

## 'By God I Will Beat Tyrone in the Field': Essex and Ireland

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### FATHER

Ireland marked Robert, earl of Essex, even before he set eyes on the place. His father, Walter, the first earl of Essex, had died there in 1576. He had been involved in a disastrous colonising scheme in Ulster where he had perpetrated out of sheer frustration two massacres at Belfast and Rathlin Island before dying himself of dysentery in Dublin.



Walter Devereux

He left his ten-year heir Robert deep in debt – ‘the poorest earl in England’ and the unfulfilled legacy of Protestant crusading zeal.

### INTEREST IN IRELAND

Essex did not take much interest in Ireland. The claims he inherited there to lands at Farney in County Monaghan and at Islandmagee in County Antrim and to fishing rights on the River Bann went unexploited.

However in the 1590s war broke out again in the North of Ireland. The crown was spending a lot of money and losing an increasing number of men. Furthermore the Irish confederates led by Hugh O'Neill, earl of Tyrone, were making overtures to Spain inviting military intervention in the pursuit of their common Catholic cause.

At the beginning of 1598 Francis Bacon penned 'A letter of advice to the Earl of Essex to take upon him the care of Irish causes, when Mr Secretary Cecil was in France'. He said that 'Irish causes have been much neglected, whereby the reputation of better care will put life in them'. He referred directly to 'your father's noble attempts'. As a result Essex did take an interest and again consulted Bacon on the negotiations then ongoing in Ireland. However he did not act on Bacon's advice that he should be advertised as the prospective new governor there as a means of forcing the Irish to accept the Queen's offers. That was a designation he obviously did not want (Bacon Letters, II, pp94-100). Essex saw the continent as the only proper field for the Protestant crusader - in the Low Countries, in France with the Huguenots and against Spain on the high seas and in the peninsula itself. He knew there were precious few accolades to be won from service in Ireland. So apart from the general interest as a privy councillor, Essex confined himself - in his capacity as Earl Marshall of

England - to suggesting officers for appointment to the army in Ireland. (Edwards article)

It was over the Irish command that one of the most famous rows between Elizabeth and Essex took place at a meeting of the Privy Council. The episode is recorded by the historian William Camden (*Annales, sub anno 1598*): ‘For whereas shee thought Sir William Knolles, unckle to Essex, the fittest man of all others to be sent into Ireland, and Essex obstinately perswaded her that Sir George Carew was rather to be sent ( that so hee might ridde him from the court), yet could not by perswasions draw her unto it. Hee, forgetting himselfe and neglecting his duty, uncivilly turned his backe, as it were in contempt, with a scornfull looke. She waxing impatient gave him a cuffe on the eare, and bad him be gone with a vengeance. He layed his hand upon his sword; the Lord Admirall interposing himselfe, he sware a great oath that hee neither could nor would swallow so great an indignity, nor would have borne it at King Henry the 8th his hands, and in great discontentment hastened from the Court’. When the Lord Keeper counsels Essex to make an abject apology and throw himself on the Queen’s mercy. ‘He answered hereunto stomackfully in a long letter (which was afterward divulged with advisement by his friends), appealing from the Queene to Almighty God, interlacing therein these speeches following, and such like: *No storme is more outragious then the indignation of an impotent prince. The Queenes heart is indurate. What I owe as a subject I know, and what as an Earle and Marshall of England; to serve as a servant and a slave I know not. If I should acknowledge my selfe guilty, I should*

*be injurious to the truth, and to God the author of truth. I have received wounds all my body over. Having received this scandall, flatly it is impiety to serve. Cannot Princes erre? Can they not wrong their Subjects? Is any earthly power infinite?*' Extraordinary as this incident was, the earl eventually calmed down and sought and received the Queen's pardon. It is remarkable that the Queen was willing to forgive such a singularly transgressive act. The temper shown at the Privy Council was one thing but the tenor of the subsequent letter was quite another.

## YELLOW FORD

After 14 August 1598 neither the Queen nor Essex could any longer ignore the crisis in Ireland as a passing item on the Privy Council agenda. That day the English forces in Ireland suffered their worst ever defeat at the battle of the Yellow Ford in County Armagh. There O'Neill, the so-called archtraitor, had cut down 2000 Englishmen including its commander, and the marshal of Ireland, Sir Henry Bagenal. Forced into a hasty withdrawal, the crown evacuated its forward garrisons at Blackwater and Armagh. Further disasters followed. As a result the confederates, already rampant in Ulster and Connacht, made significant advances in Leinster and then in October/November they irrupted into Munster overthrowing the plantation there in the space of a fortnight. It was England's darkest hour in Ireland – plainly at such a nadir its greatest soldier would have be called upon to right the situation.

The man lionised as ‘The Hero of Cadiz’ was the popular choice for the job.



### Essex victor at Cadiz

He would have been insulted had he not been offered the opportunity. When the Queen finally made her decision in December 1598, he boasted: ‘ I have beaten Knollys and Mountjoy in the Council, and by God I will beat Ter-Owen in the field; for nothing worthy Her Majesty’s honour hath yet been achieved’ (Quoted in Falls, p.228)

## DISPOSITION/RELUCTANCE

The problem is that Essex didn’t much want to go. He was going out of a sense of duty. If Essex had been writing a mission statement, Ireland would not have featured on it! The earl’s letters indicate that he was not in the right frame of mind to undertake the huge task confronting him. If

anything he was in quite the contrary disposition. He wrote to Lord Willoughby on 3 January 1599 ‘Into Ireland I go. The Queen hath irrevocably decreed it; the Council do passionately urge it; I am tied to my own reputation to use no tergiversation...I am not ignorant of the disadvantages of absence; the opportunities of practising enemies when they are neither encountered nor overlooked’. He believed that ‘The difficulties of a war where the rebel that hath been hitherto ever victorious is the least enemy I have against me’; indeed he believed this to extent of claiming that ‘the state that set me out must conspire with the enemy against me’ (Hatfield papers, ix, 10-11). The problem for Essex was more than simply the machinations of court rivals. He knew that his relations with the Queen – Irish command or no command – were no longer in the most favourable state. Essex was still on her Christmas card list, but his card was probably one of those Victorian coaching scenes left at the back of the pack!

## PATENT

In spite of his carping, or rather because of it, Essex got most of what he wanted for the Irish campaign. He obtained the most extensive patent of any chief governor going to Ireland – his authority was truly vice-regal. He had full power of pardon and full plenipotentiary powers to negotiate. He could restore the lands to forgiven traitors. On the other hand he had full powers of martial law. He could confiscate lands of the traitors and parcel them out to others. By 1599 this included large swathes of Ulster, Connacht and Munster. Furthermore he was empowered to

commandeer shipping to transport men to Ireland and to keep them supplied (Tenison, Elizabethan England, ix, 59-67). On 5 March the newsletter writer Chamberlain reported that the earl 'hath all his demands, the Queen showing herself very gracious and willing to content him, marry the clause of liberty to return at pleasure is not inserted but must pass the broad seal itself' (quoted in Tenison, p.11). Presumably Essex was given all he asked for to make sure that he did cavil at going. He was the great governor that the Protestant hardliners in Ireland had long since demanded.



Edmund Spenser

Indeed his patent is very much in tune with the programme outlined in Edmund Spenser's in his famous tract of 1596 'A view of the present state of Ireland'. Reportedly it was Essex who paid for Spenser's funeral in Westminster Abbey after the poet died a penniless refugee in London in January 1599 having been driven off his plantation estate in County Cork. (EM Tenison, Elizabethan England, pp.lxvi-xxi).

## ARMY

Essex also received an army to correspond with his great power. He was able to ratchet up the number of troops required – until he was finally granted a force of 17,000 foot and 1,500 horse. 2,000 of these were veterans transferred from the Low Countries and he had the promise of 2,000 more in reinforcements after three months. Six months victual was being collected in western ports for dispatch to Ireland and Essex carried with him in treasure a quarter-year's pay. In addition to the regular army, he attracted to his standard a large supplement of young gallants– the so-called 'gentlemen voluntaries' - who hoped to make their name in his service. Essex left London to a great fanfare on 27 March with the citizens standing row upon row for four miles calling down the blessings of heaven upon him. The hacks in Grub Street cashed in on this fervour by producing an outpouring of honorific verse of truly dire proportions.

But all was not well. He had only got as far as Bromley when he wrote back to the Privy Council complaining about the Queen's refusal to appoint the new marshall of the army in Ireland Sir Christopher Blount, Essex step-father, to Irish Council. This merely compounded an earlier refusal of the Queen's to allow him to make his other much younger confidant, the earl of Southampton, general of the horse. 'I did move Her Majesty for her service to have given me one strong assistant, but it is not her will. What

my body and mind will suffice to, I will by God's grace discharge with industry and faith. But neither can a rheumatic body promise itself that health in a moist, rotten country, nor a sad mind vigour and quietness in a discomfortable voyage. But I sit down and cease my suit, now I know Her Majesty's resolute pleasure'. (He was saying here that he wasn't up to the job he had been given either physically or psychologically but continuing the medical metaphor he went on to transfer the responsibility to his army). 'Only I must desire to be freed from all imputation, if the body of the army prove unwieldy, that is so ill furnished, or so unfinished, of joints; or of any maim in the service, when I am sent out maimed beforehand'. He ended 'Hereof I thought it fit to advertise your Lordships, that you might rather pity me than expect extraordinary success'. (CPSI viii 1) The only analogy I can think of is an English football manager going off to the World Cup. Great popular expectation, a great splurge of tabloid publicity but the manager knows in his heart that neither he nor his team are good enough. When he was ready to leave Beaumaris twelve days later he was still complaining about having 'a natural antipathy against his service... But *Jacta est alea*; I have the best warrant that ever man had, and I go in the best cause' (CPSI viii 10)

## ARRIVAL

Amongst loyalists in Ireland there was also considerable expectation. Judge James Gould wrote to Essex from Limerick saying 'We hear every day that your Lordship is

expected at Dublin by every easterly wind. And it is generally wished and prayed for daily by all good subjects, not doubting, if your Honour come, your armies shall be such, as your famous victory in mighty Spain shall not be subject to blemish in miserable Ireland' (CPSI viii 4). This opinion was not shared by all. The veteran army captain Thomas Reade warned Sir Robert Cecil that Essex was a stranger to Ireland with no experience of its tricky politics and irregular warfare. He would not find there any great battles or sieges to be fought continental style. The only way was a strategy of garrison and scorched earth beginning with the establishment of an independent force at Lough Foyle behind enemy lines. (CPSI vii 449-52). Essex finally arrived in Dublin on 15 April. He took the sword of state at Christchurch Cathedral the same day. On the 23<sup>rd</sup> being St George's Day he presided over a glittering Garter ceremony in Dublin Castle which had been quickly refurbished for his arrival. These must have been stirring days in Dublin. The small city swelled to bursting point by the largest English army yet assembled in Ireland. Picture especially the gentlemen volunteers with shiny swords and fancy clothes strutting their stuff, arguing and carousing before going on campaign.

## WHY NOT LOUGH FOYLE

The reality of war in Ireland was a different matter. Crown forces, which had recently lost many experienced soldiers including officers and generals, were everywhere on the defensive. The Irish Council assessing the situation reckoned, probably exaggerated, that there were 20,000

rebels ranged against the state. Essex arrived determined to lay the axe at the root of the tree of the rebellion – to attack Ulster. However being the spring time there weren't enough cattle available to take on hoof to feed a large army in Ulster nor were there enough carriage horses in the English Pale to transport dry victual with an army going northwards. The Council persuaded him otherwise - 'to shake the branches of the tree' instead by shoring up the situation in the other provinces. As a result Essex sent large numbers of men to towns in Connacht, the Midlands and the East Coast and on 9 May he himself began a march southwards with 3,000 foot and 300 horse. Essex had made his decision reluctantly and he requested from the Privy Council the dispatch of carriage horses from England to be available on his return. Furthermore he expected the long-planned expedition to Lough Foyle would also be ready on his return.

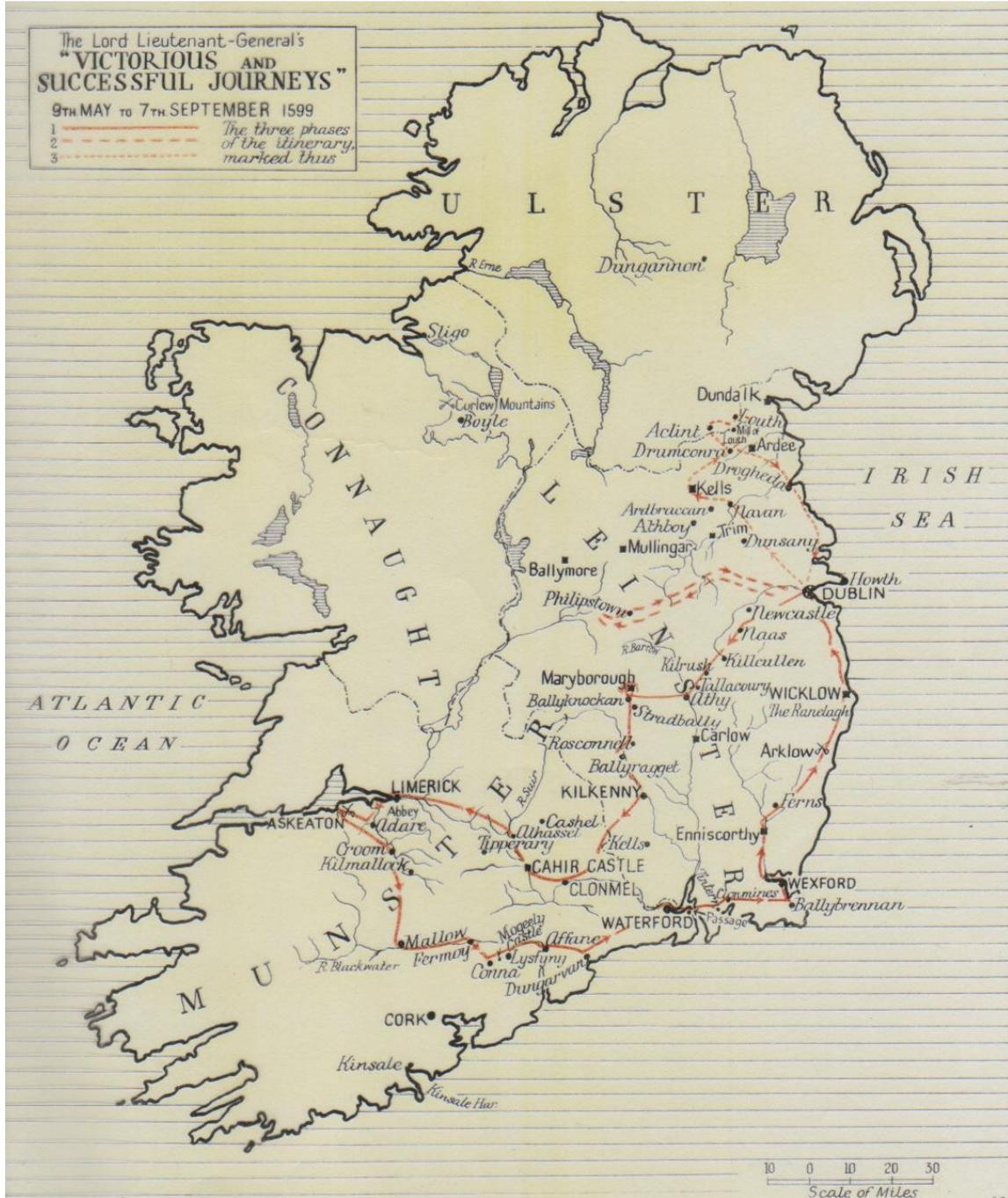
The establishment by sea of a garrison at Derry in Lough Foyle had been the key factor in breaking the power of Shane O'Neill in the 1560s. From the very start of this new northern revolt, veterans had canvassed the same scheme as the best strategy. In 1597 Essex in an overall review of military policy had himself supported this option for Ireland. Such an expedition was ready to go in August 1598 but had to be diverted to secure Dublin after the disaster of the Yellow Ford. When Essex was appointed, analysts again suggested Lough Foyle and we know that it was discussed in the Privy Council before his departure. This expedition was widely recognised as the masterstroke which could win the war and indeed when it was eventually

dispatched and a garrison established behind enemy lines in 1600 the Ulster insurrection began to unravel. So why was it not sent in Essex's governorship? It is a mystery. Essex blamed the enemies on the Privy Council for not sending the expedition; however the Queen and the Privy Council seemed to have believed that it was Essex's task to organise and mount the expedition. There would seem to be some logic in this because after all Essex had been given extraordinary powers to levy shipping for his purposes. One reason might be that Essex had now too many men in Ireland and with Ireland's resources in the hands of the confederates the shipping on the Irish sea was being requisitioned merely to keep his outsized army supplied from England. Another strange aspect is that during Essex's time on neither side of the Irish sea was an officer ever appointed to assemble and led such an expedition. In the absence of the Privy Council register for this period we will probably never know the answer.

## LEINSTER/MUNSTER JOURNEY

Without the Lough Foyle expedition, Essex's governorship was decidedly on the back foot. Furthermore the southern journey took more than two months – it was 11 July before he returned to Dublin. The expedition – its supplies being carried by pack-horse and porter - was reasonably successful. Essex took and garrisoned a number of important castles including Cahir Castle and Askeaton. He secured a number of submissions from rebels; had an interview with Norris the governor of Munster; he marched his men successfully through dangerous defiles; he had

knighted the bravest in his army and was greeted warmly by the inhabitants of the towns through which he passed. Also on this journey he had deliberately defied the Queen by making Southampton general of the horse.



Tenison's map of Essex's Irish campaign

## SCOLDED BY QUEEN

Back in Dublin, Essex was now forced to demote Southampton. Having lost face, he fired off, in a fit of transferred aggression, a letter to the Privy Council asserting that ‘a difficult war cannot be successfully managed by a disgraced minister’(CPSI, viii 96). An even more caustic missive was flying in the opposite direction. The Queen made mincemeat of his alleged southern triumphs. Whilst the eyes of the world were upon him he had wasted two months. The traitors who had submitted had come in under the influence of the earl of Ormond not Essex’s army. The taking of Cahir was the capture of nothing more than ‘an Irish hold from a rabble of rogues’. The governor of Munster suitably reinforced could have made such gains himself. All the time the archtraitor in the North was living ‘at his pleasure’. Now she was hearing that he planned to make another journey into the Irish Midlands; but wasn’t the victualling of forts the job for a subordinate? The year was moving on and she demanded ‘the timely plantation of our garrisons in the North’. He must put the axe to the root of the tree otherwise ‘all these former courses will prove like *via navis in mari*’. His actions, it seemed to her, were exactly the actions he had so often criticised in previous failed governors of Ireland (CPSI, viii, 99-102). On the 30<sup>th</sup> she wrote another letter demanding immediate action against the North. ‘You may easily judge that it is far beyond our expectation to find you make new doubts about further proceeding into Ulster, without further increase of numbers, when no cause can be

conceived by us, that you should hold that the traitor's strength at higher rate than when you departed, except it be that by your unseasonable journey into Munster, and by the small effects thereof (in comparison of that we hoped this great charge should have effected), you have broken the heart of our best troops and weakened your strength upon inferior rebels, and run out the glass of time which can hardly be recovered'. Furthermore she expressly countermanded his former liberty to return home 'till the northern action be tried'. (CPSI viii 105-7)

## FURTHER DISASTERS

The rather negative strategy adopted probably induced other disasters, though Essex was not directly to blame. In Wicklow, Harrington's army was ambushed and ran away – its officers were court-martialled and its ranks decimated. Essex had met Sir Conyers Clifford on his second journey into the Midlands and planned a two-pronged attack in Ulster. But on 5 August Clifford and two hundred of his troops were killed at the Curlew pass marching to the relief of Sligo. In Munster Sir Thomas Norris died from wounds sustained in a siege. A large segment of the army had fallen sick - Essex himself was laid up for a week on his return to Dublin. A third of new soldiers coming to Ireland died from camp diseases such as dysentery and typhus in the first six months of service. Many blamed the wet climate and held that the only remedy was to drink large quantities of whiskey! Finally in the late summer the proposed Lough Foyle expedition was called off with shipping having to be diverted to meet another threatened Spanish Armada.

## TO THE BORDER

Finally ordered northwards, Essex was reluctant to go. With most of his army in garrison across the country, the men at his disposal were plainly insufficient to undertake a frontal assault upon O'Neill.



Hugh O'Neill, 2<sup>nd</sup> earl of Tyrone.

He was backed by a council of war held at Dublin Castle on 21 August 'After long debating, every one of us having spoken in order, at last by common consent resolved that, seeing the army so unwilling to be carried thither, that some secretly run into England, others revolt to the rebels, a third sort partly hide themselves in the country, and partly feign themselves sick; and seeing there could be no planting this year at Lough Foyle, nor assailing the North but one way (the Connacht army, consisting of a great part of old companies, being lately defeated) and that our army, which passeth not the number of 3,500 or 4,000 at the most, of strong and serviceable men, should be far overmatched, when all the forces of the North should encounter them; and sithence that it was a course full of danger, and of little

or no hope, to carry the army into their strengths'. It was a forlorn exercise but they would attempt it if they had to (CPSI, viii, 126-7). London was astonished by the sheer defeatism of this communication. The march north did take place but achieved nothing. On reaching the border Essex encountered an army twice the size of his own. The armies shadowed each other, there were a few light skirmishes and on the third time of asking Essex accepted the proposal of a parley. The first one was the famous half-hour meeting alone at a river ford, then followed a six-a-side meeting at the same ford and finally the appointment of sets of commissioners who set down the points of a six week ceasefire. Essex returned to Dublin, handed over to the sword of state to two temporary governors and left for England with a small band on 24 September. He was placed under house arrest soon after arriving at court four days later. His glittering political career was over.

## CAMPAIGN OVERVIEW

Essex had achieved nothing worthwhile in Ireland. He had gone there with a bigger army and more empowered than any previous governor. However he had gone in the wrong frame of mind – he was not psychologically fit for the job. His inability to reward those who followed him to Ireland was a major slight to his honour. He feared his enemies on the Council and at Court were undermining him. In fact so far as I can see he received all the necessary backing from his fellow privy councillors. His main opposition was from the Queen herself. Her letters of rebuke - only some of which I have quoted here - were quite right to be critical as

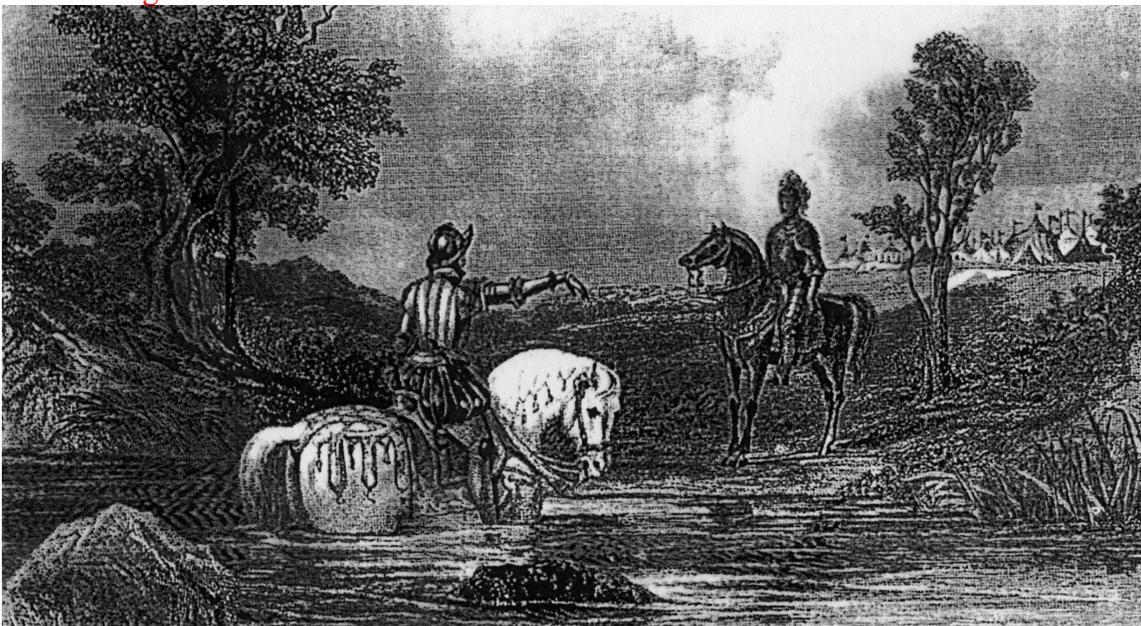
the most expensive overseas expedition she had ever mounted disappeared into the Irish mists. Essentially she disliked ceding control – that was something that had also been obvious during Leicester’s mission to the Netherlands. Essex’s tactics were wrong. Even despite the delay in the Lough Foyle expedition he could have achieved more in the North. The provincial governors, reinforced by detachments from his grande armée, could have cleaned up Munster and Connacht. He wasted men by placing large garrisons in towns the state already held rather than fanning out with smaller more offensive frontline posts. With his great patent, he did not have to accept the advice of the Irish Council to march south. Nor did he have to take cognizance of the extraordinary letter of the army captains – though it was to some extent a manufactured face-saving exercise to cover him against a prospective border campaign which he already knew would be a non-event. Essex made almost all the mistakes he accused former governors of making including negotiations with the rebels. He also left Ireland against the Queen’s order, even though he would have probably have been recalled soon after.

## AT THE RIVER FORD

Besides this assessment of Essex as a military man - which makes his victory at Cadiz seem like a fluke - we have to fathom what happened at his famous meeting with O’Neill on 7 September 1599



From George Carleton's *Thankfull Remembrance*



From Tom Moore's *History of Ireland*

We have with these illustrations on the overhead the two interpretations. The top one – the early seventeenth century woodcut is Essex conspiring with O'Neill with the Latin tag – 'Sons of Iniquity act craftily'. The bottom one – the nineteenth century engraving - depicts a far more decorous and more honourable encounter. I incline to the latter. Out

of earshot of their armies O'Neill waded his horse into the midst of a stream and saluted. Essex stayed on his horse on the bank throughout. We can reconstruct what happened from subsequent documents and speeches of Essex. O'Neill expressed his love of Essex's father whom he had once served in Ulster - he was now willing to look to Essex above all others in the hope of obtaining peace with Justice. He would not give Essex anything in writing – the earl would have to carry his offer of submission and conditions to Court and deliver them *viva voce*. He said that he feared that the crown would advertise the information into Spain in order to break his alliance with them. When O'Neill demanded liberty of conscience, Essex said that he replied 'Hang thee up, thou carest for religion as much as my horse' (Moryson, *Itinerary*, pt. II, 75) He also demanded the restoration of confiscated lands throughout Ireland to their former owners. He wanted the crown to make peace with all those in revolt in one treaty rather separate ones so that the Irish cause would be a monolith with himself at its head (Camden, *Annales*, *sub anno* 1599). It is quite ridiculous that they may have discussed a bargain to make one of them king of England and the other king of Ireland. A far more likely subject of discussion would have been the connections both had with James of Scotland. Essex had indeed power to conclude a treaty but the request was too delicate for him to make a judgement.

Articles agreed vpon for a  
cessation of Armes between the  
Lord Lieutenant of Ireland and the  
Earle of Tirone, on the 8.<sup>th</sup> of September  
1599 in the old stile .

- 1 That the Earle of Tirone shall undertake for  
all those that are bound w<sup>th</sup> him, that for the space  
of six weekes (beginning at the day of the date hereof)  
they shall be a cessation of armes, and that in the  
remote parts of this Kingdome the cessation shall  
begin as soon as knowledg is given of this agreement.  
And if any that are now bound w<sup>th</sup> the Earle of Tirone  
shall refuse this agreement, they shall be by him left  
to be persecuted by the Lord Lieutenant of  
Ireland .
- 2 That it shall be in the power of either side to continue  
the cessation from .6. weekes to .6. weekes till May  
day, or to break yt upon further dayes warning .
- 3 That for all injuries that are committed during the  
cessation there shall be iustice done and restitution made  
within twenty dayes after knowledg is given .
- 4 That the Earle of Tirone shall take his oathe  
for the performance of all these articles .

James Tyrone



Ceasefire dated old-style in case of O'Neill took advantage as he used new Roman calendar

The fact that the ceasefire was to be of six weeks duration may explain his rapid departure to England, if he were to return with a settlement in his pocket in the time available. If that was Essex's object, he had sadly misjudged the situation and the Queen.

The Queen did not trust the sender of the message and she increasingly distrusted the messenger boy. Hugh O'Neill, earl of Tyrone, was one of the most tricky politicians in Irish history. The Queen was by now used to his wiles and shifts. But the more honourable Essex clearly was not. He was in the first instance a gullible fool. How could O'Neill's offers be treated as serious and genuine if he was afraid of news of them reaching the Spaniards. O'Neill plainly wanted it both ways until such times as his foreign allies turned up in force. Furthermore by seeking to deal only through Essex, he was seeking not only to make him a go-between but also his protector and proxy at court. This involved the Queen's prerogatives. She wanted a dependency on none but herself; though here she may have been mistaking O'Neill's alleged desire to depend on Essex above all other governors of Ireland as a reference to herself as monarch. Far from returning with a peace settlement, Essex found himself imprisoned and suffered something close to a physical and mental breakdown.

The crown however did not abandon the peace process. The war-weariness in England was palpable on all sides. Notes on a speech of Cecil's survive from October 1599. All the wars were costing England dearly. Was Ulster worth the cost of a full conquest? Peace in Ireland at this point would

have complemented the peace feelers then coming from Spain because it would cut off the potential Spanish hawks entertained of opening a second front in England's strategic weak spot. Although the crown decided not to send Essex back, they were no going to leave O'Neill hopeless. New peace commissioners were appointed and he was to be offered *de facto* control of Ulster and non-interference with religion. But it was already too late. In a letter to Essex on 10 November he gave notice of breaking off the ceasefire with the state claiming infringements and because Essex the only man he had confidence in was in prison. In fact he had already made his decisive shift. In a public proclamation issued on 5 November he declared a holy war against England. He also issued a remarkable series of nationalist and Catholic demands which Cecil annotated when he received as EWTOPIA. (These twenty-two demands were not communicated to Essex at the Ford as some historians have earlier asserted.) O'Neill had cast his die. Mountjoy was dispatched from England. It was war *à outrance*.

## THOMAS LEE

This is the best possible interpretation that can be put on Essex's fateful meeting with O'Neill and explores some of its unfulfilled potentialities. A different interpretation was applied by the state to blacken his name after his attempt *coup d'état* in February 1601.



Gheeraedts - Captain Thomas Lee

There was no easier way of damaging Essex's popular image than accusing him of conspiracy with the extremely unpopular Irish rebels. In 'A declaration of touching the treasons of the late Earl of Essex and his complices', the state argued that Essex had always intended to conspire with the archtraitor O'Neill – this was why he had not attacked Ulster but instead conducted his campaign there in completely contrary fashion, dissipating the great army had sent over with him. Having intended treason from the outset, Essex, it was argued, had deliberately created this situation in which he would have to negotiate with O'Neill. Here we must look at Captain Thomas Lee's role. Here is

his famous portrait. He was both an old friend of O'Neill and a follower of Essex. Though one of the few captains not knighted by Essex, he was part of the small band who arrived at Court with his patron on 28 September 1599. Although not involved in Essex's coup attempt in 8 February 1601, he was arrested shortly afterwards when he was discovered lurking outside the presence chamber of Whitehall Palace. Apparently he was about to seize the Queen in an attempt to secure Essex's release. It was a stupid thing that Lee had done but a lucky break for the state. It remembered information he had given a year before about being sent by Sir Christopher Blount, presumably with Essex's permission, on a secret mission to O'Neill's camp in Ulster in early August 1599. Lee had in fact found O'Neill more insolent and unreasonable than ever before and indeed such espial or intelligence gathering was stock in trade. However another confession was forced out of Lee before he was executed and it was edited in a way to make his trip the necessary prelude to Essex's own meeting with O'Neill at the ford. Besides this, the crown reproduced various unfounded rumours about what had been said at the Ford. There was another exquisite piece of editing. After the ceasefire, Sir William Warren - who had cause to go back and forth to O'Neill as the official intermediary - reported a declaration that had O'Neill made to him 'that within two or three months he should see the greatest alterations and strangest that ever he saw in his life, or could imagine; and that he the said Tyrone hoped ere long to have a good share in England'. However this evidence had been manipulated by simply omitting Tyrone's next sentence about his expectation - not about what Essex was

going to accomplish at Court - but of an imminent Spanish landing in the south of England! In William Camden's account it is Mr Secretary Cecil who provides this rendering of O'Neill's letter!

## CONSPIRACY

I think Essex can be absolved from conspiracy with Tyrone and probably Thomas Lee as well. However it is more difficult to absolve Essex from conspiracy against the state at the end of his Irish sojourn. The confessions which Blount and Southampton gave in February 1601 revealed that Essex had spoken to them privately in Dublin Castle. Essex had proposed taking two or three thousand men over to England 'to make his own conditions as he thought good'. However Blount and Southampton had dissuaded him from this action. Although these confessions too might have been concocted, they seem quite implausible in the heightening tension with the vicious circle of recrimination, rebuke and expostulation going on between Essex, the Queen and the Privy Council in their correspondence across the Irish Sea. The eminent historian of Elizabeth, Wallace MacCaffrey, believes this to be the case and indeed he even goes so far as to claim that the security alert on the coasts and at court in the late summer of 1599 was not aimed at meeting an external threat from Spain but an internal threat from Essex. It is interesting that Southampton, who was left unexecuted and released afterwards by King James, never retracted his confession, so far as I am aware,. Furthermore there was an additional confession by Sir Charles Danvers that Essex had sent Southampton and Danvers to Ireland in

1600 to encourage his friend and successor as governor, Lord Mountjoy, to bring the army in Ireland over to England. Mountjoy had of course rejected these overtures and in the official condemnation of Essex the Danvers confession was left unpublished so as to avoid any embarrassment of Mountjoy's increasingly successful government.

To sum up.

Essex failed in Ireland. If he had been successful, the war could have ended over three years earlier with far less loss of life and less cost to the exchequer. If he had secured a peace, some of the worst effects of English colonialism in Ireland might have been avoided. But the main result was a personal one which postponed the larger political developments.

Essex was mentally unfit for the Irish job and he was dealing with an ageing Queen who was extremely tetchy about her sovereignty. Ireland was simply the catalyst for his final break with her – it may have happened sooner or later anyhow. Unfortunately the Ireland job involved a rebellion and an army at the lowest point in their relations.

Posted by *HIRAM MORGAN IRCHSS SENIOR RESEARCH FELLOW, February 2009*