ulster in 1103, whereupon Sigurd cast aside his child-bride and returned to Norway. Dublin, and perhaps the Isles, then passed back into Munster control, but in 1111 Domnall mac Taidc forcibly seized the Isles against his uncle's wishes and Muirchertach came to Dublin and, as reported in the annals, spent three months in the town, presumably to ensure that it did not fall into Domnall's hands. The fact that the king of Munster could leave his own province and spend a quarter of a year in residence in Dublin says much about the degree of control which the Munstermen had over the city, about the importance they attached to it as a satellite possession, and about the place of Dublin in the Irish polity – it was becoming a home away from home for ambitious Irish dynasts. Not only that, but

Muirchertach continued the policy adopted by his father and by Diarmait mac Maíl na mBó: he appointed his own son and heir as king over the town.[32]

Like his father before him too Muirchertach had involvements further afield. The two leading Welsh allies of Tairdelbach Ua Briain appear to have been Gruffudd ap Cynan of Gwynedd (North Wales) and Rhys ap Tewdwr, the king of Deheubarth (South Wales). They both won back their kingdoms together in 1081 thanks to an army supplied by the Uí Briain royal house of Munster. In 1093 Rhys ap Tewdwr was killed by the Normans who were then just beginning to settle in South Wales. His heir was his son, Gruffudd ap Rhys. We can get no better reminder of the dimness of our understanding of the inter-dynastic connections between Ireland and Wales at this point than from contemplating what happened next. This young boy, Gruffudd ap Rhys, fled to Ireland, and there he spent, probably at Muirchertach Ua Briain's court in Limerick, the next twenty-two years. He did not return to Wales until 1115, and his long enforced exile in Ireland does not appear to have done him much harm, because, even though the Normans had established a permanent base in South Wales by then, he was able to rouse the Welsh to back him, and he recovered at least part of his ancestral kingdom of Deheubarth. When he was expelled by the Normans in 1127, he returned again to Ireland.[33]

The Normans who forced Gruffudd ap Rhys to flee to Ireland were the de Montgomery brothers, and soon afterwards they themselves got into trouble by rebelling against the new king of England, Henry I. To try to resist Henry, they needed allies. Therefore in 1101 they sent an embassy to Ireland, to Muirchertach Ua Briain, looking for his help. The man whom they sent was the steward of Pembroke, Gerald of Windsor, a very important man in Irish history since it is from him that the Irish Geraldines are descended. As a result of Gerald's embassy, Muirchertach Ua Briain agreed that his daughter would marry one of the de Montgomerys, Arnulf, and she was duly sent off to Wales, along with a fleet of armed

ships. The Welsh chronicler's account of the alliance is interesting: it says that Arnulf

> thought to make peace with the Irish and to obtain help from them. And he sent messengers to Ireland, that is Gerald the Steward and many others, to ask for the daughter of King Murtart for his wife. And that he easily obtained; and the messengers came joyfully to their land. And Murtart sent his daughter and many armed ships along with her to his aid. And when the earls [the de Montgomery brothers] had exalted themselves with pride because of those events, they refused to accept any peace from the king [Henry I].[34]

It is interesting that the Normans' alliance is here interpreted as an attempt 'to make peace' with the Irish. It is interesting too that they were perceived as becoming 'exalted with pride' because of the marriage alliance, after their emissaries 'came joyfully' with the news, and then refused to accept peace with Henry I on the strength of it, a reminder of the importance of the Irish input into Welsh warfare at this point. King Henry responded by placing a trade embargo on Ireland and choking off all commercial contacts between the ports of Ireland and England. This had the desired effect. A contemporary English chronicler, William of Malmesbury, speaking probably of these events, tells us that Ua Briain's 'insolence soon subsided, for of what value would Ireland be if deprived of the merchandise of England?'.[35]

After the revolt collapsed, Arnulf, according to the chronicler Orderic Vitalis, fled to his new father-in-law in Ireland, and hoped that he might succeed to Ua Briain's kingdom of Munster. That may seem a bit far-fetched, but Arnulf de Montgomery was lord of Pembroke: sixty-five years later the new ruler of Pembroke was Richard fitz Gilbert de Clare, better known in Ireland as Strongbow, and he succeeded to *his* father-in-law's kingdom by marrying the daughter of Diarmait Mac Murchada, king of Leinster. If Arnulf did flee to Ireland (we know that Ua Briain wrote a letter to the archbishop of Canterbury on his behalf)[36] he did not last long there.

Orderic claims that the Irish used the Normans to ward off the aggression of Magnus Barelegs. Then,

> when the Irish had tasted blood by killing King Magnus and his companions they grew more unruly and suddenly turned to kill the Normans. Their king took his daughter away from Arnulf and gave the wanton girl in an unlawful marriage to one of his cousins. He resolved to murder Arnulf himself as a reward for his alliance, but the latter, learning of the execrable plots of this barbarous race, fled to his own people and lived for twenty years afterwards with no fixed abode.[37]

It is impossible to know how much reliance, if any, to place on this story, but it does at least raise the intriguing possibility that there were contingents of Anglo-Normans participating in Irish warfare two-thirds of a century before they began arriving there *en masse*, and even if Orderic is mistaken, his condemnation of the mores of Irish society, particularly their marriage practices, is in keeping with what we know of contemporary opinion.

These events are a measure of the stature of Muirchertach Ua Briain at the height of his power. He changed the face of Irish politics in other ways too. In 1089, the same year in which he regained control of Dublin, Muirchertach took advantage of internal warfare in Leinster to take temporary control of that province also. Here he was not doing as Irish kings of the past had done, forcing other province-kings to submit to his overlordship: he was actually seeking to replace them. In 1093 he went to Connacht and expelled the heads of the reigning dynasty, driving them all the way north to Tír Eógain, giving their lands to a minor local chieftain whom he supported, and making this man, from nothing, king of Connacht.[38] Although the tactic did not succeed for long, it indicates how ruthlessly innovative he was. He performed a similar deed in the following year when he marched to Mide (Meath) and banished the ruling dynasty into Bréifne. To that extent he simply repeated what he had tried in Connacht, but he was even more thorough on this occasion, because he partitioned Meath in two and appointed two

minor local lords to rule the divided province under his authority. By the mid-1090s, therefore, Muirchertach Ua Briain, after a decade's struggle, controlled Munster and Leinster and the Hiberno-Scandinavian towns; he had also intervened to good effect in Connacht and Meath. The next twenty years of his life were spent trying to extend his control even further north, in particular, to get the northern king, Domnall Mac Lochlainn of Cenél nEógain, to submit to him as overking.

In Mac Lochlainn, however, Muirchertach had met his match, and the northern king may well have learned from the innovations which Muirchertach introduced. For instance, as already mentioned, along with the Cenél nEógain the other major sept comprising the Northern Uí Néill was the Cenél Conaill, for long now distinct dynasties with distinct ruling families. But in 1112 Domnall Mac Lochlainn of Cenél nEógain appointed his own son as king of Cenél Conaill. This move was doomed to failure, but is nevertheless a prime example of the way in which the practices of kingship were changing in this period and the niceties of politics were being abandoned in favour of more ruthless methods. Tír Conaill lay to the west of Tír Eógain; to the east lay the kingdom of the Ulaid. This kingdom, which had anciently covered all of Ulster, had long since been reduced to what are nowadays counties Down and Antrim, and was ruled by a dynasty very proud of its ancient glory, who were very reluctant vassals of the Cenél nEógain. They often sided with Ua Briain and the men of Munster in their efforts to force Mac Lochlainn into submission. In 1113, therefore, Domnall Mac Lochlainn marched into Ulaid, defeated their forces, expelled their king, and did exactly as Ua Briain had done in Meath, partitioned the kingdom. Not only that, but he took a large slice of the kingdom for himself. This again was innovation. What was happening here was the annexation of land. Domnall Mac Lochlainn was acting as a lord, a *dominus terre*, exercising authority not simply over the peoples who inhabited particular areas, but over areas inhabited by particular peoples. That is what is significant about the politics of this age, and about

Muirchertach Ua Briain's contribution to it, since he largely started this trend. In doing so he was not simply aping the developments that were taking place in feudal society abroad, but his foreign connections were such that he was undoubtedly influenced and impressed by the power of kings elsewhere, and was anxious to push his own powers of lordship to their elastic limit.

Muirchertach's involvement with the church was a manifestation of the same aggrandizing policy. In the late eleventh and early twelfth centuries the influence of the reform movement which had been sweeping the European church for some decades began to be felt in Ireland. There is occasionally a tendency to assume that it was as a result of this movement, which came to be known as the Gregorian reform, that Ireland came into contact with the European church, and that this movement brought Ireland into the European mainstream in a way that had never previously been the case. This assumption ignores the earlier achievements of the Irish church during its Golden Age, when Ireland made a not inconsiderable contribution to the civilization of Europe, which reflected itself in great learning, in beautiful works of art, and in a widely held perception that it was a place of great sanctity, an *insula sanctorum*. The fact is that the Irish church had always been open to external influence. It had always been open to receive scholars from abroad to study in its schools, and this was as true in the eleventh century, when the great Welsh scholar, Sulien, bishop of St Davids, spent at least thirteen years studying there, as it was in the seventh century of which Bede later wrote that 'there were many English nobles and lesser folk in Ireland who had left their own land ... either to pursue religious studies or to lead a life of stricter discipline; some of these soon devoted themselves to the monastic life, while others preferred to travel, studying under various teachers in turn; the Irish welcomed them all kindly, and, without asking for any payment, provided them with daily food, books, and instruction'.[39]

The flow in the other direction was even heavier, to such an extent that it is now nearly twelve hundred years since

Walafrid Strabo, based in the monastery of Reichenau on Lake Constance on the modern Swiss-German border, commented on 'the Irish people, with whom the custom of travelling to foreign lands has become almost second nature'.[40] He was referring to those *Scoti vagantes*, the wandering Irish, who were part of a vast *peregrinatio* movement to the Continent. They consisted of priests and monks who evangelized parts of Europe which were without pastoral care, scholars who went to teach or to study, and pilgrims visiting the great shrines and pilgrimage centres of Europe. In the ninth century Irish churchmen and scholars appear throughout Europe, particularly in the Carolingian empire. In the tenth, they still turn up in great numbers all over the Frankish empire, in the Low Countries in places like Ghent, Liège, and Metz; in the valley of the Main, at centres like Würzburg, Mainz and Fulda; in Bavaria, at Regensburg (Ratisbon) and Salzburg; then in the Alpine region at St Gall (named, of course, after an Irish missionary), and Reichenau – this is to name but a few cities and abbeys where Irish influence was strong, and where it remained strong. In 1067, Muiredach mac Robartaig (or Marianus Scotus) left his native Tír Conaill and founded the priory of St Peter at Regensburg. Another Irish abbey, St James's, was founded in the same place in 1111; then came Würzburg (1134), Nüremberg (1140), Constance (1142), Erfurt (1150), Vienna (1155), and Eichstadt (1183). This last house was founded after the English invasion of Ireland. In some respects, therefore, the Irish church remained expansionist and outward-looking right up to the late twelfth century. It was not so cut off from the rest of Christendom as one might imagine, and it was not so decayed and ridden with abuse that it was incapable of making a contribution to the Christian church on the European mainland.[41]

The Irish church also had a long tradition of contact with the church in Anglo-Saxon England, with places like Worcester, Winchester, Winchcombe, Glastonbury, and Canterbury.[42] The pace of reform in the English church increased rapidly in the aftermath of the Norman conquest in 1066. If these religious centres became vehicles for reform

in the church in England, and there were Irishman in training for priestly orders there, it followed that when they returned to Ireland they brought these ideas with them. We get the first evidence of this wind of change only eight years after the Norman conquest. In 1074 the Ostmen of Dublin chose as their bishop a man called Gilla Pátraic, and he was sent to the new reform-minded archbishop of Canterbury, Lanfranc, who canonically examined him, and, when he proved satisfactory, consecrated him as bishop. Gilla Pátraic then swore canonical obedience to Lanfranc. The archbishop of Canterbury was, therefore, the metropolitan, the provincial superior, of the bishop of Dublin. This procedure was repeated for each of Gilla Pátraic's successors at Dublin over the next half century, and when Waterford got a bishop in 1096 he too was consecrated by the archbishop of Canterbury and swore obedience to him, as did one of the bishops of Limerick. Another of Limerick's bishops, Gilla Espaic, author of an important treatise on church organization, known as *De Statu Ecclesiae* ('Concerning church order'), was an acquaintance and correspondent of Archbishop Anselm of Canterbury.[43]

These were, of course, Ostman dioceses, which may have chosen to affiliate themselves with Canterbury in order to emphasize their distinctiveness from the rest of the Irish church. In 1121, for instance, during a dispute over the succession to the diocese of Dublin, a letter was sent to the archbishop of Canterbury from 'all the burgesses of Dublin, and the whole assembly of the clergy', stating that 'the bishops of Ireland are very jealous of us, and especially that bishop who lives in Armagh, because we are unwilling to submit to their ordination but wish always to be under your rule'.[44] Gilla Pátraic, before he became bishop of Dublin, had been a monk at Worcester. His successor as bishop was Donngus, who had been a monk at Canterbury, who was succeeded in turn by his nephew Samuel who had studied at St Albans, and the first bishop of Waterford, Máel Ísu, was a monk of Winchester. Since these bishops received their training in England, they may, therefore, have been out of step with the

rest of the Irish church. But, although they were appointed to the Ostman dioceses and studied in England, all these bishops were native Irishmen, products of the Irish church, not outsiders trying to force this new regime on reluctant natives. Furthermore, the appointment of Gilla Pátraic to Dublin in 1074 had the backing, not only of the Ostman underking of the city, but of the city's new overlord, Tairdelbach Ua Briain. When Máel Ísu was chosen as bishop of Waterford in 1096, a letter was sent to Archbishop Anselm asking him to perform the consecration, among the signatories to which was Muirchertach Ua Briain and his brother Diarmait. And when the Dubliners chose a new bishop in 1121, their new Irish overlord, Tairdelbach Ua Conchobair of Connacht, supported their selection. Therefore, when, during this period, the inhabitants of the Ostman towns decided that they needed a bishop, and that they would send the candidate to Canterbury for consecration, they had the full support of the Irish kings. It was not, as it is sometimes portrayed, an imperialist gesture on Canterbury's part; turning to Canterbury was clearly something of which the Irish kings approved.

Evidently, the Irish kings recognized that these new Ostman dioceses would have to meet the standards now becoming common throughout the Western church, standards for which the Irish church in general was not yet ready. The most basic standard of all was that bishops should be consecrated by canonically qualified superiors, and within the Irish church at that point there was nobody qualified to do this. To have such superiors the Irish church needed considerable reorganization, so that it acquired a structured, territorially based, diocesan system, which it as yet did not have. In this movement towards reform Muirchertach Ua Briain took the lead. The first reforming synod, whose decrees we still have, took place under his direction at Cashel in 1101. His motives were, no doubt, mixed. It would be wrong to cast doubt on the sincerity of his actions, but as high-king of Ireland, Muirchertach presumably had no wish to preside over a country out of step with the rest of Europe, whose church was viewed as backward. To a

certain extent, his own international image and reputation depended upon the perceived status of the Irish church. The council that he convened at Cashel, therefore, concerned itself with the sort of issues synods throughout Europe were dealing with at that time. It dealt with the laws on marriage, with securing various clerical privileges, and with establishing the freedom of the church from lay exactions. It also made an effort to improve the quality of churchmen by insisting on them taking holy orders, and on being celibate, and it tried to eradicate abuses like simony. The proposed reforms were quite sweeping. If the Irish church was lagging behind the church in the rest of Europe, these provisions were designed to help it catch up. In theory, they brought it into line with the church elsewhere, with one major exception: the absence as yet of a proper diocesan structure, and this was very successfully provided for at the synod of Ráith Bressail in 1111, again under the auspices of Muirchertach Ua Briain. The structure arrived at was one which respected the traditional division of the country into two halves. Two ecclesiastical provinces were established, the headship of the northern half (*Leth Cuinn*) going to Armagh, and that of the southern half (*Leth Moga*) to Cashel, each province being divided into twelve dioceses, Armagh having the primacy. This system was later modified. To reflect the growing power of Connacht (and its ecclesiastical capital at Tuam), and to bring Dublin into the ambit of the Irish church (since the issue had not been dealt with at Ráith Bressail), the country was divided into four ecclesiastical provinces at the synod of Kells-Mellifont in 1152, when the papal legate, Cardinal John Paparo, conferred pallia, the symbols of archiepiscopal jurisdiction, on the new archbishops of Armagh, Cashel, Dublin and Tuam (the archbishop of Armagh retaining primacy over all Ireland), a structure which has lasted to this day.

The increasing power of Connacht to which the synod of Kells-Mellifont gave expression was first felt in the aftermath of 1114, when Muirchertach Ua Briain was taken seriously ill and fell from power. Thereafter, the balance of power in the country shifted northwards and his place as the most powerful

king in Ireland was soon taken by Tairdelbach Ua Conchobair, who had been king of Connacht since 1106. As part of his bid for power Ua Conchobair marched on Dublin in 1118 and made himself king.[45] The symbolism is significant. The high-kingship of Ireland was now vacant and Ua Conchobair made good his bid for it by marching his armies on Dublin and accepting its kingship from the populace: without Dublin, his claim to the high-kingship of Ireland would ring hollow. Then in 1126 he performed an equally significant act: Tairdelbach became the fourth successive claimant to the kingship of Ireland to appoint his intended heir (his son Conchobar) as king of Dublin. Tairdelbach Ua Conchobair was a remarkable military commander and his reign is notable for the use he made of naval forces and for the construction of castles and bridges.[46] Like Muirchertach Ua Briain before him, he deposed other province-kings, partitioned their kingdoms, and his favourite son Conchobar was at various stages appointed king not only over Dublin but over Leinster and Meath as well. He gravely weakened the status of the Ua Briain kings of Thomond by setting up as rivals a branch of the Eóganacht who bore the surname Mac Carthaig (Mac Carthy), whom he allowed to rule the kingdom of Desmond. Munster never recovered from this division, a collapse made all the greater by the slaughter of the forces of Tairdelbach Ua Briain at the battle of Móin Mór in 1151 which shattered Uí Briain power; thereafter Munster tended to remain divided in two, and easily fell victim to English assault after 1169. When his son Conchobar was killed in Meath in 1144 Tairdelbach Ua Conchobair allowed a member of the Uí Maíl Sechnaill dynasty to continue ruling in the west of the province, but divided east Meath between Tigernán Ua Ruairc of Bréifne and Diarmait Mac Murchada of Leinster. Meath was now so weak that it was a cockpit of warfare between these and other competing kings and again fell with barely a whimper into the hands of the ambitious English warrior-baron, Hugh de Lacy, in 1172.

By the mid-1140s Ua Conchobair's place as king of Ireland was coming under threat from the northern king,

Muirchertach Mac Lochlainn, who had succeeded to the kingship of Cenél nEógain following the death of his uncle Conchobar in 1136.[47] His first major victory outside Tír Eógain came in 1147 when he was victorious in battle over the east Ulster kingdom of Ulaid. Within a year he had obtained the hostages of his western neighbours, the Cenél Conaill, and of the Airgialla of south Ulster. This gesture of submission was performed at a formal assembly at Armagh, and made him the paramount king throughout the north of Ireland. In 1149 he led a cavalry march south and took hostages from Bréifne and Meath, and went to Dublin where he received the submission of the Ostmen and of their overlord, Diarmait Mac Murchada of Leinster. It was this success that made him a challenger for the high-kingship of Ireland and there followed several years of robust rivalry between him and Tairdelbach Ua Conchobair. In 1153 Mac Lochlainn routed the forces of Tairdelbach's son Ruaidrí, while in the following year the Connacht fleet scored only a limited success in a major naval confrontation off the Inishowen coast, partly because Mac Lochlainn had, in anticipation of the assault, hired a fleet from as far afield as Galloway, Kintyre and Man. In its aftermath, Muirchertach paraded his armies over Connacht and Bréifne, and came to Dublin, where the Ostmen proclaimed him as king and he gave them twelve hundred cows as *tuarastal* or wages, a sign of his overlordship.[48] Although the kingship of Tara had held (or was believed by contemporaries to have held) a special place in the Irish body politic, the myth became hard to square with reality when the province of Meath lost its former greatness and Tara became the scene of petty local squabbles. At the same time, Dublin was rising in importance both economically and symbolically. Implicitly, therefore, Muirchertach Mac Lochlainn's march on Dublin in 1154 secured him the high-kingship of Ireland. He demonstrated his new status by flexing his muscles further afield, by invading Osraige (Ossory) in 1156, in alliance with Diarmait Mac Murchada of Leinster, and by partitioning Munster in the following year, where he laid siege to Limerick and was granted its kingship by the Ostmen.

Since the great Tairdelbach Ua Conchobair died in 1156, his son Ruaidrí now emerged to challenge Mac Lochlainn, and invaded Tír Eógain in 1157 and 1158, though Ruaidrí and his allies, Ua Ruairc of Bréifne and Ua Briain of Thomond, were defeated by Mac Lochlainn in the battle of Ardee in 1159. In 1161, when he took the hostages of Bréifne and received the formal submission of Ruaidrí Ua Conchobair and Diarmait Mac Murchada, Muirchertach was styled in the annals 'king of Ireland without opposition'. When he attended the consecration of the Cistercian abbey church of Mellifont, co. Louth, in 1157, he granted the monks lands in the kingdom of Meath, and when he issued a charter at about the same time to the Cistercian house of Newry, co. Down, styling himself '*Rex totius Hibernie*', he handed over lands in the vicinity of this house too. The significance of both land grants is that they were outside his own kingdom of Tír Eógain, and he was therefore assuming a proprietary right to the estates of those who had become his vassals. Therefore, Muirchertach Mac Lochlainn was not content with military overlordship, with receiving submissions and exacting hostages from his rivals, with compelling them to perform military service in his army, and deposing those who did not meet with his approval. He sought something akin to territorial lordship of the lands he conquered. He charged for the privilege of accession to kingship: an Ua Maíl Sechnaill dynast paid one hundred ounces of gold for the kingship of western Meath in 1163. When Muirchertach invaded Ulaid in 1165, not only did he temporarily banish its king, Eochaid Mac Duinnsléibe, but he gave away lands in the kingdom to the church of Saul, co. Down, and to Donnchad Ua Cerbaill of Airgialla. In the following year, however, he treacherously blinded Eochaid, and this led to Muirchertach's own downfall. Tír Eógain was invaded by the united forces of Airgialla and Bréifne, and, in a battle in south co. Armagh, Muirchertach was slain. His death gravely weakened the Mac Lochlainn family and ultimately paved the way for the restoration of the O'Neills to power in the north. More importantly, Muirchertach's ally Diarmait Mac

Murchada was left exposed by his death and shortly afterwards took flight overseas, so that, in a very real sense, the death of Muirchertach Mac Lochlainn precipitated the English invasion of Ireland.

3

ADVENTUS ANGLORUM

In the mid-1830s the great Irish scholar John O'Donovan toured the country gathering local traditions on behalf of the Ordnance Survey, and when he visited the townland of Ballynagran, co. Wicklow, he was informed that the ruined structure there, known locally as Mac Dermot's castle, was the place to which Diarmait Mac Murchada had brought Derbforgaill, the wife of Tigernán Ua Ruairc, when he abducted her in 1152.[1] The story has little to recommend it since the castle may postdate the event by as much as a century, but, if it tells us anything, it is that one should not underestimate the force of tradition. The so-called 'rape of Dervorgilla' may be just a line in a set of annals, but at some point it entered the public imagination. Historians, anxious not to allow undue weight to personal animus, tend to play down the importance of events such as these as motivating forces, but in this case they may be wrong. When, during a raid on Bréifne in 1152, Diarmait Mac Murchada made off with the wife of Tigernán Ua Ruairc, he made an enemy for life; and it was an outrage for which, as we shall see, Tigernán later sought harsh vengeance.

In the middle years of the twelfth century Mac Murchada of Leinster and Ua Ruairc of Bréifne were rivals for supremacy over the declining kingdom of Meath, and by and large Ua Ruairc got the upper hand, though in 1156 Mac Murchada

severely routed his forces there.[2] What advances Mac Murchada made (when, for example, he gained control of Dublin in 1162) he made through association with Muirchertach Mac Lochlainn, king of Tír Eógain, but when the latter fell on the battlefield in 1166 Mac Murchada was defenceless. The new king of Ireland was Ruaidrí Ua Conchobair, ally of Ua Ruairc. Together, in the same year, they marched on Dublin, where the Ostmen acknowledged Ua Conchobair as king, who was then 'inaugurated king as honourably as any king of the Irish was ever inaugurated, and he presented their *tuarastal* [ceremonial stipend] to the Ostmen in many cows, for he levied a tax of four thousand cows upon the men of Ireland for them'.[3] Soon afterwards they turned their attention southwards, to Mac Murchada. On their approach Diarmait burned Ferns, for fear of what the Four Masters call 'his castle and his house' falling into enemy hands. Ua Conchobair, however, was content to leave Diarmait in power, provided he gained his submission, which he duly did. Not so Tigernán Ua Ruairc. He joined forces with the Ostmen of Dublin and some of Mac Murchada's own rebellious Leinster vassals, and together they came after him, marched on his core territory of Uí Chennselaig, demolished his castle at Ferns and forced Diarmait to flee. Without an ally in Ireland, on 1 August 1166, Mac Murchada, his wife and daughter and a small group of followers, set sail for Bristol, causing the scribe of the *Book of Leinster* to exclaim 'O king of heaven, awful the deed done in Ireland today, the kalends of August, that is, the expulsion overseas, by the men of Ireland, of Diarmait son of Donnchad Mac Murchada, king of Leinster and the Ostmen. Alas, alas, what shall I do?'[4] The exiled king was received by the reeve of Bristol, Robert fitz Harding, a confidant of Henry II of England, and from that moment on his fortunes never looked back. Within a year he was back in Ireland, back in power, and Ireland was facing invasion.

Historians who study the invasion of Ireland that took place in the late 1160s are aware that there is no contemporary depiction of it as Anglo-Norman or Cambro-Norman, or, for that matter, Anglo-French or Anglo-Continental. Such terms

are modern concoctions, convenient shorthands, which serve to emphasize the undoubted fact that those who began to settle in Ireland at this point were not of any one national or ethnic origin, but included people whose backgrounds lay scattered throughout Britain, northern France and the Low Countries. The difficulty, of course, with all of these terms is that they fly in the face of the overwhelming contemporary view that what these years witnessed was, to use Gerald de Barri's phrase, *adventus Anglorum*, 'the arrival of the English'.[5] Most reasonably well-informed contemporaries, Gerald included, must have known that this was hardly a satisfactory encapsulation of the invaders' origins, and yet it is employed with remarkable consistency (except in charters, where the nationality of all the various parties addressed is, presumably for legal reasons, spelt out). Its ubiquity must reflect a contemporary perception that the essential dynamic of the invasion was supplied from England, and that the invasion was, for all intents and purposes, especially after the intervention of the king of England, an English affair.[6]

The invasion is sometimes portrayed as an unforeseen accident, but if one examines Diarmait Mac Murchada's actions in the summer of 1166, when he was ejected from his kingdom and sailed into exile, it seems that he did not simply go abroad in pursuit of mercenaries – hired hands to help him recover his kingdom, who would go back whence they came, their pockets filled with pay, once that task had been completed. To view the invasion in those terms is to ignore the evidence of the two most important and most detailed contemporary accounts of the invasion, the Norman-French *chanson de geste* to which Goddard Orpen gave the title *The Song of Dermot and the Earl*, and Gerald de Barri's great history of the invasion, entitled *Expugnatio Hibernica* ('The Irish conquest'). One does, of course, have to be careful in using these texts, since both were written with the benefit of considerable hindsight, both describe events from the invaders' perspective, and both seek to justify the English conquest. Nevertheless, though independent of each other both accounts are quite consistent in their portrayal of events and, where they can be checked against

other sources, remarkably accurate. To deal with the *Song of Dermot* first: it specifically states that Diarmait Mac Murchada went to Aquitaine in pursuit of a meeting with the king of England and, when he caught up with him, offered to become his liege-man, his vassal, and to hold his kingdom as a fief of the crown of England. Diarmait is made to exclaim:

> 'Hear, noble king, whence I was born, of what country.
> Of Ireland I was born a lord, in Ireland acknowledged king;
> But wrongfully my own people have cast me out of my kingdom.
> To you I come to make plaint, good sire,
> In the presence of the barons of your empire.
> Your liege-man I shall become henceforth all the days of my life,
> On condition that you be my helper so that I do not lose at all:
> You I shall acknowledge as sire and lord,
> In the presence of your barons and earls.'
> Then the King promised him, the powerful king of England,
> That willingly would he help him as soon as he should be able.[7]

It would be hard to find a plainer statement of the situation. Diarmait has become the liege-man of Henry II. He has done fealty to him. Henry is to be his sire and lord, with the duty of protecting him from his enemies. Gerald goes one step further. According to him, Diarmait did not merely swear an oath of fealty, he performed homage for his kingdom:

> His ship ploughed the waves, the wind was favourable, and he came to Henry II, king of England, intending to make an urgent plea for his help ... When he [Henry] had duly heard the reason for his exile and arrival at the court, and had received from him the bond of submission and the oath of fealty, he granted him letters patent in the following terms: 'Henry king of England, duke of Normandy and Aquitaine, and count of Anjou, gives his greeting to all his faithful subjects ... When you receive this present letter, be advised that we have admitted to our most intimate grace and favour Diarmait, prince of Leinster. Wherefore, if any person from within our wide dominions wishes to help in restoring him, as having done us fealty and homage, let him know that he has our goodwill and permission to do this.'[8]

Whatever the precise differences between these two accounts – one talks about Mac Murchada doing fealty, the other about fealty and homage – the essential point is that if these two near-contemporary sources are to be believed, Mac Murchada, in going abroad in 1166, intended to enlist the support of Henry II to win back his kingdom of Leinster, and had decided that the means by which he would gain Henry's support, win back his kingdom, and hold onto it, was by becoming Henry's vassal. Therefore, the invasion was no accident. If these accounts are to be believed, Diarmait Mac Murchada foresaw the consequences of his action in appealing to Henry II for help, and equally he planned to win that help by becoming Henry's liegeman, thus establishing a feudal bond between Leinster and the kingdom of England.

After Henry accepted Diarmait's oath of fealty and issued him, as we have seen, with letters authorizing his vassals throughout his many lands to come to Mac Murchada's aid, Diarmait went to South Wales. This was a very natural place to go in view of the long-standing closeness in the relationship throughout history between Wales and the southern half of Ireland. But the question here again is: was Diarmait simply seeking temporary military aid in Wales? The *Song of Dermot* claims otherwise:

> King Dermot then sent word by letter and by messenger,
> He sent over Maurice Regan, his own interpreter.
> To Wales this man crossed over [bearing]...
> The letters of King Dermot which the king sent in all directions.
> To earls, barons, knights, squires, sergeants, common soldiers,
> Horsemen and foot, in all directions the king sent word:

And the *Song* claims to quote what the letter said:

> 'Whoever shall wish for land or pence, horses, armour, or chargers,
> Gold and silver, I shall give them ample pay;
> Whoever shall wish for soil or sod richly shall I enfeoff them'.
> He would also give them sufficient farm-stock and a handsome fief.[9]

According to the *Song*, therefore, Mac Murchada offered land in Ireland to those who would come to his aid.

Diarmait came back to Ireland in August 1167 with a small band of people of Flemish origin who had settled in Pembrokeshire at the south-western tip of Wales; they were led by Richard fitz Godebert, ancestor of the Roche family in Ireland, and with their help he won back the core of his kingdom, his ancestral lands of Uí Chennselaig. At this moment Ruaidrí Ua Conchobair was presiding over a great national conference at Athboy in Meath, which 'passed many good resolutions respecting veneration for churches and clerics, and control of tribes and territories, so that women used to traverse Ireland alone'.[10] Having done that, Ua Conchobair and Ua Ruairc marched to oppose Mac Murchada, and fought two battles, one in which some of the Connacht forces were routed and one in which the army of Bréifne defeated Mac Murchada's troops, causing the death of 'the son of the king of Wales, who was the battle-prop of the island of Britain, who had come across the sea in the army of Mac Murchada', presumably a son of the lord Rhys ap Gruffudd, prince of Deheubarth.[11] After this defeat Diarmait came to Ua Conchobair and handed over hostages in return for his kingdom of Uí Chennselaig and, significantly, he was forced to give one hundred ounces of gold to Tigernán Ua Ruairc for his *enech*, his 'honour', in reparation, that is, for the offence of abducting Derbforgaill fifteen years earlier.[12] Both the *Expugnatio* and the *Song* ascribe great importance to this grudge which Ua Ruairc bore. Gerald says that Tigernán 'was stirred to extreme anger on two counts, of which however the disgrace, rather than the loss of his wife, grieved him more deeply, and he vented all the venom of his fury with a view to revenge', and he, therefore, was the one inciting Ruaidrí Ua Conchobair to suppress Mac Murchada.[13] Similarly, the *Song* has Ua Ruairc complaining to King Ruaidrí of the manner in which Mac Murchada

> Took his wife by force from him, and placed her at Ferns for her abode.

> To the king of Connaught of the outrage bitterly he complains,
> And of the injury; very earnestly he besought him to make ready for him
> Some of his household and of his men so that he could avenge his shame.[14]

By making reparation for his offence Mac Murchada had now purchased his reinstatement in Uí Chennselaig, but the kingdom of all Leinster was still denied him, and this is what he sought to recover when, about 1 May 1169, the main body of his foreign allies arrived. They landed in three ships at Bannow Bay in co. Wexford – 30 knights, 60 men-at-arms, and 300 foot-archers. They were led by Robert fitz Stephen, uncle of Gerald de Barri, and they included in their ranks Gerald's brother, Robert de Barri, the first of the Barry family in Ireland (to be joined the next day by Maurice de Prendergast, a Pembrokeshire Fleming with two shiploads of men-at-arms and archers). Because of his intimate connection with them, when Gerald describes these men's actions – under what circumstances they came to Ireland, and what they expected to gain – no one could be better placed to do so. Gerald tells us that before Robert fitz Stephen ever set foot in Ireland 'a firm guarantee' (*firma sponsio*) was given by Mac Murchada that if Robert fitz Stephen came to Ireland and helped Diarmait recover his kingdom, Diarmait would grant Robert and his half-brother Maurice fitz Gerald (the founder of the Irish Geraldines), the town of Wexford and the adjoining territory.[15] Sure enough, this is precisely what happened. After they landed at Bannow Bay, they proceeded to attack the Ostmen of Wexford, conquered the town, and Mac Murchada granted it to fitz Stephen and fitz Gerald. According to Gerald, Robert fitz Stephen then told his followers that Diarmait Mac Murchada 'loves our race; he is encouraging our race to come here, and has decided to settle them in this island and give them permanent roots there. Perhaps the outcome of this present action will be that the five divisions of the island will be reduced to one, and sovereignty over the whole kingdom will devolve upon our race for the future.'[16] If we accept this at face value (and it

must always be borne in mind that we have only Gerald's word for it), the invaders believed that Mac Murchada had decided that the best way of restoring himself to power in Ireland was by enlisting foreign support, but he did not envisage a temporary arrangement; he planned that a colony would be established in Ireland, and that these men would be granted land to hold by military tenure, and that, in return for their new acquisitions, the settlers would provide Diarmait with military service (just what he needed if his army was to be tough enough to withstand his enemies).

Granting away the town of Wexford was one thing. It was run by the Ostmen, not by Diarmait himself. It was therefore semi-autonomous, and Mac Murchada in effect merely swapped one set of errant vassals for another set of potentially errant vassals. However, granting away the succession to the kingdom of Leinster was another matter altogether. This Diarmait did to the lord of Pembroke and Strigoil, Richard fitz Gilbert de Clare, better known as Strongbow. According to both the *Expugnatio* and the *Song of Dermot*, Mac Murchada met Strongbow in Wales, sometime in 1166–7, and they too made a deal. Here is how the *Song* puts it:

> King Dermot then, you must know, goes everywhere seeking aid:
> Aid everywhere he seeks in Wales and in England.
> So far did he ask for aid up and down in this kingdom
> That he had an interview, so says the geste, with Earl Richard [Strongbow].
> He was a brave earl, courteous, generous and lavish.
> Very earnestly the king besought him, very courteously,
> To give him some succour, or that he himself should come
> To conquer his kingdom, from which he had been wrongfully cast out.
> To the Earl he told plainly how he had been betrayed by his people:
> How his people had betrayed him, and driven him out, and put him to flight.
> His daughter he offered him to wife, the thing in the world that he most loved:

> That he would let him have her to wife, and would give Leinster to him,
> On condition that he would aid him so that he should be able to subdue it.[17]

Here, then, assuming the accuracy of this source, we have Diarmait promising his daughter, the famous Aífe, in marriage to Strongbow, together with the succession to his kingdom after Diarmait's own death. This prompts the question: did Diarmait Mac Murchada really intend that Strongbow would succeed him as king of Leinster, or was it just an empty promise? Was it the case that since he wanted Strongbow's aid, he was prepared to offer him anything to get it, without necessarily having considered how Strongbow would get a return on the investment? Of course, it is impossible to be certain just what Diarmait had in mind, but there are, perhaps, grounds for accepting the view that Mac Murchada may well have contemplated having Strongbow succeed him as king of Leinster.[18] Irish historians have been reluctant to accept this, for a number of reasons. To start with, if Strongbow did succeed to Leinster, the pretext under which he would do so is that he was Diarmait's heir, but he does not appear to have been Diarmait's heir, either under the terms of Irish Brehon law or English common law. Under the common law of England, the oldest surviving son inherited property and title, and if there was no son, the property was divided between the daughters. But Diarmait Mac Murchada had several sons, and had other daughters besides Aífe. The only way in which Strongbow could have inherited Leinster through marriage with Aífe is if all Diarmait's other children were deceased or were regarded as illegitimate, since illegitimate children, in theory at least, could not inherit property. This is probably how Strongbow's succession was justified. Diarmait Mac Murchada had married more than once. Aífe seems to have been a child of his last union. The church, anxious, as we have already seen, to stamp out irregularities in Irish marriage practices, may have recognized this as canonical and Aífe therefore became Diarmait's only legitimate heir. Of course, this must remain a suggestion; it cannot be proven.

However, even if the English could attempt to claim that Strongbow succeeded by right through English law, he had no right to do so in accordance with Irish convention, and therefore when Diarmait offered Strongbow the kingship of Leinster, he was offering something which was not within his powers, for two reasons. Firstly, in Ireland, technically speaking at least, succession to kingship was elective. A king did not choose his successor, a broader kin-group was meant to have this role. Therefore, even if Diarmait wanted Strongbow to succeed, he could not insist on it. Secondly, in any case, kingship was exclusive to the male descendants of previous kings; it could not be passed on through the female line. Be that as it may, whatever the theory of regnal succession, the practice in eleventh- and twelfth-century Ireland was such that the rules of kingship, and succession to kingship, were breaking down. Kings of one province were imposing themselves or a near relative or an ally as king over another province, without any regard for the fact that these people had no ancestral connection with that kingdom. Except for the fact that he was not even an Irishman, Strongbow was no different from one of these 'strangers in sovereignty'.

Strongbow also had the full support of Diarmait's most powerful son, Domnall Cáemánach. Domnall might have expected to succeed his father as king of Leinster, but instead he supported Strongbow, his sister's husband, or half-sister's husband. Why should he be willing to do that? Perhaps the answer lies in the fact that both Diarmait Mac Murchada and his son Domnall Cáemánach felt that the best or only chance of them retaining any power in Leinster was through Strongbow: without him they had no hope at all; with him, they had some chance. And so it was to prove. After the death of Diarmait in 1171 and of Domnall Cáemánach in 1175, the Mac Murchada dynasty remained quiescent for several generations. Although there were rival branches of the family, none of these stood the test of time, and a century later, in the 1270s, when the English colony in Leinster started to go into decline, and the Irish began to recover the position of power they had lost earlier, they were led by Domnall Cáemánach's

great-grandson, and hence they became known as the MacMurrough Kavanaghs: this is Mac Murchada Cáemánach, the surname deriving from Domnall Cáemánach's nickname. In that sense, Diarmait Mac Murchada's dynasty was a success, and his descendants survived as kings of Leinster until the sixteenth century.[19]

Strongbow did not go to Ireland until August 1170, though his uncle Hervey de Montmorency had arrived in the main fleet in 1169, and was granted by Mac Murchada two cantreds between Wexford and Waterford. With these knights, and especially their forces of archers, Mac Murchada had sufficient resources to set about the recovery of Leinster. Although the Irish still, according to the annals, 'set little store by' them,[20] Ruaidrí Ua Conchobair responded to this new challenge by leading an army to Leinster, where he accepted Mac Murchada's submission, and – rather too leniently, it would appear – allowed him to remain as king of Leinster, in return for the receipt of Diarmait's son as a hostage, and an undertaking to send back his foreign allies as soon as all Leinster had again been subdued. It is doubtful, of course, whether Mac Murchada had any such intention and, indeed, according to Gerald, he was now beginning to set his sights on the high-kingship of Ireland. Contingents of reinforcements were still arriving periodically. At Baginbun, co. Wexford, early in May 1170, another of the Geraldines, Raymond le Gros, arrived with fresh troops, to be followed on 23 August by Strongbow himself with as many as two hundred knights and a thousand troops. They took Waterford, and there Strongbow married Aífe as planned.

In September 1170, Strongbow, Mac Murchada and all the might of the English military machine advanced on Dublin. Ruaidrí Ua Conchobair assembled the armies of his allies and marched to meet them.[21] He camped at Clondalkin and blocked all the main approach routes to the town from the south. According to the *Song*, those which were afforested on either side had trees felled to block access, while others were entrenched, but Strongbow's army outflanked him by traversing the Wicklow and Dublin mountains and approaching the

town by way of Rathfarnham.[22] While both sides were engaged in negotiations, some of the more impetuous of the English forces, under Raymond le Gros and Miles de Cogan, 'eager for battle and plunder' as Gerald puts it, 'made an enthusiastic assault on the walls, were immediately victorious, and valiantly overran the city, with considerable slaughter of the inhabitants'.[23] According to the Four Masters, the Ostmen were slaughtered 'in the middle of their fortress', by the English, 'who carried off their cattle and goods'. Gerald claims that the greater part of the inhabitants of Dublin escaped the slaughter by boarding ship and heading for the Isles, bringing their most precious belongings with them. It is possible that many of them never returned, though the refugees were led by their king, Ascall Mac Turcaill, and within weeks of the death of Diarmait Mac Murchada about May Day 1171, Ascall launched an invasion of Dublin in the hope of ousting its English garrison. He had somewhere between sixty and one hundred shiploads of warriors and they proceeded to an assault on the eastern gate of the town, but a sortie out of the south gate by some of the garrison caught them by surprise in the rear, and the invading army was heavily defeated; Ascall Mac Turcaill was captured at the seashore as he fled to his ship, and was later beheaded in the town.

It was after this disaster that Ruaidrí Ua Conchobair instigated his famous siege of Dublin. The *Song* says that Ua Conchobair himself camped his forces at Castleknock, that his northern ally, Mac Duinn Sléibe of Ulaid, set up camp at Clontarf, Ua Briain of Thomond at Kilmainham, and Murchad Mac Murchada (the late King Diarmait's brother, an opponent of Strongbow) at Dalkey, while Gerald says that thirty shiploads of warriors from the Isles sailed into the harbour of the Liffey and blockaded it. The siege is said to have lasted about two months, with the English forces being confined within the walls, without access to provisions by either land or sea. Negotiations then ensued, with Strongbow, rather remarkably, offering to swear an oath of fealty to King Ruaidrí if he could retain Leinster under Ua Conchobair's overlordship. But Ua Conchobair would compromise only to

the extent of allowing the English to hold the three Ostman towns of Dublin, Wexford and Waterford.[24] It was after the collapse of the negotiations on this sticking-point that the besieged garrison decided to make a sortie, caught Ruaidrí's forces unawares (he himself was bathing, apparently in the Liffey), 'killed a multitude of their rabble, and carried off their provisions, their armour, and their sumpter-horses',[25] the *Song* noting that 'so much provision did they find, corn, meal and bacon, that for a year in the city they had victuals in abundance'.

The humiliation of King Ruaidrí Ua Conchobair at Dublin proved to be a turning point in its history, and a landmark in the English conquest of Ireland. Gerald, in recounting these events, describes Dublin as 'the capital of the kingdom (*regni caput*)', and this by then it undoubtedly was.[26] But Strongbow's possession of it was now secure, and Diarmait Mac Murchada was dead. Strongbow had married his daughter with the widely publicized intention of succeeding to the kingdom of Leinster in her right, and was now putting it into effect. This was, undoubtedly, a major development in English politics. He was an important tenant of the crown, not just in the south Welsh marches, but in England and Normandy, and was now the heir to a kingdom and controller of Dublin and Waterford, the two most important trading ports in Ireland. There were, therefore, severe implications for Henry II's authority involved in Strongbow's rapid ascent to power in Ireland. And hence Henry now made plans to come to Ireland himself to take control of the situation. Aware of his impending expedition, Strongbow sailed to meet the king and to assuage his anger. As a sign of his good faith he handed over to Henry, Dublin and the adjacent cantreds, as well as the other 'coastal towns' and all castles.[27]

Historians have rightly stressed that when Henry came to Ireland himself in 1171, he did so more to bring the pioneers there back into line than to conquer the Irish.[28] That said, one should not lose sight of the fact that coming to Ireland (the first king of England ever to do so), having the Irish province-kings submit to him, adding Ireland to the already long list of

his dominions, alongside England, Normandy, Aquitaine and Anjou, and adopting the title 'lord of Ireland', was not something Henry II reluctantly embraced. Though it may not have topped his list of priorities, no king, certainly no king as ambitious, domineering and 'relentlessly expansionist' as Henry fitz Empress,[29] reluctantly extends his overlordship over a neighbouring kingdom. And no man who came to dominate so much of north-western Europe, from the Scottish border in the north to the Pyrenees in the south, in the manner that Henry did, in the process becoming western Europe's most powerful ruler, could but look longingly at Ireland and hope to bring it within his grasp.

In 1155, shortly after his accession to the throne, Henry had discussed plans for an invasion of Ireland. If the papal document *Laudabiliter* is genuine, it was obtained at this point from the English pope, Adrian IV, to provide justification for such an invasion (though Henry may have been acting at the behest of Archbishop Theobald, anxious to re-assert Canterbury's waning influence over the Irish church).[30] According to the archbishop's secretary, John of Salisbury, a usually reliable source, such a privilege was obtained, and John himself was instructed by the pope to give to Henry 'a golden ring, adorned by a fine emerald, in token of his investiture with the government of Ireland; and this ring is still, by the king's command, preserved in the public treasury'.[31] The plans were, however, shelved at this point. It was only when Diarmait Mac Murchada came to him in Aquitaine that the plan was resurrected. Even if Henry had no great immediate interest in Ireland, he did accept Mac Murchada's oath of fealty, and thereby showed himself willing to become the overlord of a dispossessed Irish province-king, with, of course, the concomitant duty to protect him from his enemies. Thus, there hardly seems reason to doubt that the arrival of Diarmait Mac Murchada at the court of Henry II provided an opportunity which Henry was happy to embrace. And if the king of England saw opportunities opening up for himself in Ireland, it would be naive to imagine that those opportunities would not come at the expense of others.

When Henry II landed in Ireland he did not have to do battle with the native rulers (a Welsh chronicler says that he 'stayed that winter without doing any harm to the Irish'),[32] and during his brief stay there, which lasted from mid-October 1171 to mid-April of the following year, several of the more important Irish kings, and quite a few of lesser importance, voluntarily submitted to him. Of course, they did not have a great deal of choice. Henry brought with him an army of about 500 knights and anything up to 4000 archers. In the field, these would have made quick work of any Irish resistance. It is true to say that several Irish kings who felt themselves under threat from the aggressive expansionism of Strongbow and the other settlers probably thought that the arrival of Henry was good news, since he came to Ireland, after all, primarily because he was worried about the rapid gains the freelance operators were making. The Irish kings hoped that he would be a restraining influence on the more aggressive of the new arrivals (indeed, one English chronicler claims that Henry had come to Ireland in the first place because of 'the call of the Irish to be defended against Richard [Strongbow]'),[33] and to some extent this hope proved justified. Henry did not stop the conquest, but he did slow up the pace. Henceforth, if the settlers were to seize more lands, their operations, in theory at least, had to be licensed by Henry. Therefore, the hope of securing Henry's protection against the aggression of the colonists may have motivated some Irish kings to submit to him, and to make oaths of fealty to him.

There is one other consideration here that should not be forgotten. In 1171, when Henry II arrived in Ireland, Ruaidrí Ua Conchobair was high-king. He had become king simply by compelling the other province-kings to acknowledge him as such. Many of them did so reluctantly. They would have been only too happy to throw off their allegiance and transfer it to another – in this case, the king of England. It may be that the submission by the Irish kings was a temporary expedient, into which too much should not be read. By submitting to Henry they bought some time; they knew that he would not stay in

Ireland long, and hoped, perhaps, that the *status quo ante* would return after his departure.

The response of the Irish church leaders to the invasion was similarly complex. It was not dictated by 'patriotism', by anti-Englishness, or by a desire to defend their flock from foreign assault. There are few contemporary signs of any such sentiment, and no reason why one should expect otherwise. The one overriding consideration that coloured their response was the question of whether or not the English assertion of lordship over Ireland would help or hinder the process of reform then underway in the Irish church. From what we can tell, it was the unanimous view of the Irish hierarchy that such an assertion of lordship would prove beneficial. In 1171–2 the Irish prelates, the bishops and leading abbots, submitted to Henry without hesitation, swore fealty to him, and accepted him and his heirs as their lord and king. They then sent letters to Pope Alexander III explaining why they did so, and the benefits which they hoped would accrue to the Irish church and people as a result. We do not have the texts of those letters, but we do have Pope Alexander's reply to the Irish bishops, in which he says that:

> '... *Your letters* ... have informed us how great are the enormities of vice with which the Irish people is contaminated and how they have put aside the fear of God and the faith of the Christian religion to put their salvation in jeopardy. We have further learnt from *your letters* that our dearest son in Christ, Henry noble king of the English, prompted by God, has, with his assembled forces, subjected to his rule that barbarous and uncivilised people, ignorant of divine law, and that what was unlawfully being practised in your country is already, with God's help, beginning to decrease, and we are overjoyed.'[34]

The cause of the pope's joy was his belief that King Henry and the English presence in Ireland in general would be instruments of reform in the Irish church, and if he got his information from the Irish bishops, then they too believed this. They, the Irish bishops, also believed that the process of reform in Irish church-life and society, which had been underway for three-quarters of a century or more, was far from complete,

that there were forces within Irish society which were hindering the process of *self*-reform, and that external aid was necessary to bring it about. What they sought becomes clear from Pope Alexander's letter written to Henry II at this same time, in which he lists four specific abuses among the Irish which need addressing, and presumably it was the Irish bishops who supplied the information. The first concerns lax marriage practices, the second, the eating of meat during Lent, the third, that they were not paying tithes to the church, and the fourth, that they were showing insufficient respect for church property and for clerics themselves.[35]

These last two were significant and had been among the first things addressed in the reform movement throughout Europe during the preceding century. Tithes were a vital source of income for the church; the system of tithes, whereby a proportion, strictly speaking a tenth, of income was paid to the local church for its maintenance, was the very basis of the parochial system throughout the Western church. Under the synodal reforms introduced in Ireland in the early twelfth century, the country was divided up into thirty or so dioceses, but the process of dividing the dioceses in turn into parishes, each with a parish church, a parish priest, and parishioners paying for their upkeep, was as yet in its infancy, and the Irish church leaders who supported the English invasion obviously believed that this would be greatly accelerated by such intervention. And their expectations were not misplaced. Those parts of Ireland which were conquered by the English were carved up into fiefs and at a local level manors were erected for the better exploitation of the land. Hand in hand with the creation of a manor-based economy went the development of a parochial system, so that their boundaries were often one and the same. Therefore, if the development of parishes and the exaction of tithes was a major desideratum on the part of the Irish bishops, then there is every reason to think that they favoured the introduction of the 'feudal' system of land-tenure because it would facilitate that aim.

Likewise, if they complained to the pope that church property and churchmen themselves were not sufficiently respect-

ed by the Irish, they were making the same sort of complaint that continental churchmen had been making throughout the previous century: laymen should not interfere unduly in church affairs, they should not have the primary role in choosing who should succeed to ecclesiastical office, and the church should be exempt from excessive secular taxation. These were common complaints. In England, church and state had arrived at a compromise that worked well, by and large, whereby the king would not appoint bishops, but the church did need to obtain his permission before proceeding with the appointment of a new bishop and, while a bishopric was unoccupied, the property of the diocese (what was known as the temporalities) belonged to the king. This orderly, reasonable *modus vivendi* between church and state was presumably what the Irish bishops wished to see in operation in Ireland and it explains why, when the second synod of Cashel was held in 1171–2, it passed legislation to do with marriage, the payment of tithes, the freedom of the church from lay control, and the safeguarding of clerical privileges. Furthermore, in order to ensure that these provisions would take effect, it announced the principle that henceforth the Irish church was to be brought into line, and to operate in conformity, with the English church. The Irish church as it had existed for 700 years since the time of Patrick was to be no more, and it was to be no more by its own volition.

As already stated, there was nothing 'unpatriotic' about the adoption of this policy or about the way in which the Irish kings flocked to the court of the king of England to swear their allegiance to him. Neither was there anything treacherous about Diarmait Mac Murchada's actions in inviting English assistance. That is not to say that contemporaries did not condemn him for his deeds. There may be some doubt over the reliability of the obituary of Mac Murchada that occurs in the seventeenth-century Annals of the Four Masters, which has it that

> Diarmait Mac Murchada, king of Leinster, by whom a trembling sod was made of all Ireland – after having brought over Saxons, after having done extensive injuries to the Irish, after plundering many churches, Kells, Clonard, etc. – died before the end of the year of an insufferable and unknown disease, for he became putrid while living, through the miracles of God, Colum Cille, and Finnian and the other saints of Ireland, whose churches he had profaned and burned some time before; and he died at Ferns, without [making] a will, without penance, without the body of Christ, without unction, as his evil deeds deserved.[36]

This has to be set against the polite account of his passing that occurs in the (admittedly biased) *Book of Leinster*, which simply says that he 'died at Ferns after victory of extreme unction and penance in his sixty-first year'. However, it is worth pointing out the next line in the same text: 'Thereafter the English wretchedly rule'. This is a source one would have expected to be sympathetic to Diarmait and supportive of his actions. But it is quite clear that the author was no supporter of the English invasion; and his statement about the English wretchedly ruling is not very far removed from the comment by the author of the annals of 'Tigernach', a contemporary chronicle compiled in Connacht, which describes the arrival of Robert fitz Stephen as 'the start of Ireland's woe'. It should be pointed out too that elsewhere in the *Book of Leinster* there is a set of annals which sums up the invasion in these words: 'The English came into Ireland and Ireland was destroyed by them'.[37]

Diarmait Mac Murchada's fiercest foe was, as already noted, Tigernán Ua Ruairc of Bréifne, and both men died within a year of each other. As far as Gerald was concerned, to judge from what he has to say in the *Expugnatio*, Tigernán's death was regarded at the time as a major breakthrough in the conquest, and he describes how his head was cut off and sent to Henry II as a trophy: that is an indication of its significance.[38] But according to the Irish annals, Ua Ruairc was assassinated by the English in treachery, and his head was hoisted over the gate of the fortress at Dublin. The annalist describes this as 'a sore and miserable sight for the Irish'. Then the annalist tells us that the rest of the body, in an act of extraordinary vindic-

tiveness, was hung, feet upwards, at another place on the north side of the town. There is a huge contrast between the obituaries of both men. Whereas the annals of 'Tigernach' say that Mac Murchada was 'a man who troubled and destroyed Ireland', who died 'after mustering the foreigners and ruining the Irish, after plundering and razing churches and territories', the same annals call Ua Ruairc 'the deedful leopard of the Irish, Leth Cuinn's man of battle and lasting defence ... surpasser of all the Irish in might and abundance'. Hence, by contrasting both men in this way the authors, consciously or otherwise, are expressing a contemporary perception of the reprehensible nature of Mac Murchada's actions in enlisting English aid, and of general Irish disapproval of the deed.

Gerald de Barri has the most detailed account of the invasion, and because he is usually very critical of the Irish, one should pay special attention when he occasionally shows sympathy for them. He, of course, sees the invasion as divine punishment for the sins of the Irish, and claims that a national council of all the Irish church, meeting at Armagh in the immediate aftermath of the invasion, admitted as much (God's punishment of the Irish for their practice of carrying off English people into slavery); but it is worth pointing out that he concedes that the assembled clerics regarded the invasion as 'a disaster which had befallen them'.[39] Again, Gerald puts into Ruaidrí Ua Conchobair's mouth a speech warning that the English are 'a race most hostile to ours, a race which has long been eager to rule us all alike ... a race moreover which asserts that by the Fate's decree they are entitled to jurisdiction over our land'.[40] Now, one does not have to believe that these are the exact words Ruaidrí uttered; one does not even have to believe that Ruaidrí made the speech at all. What Gerald is telling us here is that it was his understanding of Ruaidrí Ua Conchobair's view, and of the view held by the Irish in general, that they suspected the English of having long held hostile intentions towards Ireland, and that the Irish disputed the legality of the English claim to Ireland. According to Gerald, Ua Conchobair sent messages to Robert fitz Stephen to persuade him 'to leave peacefully and with

mutual goodwill this country in which he could claim for himself no right of jurisdiction'.[41] So says Gerald, Robert's own nephew; there seems little reason for doubting what he has to say on the point, since it reflects poorly on fitz Stephen and the whole English enterprise. Clearly this is simply Gerald's way of stating that, right from the very start, the Irish, led by their king, disputed the legitimacy of the English title.

Gerald goes so far as to admit that there were problems about the legality of some of the invaders' conquests in Ireland. He has no doubt that Strongbow was entitled to claim Leinster by virtue of his marriage to Mac Murchada's daughter, but then he adds: 'as regards Waterford, Desmond, Thomond, and Meath, all of which were seized unlawfully, I make no excuses for the Earl'.[42] He quotes what he claims is the text of a message sent by Ua Conchobair to Diarmait Mac Murchada, as follows:

> 'Contrary to the conditions of our treaty you have invited into this island a large number of foreigners. Yet we put up with this with a good grace while you confined yourself within your province of Leinster. But now, since you are unmindful of your oath and without feelings of pity for the hostage you have given [Diarmait's son, Conchobar], and have arrogantly trespassed beyond the stipulated limits and your ancestral boundaries, you must either restrain the forays of your foreign troops for the future, or else we will send you without fail the severed head of your son.'[43]

This may, of course, have been concocted by Gerald, but it is at least an indication of the way he *expected* Ruaidrí to feel. Gerald is conscious of the need to rebut criticism of the invasion. At one stage he refers to 'vociferous complaints that the kings of England hold Ireland unlawfully'.[44] Who were making these complaints? Hardly the English themselves. Gerald also states:

> [Robert] fitz Stephen and the Earl cannot in any sense be classed as mere robbers, as far as Leinster is concerned. Both rest their claims on the same legal position, for they both acted within the law in restoring Diarmait to his lands, the one because he had taken an oath of allegiance to him, and the

> other because he had married his daughter ... The remaining princes of Ireland immediately made a voluntary submission to Henry, and thus conferred a legal claim that is beyond dispute. So ... it must be clear from the above that in entering Ireland the English were not guilty of injustice such as is foolishly attributed to them by the ill-informed.[45]

This last statement is the important point: somebody, by the mid-1180s when Gerald was writing, was of the view that the English invasion of Ireland was unjust.

If, therefore, a sense of injustice was felt by the native Irish as early as the 1180s, it must have found a political, and hence a military, expression. For this reason, it is wrong to think that the conquest proceeded smoothly in this first generation. The *Expugnatio* records a speech said to have been made by Strongbow's uncle, Hervey de Montmorency, in which he declares:

> '... the whole population of Ireland has joined in plotting our destruction, not without good reason ... We are surrounded on all sides by external hazards ... Countless numbers without, and many within, are trying to accomplish our total destruction. What happens if these men free themselves from the bonds with which they are but lightly tied and make a sudden rush to seize our arms? ... We must choose one of two policies. Either we must vigorously pursue that end for which we have come here, and with the aid of our armed might and our valour subdue with a strong arm this rebellious people, completely casting aside all pretence of clemency; or ... turn our ships around and leave this people which so deserves our pity to enjoy their country and ancestral lands in peace.'[46]

According to Hervey, therefore, 'the whole population of Ireland' was engaged in a plot to overturn the conquest. That plot found its opportunity in the summer of 1173, when Henry II's eldest son, the young king Henry, rebelled against his father, in league with Louis of France. In order to subdue the rebels, large numbers of the new settlers in Ireland, including their leaders Strongbow and Hugh de Lacy, went to Normandy to fight alongside their lord, Henry II. This was the

signal for an Irish revolt. Gerald says: 'The Irish had got to hear of the serious disturbances which had lately broken out in the lands beyond the sea, and, as they are a race consistent only in their fickleness ... [the Earl, on his return] found almost all the princes of that country in open revolt against the king and himself'.[47] Sure enough, we know that in 1173 Domnall Mór Ua Briain attacked Strongbow's garrison in Waterford, and that a disinherited grandson of Diarmait Mac Murchada revolted against his new uncle by doing battle with the English settlers in Leinster.[48]

This revolt in Ireland was matched by a rebellion in Wales. These disturbances took place in the south-east marches of Wales, the area between Glamorgan and Gwent, led by the local Welsh princeling, Iorwerth ab Owain. What is most interesting is that the target of this revolt too was Strongbow and the high point of the rebellion was reached in mid-August 1173 when the rebels swept as far as the very walls of Chepstow castle, the *caput* of Strongbow's lordship.[49] Here we have two rebellions taking place against Strongbow in the same summer – one in Ireland, the other in Wales. We have no evidence that the organizers collaborated in any way, but we can imagine that both sides knew well what was going on on the other side of the Irish Sea. The same set of circumstances applied on both sides. First, both Irish and Welsh had the same target – Strongbow. Second, he, being with the king in Normandy, was conveniently absent from both arenas, which meant that the defensive strength of the colonists was considerably weakened. And third, both the Irish and the Welsh had a common grievance, a common experience of colonial harassment and dispossession. It was that common grievance that led to these simultaneous revolts breaking out on both sides of the Irish Sea in 1173; and for the next hundred and fifty years, right the way through to the period of the Bruce invasion, they were to become a continual occurrence.

Resistance to the conquest was, therefore, present from the start, though it is undoubtedly true that perennial political fissures among the Irish militated against it. It was also the case that the attempt at conquering the whole country got

bogged down quite early on. When the Anglo-Irish annals compiled in Dublin describe the death of Hugh de Lacy in 1186, they add the curious comment: 'There ended the conquest'.[50] Gerald of Wales makes a very similar point:

> This island ... would long since have been successfully and effectively subdued from one end to the other ... had not the further influx of fresh troops been cut off by royal decree ... For when our people arrived there first, the Irish were paralysed and panic-stricken by the sheer novelty of the event ... But thanks to the half-hearted dragging out of the conquest over a long period ... the natives gradually became skilled and versed in handling arrows and other arms ... Consequently this people, which to begin with could have been easily routed, recovered its morale and military strength, and was enabled to put up a stronger resistance.[51]

This passage was written in the 1180s. As far as Gerald was concerned, and we have no reason to doubt him, the Irish rally was well and truly under way. All the signs were there to indicate that the English invasion of Ireland was not going to lead to a complete conquest.

4

FROM KINGDOM TO LORDSHIP

Beginning in the late 1160s, and in the space of a few short years, the face of Ireland was transformed and the course of Irish history irrevocably changed. The English invasion effected a revolutionary metamorphosis on the landscape of Ireland, bringing enormous changes in patterns of landholding and methods of land exploitation; there followed an agricultural and economic transformation, and the introduction of a whole new social system affecting everything from the laws people used, to the homes they lived in, to the food they put on the table. Of course, it was by no means the case that all of Ireland felt the impact of these developments. Change was confined to those parts of the country successfully exposed to English colonization, which, as we shall see, never affected the entire island. Furthermore, while the events of the late twelfth century were clearly momentous, it would be wrong to underestimate the degree to which there was some form of continuity from the pre-invasion period. This expressed itself in very visible ways in, for instance, the re-use by the settlers of sites (both church sites and centres of secular power) formerly occupied by the Irish, but it can also be seen in the manner in which the new settlement was dictated by pre-existing political and territorial structures. Sometimes, it is true, existing territorial divisions were ignored in the carve-up that followed the invasion, but in many instances they were respected and simply adapted for use by their new lords.