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Just Warfare, or Genocide?: Oliver Cromwell and the Siege of Drogheda

Lukas A. Dregne
“This is a righteous judgment of god upon these barbarous wretches, who have imbrued their hands in so much innocent blood....”

-Cromwell 1649
Intro

• Cromwellian land settlement: land confiscation against participants and bystanders in the Irish Rebellion of 1641.

• Rebellion a result of the resentment felt by Catholic Irish regarding loss of land and threats to religion.

• The way he is remembered has changed significantly.

• Originally depicted as dark and deceitful.

• Later rehabilitated by the Victorians.
Cromwell’s Siege of Drogheda

• Began August 1649
• Fleet of over 130 ships, large artillery, full treasury, well disciplined regiments.
• Three objectives:
  • Eliminate threat of military support for Charles II.
  • Carry through confiscation of land, repay debts of English Nation.
  • Improve and reform Irish Institutions.
Drogheda meets the New Model Army

- Drogheda was a well-fortified gateway to Ulster, near Dublin.
- New Model Army - strict discipline, efficiency, siege making capacity.
- Extremely religious.
- Marked into battle singing hymns and psalms.
- Perceived themselves as engaging upon a holy war.
Cromwell’s motives

• “a righteous judgment of God upon these barbarous wretches, who have imbrued their hand in so much innocent blood” – Oliver Cromwell

• A reference to the rebellion in 1641.

• However, Drogheda had never been a confederate town.

• Cromwell felt contempt toward the Irish.

• Siege met to “prevent the effusion of blood for the future.”
Drogheda’s demise

- Drogheda’s walls twenty feet high and six feet thick.
- Siege making capacity critical; created two breaches.
- 3,000 Royalist troops killed, also all Catholic Clergy identified.
- St. Peter’s Church set alight with 80 inside.
- No apparent general massacre of civilians.
New Model Army unleashed

- Most discipline, organized, religious – not the most enlightened.

- Cromwell forbid his soldiers ‘to spare any that were in arms in the Town.’

- Remains his most irresponsible and treacherous act of all.
Profound Impact

• Around 3,500 killed at Drogheda.
• Terror projected mostly toward enemy combatants.
• Fighting gruesome for three reasons:
  • First, antipathy between the English and the Irish went back centuries.
  • Second, nature of military operation.
  • Third, the religion of the soldiers comprising the New Model Army.
Conclusion

• Drogheda the impetus for the resulting demographic catastrophe.

• Cromwell’s targets were not random.

• Disproportionate dint in the legacy of Cromwell, considering his time there.

• Religiosity of his troops more important than his own, also racial animosities and military realities important.