

Kildare rebellion

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Both the Kildare rebellion of 1534 and the rebellion of the 1640s failed due to insufficient military support. If the rebels had acquired the military back-up they sought they may have initially prevailed, however, they would not have endured. The rebels would have been unable to sustain their aims due to the complex political circumstances during which they occurred. This essay discusses the events and aims of each rebellion, and attempts to illustrate how the rebels would have been unable to achieve and maintain their aims given the political conditions in England and the political instability in Ireland. Ireland, ultimately, was too divided politically with no strong political base present. The political situation in Ireland since the 1470's, saw the Anglo-Norman Earls of Kildare rule as lord deputy for the crown. This policy of devolution was the most economic way for the king to govern Ireland, but it also created a sense of autonomy for Ireland. There was tension and unease about the power of the Kildares with the feeling that they were becoming too powerful and independent. During the 1530's, Tudor political reform brought about a protected change in English policy towards Ireland. Henry VIII's chief minister, Thomas Cromwell, drew up a policy to lessen the power of the Kildares and put more control into the hands of the king. In 1533, Garret "G" was summoned to London to discuss this program of political reform and to respond to grievances of his deputyship, leaving his son Silken Thomas in command. Hayes-McCoy notes that the expansion of the structure of the English state created much friction between the Anglo-Irish and the Gaelic-Irish. Hence, from the beginning there was political instability present in Ireland evident in both the dynastic rivalry between the Kildares and the Butlers, and also within the Irish themselves. Conflicting reports exist as to

why the rebellion of 1534 occurred. Some historians attribute it to the Cannon Letter, which documented the alleged death of Garret Á g, and fell into the hands of Silken Thomas who, in retaliation, renounced his allegiance to the throne and lay siege on Dublin. Stanihurst documents Thomas' arrival at St. Mary's Abbey and his dramatic declaration: ' I am none of Henrie his deputie... I am his fo!' More recent historians, like Bradshaw, attribute the outbreak of the revolution to ' Cromwellian political reform'. Bradshaw also notes that, either way, the ' deciding factor for Silken Thomas and his advisers was the knowledge that Kildare had lost the political battle in London'. Furthermore, Bradshaw describes the rebellion as a ' premeditated response to a contingency that had been anticipated as far back as the previous autumn' . The Kildares had planned this; it was not a rash decision of Silken Thomas. The rebels used the threat of political chaos in Ireland to try and ensure their aims were met. The original aims of the Kildare rebellion were to preserve the old order, to protect Kildare power by keeping what they had, and to remain chief governors of Ireland. These aims were in retaliation to the new English policy, and it is suggested that the timing of the Cannon Letter presented Silken Thomas with the opportunity to rebel. As time progressed, it is evident that these aims expanded to include the right to religious freedom. Ellis notes that Silken Thomas, taking advantage of the king's schism with the Catholic Church, decided to turn his revolt into a ' religious crusade' spurred on by the hope of ' Imperial intervention and the likelihood of clerical support for his cause' . Ellis also remarks how the king was troubled by the rebels ' negotiations with Charles V, from which the major threat to security and policy would come' . Cromwell had never

intended on destroying the Kildares completely. But as the rebellion took hold, it became evident that Henry VIII wanted to crush the revolt rather than negotiate. Although it had previously worked for the Kildares, Silken Thomas' original plan of threatening the king to back-down had backfired. With insufficient military support, and faced with the intense determination of the king, the rebellion was defeated. Silken Thomas and his five uncles were executed, bringing an end to the supremacy of the Kildare family. By incorporating religion into his aims, Silken Thomas dramatically altered the political circumstances. Introducing a European dimension put pressure on the king to react harshly. Silken Thomas effectively contributed to his own downfall. Even if the Kildares had triumphed in the events of 1534, their success would have been short-lived. The Irish population of the 16th century consisted of two cultures, the Anglo-Irish and the Gaelic-Irish. Although they had united for the purposes of the rebellion, due to the religious element connecting them, this is where the affiliation ended. The friction that existed between these groups resulted in Ireland being too politically unstable to progress as an independent state. Their opposition on the other hand was better equipped; militarily and politically. The English monarchy, guided by Cromwell, was a challenging opponent for the rebels, and the rebellion was defeated by Skeffington and his army. Furthermore, the protestant reformation, that was unfolding within Europe, would have presented more difficulties for the Kildares in securing their aims, if they had been successful. The rebellion of the 1640's consisted of a movement of the Old Irish of Ulster to " overthrow the plantation and restore Catholicism" . The aims of the rebels were to attain the freedom to practice their religion

and the preservation of their land. Similar to the Kildare rebellion, the rebels wanted to prevent change. Their first move was to proclaim loyalty to the king in an effort to secure the support of the Old English. In 1642, the Confederation of Kilkenny was established with the motto ‘ pro deo, pro rege, pro patria Hibernia unanimis’. J. C. Beckett describes this union as an ‘ alliance of individuals, bound by oath to the pursuit of common objects’. As time progressed, tensions and divisions became apparent within the Confederates. Charles I, unable to concede to the high demands of the rebels, sent his representative, the Earl of Ormond, to delegate. The treaty that was proposed culminated in a split between the Old English and the Gaelic-Irish within the Confederation. The Old English had a lot at stake and were willing to accept the offer of de facto toleration as they realised that they were in danger of losing everything; which is what happens eventually. But the Gaelic-Irish, encouraged by Archbishop Rinuccini, felt they could take advantage of the king’s desperation and hoped that by holding out they could force the king to meet their aims. The radicals had already lost their land from the plantations, so essentially they had nothing else to lose. The aims of the rebels had altered under influence of Rinuccini, who had been instructed to ‘ restore and re-establish the public exercise of the Catholic religion in the island of Ireland’. This religious dimension put pressure on the Confederates resulting in an unstable political base in Ireland. The conflicting aims within these political circumstances would have proved difficult to maintain, if the rebels had succeeded. The civil war in England between Charles I and parliament provides a political backdrop for the events of the 1640’s. Parliament, composed of protestant fanatics, wanted a weaker

monarchy and despised the Catholics. The massacre of Irish Protestants during the 1641 rebellion had fueled this hate. There was a fear that the English parliament was going to gain more power, possibly leading to further Catholic persecution. The Confederates had proposed that if the king met their aims, they would form an army and fight for the king in the civil war. The king really needed the support of an Irish army but was caught in difficult position. Realistically, he could not grant Catholics complete freedom, given that he was the king of a largely Protestant England. Consequently, the religious and political circumstances hinder the prospect of the rebels reaching their goals. These political circumstances demonstrate why the rebels would have been unable to achieve their aims, even if they had succeeded militarily. Firstly, there was a division in Ireland between the Irish and English Catholics. Both were loyal to Charles I, but there was tension between them. Furthermore, in Ulster there were Scottish settlers who were loyal to parliament and detested the Catholics. Gillespie notes this division as he points out that there was no uniform national rising in 1641 giving broad ' regional and political variations in the pattern of the rebellion and in the settler response to it' . The Confederation progressed for a short period. But ultimately there was no political stability in Ireland, making their quest for achieving their aims unattainable. Parliament was successful in the civil war. Charles I was killed; and England became a republic dominated by an army led by Oliver Cromwell. So even if the Confederates had won the rebellion, any achievements would have been crushed by Cromwell. This occurred regardless, as Cromwell invaded Ireland in 1649. There are many similarities evident between the 1534 rebellion and the rebellion of the

1640's. Both begin with a sense of localism with an aim to preserve the old order, expanding over time to involve a religious element and incorporate a European dimension. Militarily, the risings equally fail. Although a century apart, political instability in Ireland seems to be a common theme running through both. Neither rebellion could have ultimately achieved and maintained their aims given the political strength of the English against the lack of political stability and coherency in Ireland.