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

*Sir, the state, in choosing men to serve it, takes no notice of their opinions; if they be willing to serve it, that satisfies. I advised you formerly to bear with minds of different men from yourself. Take heed of being sharp against those to whom you can object little but that they square not with you in matters of religion.*

**- Cromwell, To Major General Crawford (1643)**



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**Abstract:**

Oliver Cromwell has always been a subject of fierce debate since his death on September 3, 1658. The most notorious stain blotting his reputation occurred during the conquest of Ireland by forces of the English Parliament under his command. This essay will concentrate on Cromwell and his New Model Army's siege at Drogheda, the most brutal of all the military confrontations which transpired during the settlement. From the time Cromwell's body was exhumed and mutilated in 1661, up unto the present day, the way in which he is remembered has changed significantly. While some position Cromwell as just one of many key actors in a wider drama, others assert that his savagery cannot be excused as just merely reflecting the bloody and unprincipled nature of war in that country. The siege of Drogheda provides a glimpse into the severity of that savagery.

Cromwell undoubtedly killed thousands, and adversely impacted countless more, but it is not clear if his actions which occurred amid a time of war departed from or exceeded the accepted laws, practices, and norms of the day. Drogheda's siege, which began in August 1649, was Cromwell's first major, and most infamous, action in Ireland. He was by this time the new lord lieutenant of Ireland and arrived between August 15-23, in a fleet of over 130 ships, bringing with him a large artillery train, a full treasury, and well-disciplined regiments. The invasion was a long-delayed response to the Irish revolt which occurred in Ulster in 1641, though the defenders and victims of Drogheda were not the Irish responsible for the attacks on English and Scottish settlers years earlier. It is the siege which remains the most notable stain on his reputation, that has –rightly or wrongly- remained with Oliver Cromwell to this day.

Oliver Cromwell has always been a subject of fierce debate since his death on September 3, 1658. Judgements concerning him are rendered immediately, often posited without the slightest inclination of uncertainty and put forth with remarkable passion. Indeed, the name itself evokes powerful emotions in Ireland since his passing over 350 years ago. This trend of controversy extends deep into the historiography on Cromwell and his role in the design and implementation of the 'Cromwellian' land settlement, further compounding the difficulty at which one has access to opinions and pieces of scholarship of relative objectivity. Cyphering through this complex array of historical interpretations is part of this essay's objective; it is no simple task, considering the prodigious amount of scholarly attention given to the subject. It may be true to say that more books and biographies have been written about him than any

other figure in Anglo-Irish history.<sup>1</sup> Similar to, say to tackling a topic like Julius Caesar, a researcher must constrain and narrow the focus to a reasonable size if they hope to contribute anything fresh to the discussion. That's precisely what this essay will attempt to do, by concentrating on Cromwell and his New Model Army's siege at Drogheda, the most brutal of all the military confrontations which transpired during the settlement.

Cromwell remains a curse in Ireland, and his time there is judged harshly. No event he took part of comes close to commanding the level of scrutiny and criticism as his invasion of Drogheda. However, even those who view him as a moral abomination have admitted that he is one of England's great historical figures. From the time his body was exhumed and mutilated in 1661, up unto the present day, the way he is remembered has changed significantly. Overwhelmingly critical and negative published assessments of Cromwell during the century—and-a-half following his death in 1658 depicted a dark and deceitful figure, equally insidious as destructive<sup>2</sup>. Yet the prevailing mood shifted during the nineteenth century as the strong emotions of the English Civil Wars retreated into a safer historical past and historians began to take a more dispassionate and balanced view of the era.<sup>3</sup> Plays, sermons and pamphlets of the Restoration period were all overwhelmingly hostile to his memory; this changed with the Victorians who saw men such as Cromwell as a cure to England's industrial sickness- a moral desperado who redefined the soul of a nation. For many, including historian S.R. Gardiner,

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<sup>1</sup> Denis Faul, "Cromwell in Ireland: The Massacre," *Seanchas Ardmhacha: Journal of the Armagh Diocesan Historical Society* 20, no. 1 (2004): 293–98. P. 293

<sup>2</sup> Peter Gaunt, "The Reputation of Oliver Cromwell in the 19th Century.," *Parliamentary History (Wiley-Blackwell)* 28, no. 3 (October 2009): 425–28.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

Oliver Cromwell represented the ‘third way’ between reaction and revolution, and one who fought to uphold political and religious liberty.<sup>4</sup>

At first condemned as a king-killing tyrant, the Victorians later rehabilitated Cromwell – certainly finding inspiration in his history- and elevated him as a ‘liberal hero’.<sup>5</sup> For he became a rather coveted personality, and coveted by an impressively differentiated spectrum of interests and classes. Working-class radicals and 19<sup>th</sup>-century trade unionist viewed him as a working class hero; to the better off, he epitomized Victorian middle-class values by advancing himself through hard work and seizing every opportunity within reach; for the liberal nonconformist historians of the century, Cromwell could be portrayed in their own image as an advocate of religious plurality and toleration.<sup>6</sup> It is clear that individuals and various groups have a tendency to see what they want to see in Oliver Cromwell. A wide consensus still has failed to emerge on where the Lord Protectorate most properly resides in the historical narrative. Drogheda is the point of ignition for this controversy, and as the most bloody and vicious battle in a campaign defined by its ruthlessness, it remains the most obvious stain on Cromwell’s reputation. For the individuals that occupied this town over three centuries later, his memory is tarnished upon their community. As for those on the outside considering the history of Ireland, it may be easier to scrutinize Cromwell from a more dispassionate perch, or perhaps a more neutral lens. Ultimately though, it is the people of Drogheda, and their Irish countrymen and women, who directly live with and endure Cromwell’s legacy.

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<sup>4</sup> Nick Poyntz, “Polychronicon: A True Individual: Oliver Cromwell, Hero and Villain,” *Teaching History*, no. 114 (2004): 22–23.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> Gaunt, “The Reputation of Oliver Cromwell in the 19th Century.”

Since Father Denis Murphy published the first detailed study of the conquest titled *Cromwell in Ireland*, in 1883, a widening of focus, and repositioning of Cromwell's role in the conquest has occurred in the historiography of the settlement.<sup>7</sup> Murphy's publication focuses mainly on Cromwell's campaign between August 1649 and May 1650 (also the dates focused on in this essay), while two recent monographs have offered detailed accounts of the entire war up to its conclusion in 1653.<sup>8</sup> These latter works attempt to clarify the role of Cromwell through highlighting the parts played by other significant figures such as Henry Ireton, and in doing so, reposition Cromwell as just one of many key actors in a wider drama.<sup>9</sup> Still others, such as the Irish historian Micheál Ó. Siochrú, assert that Cromwell's savagery cannot be excused as just merely reflecting the bloody and unprincipled nature of war in that country, and indeed the entirety of Europe in the period after the Thirty Years War.<sup>10</sup> For Siochrú, these comparisons are employed by Cromwell's "apologists" in an effort to absolve him from having committed horrors which exceeded those of his contemporaries.

While the degree of savagery is contestable, it is undeniable that in the years between 1641 to 1652 Ireland witnessed a demographic collapse of astounding proportions. Estimates vary, with many asserting that at least a quarter of the population perished because of endemic warfare, famine and disease. Throughout the early 1650's Cromwell's troops practiced a policy of scorched earth in Ireland which led to the death by starvation and other causes of at least

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<sup>7</sup> John Cunningham, "Oliver Cromwell And The 'Cromwellian' Settlement Of Ireland," *The Historical Journal* 53, no. 04 (December 2010): 920.

<sup>8</sup> Cunningham, "Oliver Cromwell And The 'Cromwellian' Settlement Of Ireland."

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> Micheál Ó. Siochrú, "Atrocity, Codes of Conduct and the Irish in the British Civil Wars 1641-1653," *Past & Present*, no. 195 (2007): 55–86.

200,000 and possibly as many as 600,000 in a total population of 2 million.<sup>11</sup> Once the duration is narrowed between August 1649- May 1650 – the time Cromwell spent in Drogheda- estimates gain in precision but remain contestable. One respectable historian in his study of Drogheda wrote “There were about 3,500 killed after the fall of the town which, not by coincidence, was the number that made up the garrison, and by the rules of contemporary war Cromwell was justified in executing the garrison once they refused, as they had at Drogheda, an opportunity to surrender on reasonable terms.”<sup>12</sup>

The *Irish Daily Mirror* in 2000 quoted a councilor from Drogheda as saying: “Bringing Cromwell’s death mask to Drogheda is like asking a Jew to meet Adolf Hitler. The people of this town are in no doubt that Cromwell was responsible for putting thousands of innocent civilians to the sword, no matter what some authors might say”.<sup>13</sup> This statement is telling for reasons beyond the visceral language its uses to describe the invocation of Cromwell. The phrase ‘no matter what’ conveys an attitude of absolute adherence towards an opinion - in this case an extremely negative and deeply felt opinion - of a man who lived over 350 years ago. It’s an important phenomenon, and cannot be lost sight of when endeavoring upon a subject still so engrained in the hearts and minds of the Irish. However, is this general impression deserved? Cromwell undoubtedly killed thousands, and adversely impacted countless more, but it is not clear if his actions which occurred in the midst of war departed from or exceeded the accepted laws, practices, and norms of the day. To determine so, several questions must be addressed,

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<sup>11</sup> Robert Bucholz and Newton Key, *Early Modern England: 1485-1714*, second (Blackwell Publishing, 2009), 668.

<sup>12</sup> Gerard Rice "Cromwell – Was there a Massacre?" Drogheda Independent. Supplement Drogheda 800, 31 January 1984

<sup>13</sup> Tom Reilly, “Cromwell: The Irish Question,” *History Today* 62, no. 9 (September 2012): 52–53.

including: the extent to which he oversaw and was directly responsible for innocent casualties, what motives prompted those killings, and whether the military campaign he conducted constituted an indiscriminate affliction of terror upon Drogheda, Ireland.

Cromwell has no known connection with Irish affairs prior to the rebellion in November 1641, yet in the months preceding the civil war in England he became one of the committee for the affairs of Ireland's most active members. Other military expeditions would suspend his intrigue into Irish affairs, however this resumed when Lord Fairfax declined to command the expedition to crush the royalist alliance in Ireland, and the position fell to Cromwell.<sup>14</sup>

Drogheda's siege, which began in August 1649, was Cromwell's first major, and most infamous, action in Ireland. By this time the new lord lieutenant, he arrived between August 15-23, in a fleet of over 130 ships, bringing with him a large artillery train, a full treasury, and well-disciplined regiments. Cromwell had three principle objectives in mind when crossing into Ireland. First, to eliminate the threat of military support for Charles II from those loyal to him. For if Charles Stuart was to be restored to the English throne, his likeliest route seemed to be through Ireland. Second, to carry through the confiscation of land from all those involved in rebellion against the English Parliament since 1641, as the English Nation hoped to use those lands to repay massive debts. Finally, Cromwell sought to improve and reform Irish institutions, this being displayed in his proposal of having law reform in Ireland be rooted in natural law and equity.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> J.S. Morrill, "Oliver, Cromwell," *Dictionary of Irish Biography*, 2009.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*



Drogheda was the well-fortified gateway to Ulster on the Boyne River, near Dublin, and its northerly location isolated it from the main centers of military activity located in the south and the west. Cromwell had the New Model Army under his command to crush the insurgent Royalist army under James Butler, Earl of Ormonde.<sup>16</sup> Its formation in 1645 encouraged a more professional approach to all aspects of warfare and its strict discipline and efficiency brought immediate improvements to the siege making capacity of the Parliamentary forces.<sup>17</sup> This became critical to the strategic operations employed by Cromwell, who used the siege guns to blast holes in the walls to storm the city with a population of once 4,000, but by this time depleted to a military garrison half that size. Drogheda's fortifications had two weak points: along the ravine and adjacent to the St. Mary's Church, an outpost which provided the defenders a view of the town. They dug three parallel entrenchments to provide more time to prepare defenses at those weak points, as these works would delay an attacking force until the last instant before the main assault.<sup>18</sup>

The fact that Cromwell had won the hearts and minds of his soldiers proved to be as integral to the success of the New Model Army as its siege making capacity. The armies renowned discipline should be at least partly attributed to fact that the Puritans concern for discipline carried over into actual military conduct, and Cromwell carefully picked his troops, always looking for "Godly men and brave."<sup>19</sup> Indeed, one of Oliver's greatest strengths was his

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<sup>16</sup> Barry M. Taylor, "Siege And Slaughter At Drogheda," *Military History*, October 1999, Educators Reference Complete.

<sup>17</sup> James Burke, "The New Model Army and the Problems of Siege Warfare, 1648-51," *Irish Historical Studies* 27, no. 105 (1990): 1-29, p.3

<sup>18</sup> Taylor, "SIEGE AND SLAUGHTER AT DROGHEDA," 65.

<sup>19</sup> George Drake, "The Ideology of Oliver Cromwell," *Church History* 35, no. 3 (1966): 264.

ability to communicate to his troops both his zeal for discipline and dedication to his cause.<sup>20</sup> Cromwell successfully developed and harnessed this devotion in the battlefield, allowing him the opportunity to engage in military maneuvers that he otherwise would not have been able.<sup>21</sup> These men marched into battle singing hymns and psalms, lifting their voices to the Lord after victory, and as time progressed, an increasing number of common soldiers took upon themselves preaching functions.<sup>22</sup> It would not be an exaggeration to say that the soldiers composing the New Model Army perceived themselves as engaging upon a holy war in the name of God's people.<sup>23</sup>

Yet while the soldiers may have been sure that 'He' was on their side, Cromwell did not reason like an ordinary believer. Though confident that "faith will answer all difficulties," he also knew that "we are very apt, all of us, to call that faith which perhaps may be but carnal imagination and carnal reasoning."<sup>24</sup> Recognizing this human proclivity reinforced Cromwell's ideas concerning toleration, a hallmark of his puritanism. A Venetian Ambassador, Sagredo, reported in October, 1655, that the government's policy was: "to deprive the Catholics of their possessions, but to let them hear as many Masses as they would."<sup>25</sup> Under him England accepted the Jews being driven from Spain and Portugal by the Inquisition, and on the other

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 263.

<sup>21</sup> Cromwell's strategy after initially breaching Drogheda's walls was, more or less, to pack the hole with bodies. The moral of the infantry during the desperate assault was only sustained by the presence of Cromwell himself.

<sup>22</sup> Drake, "The Ideology of Oliver Cromwell," 264.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 265.

<sup>24</sup> Jacques Barzun, *From Dawn to Decadence* (Harper Perennial, 2000), 276.

<sup>25</sup> S.R Gardiner, *History of the Commonwealth and Protectorate* (3 vols; London: Longsman, Green, 1894-1901), III 235. A letter from Sagredo to the Doge, October 19/29, 1655.

end of the religious spectrum we find Cromwell acted far more tolerant of the Quakers than his coreligionists.<sup>26</sup>

An extract of Cromwell's taken from the General Council of the Army at Whitehall on March 23, 1649 reveals his attitude towards the Irish people.

I had rather be overrun with a Cavalierish interest than a Scotch interest; and I had rather be overrun with a Scotch interest, than an Irish interest; and I think of all this is most dangerous. If they shall be able to carry on their work, they will make this the most miserable people in the earth, for all the world knows their barbarism—not of any religion, almost any of them, but in a manner as bad as Papist—and you see how considerable they are therein at this time.<sup>27</sup>

The *Perfect Diurnal* of August 23, 1649 quotes Cromwell's speech upon his arrival in Dublin on August 15, and in this address, he called the Irish "Barbarous and bloodthirsty." During his forty weeks on the Island, Cromwell occupied twenty-five fortified towns and castles, beginning in Louth and moving through counties Dublin, Wicklow, Wexford, Waterford, Cork, Kilkenny, and Tipperary and Limerick; however, his sack of Drogheda on 11-12 September remains the most notable stain in Cromwell's reputation. Drogheda's siege is a tarnish that has—rightly or wrongly—remained with Oliver Cromwell to this day. The siege, according to Cromwell, served as:

'a righteous judgment of God upon these barbarous wretches, who have imbrued their hand in so much innocent blood; and that it will tend to prevent the effusion of blood for the future,

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<sup>26</sup> Drake, "The Ideology of Oliver Cromwell," 262.

<sup>27</sup> Drake, "The Ideology of Oliver Cromwell." (Taken from 265)

which are the satisfactory grounds to such actions, which otherwise cannot but work remorse and regret'<sup>28</sup>

This is a reference to the Irish Catholic Revolt which began in October 1641 and continued for twelve years until the final victory of the English parliamentary forces in 1653. Authorities in Dublin were completely taken by surprise when disgruntled native Irish catholic landowners in the northern province of Ulster launched a pre-emptive strike on 22 October in the hopes of forcing concessions from the king, as the Scottish covenanters had already done.<sup>29</sup> Thousands of terrified refugees fled to Dublin, Scotland, or England, bringing with them stories of atrocities by the Catholic insurgents, however surviving evidence suggests that relatively few died on either side in the early weeks of the uprising.<sup>30</sup> Cromwell associated the Catholics in Arthur Aston's (Drogheda's governor) garrison with the atrocities committed in the Irish war. His reference to the revolt of 1641 is a moral justification for the massacres at Drogheda, but it is inaccurately applied: Drogheda had never been a confederate town and many of those killed – including most of the officers- were English. Furthermore, throughout the years since the insurrection of 1641 Drogheda had maintained a constant good affection towards the English interest, Catholic Old English, and Protestant New English alike, and was not less loyal to the parliamentarians than they were to the king.<sup>31</sup> Cromwell's judgement that they were the Irish rebels who had 'imbrued their hands in so much innocent blood' was, in the words of historian

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<sup>28</sup> Oliver Cromwell, *Letters and Speeches*, 1904, letter 105, 17 Sept 1649.

<sup>29</sup> Siochrú, "Atrocity, Codes of Conduct and the Irish in the British Civil Wars 1641-1653," 59.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Harold O'Sullivan, "Military Operations in County Louth in the Run-up to Cromwell's Storming of Drogheda," *Journal of the County Louth Archaeological and Historical Society* 22, no. 2 (1990): 204.

Harold O'Sullivan 'nothing more than the intemperate remarks of a man whose knowledge of Ireland was not any more informed than the popular English press of his day.'

A great number of civilized Englishmen of the propertied classes in the seventeenth century spoke of the Irish with the same contempt and hatred that Cromwell did. A rather pernicious view was shared amongst the English, even by figures such as English poets Edmund Spenser and John Milton to the philosopher Francis Bacon, which held that the Irish were culturally so inferior that their subordination was natural and necessary.<sup>32</sup> It was a line of thinking not far removed from the way the Nazis viewed eastern Europeans, and served to propel and invigorate the desire to conquer and exploit. The severity of bloodshed and violence at Drogheda is made more understandable if the racial animosity Oliver Cromwell held towards the Irish is kept in mind; contempt motivated Cromwell more than religious conviction. His faith is without question; however, it would be inaccurate to categorize Cromwell's actions in Drogheda as motivated purely by religious fanaticism.

Drogheda's siege was also met to "prevent the effusion of blood for the future", or in other words, to act as a future deterrent aimed towards terrorizing others into immediate surrender. To induce this effect, Cromwell had brought with him the largest train of siege artillery ever seen in Ireland, one which outnumbered the Drogheda garrison by about five to one.<sup>33</sup> His force of 12,000 troops and nearly 4,000 horses consisted of eight infantry regiments, six cavalry regiments, as well as 11 siege guns far outmatched that of the royalist forces.<sup>34</sup> Yet Drogheda

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<sup>32</sup> Christopher Hill, *God's Englishman: Oliver Cromwell* (Penguin Books, Limited, 1997), 113.

<sup>33</sup> Burke, "The New Model Army and the Problems of Siege Warfare, 1648-51," 10.

<sup>34</sup> Taylor, "Siege and Slaughter at Drogheda," 64.

would prove a formidable town to ensnare, with its walls being twenty feet high and six feet thick at the bottom. As previously mentioned, the revolutionary siege making capacity of the New Model Army proved essential in the effort to breach Drogheda's walls. With the guns in place by 10 September, and after Astons refusal to surrender, Cromwell ordered his troops to open fire the next day. After firing several hundred shots at the walls, they created two breaches in the 'east and south wall' which allowed three infantry regiments to attack those points at about 5pm.<sup>35</sup> The men, according to Cromwell "that stormed the breaches were forced to recoil, as is before expressed; yet, being encouraged to recover their loss, they made a second attempt : wherein God was pleased so to animate them that they got ground of the enemy, and by the goodness of God, forced him to quit his entrenchments."<sup>36</sup> Initially, the cavalry could not enter the breach because it was too high, and the defenders twice repulsed the assault on foot after intense fighting. It is said that the quantity of corpses in the breach became high enough to serve as a suitable ramp from ground level up to the lower edge of the hole in the wall, enabling Cromwell to throw his cavalry into an aggressive assault.<sup>37</sup>

It is in the events following the breach, and Cromwell's role in overseeing such events, where the controversy concerning him and the Irish really begins. On 11 September the terror commenced. Writing six days later to William Lenthall, Speaker of the Parliament of England, he states:

"The Governor, Sir Arthur Ashton, and divers considerable Officers being there, our men getting up to them, were ordered by me to put them all to the sword. And indeed, being in the heat of

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<sup>35</sup> Scott Wheeler, *The Irish and British Wars: Triumph, Tragedy, and Failure* (London: Routledge, 2002), 214.

<sup>36</sup> Oliver Cromwell, *Oliver Cromwell's Letters and Speeches*, 1894. Letter CV. Storm of Drogheda 17 Sept 1649.151

<sup>37</sup> Burke, "The New Model Army and the Problems of Siege Warfare, 1648-51," 11.

action, I forbade them to spare any that were in arms in the Town: and, I think, that night they put to the sword about 2,000 men; - divers of the officers a soldiers being fled over the Bridge into the other part of the Town, where about 100 of the possessed St. Peter's Church-steeple, some the west Gate, and others a strong Round Tower next the Gate called St. Sunday's. These being summoned to yield to mercy, refused. Whereupon I ordered the steeple of St. Peter's Church to be fired, when one of them was heard to say in the midst of the flames: "God damn me, God confound me; I burn, I burn."<sup>38</sup>

Ironically, those 'barbarous wretches', as Cromwell refers to them, were predominantly English-speaking and Protestant, including the officers Cromwell ordered to be 'put to the sword' in the preceding paragraph. Most of the men –including most of the officers- were English, the rest of Munster who had fought with Ormond against the rebels.<sup>39</sup> The sequence at which many officers were killed suggest some time elapsed before their slaughter, so that the killings did not occur in the heat of the initial storm.<sup>40</sup> Cromwell's men killed perhaps 3,000 Royalist troops, as well as all the Catholic clergy and the religious he could identify. Cromwell's disdain for priests remained no secret, and he ordered the execution of five at Drogheda; one a Jesuit and another a secular, one an Augustinian Friar and two Dominicans, all murdered.<sup>41</sup> What is less clear when analyzing Cromwell's role in the siege, is if his actions departed from or exceeded the accepted laws, practices, and norms of seventeenth century Europe. The people of Drogheda had been summoned and warned to end their prolonged resistance, yet they could

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<sup>38</sup> Cromwell, *Oliver Cromwell's Letters and Speeches*, 115.

<sup>39</sup> Morrill, John. "Cromwell, Oliver (1599–1658)." John Morrill In *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, edited by H. C. G. Matthew and Brian Harrison. Oxford: OUP, 2004

<sup>40</sup> Burke, "The New Model Army and the Problems of Siege Warfare, 1648-51," 13.

<sup>41</sup> Faul, "Cromwell In Ireland: The Massacres," 294.

not have expected the savagery that ensued. How could they? Even the events of the English Civil Wars bore little semblance to the horrors which followed. Cromwell made their choice simple: either surrender unconditionally, or die. When a party of eighty sought refuge in the tower of St. Peter's Church and refused to come down when summoned, Cromwell had a charge of gunpowder ignited underneath and, when this failed to shift them, he ordered the church furniture to be piled up and set alight. Fifty were cut down as they tried to escape the flames and the remainder were burned to death.<sup>42</sup> One screamed 'God damn me, God confound me; I burn, I burn', as Cromwell later recorded in a letter sent from Ireland to Parliament in 1649.

It can now be determined to what extent Cromwell personally oversaw and was directly responsible for innocent casualties, and what motives may have prompted him to engage in any other atrocities. In a later letter, Cromwell admits that 'many inhabitants died', however, there appears to have been no general massacre of civilians.<sup>43 44 45</sup> Tom Reilly, in his perusal of Drogheda's municipal records of 1649, read about the activities of hundreds of Drogheda people who went about their daily business in the days immediately after Cromwell's siege. Reilly found that not a single person in the town left written details of the deaths of even one unarmed civilian.<sup>46</sup> It is without doubt that some innocent men, women, and children died in the heat of battle, as happens in every violent conflict. Yet, despite Cromwell not being

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<sup>42</sup> Burke, "The New Model Army and the Problems of Siege Warfare, 1648-51," 13.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>44</sup> Wheeler, *The Irish and British Wars: Triumph, Tragedy, and Failure*, 214.

<sup>45</sup> Reilly, "Cromwell: The Irish Question."

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*



responsible for any general massacre of civilians, the fighting at Drogheda was undeniably gruesome, for three reasons.

Firstly, the antipathy between the English and the Irish already extended backward for centuries, with the invasion of Ireland by the English in 1117. Ireland held with it a history of repression, and deep and mutually engrained antagonisms between the two peoples undoubtedly elevated the levels of violence to unnerving proportions. Cromwell's determination to take revenge upon the Irish for the Uprising of 1641 added to the cauldron of friction. Though his outlet of choice to unleash that vengeance was wildly misplaced, it mattered little, as Oliver Cromwell remained 'persuaded that this is a righteous judgement of God upon these barbarous wretches', and acted accordingly. Cromwell's anger and vitriol is evident in his suggestion that, the general slaughter in the vicinity of the church was a fitting retribution for the 'insolent' who had dared celebrate a mass there on the previous Sunday.<sup>47</sup> Oliver's disdain for the Irish bleeds through his writings, and the battle of Drogheda served in many ways as the first opportunity for life long hatreds to be vented in full.

Secondly, the nature of the military operation itself necessitated brutality. If Cromwell wanted to 'prevent the effusion of blood for the future' he had to be certain that his army projected strength and fear. His severity appeared to have the desired effect, as a number of garrisons in the vicinity of Drogheda fled without even a show of resistance.<sup>48</sup> Prior to leaving for the invasion, Cromwell decided Ireland needed to be dealt with swiftly, and for three reasons: first, the possibility of foreign intervention via Ireland; second, the political situation in

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<sup>47</sup> Burke, "The New Model Army and the Problems of Siege Warfare, 1648-51," 13.

<sup>48</sup> Siochrú, "Atrocity, Codes of Conduct and the Irish in the British Civil Wars 1641-1653," 78.

England called for quick success without heavy financial burdens; third, if Cromwell had gotten bogged down in a long-drawn-out campaign in Ireland, control of the government of England may have gone to men of differing predilections.<sup>49</sup> A destructive campaign would kill two birds with one stone by deterring future enemy combatants and ensuring Cromwell could make it back in time to England. It is difficult to judge the level of deterrence which Drogheda provided the New Model Army throughout the entirety of the invasion, however its effect on the spirit of the parliamentary cause in London is clear: it celebrated the victory, setting aside October 30 as a day of public thanksgiving.

The final reason for the horrors that unfolded in Drogheda is the religious component, but not necessarily that of Cromwell's. For his motivation to crush Drogheda stemmed more from racial contempt and military practicalities than from his religious belief. However, the same cannot be said of the soldiers in the New Model Army. It is unlikely that the enlightened notion of religious toleration extended into the garrisons which comprised the most disciplined, organized, efficient, and religious army England had ever seen. Cromwell himself indicated where the source of his men's courage resides:

“And now give me leave to say how it comes to pass that this work is wrought. It was set upon some of our hearts, that a great thing should be done, not by power or might, but by the Spirit of God. And is it not so, clearly? That which caused your men to storm so courageously, it was the Spirit of God, who gave your men courage, and took it away again; and gave the Enemy

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<sup>49</sup> Hill, *God's Englishman*, 114.

courage, and took it away again; and gave your men courage again, and therewith this happy success. And therefor it is good that God alone have all the glory.”<sup>50</sup>

Cromwell’s decision to forbid his soldiers ‘to spare any that were in arms in the Town’ unleashed several thousand fanatics who all believed they were killing for the good of God, and that remains his most irresponsible and treacherous act of all.

In conclusion, though evidence indicating that Cromwell oversaw and was directly responsible for innocent casualties is lacking, the level of suffering and brutality during the siege proved to be enormous. Drogheda acted as the impetus for the demographic catastrophe which occurred in Ireland between 1649 and 1653, as mortality rates in the region hovered around 20 per cent due to the continued fighting, disease, and starvation.<sup>51</sup> Hugh Peter, Cromwell’s chaplain, estimates 3,552 ‘enemy’ killed at Drogheda, while Cromwell himself placed the number at 2,900.<sup>52</sup> The tragedies were abundant, but it seemed that Cromwell projected terror only towards enemy combatants, civilians who refused to surrender, and Roman Catholic clergy and religious persons. Of the three, the first two are well within rule and reason and the third is a cruel individual animus, but still far from constituting any massive affliction terror. Cromwell’s targets were not random and most of the time not completely innocent. Drogheda has created a disproportionate dint in the legacy of Oliver Cromwell, considering the time he spent in Ireland compared to the duration of his ascension and rule. It’s a legacy that is unlikely to change dramatically soon. However, a more nuanced discussion

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<sup>50</sup> Oliver, Cromwell, *Oliver Cromwell’s Letters and Speeches*, 154.

<sup>51</sup> Siochrú, “Atrocity, Codes of Conduct and the Irish in the British Civil Wars 1641-1653,” 79.

<sup>52</sup> A letter from Ireland, read in the House of Commons, from Mr. Hugh Peter, minister of God’s Lord (London, Sept. 1649)

concerning Cromwell is welcomed, particularly as it relates to his motivations when storming Drogheda. Emphasizing his religion can undervalue the importance religion had on his men, and mitigates other equally important factors such as racial animosities and military realities.

Between August 1649 and May 1650, Oliver Cromwell brought terror to Drogheda, Ireland neither indiscriminately or to the level of constituting genocide, but in a manner calculated to send a warning to the rest of Ireland. Today, the country still hears him.

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