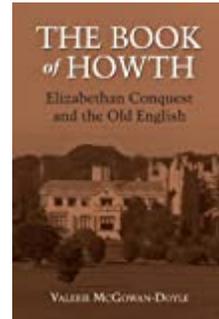




Valerie McGowan-Doyle. *The Book of Howth: Elizabethan Conquest and the Old English.* Toghher, Cork: Cork University Press, 2011. xiv + 206 pp. \$49.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-85918-468-4.



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There has been growing scholarly interest in the cultural and political evolution of the sixteenth-century descendants of Ireland's original Anglo-Norman conquerors, commonly known as the Old English. To date, scholars of Tudor Ireland have succeeded in thrashing out many pivotal events and developments that contributed to a developing sense of Old English identity and distinguished them from both their ancestral English-born brethren and the Gaelic Irish of their adopted fatherland. Due to the nature of contemporary sources, however, recognizable shifts in Old English attitudes have not been traced over a continuous period of time; rather, they have been studied in an episodic manner according to the impact of one or more events and the responses these evoked. Furthermore, with limited sources offering native perspectives, such studies have been heavily reliant on information emanating from the pens of Englishmen who, during the latter half of the sixteenth century, came to Ireland in increasing numbers, but regarded it as a strange, foreign, and barbaric land. It is, therefore, fortunate that Valerie McGowan-Doyle has rescued *The Book of Howth* and its compiler, Sir Christopher St. Lawrence (1510-89), seventh Baron of Howth (1558-89), from relative obscurity and, in doing so, has shed significant new light on the values and concerns of what may be consid-

ered Ireland's "middle nation."

Rather than studying this community, or one or more of its members, according to isolated episodes which were, undoubtedly, formative in the evolution of this population's sociopolitical outlook, McGowan-Doyle has successfully placed Christopher St. Lawrence and his manuscript collection within the context of successive events and developments as he experienced them over the course of his career. Previous histories have made only passing mention of Howth, focusing almost solely on his leading role in the Old English opposition to cess in 1577-78 and the dramatic domestic abuse case brought against him in 1579. While these two incidents are essential to any understanding of Howth himself, the fact remains that these were only two of the many events and altercations that not only shaped the baron's experiences, but also contributed to the shifting sociopolitical attitudes of Ireland's Old English community during the sixteenth century.

The identification of the book and baron of Howth as a subject is an important one. Living under the rule of four Tudor monarchs, Howth was an eyewitness to the rebellions of Kildare, Baltinglass, William Nugent, Shane O'Neill, and the two Desmond revolts. He lived

through the 1541 creation of the kingdom of Ireland, the enactment of the Protestant Reformation, the redistribution of dissolved monastic properties, the establishment of provincial presidencies, and the erection of New English plantations in Laois, Offaly, and Munster. All of these events must have, to varying degrees, exerted certain influences on Howth's general sociopolitical outlook as well as on his relationship with Queen Elizabeth I, Ireland's English administration, and the reinvigorated Tudor effort to finally complete the English conquest of Ireland. Moreover, Howth was particularly well placed and informed to recognize the implications of these significant and subtle shifts in the Crown's Irish policies. In addition to fulfilling the traditional military and judicial duties of Ireland's Old English aristocracy, Howth had obtained a legal education at London's Lincoln's Inn and, upon inheriting his baronial title, became a member of the Irish parliament and a regular attendee at Council sessions.

As crucial as all these considerations are for understanding Howth's personal experiences, equally important, if not more instructive, is the sizeable manuscript he compiled, appropriately known as *The Book of Howth*. This is one of only a few existing documentary records that was not only composed by an Old Englishman, but which specifically addressed the position of Ireland's original colonial community from the perspective of one of its members. Long dismissed as an inchoate collection of historical and literary excerpts and anecdotes, this manuscript has languished in archives only to be consulted for the odd quote. This regrettable fact was largely the fault of the manuscript's nineteenth-century editors, J. S. Brewer and William Bullen, who, rather than illuminating the source, only reinforced the impression that it was a little more than the sum of random collection activity of uncertain date and authorship, and is therefore of dubious merit (p. 38). Fortunately, McGowan-Doyle has skillfully demonstrated that this was not the case. As she makes abundantly clear in this fascinating study, Howth's manuscript offers scholars unique insight into the Old English mind-set and a thorough examination of this contemporary rarity was long overdue.

McGowan-Doyle expertly challenges the nineteenth-century editors' impression that *The Book of Howth* was the haphazard product of amateur antiquarian interest. This was by no means an easy task. Through painstaking textual analysis and impressive archival researches, McGowan-Doyle has, with convincing accuracy, identified the time frame in which each of the manuscript's thirteen scribal hands worked as well as the exact sources

from which Howth drew excerpts and fragments, including some which no longer exist. Similarly, she has singled out entries which were either of Howth's personal composition or had been modified from their original source. And, by establishing these details, it becomes evident that the manuscript's historical and miscellaneous contents were in direct correlation to specific developments occurring during the period of compilation, as well as to others which had shaped Howth's experiences over the course of his long life. Indeed, as McGowan-Doyle's study reveals, each entry was carefully selected and inserted according to Howth's particular interests during different stages of compilation and, as a whole, this work was the product of deep personal reflection and a scholarly investigation of the past.

Rather than being a bewildering collection of short stories and fables, *The Book of Howth* was in fact designed to be a history of the English conquest of Ireland, from the original Anglo-Norman invasion to Howth's present. An unlikely coincidence, Howth's initiation of the collection coincided with early sessions of the 1569-71 Irish parliament, and subsequent flurries of composition correspond with his 1577-78 opposition to the cess and the punitive sentence imposed upon him following the 1579 investigation into his domestic abuse case. Nevertheless, as McGowan-Doyle argues, the sentiments expressed in this text had much deeper roots. The many events and developments Howth had witnessed over the course of his career had sparked his growing concern for the direction of English policies in Ireland and the declining role his community had in influencing them. These issues, as they pertained to Howth, had finally catalyzed in the late 1560s, ultimately inducing him to embark on this manuscript project.

While the sixteenth century had witnessed the increased production of historical publications, those concerning Ireland were almost exclusively representative of the English viewpoint and the condescending attitudes of English authors towards Ireland's indigenous populations were unmistakable. Thus, it seems the main impetus for Howth's project stemmed from his determination to rectify what he believed was a misrepresentation of the past, both in terms of his community's historic commitment to English Crown interests in Ireland as well as the English conquest itself. Howth set out to address these questions in the context of failed conquest, but from the perspective of those who had centuries-long experience in Ireland. In defending the many achievements of his community, Howth intimated that had the Old English been left to the task of anglicizing Ireland without out-

side interference, the English conquest would in fact have been completed much earlier. In making his case, Howth simultaneously laid the blame for the failed conquest at the feet of the New English whose greed, inconsistent policies, overwhelming ignorance of the Irish situation, and, most importantly, discriminatory treatment of the original English colony had resulted in a series of political setbacks and social upheavals that ultimately doomed the English conquest. In effect, Howth's manuscript purposely championed the Old English community, advocating that without recourse to their unique and indispensable expertise on the Irish situation, Ireland would never be fully incorporated into the English commonwealth nor would it become completely obedient to the English Crown.

It is unfortunate that we cannot be sure what Howth intended to do with his *Book*, whether it was merely for personal use or aimed for a wider audience; neverthe-

less, it is clear that this manuscript circulated within certain circles. Although it was never published, McGowan-Doyle has traced several other partial manuscript copies, as well as how and by whom this manuscript was used in subsequent histories of Ireland and the English conquest. Not knowing his exact intentions, however, does not diminish the value of *The Book of Howth*; indeed, the manuscript is of extreme importance for any study of Christopher St. Lawrence, the Old English community to which he belonged, and the Tudors' final push to complete the English conquest of Ireland. Following McGowan-Doyle's careful and fascinating expose on *The Book of Howth* and its creator, it may be hoped that a more comprehensible transcription of this manuscript will be made available and thus rescue future students of sixteenth-century Irish history from the toilsome and frustrating perambulation of the Calendar of Carew's nineteenth-century edition.

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