6. The O’Doherty Rebellion 1608

King Henry VIII Reformation

In the 1530s, King Henry VIII of England colonised the Pale of Ireland and confiscated the land for the British Crown. Any land beyond the Pale, including Ulster, was still largely under the control of the Irish Lords. However, this was short lived and by the 1540s almost every Irish Lord had accepted the King’s supremacy. Henry’s reformation destroyed Gaelic life including many monasteries. Following his reformation, he declared himself the King of Ireland. Although he died in 1547 his colonising reign continued through his daughter Queen Elizabeth I.

Henry VIII    Elizabeth I
The Nine-Year War

From 1593 to 1603, a nine-year war was fought the length and breadth of Ireland. This war, often referred to as Tyrone’s Rebellion, was an alliance of Irish Lords led by the O’Donnellls from Tir Connell and the O’Neills from Tir Eoghan. It was a very brutal war costing many lives on both sides and concluded with an Irish defeat at the battle of Kinsale, Co Cork.

The Flight of the Earls

As a consequence of the Kinsale defeat, many Irish Lords left Ireland for the Continent, possibly to rally further support from allies. On the 4th September 1607, the Earls of Ireland led by O’Neill and O’Donnell departed from Rathmullan on the shores of Lough Swilly, Co. Donegal. This event is known as ‘The Flight of the Earls’. They never returned.
Cahir O’Doherty, the new Lord of Inishowen

While the Nine-Year War raged, an ancestor Cahir O’Doherty, was appointed the new Lord of Inishowen in 1601 upon the death of his father, Sir John O’Doherty. Cahir was 14 years old at the time. As a young Lord he began his reign and was fostered by an older family member and advisor, Phelim MacDavitt. Cahir was sometimes referred to as the ‘Queen’s O’Doherty’ because of his initial support for the English Crown.

Initially, Cahir had a positive relationship with Sir Henry Docwra, the English Governor of Derry, and was rewarded with a knighthood. Unfortunately, a newly appointed Governor to Derry, Sir George Paulet, publicly criticised and insulted Sir Cahir by slapping him across his face. The relationship deteriorated and diminished Cahir’s trust of the English Crown. This act enraged him and his followers and led to the O’Doherty Rebellion.
The O’Doherty Rebellion 1608

In the early hours of the 19th April 1608, Sir Cahir assembled 100 men for a siege on Culmore Fort. This was followed by a pre-dawn surprise attack on the City of Derry. In this raid Sir George Paulet was killed and every building in the city was burnt to the ground. Sir Cahir then declared he was not there to shed blood and released most of the captured inhabitants, taking a few important prisoners as hostages. He jailed them in his castle of residence, Burt. Shortly after this incident the town of Strabane was burnt to the ground. O’Doherty and his followers had declared war and they used their Inishowen and Ulster castles as defensive strongholds and places to plan their on-going rebellion.

Culmore Fort

Map of Derry c 1607

Sir Cahir leaving a burning Derry
The English Response

The English response to these attacks was for Viceroy Sir Arthur Chichester of Dublin to dispatch 700 troops to Inishowen, under the command of Sir Richard Wingfield. Wingfield’s forces overran the town of Buncrana and captured Burt Castle. The Derry prisoners were released and at the same time O’Doherty’s wife and his son were captured. Sir Cahir and a thousand men then marched to meet the crown’s troops at Kilmacrennan just north of Letterkenny.

Sir Arthur Chichester  

Sir Richard Wingfield

During the battle of Kilmacrennan Sir Cahir was shot in the head by a musket bullet. The hilltop where he was shot was Doon Rock, the inauguration rock for the O’Donnell Clan Chiefs. The charismatic leader of the rebellion was dead, and the battle was lost.
Post Rebellion

The Crown and the new King James I could now proceed with the plantation of Ulster. Viceroy Sir Arthur Chichester was granted the land of Inishowen. The Counties of Tír Connell, Tír Eoghan, Derry, Armagh, Fermanagh, and Cavan were now the property of the King. They were ready to be planted with English and Scottish landlords and settlers.
Many of Sir Cahir’s followers were tried and executed in Lifford, Co. Donegal. Some followers continued small short-lived attacks ending in more deaths while others were conscripted into the King’s army. It is said that some O’Dohertys were castrated. Fortunately this attempt at genocide failed.

**Lifford Court House**

**Rosa Doherty**

I will end this tragic tale with a Doherty love story. Sir Cahir’s younger sister Rosa married Cathbarr O’Donnell, son of the Lord of Tir Connell. Both of them and the Lord sailed to continental Europe with the ‘Flight of the Earls’. Sadly, a year later in Rome both the O’Donnell boys died of a fever leaving Rosa widowed with a young son named Hugh O’Donnell. A number of years later she married Owen Roe O’Neill who served as an officer.
in the Spanish Army. This is a fine example of the importance of marriages and alliances between the three powerful clans of Western Ulster, the O'Donnells, the O'Neills and the O'Dohertys.
Sir Cahir Rua

Standing on O’Donnell’s Rock of Doon
I hear lead penetrate your red-headed skull.
I flinch.
I too look towards the Swilly
Alas, our Earls had flown, Ulster defeated.

Alone you fought the last battle
For the High Kings of Ireland.
Royal crowns were changing
England’s crown to reign.

From your past to my future
It will never be the same.

Your castles of Inch and Carrickabraghy taken
Now for me, ruins.
Culmore laid waste, Derry torched.
Inishowen fallen.

Elizabeth knighted you once
Now you turn to slay her successor
They took it all, Chichester’s gain
You were left with only the struggle.

The redcoat’s aim was true
Your blood spilled on Doon
Your O’Dogherty troops castrated and banished
Your body drawn and quartered in Derry.

‘Let no one do this again,’ they decreed
As they thrust your bearded head on a pole
And displayed you at the gates of Dublin Castle
The English Crown’s warning.

Four centuries later I stand at these castle gates
To remember you and enjoy your free city
I salute you, my cousin,
For your daring, for your stand.

Jack Doherty 2002