

Introduction to the Nugents in Ireland

Ireland ! In the 7th and 8th centuries, a country that has offered civilisation and culture to a barbarous Europe. A country that, from the 12th century, will suffer the most despicable and the most humiliating treatment imposed by a "civilised" European country, upon its neighbour. For nearly seven centuries, a Catholic country brought to its knees, and symbolically decapitated by a Protestant England.

How did this come about ? What was the trigger which began the slow but sure descent of the Irish into the depths of slavery imposed by successive Kings and Queens of England. This subject merits a closer study, for the initial incursions of the English into Ireland in second half of the 12th century were neither colonialist nor invasionist. They were simply a response to a call for help ! And while we are on this subject, we can set the scene for the arrival in Ireland of the English descendants of the De Nogent family, as they are now known.

The first movements of hostility and animosity towards Ireland begin from the Vatican, in the course of the 12th Century. A contemporary chronicler, Giraldus Cambrensis ¹, writes that in about 1155 the pope granted Henry authority over Ireland so that he could reform the Irish church. The pope, appropriately, is Adrian IV - the only Englishman to have held the see of Rome. However, Henry II was busy consolidating his hold on England, and any ideas of subduing Ireland were put on the backburner.

The future of Ireland was decided by what at first, seemed to be of a secondary nature. One of the Kings of Ireland ², Dermot MacMurrough was driven from his kingdom, Leinster, by a coalition of Irish and Norse belligerents. Calling upon Henry, King of England, to help recover his kingdom, Dermot escaped to Wales to plead his cause. King Henry had his hands full with "internal affairs" ³, and so gave Dermot authorization to approach his allies. Dermot was thus given authorisation by Henry, to recruit mercenaries to assist him in recovering his lands. Dermot turned to Richard de Clare (known as Strongbow), a descendant of the Capetians and the Dukes of Normandy. However, Strongbow was, at this time, out of favour with King Henry, and his title of Count of Pembroke had been confiscated. In a sorry financial position, Strongbow jumped at the chance to improve his situation, especially as Dermot went so far as to promise the hand of his daughter Aoife, together with other incentives of land, if Strongbow succeeded. He organized the setting up of a small expedition to Ireland, headed by Robert FitzStephen. FitzStephen had been released from prison on condition that he went to Ireland to help Dermot. This force, although small in number, was more

¹ Medieval clergyman and chronicler of the second half of the 12th century, Giraldus Cambrensis (Gerald of Wales) was archdeacon of Brecon. Of mixed Norman and Welsh blood, nephew of Robert FitzStephen, and future chaplain to Henry II, he was well situated to offer his arguments at this time.

² At this period in Ireland there were at least eight kingdoms in Ireland; Meath, Ulaid, Munster, Cork, Limerick, Leinster, Airgialla and Breifne.

³ Thomas Becket, the Archbishop of Canterbury had just been assassinated, and King Henry was "somewhat" involved.

than enough, with their modern fighting techniques, to overcome local Irish resistance. Strongbow, at this moment, was only piloting the help to Dermot, from a distance, but he was brought directly into the fray, when Dermot began to covet the high-kingship of Ireland. Dermot had recovered some of his authority, but was obliged to recognize Ruari O'Connor as the high-king, and to promise to send his foreign allies back to Wales (known as the treaty of 1169). Dermot requested more support from Strongbow, who eventually arrived in August of 1170 with a force of 1000 men, composed of a majority of archers ⁴). This force, together with those of Dermot, FitzStephen and FitzGerald, captured the town of Waterford. Dermot gave Strongbow the hand of his daughter, as promised, and thus the treaty of 1169 was broken. The city of Dublin soon fell to the combined Irish/Norman armies, and Strongbow went on to retake Wexford and Waterford which had been lost to Norse forces for a short time.

Henry, by this time was beginning to get worried that he had let Strongbow create a rival state in Ireland. He rapidly amassed a large army, and arrived in Ireland in October 1171. Strongbow immediately surrendered his Irish conquests to Henry, who showed magnanimity, and granted Strongbow the kingdom of Leinster, while retaining Dublin, Waterford and Wexford for himself. The Irish kings paid homage to Henry, but retained their full powers. This was effectively replacing the authority of the Irish high-kings, and in addition guaranteeing the security of the kingdoms, a situation that the Irish kings fully accepted.

Before leaving Ireland in April 1172, Henry granted the province of Meath to the head of his army, Hugh de Lacy, but, much more important, appointed him "justiciar" (viceroy). This gave to Hugh de Lacy practically the same powers as the King himself, an honour rarely given. Henry's object was clear, to reward the De Lacy family for generations of faithful service to his cause, and also to leave a faithful servitor on site in Ireland, to balance the power of Strongbow ⁵.

There are two schools of thought in Ireland at this moment, entirely opposed. The Irish do homage to Henry, under absolutely no pressure. They recognise his power, and submit to his presence, probably with the idea that he will protect them from the invading Vikings. However, the Anglo-Norman families who have come to "save" the kingdom of Dermot MacMurrough have other ideas in mind. Perhaps the Anglo-Norman lords preferred to take a chance on their potential in Ireland, rather than wage it against an unsure future in England, Wales and Scotland. They have all been present since the Conquest of 1066. Many of them were endowed with lands and dominions, but some of the Norman descendants have difficulty holding on to their lands. At the frontiers of Williams conquered land, such as Wales and Scotland, resistance to the Norman invaders continued long after the initial invasion of 1066, and William deliberately gave some of the largest tracts of land to his vassals on the principle "If you can hold it

⁴ The use of archers at this time, a Norman development, was lethal to the poorly protected armies, such as the Irish.

⁵ Henry certainly estimated that Strongbow would continue his intrigues in Ireland, but did not wish to order him to return to England. Strongbow would be out of the way, but nevertheless under the watchful eye of de Lacy.

against all odds, you can keep it". Welsh dissidents continually harried these Norman barons on the border with England, in true terrorist fashion ⁶. Not surprising indeed, that some Anglo-Norman family descendants were tempted to try their luck in Ireland.

We must remember the basic rules applied to estates and titles by the King of England at this period. His subjects were vassals, and they were considered as tenants of the land attributed by him. He could destitute someone of their land and titles, as he pleased, and attribute them to another who had come into favour ⁷. The case with Strongbow was an ideal example. He had fallen out of favour, and was not likely to regain it. However, Henry, although appearing to be magnanimous, was in fact a very astute ruler, using the "carrot", or allocation of land and titles, to keep his subjects in line. Unfortunately for Strongbow, his future was severely compromised, for he died in June, 1176, and all his rights returned to the crown. The situation in Ireland continued to deteriorate, until, little by little, the initial expeditions to Ireland, turned into a real invasion, and Ireland progressively was reduced to effective slavery for nearly 600 years.

Among the mercenaries who accompanied Hugh de Lacy to Ireland with Henry, were several of the de Nogent family, only too eager to settle in this new land, and to look forward to what they thought would be a more prosperous future.

This, is then, their story !

⁶ The Welsh and the Scots have now shown their disapproval of English domination for more than a thousand years. Today, however, they cannot show this disapproval as they used to do in the 12th century !.

⁷ The indication of the changes of heart of the subsequent kings, year after year, can be seen in "The Pipe Rolls", a yearly list of the attribution of wealth to the kings subjects. These Pipe Rolls, available to this day, are a valuable aid to genealogists and historians, in following the fortunes of many families, as they fall into and out of favour with the King.