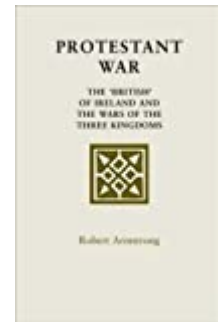




Robert Armstrong. *Protestant War: The "British" of Ireland and the Wars of the Three Kingdoms.* Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005. 261 pp. \$80.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7190-6983-3.



Reviewed by Pádraig Lenihan (Department of History, University of Limerick)

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Waging War and Talking Peace

Robert Armstrong's core narrative is organized around the response of Protestant settlers to rebellion in Ireland and civil war in England, and their slow switch of allegiance from Charles I to Westminster. This began after the Earl of Ormond, the king's man in Ireland, concluded a cessation with the Confederate Catholics in 1643. By the time he handed over Dublin to the roundheads in July 1647 his support in the settler community had bled dry. This was only the first of four realignments by most of them! The fragmenting of the parliamentary/Scots alliance that had beaten Charles I led most Protestants in Ireland (also described here as "British" and "New English") to align with Charles II. Next, many ditched Charles II and cooperated with the Protectorate, before finally cutting themselves adrift from that sinking craft in time to scramble on board the good ship "Restoration."

Some of the reasons why such apparent time-servers not only survived the Interregnum but captured the "peculiar polity" (pp. 3, 232) that was the English state in Ireland are to be found in the timeframe of the first alignment described by Armstrong. While they displayed po-

litical suppleness towards contending British regimes, they were consistent in their unremitting hostility towards the natives. To say that the 1643 cessation was a "good deal" (p. 99) was an understatement: it saved hard-pressed Protestants outside Ulster. Yet Protestants would not observe it any longer than they absolutely had to. These fierce fighters also claimed moral authority as victims of horrid popish massacre. Armstrong's treatment of the massacres that actually happened, the local spirals of massacre and revenge killings, is sure and even-handed.

The settler community is not depicted as a monolith. At one extreme were Ormond's immediate predecessors in Dublin Castle, who coldly decried any cessation with the Irish "before the sword or famine should have so abated them in numbers as that in reasonable time English colonies might overlap them" (p. 83). At the other was Ormond, who had "so much interest of blood and alliance" among Catholics (p. 177). Nonetheless, his stance during peace negotiations with the Confederate Catholics was, Armstrong concedes, "reactive, sometimes grudging, occasionally obstructive" (p. 123),

even as an increasingly frantic King urged him, in February 1645, to conclude a treaty “whatever it cost” (p. 132) and get the Irish to send an army to England before it was too late.

One is left wondering if Ormond had any interest in collective fair dealing with the Confederate Catholics. Michael ‘Siochr’*’s Confederate Ireland, 1642-1649* (1999) suggests otherwise and asserts, for instance, that Ormond introduced a specific demand for the return of churches seized by Catholics. Armstrong states that the explicit demand for Catholic retention of such churches came from the Confederates, but he does not directly confront what ‘Siochr’ says. One is left unsure who was to blame for raising an emotive issue that was best fudged and stalled peace talks.

It is made clear that Ormond preferred to detach sympathetic individuals from the Catholic regime. In this respect his greatest coup was to get Irish plenipotentiaries (shades of another treaty debate here) to sign a treaty that was spurned, however, as wholly unacceptable by the Irish Catholics, led by their priests. Armstrong vividly conveys the mood of recrimination in which Ormond handed over Dublin to Westminster. It would prove a colossal mistake, and an envoy from Queen Henrietta Maria begged Ormond not to do it. Two years later Ormond would be routed while trying to recapture Dublin, in concert with the same Irish Catholics to whom he had refused the keys. A royalist perspective on the surrender transaction, other than that of Ormond himself, would have been helpful.

From royalists talking peace to roundheads waging war, *Protestant War* deals with politics, finance, recruitment, and grand strategy rather than fighting. King and Parliament stumbled into war over the question of who would control armed force, including the English army being raised for Ireland. Later Charles was happy to

withdraw English troops from Ireland to quash his enemies at home, while Westminster, Armstrong insists, remained more ideologically committed to unrelenting war against popery in Ireland. But fighting the hydra-headed popish enemy in England took precedence. Parliament also agonized over the cost of a land war and listened in 1642 to glib promises that a landing in force on the west coast would “end the war before Xmas” (p. 73). Armstrong could well have taken the story out of stuffy committee rooms for a while at this point to follow Lord Forbes’s cruise along the west coast in all its murderous fatuity. Parliament’s long-running infatuation with such descents, especially in the Shannon Estuary, is revealed. To this reviewer it seems of a piece with the dislike of the English landed classes for costly standing armies and a preference for naval expeditions that usually turned out to be strategic and logistical muddles like Cadiz (1625), Rhé (1627), and Brest (1694). A concerted parliamentary attempt at reconquest began only between late 1645 and mid 1647 as civil war in Britain wound down. Securing the capitulation of Dublin was its only solid achievement. The extent to which the settler community directed this reconquest can be seen, for instance, from the fact that it provided the two parliamentary commissioners and army commander who took over Dublin.

Within a manageably narrow window of time Armstrong succeeds in producing a genuine three-kingdom history, focusing on two interfaces (Protestant Ireland versus Westminster and Oxford) where the proverbial billiard balls kissed or collided. Having to zoom out so often from one arena and focus in on another is a challenge. The effort would defeat most readers if Armstrong had not such readable lively style and an eye for a telling quote. This perceptive and scholarly work is a welcome counterpoint to the wealth of recent writing on the Confederate Catholics in mid-seventeenth century.

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