A Short History of Ireland

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From his Confessions we also learn that Patrick’s father was named Calpurnius and was not only a decurion, a member of the Roman British ruling group, but also a deacon of the Christian Church and a landowner. He and others like him suffered at the hands of raiding Irishmen, and Patrick himself and his two sisters were taken captive in one such raid. From the age of sixteen for six years, Patrick was a slave herdsman in Co. Antrim, which occupation gave him plenty of time for contemplation. ‘Every day was spent in frequent prayer’, he says, going on to reveal that the love of God increased in him so much, that he would recite one hundred prayers a day, and almost as many each night. ‘I felt no evil’, he adds, ‘nor was there any laziness in me because, as I now see, the Spirit was burning within me.’ At the age of twenty-three, Patrick escaped back to England and his home a convinced Christian. He probably would have stayed at home with his family were it not for a vision:

I saw in the night the vision of a man whose name was Victorius, coming as it were from Ireland, with countless letters. And he gave me one of them and I read the opening words of the letter which were ‘The voice of the Irish’ and as I read the beginning of the letter, I thought that at the same moment I heard their voice:… ‘We ask thee, boy, come and walk among us once more.’

He left home after this vision. He may have travelled to the south of France to be received and ordained as a priest, but he may instead have travelled north in England to be ordained by Germanus of Auxerre, a soldier—bishop evangelizing in Britain around 430. At any rate it seems clear that Patrick was properly ordained a priest, but more than that is problematical. One of the scribes of the Book of Armagh tells us:

In the thirteenth year of the Emperor Theodosius, the Bishop Patrick was sent by Celestine, Bishop and Pope of Rome, to instruct the Irish. Bishop Palladius was first sent, who was also called Patrick by a second name, and he was martyred among the Irish, as the old saints have said. Then the second Patrick was sent by the Angel of God Victor and by Pope Celestine. All Ireland believed, and nearly all were baptised by him.

Against this, however, is the whole nature of Patrick’s Confessions which were written as his defence against charges, brought in an ecclesiastical court in Britain, which — almost certainly — concerned his claim to be a bishop and his authority for journeying to Ireland as a missionary. The internal evidence of the Confessions
and of Patrick's one other documentary account of his mission, his Letter to Coroticus, clearly indicate that Patrick was never consecrated a bishop, but had to claim the position once in Ireland in order to ordain priests himself to help carry out his work. In addition, it also seems that Patrick applied to his British superiors (i.e. bishops) for permission to undertake his mission to Ireland, was refused, and nevertheless went ahead thus forcing an ecclesiastical court to judge his actions. In the Confessions, Patrick even implies that he was found guilty:

Accordingly, on the day I was condemned, as related above, on that night I saw a writing – it was before my image without honour – and at the same time I heard the Divine voice saying to me 'With displeasure we have seen the image of a chosen one stripped of title', nor did he say 'I have seen' but 'We have seen' as if He joined Himself with me as if He said 'Who touches you touches, as it were, the apple of my eye.'

Throughout, Patrick was certain of his defence: that in all his actions he enjoyed the sanction of the highest source of all, of God himself 'who is greater than all'. The natural reluctance of later Irish Christian monks, claiming descent and legitimacy from Patrick's mission, to admit that the mission was not legitimate is the simplest explanation of the confusion about Patrick's status.

The Irish Church, founded by Patrick who established its centre at Armagh, rapidly adapted to the circumstances of the country. At first, Patrick succeeded in introducing the concept of bishoprics, as existed in France, with their hierarchy of ecclesiastical authority. Soon, however, the geography and political experience of the country – without towns and roads and without central political unity – demonstrated that Patrick's plan was completely unsuitable. So, instead of having a number of city-based bishop and archbishoprics, Ireland developed – in opposition to Patrick's intentions – a monastic Church more in keeping with Gaelic society. While Patrick 'baptised thousands, ordained clerics everywhere' and 'gave presents to kings', his colleagues and successors concentrated more upon converting the leaders of Gaelic society, not attempting to interfere with Gaelic social structure, thus meshing their evangelism with native custom and practice. Pagan Gaelic celebrations were tolerated and sometimes – like the Feast of All Saints – adopted for Christian purposes. The forts and encampments of Gaelic kings and chiefs were chosen as the sites for churches, abbeys and monasteries, although Tara remained a pagan centre well into the sixth century.

Legends rapidly accumulated around Patrick's life. He is credited with having banished snakes from Ireland from the summit of Croagh Patrick in Co. Mayo, and to have established the shamrock as one of Ireland's national symbols by using the three leaves of the plant to explain the mystery of the Trinity to the high king at Tara. The undoubted success of his mission accounts for the central place he came to hold in Irish tradition. In 1932 the Eucharistic Congress in Dublin, on the fifteenth centenary of the saint's commencement of his mission, witnessed the largest crowds ever assembled in the city until Pope John Paul II's visit in 1979.

A century after Patrick's arrival, Irish monks began evangelizing abroad themselves. Pagan Gaels' veneration of learning, and the Gaelic class of learned men – the brehons, poets, historians and druids – found a natural place within the Christian order and lent the Irish Church a special quality. St Ninian, an Ulsterman, the first major missionary and teacher after Patrick, established early in the fifth century the monastery of Candida Casa at Whithorn in western Scotland where many more missionaries studied. By the first quarter of the sixth century, Patrick's episcopal organization was succumbing to monasticism with abotts supplanting bishops as the principal churchmen in Ireland. One such abbot, St Finnian, went on to found the monastic school at Clonard, Co. Meath, where he emphasized study and scholarship to a group of followers known as the 'Twelve Apostles of Ireland'. Two of them, St Ciaran and St Colmcille (also known as St Columba), were to establish monasticism and scholarship as the hallmarks of the Irish Church. St Ciaran founded the church and monastery of Clonmacnoise on the river Shannon. St Colmcille founded the monasteries of Derry, Swords, Durrow and Kells before sailing with twelve followers to Iona on the west coast of Scotland, where he built one of the greatest early Christian monastic schools before he died in 597. The annals of Clonmacnoise state that Colmcille wrote three hundred books in his own hand, and by tradition he is held to be the scribe of the Cathach, the oldest surviving Irish manuscript. From his foundation at Iona, Irish monks converted Scotland and much of England and, as the seventh-century English monk and historian, the Venerable Bede, was always anxious to point out, Colmcille and the monks from Iona also played a large part in maintaining Christianity among their converts.
The combination of evangelism, asceticism and scholarship epitomized by monks like Colmcille provided the Irish Church with its golden age. Their missionary fervour and complete dedication to Christianity carried Irish monks outside the British isles to Italy, France, Spain, Germany and central Europe. From 500 to 800, the Irish Church had no compare in the Christian world. After 800 its missionary work did not stop, but it became increasingly involved in the Roman controversy about the date of Easter and the ever-increasing claims of the papacy, and at home Viking raids destroyed domestic stability. Yet the achievement of the early Irish Church produced a lasting influence on the development of Christianity. In the three hundred years before the ninth century, expatriate Irish missionaries reintroduced Christianity to areas which had been overrun by the tribes which completed the collapse of the Roman Empire. They replaced the custom of public absolution with the Irish Church's practice of private confession, used by the Catholic Church to the present day. The most prominent of these expatriates was St Columbanus, born in the province of Leinster around 543, who with his followers founded the monasteries of Annegray, Luxeuil and Fontaines in France, St Gall in Switzerland, Wurzburg in Germany, Vienna in Austria, possibly one at Prague in Czechoslovakia, and Bobbio in Piedmont in northern Italy where Columbanus died in 615.

After the fall of Rome in the fifth century, the Dark Ages became set in Europe. Marauding Teutonic tribes ravaged the European continent, and the Jutes, Angles and Saxons overrun England. In the whole of Europe, Ireland alone remained unscathed, providing a refuge to Christian scholars, more and more of whom escaped there with lasting effect. By the time of the Emperor Charlemagne in the eighth century, if a man knew Greek it was simply assumed he was Irish. Alcuin, the leading scholar at the court of Charlemagne, and Scotus Eriugena ("Scotus" meaning 'Irish'), Europe's foremost philosopher in the ninth century, both studied at Clonmacnoise where they learned not only the Bible and Christian theology, but also the language and the works of the writers and poets of ancient Greece and Rome. Almost all Ireland, disregarding the sea, is migrating to our shores with a flock of philosophers' complained Heinic of Auxerre in 870 observing the sheer multitude of Irishmen in the kingdoms of Europe.

The first Viking raids on Irish monasteries occurred in 795 when Iona was sacked and the grave of St Colmcille desecrated. That same year Vikings also landed on Lambay Island, off the coast of Dublin. These first raids were conducted by Vikings from Norway, but they were by no means the first pillagers of Irish religious sites.

Between the time of Patrick and the arrival of the Vikings, Ireland had developed considerably politically. By the late eighth century two high kingdoms dominated the many small kingdoms and tribes of the country. In the north the Ua Neill ruled from Tara, while in the south the Eoganachta ruled from the Rock of Cashel. Between them lay a third, small province of Leinster around Dublin. In the eighth century and throughout the ninth century, the Ua Neill and Eoganachta struggled for supremacy, in the process destroying more monasteries, churches and abbeys than the Vikings ever did. As a result, there was no united Irish resistance to the Vikings, and many Irish kings and chiefs allied with the invaders. By the late eighth century the outstanding artistic achievement of the early Christian era, the Irish illuminated manuscripts, was already perceived as being too vulnerable to political violence, and the perfection of the more sturdy stone and metal religious work began to absorb the artistic energies of Irish monks.

The finest, though not the earliest, illuminated manuscript is the eighth-century copy of the Gospels, the Book of Kells, now the pride of the Library of Trinity College, Dublin. By the time the three scribes who copied the Book started writing, Vikings had already landed in Britain. Indeed, it is likely that the Book was begun on Iona and transferred for safety and completion to Kells. The first illustration in it is the earliest representation of the Virgin and Child in a western manuscript. Written in Latin, the language of the Church which St Patrick introduced to Ireland, it employs a script which is the recognizable precursor of Irish script today. Each page of the Book of Kells, and of every other Irish manuscript of the period, is testimony to a fantastic amount of painstaking work and skill. For the scribes, it was another way of communing with God.

Metalwork flourished beside the art of illumination in Ireland during the Dark Ages and later. There was a much longer history of making exquisite metal objects in Ireland than there was of writing and illumination. Christian Irish metalworkers were able to draw upon countless generations of knowledge, skill and experience to
make the croziers, chalices, pestles, crosses and other religious artifacts which the Vikings prized so much. From the ninth century onwards, as Viking raids increased, the skills of the calligrapher and the metalworker combined in the third great Irish art form, the stone high crosses. While churches and monasteries could have their manuscript and metal treasures plundered and destroyed, the craftsmen of the crosses must have realized that their stone work would not attract the Vikings in the same way.

Stone crosses of simple design date from the eighth century, but by the ninth century complex configurations of biblical scenes—usually of the crucifixion and the disciples and Christ—were incorporated within the shape of the cross. During the ninth century, however, the high cross itself developed, and the designs became more intricate. At Moone, Co. Kildare, the high cross is 17 feet tall and contains scenes which include Daniel in the Lion’s Den and Adam and Eve on the point of eating the apple.

In the face of ever-increasing violent Viking incursions and domestic anarchy, and as Christianity became established, stone began to be used in building construction as well. Small, boat-shaped churches and beehive-shaped stone cells began to be built in the eighth century, and many can still be seen in the south-west of Ireland. Stone round towers were built on religious sites from about 900 until 1150. Tall, thin, with conical roofs and doorways some distance from the ground, these probably fulfilled the dual function of bell- and watch-towers. No other buildings are so unmistakably Irish: only two—both in Scotland—have been discovered outside Ireland. Put together, the change from inflamable manuscripts and wood to durable stone crosses and buildings reflected the great terror the Vikings inspired. One Irish monk wrote thankfully in the margin of his manuscript one stormy night:

The wind is fierce tonight
Ploughing the wild white ocean;
I need not dread fierce Vikings
Crossing the Irish Sea.

For two hundred years the Viking raids lasted. They attacked not only Ireland, but also Britain and the rest of Europe as far afield as Paris, Sicily and Constantinople. Christianity, which had with difficulty in western Europe survived the fall of Rome, now found itself faced with severe attack again. Had it not been for the Viking urge to settle and willingness to adopt Christianity, Christian Gaelic society might have been completely lost. Viking kingdoms were founded in Normandy, southern Italy, eastern England and in Ireland in Limerick where in 841 the Norse king Thorgesius founded Ireland’s first city, Dublin, at the mouth of the river Liffey. In 851 after a great naval battle at Carlingford Lough, the Norwegian Vikings were replaced in Ireland by their Danish kinsmen, who proved just as anxious as their predecessors to relieve monasteries of their treasures.

The Vikings were not a purely destructive force in Irish history. By the second half of the ninth century, Viking raids had given way to Viking settlement, intermarrying and trading with the Irish, and even giving us the name ‘Ireland’—the old Gaelic of ‘Erin’ or ‘Eire’ with the Scandinavian word ‘land’ added. As the struggle between the Eoganachta and Ui Neill for dominance in Ireland progressed, Viking settlers began to be drawn into the fabric of Irish politics. By the early years of the tenth century, the Ui Neill had defeated the Eoganachta (at the battle of Ballaghoon in 908) and subdued the Viking settlements in all but Dublin, where the Vikings found common cause with the men of Leinster and allied for their independence against the Ui Neill. This was the high point of Ui Neill success. Before they could extend their domination in the east of the country, in 914 a great Viking fleet landed a new wave of invaders at Waterford. Within six years they had established themselves in Dublin and had founded towns at Limerick, Cork and Wexford. In 977 the Viking King Olaf of the Sandals defeated the Ul Neill high king Domnall and extended his kingdom from Dublin to the Shannon, placing the Irish in Meath under an oppression so severe they called it a ‘Babylonish captivity’.

As the end of the tenth century approached, however, two important events had taken place. The Vikings in Ireland, despite their fierceness, had in the main accepted Christianity, and Brian Boru had become high king of southern Ireland.

Brian Boru has been compared to Alfred the Great, and his twelfth-century biographer made Alfred the model for his hero. His outstanding achievement was that he enforced his authority in varying degrees over all the people of Ireland—Viking settlers included—and defeated the Danes. The extent of his authority was
not unusual – the greatest of the Uí Neill kings in the three previous centuries had enjoyed comparable power – but he overthrew Uí Neill hegemony and made the high kingship a sought-after prize in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. He did not make a national monarchy or a nationhood, but his career sparked the subsequent theory of an all-powerful high kingship for which later leaders fought. Brian was born around 940 into the Cenneyidegh clan of north Munster, and took the name ‘Boru’ from the town of Borimie, near Killaloe in Co. Clare. He rapidly proved himself an able warrior and strategist in countless battles against the Danes who had conquered much of Munster. In 968 he won a notable victory which regained Cashel, re-establishing it as the seat of the Munster kings. From 976 Brian ruled southern Ireland as king of Munster, and from 1002 he was acknowledged as the first absolute high king of all Ireland. He re-asserted the ecclesiastical primacy of Armagh, and in 1004 he demonstrated his own supremacy by conducting a grand tour of the country, marching northwards from his palace at Kincora (near Killaloe), always keeping the sea to his left, through Connaught and Ulster to Armagh, south through Meath to Dublin which he entered in triumph and where he received homage from the Viking residents, and then through Leinster and Munster back to Cashel.

Despite his successes and his claims, however, Brian always faced resistance to his authority. The families of Leinster had always been reluctant vassals to the Uí Neill and found Brian no different. During the ninth and tenth centuries they had frequently allied with the Danes of Dublin against the hegemony of the Uí Neill, and by 1014 Brian faced a serious challenge to his authority in the shape of a Leinster–Dublin–Viking alliance. On Good Friday, 23 April 1014, the two sides joined battle at Clontarf, outside Dublin. They were evenly matched, but the Danes were eventually driven back to the beach at Clontarf where an exceptionally high tide drowned hundreds of them before they could reach the safety of their ships. During the battle, Brian himself was killed at the moment of his victory. As the Vikings themselves admitted in Njal’s saga: ‘Brian fell, but won at last.’ After his death, no other high king ever attained the complete supremacy he enjoyed. Indeed, not until the reign of Queen Elizabeth I did any ruler compare with Brian in authority in Ireland.

The battle of Clontarf was not fought by Brian or the Leinstermen and their allies for the sovereignty of Ireland, although in subsequent nationalist tradition it was portrayed as such a battle. It was really an episode in the constant internal struggle for provincial and regional sovereignty.

As a result of Brian’s victory, the Boru dynasty established itself and Brian’s descendants ruled Munster and much of Ireland for the following 150 years. There was another consequence of his victory as well: in contrast to Britain at this time, where the Danish King Canute had established his dominance, in Ireland the Danes now firmly opted for a commercial life. By 1014, the Danes were a minor political force in Ireland, and Brian’s victory at Clontarf confirmed this. Danes in their towns of Dublin, Wexford, Waterford, Cork and Limerick controlled Ireland’s wine trade, and their trading ties not only began to concentrate the wealth of Ireland on the east coast in Leinster, but also to maintain a quality of separateness from the rest of the country. This was particularly manifested in two ways. First, Danes in Ireland naturally felt strong connections with Danes nearby in Britain. Secondly, and as a corollary, Danes in Ireland followed the practices of the Roman Church which acknowledged the primacy of bishops and held sway in Britain and western Europe, rather than of the Irish Church which was dominated by abbots. Thus the Church in Britain was interested in reforming the Irish Church and in extending its influence to Ireland directly. Together, these elements were to fuel conflicts and eventually were to involve Britain directly in Irish affairs. But before this happened, Irish art and architecture flowered again.

In Irish monasteries, in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, monks and scribes began to record old Gaelic poems and sagas in manuscripts like the Book of Leinster and the Book of Armagh. Before this, they had concentrated upon Latin transcriptions of religious texts, but with the passing of the first flush of enthusiasm for asceticism and evangelizing which had characterized the early Irish Church, Irish monks had become more worldly and their monasteries more secular. In this way, ancient Gaelic heritage was preserved in the monasteries. In addition, Irish versions of the Trojan Wars and the Roman Civil War were written as the scribes experimented with their new-found freedom. The art of the high cross reached its climax with refined, sophisticated carving, and metalwork attained a new mastery with the extraordinarily fine
Cross of Cong, commissioned in about 1123 by Turloch O'Connor, King of Connaught, to enshrine a relic of the True Cross. Church building became more elaborate: the splendid Hiberno-Romanesque Cormac's Chapel on the Rock of Cashel was begun by King Cormac MacCarthy of Munster in 1127. It incorporated rib-vaulting in the roof of the chancel, a technique which the Crusaders had brought back to Europe from the Near East, and which was first used in the choir of Durham Cathedral which was completed in 1093. The use of this technique at Cashel within forty years was a testimony to Irish adventurousness at this time, as well as to wide-flung contacts. The Romanesque style soon came to govern ecclesiastical building throughout the country, culminating with Clonfert Cathedral in Co. Galway, completed in 1164.

However, the Irish Church with its secularization and rejection of episcopal authority was becoming increasingly anomalous. Between 640 and 1080 there was no written correspondence between the Irish Church and the papacy; no Irish armies took part in the Crusades. Both these facts reflect the way in which Ireland was removed from the mainstream of European politics and society. While this preserved Gaelic culture, it also meant that Gaelic culture influenced the Irish Church. By the eighth century, before the Viking onslaughts, Gaelic customs had given rise to lay abbots, married clergy, pluralism and family succession to ecclesiastical office in the Irish Church. In the Roman Church, which by the twelfth century had succeeded in establishing its dominance in Britain and the rest of Europe, reforms had ended similar abuses and had created an episcopal hierarchy recognizing papal authority in Church affairs. Pope Gregory VII (1073–85) in the programme 'Unity and Purity' included Ireland as being within his jurisdiction and, to carry out papal wishes, the Norman archbishops of Canterbury revived their claim to be supreme over Ireland.

Canterbury's claim over Ireland dated from the sixth century when St Augustine was appointed first archbishop of Canterbury by Pope Gregory I with authority over the British isles as a whole. This authority remained nominal until, after their conversion, Danes in Ireland chose to join Danes in England and recognize Canterbury's ecclesiastical primacy over Armagh or local Irish abbots. Thus there was a constant pull from England exerted upon Leinster, Dublin and the other towns of Ireland's eastern seaboard, and on occasion archbishops of Canterbury used their claim to press the case for reform of the Irish Church upon Irish high kings. Recognizing the need for reform, Irish Church leaders set about reorganizing the Irish Church on Roman lines and sought papal approval for their efforts. In 1150 an Italian, Cardinal Paparo, was appointed first papal legate to Ireland, and in 1152 he attended a synod at Kells, Co. Meath, convened by the abbots and bishops of the Irish Church. At this synod Paparo, with his papal authority, ratified an episcopal organization for the Irish Church consisting of thirty-six bishops and four archbishops at Cashel, Tuam, Dublin and the primacy at Armagh. In return for selecting Dublin as the metropolitan see for Leinster, churchmen there at last accepted Armagh's authority instead of Canterbury's. However, in order for the reforms to succeed against generations of different practice, the support of a powerful, central political authority was required. Such an authority did not exist in Ireland — at any one time there were at least three leading kings with competing claims — and so in 1155, by the papal bull 'Laudabiliter', Pope Adrian IV granted the lordship of Ireland to the powerful King Henry II of England 'to reveal the truth of the Christian faith to peoples still untaught and barbarous'.

In the middle of the twelfth century, Ireland while constantly warring internally was not 'untaught and barbarous', and it was Christian. Statements to the contrary in 'Laudabiliter', however, were designed to sustain papal requirements for reform of the Irish Church and to justify the selection of Henry II as a papal agent in this respect. Pope Adrian IV was also the only English Pope in history — he was born Nicolas Breakspear at Langley, near St Albans — and held high notions of the papal supremacy over all other rulers. No doubt he saw that if Henry II expanded his power to Ireland, then there would be an opportunity to secure firm control of the Church there too. The Pope's right to grant such an authority derived from the 'Donation of Constantine', supposedly of 325 but subsequently shown to have been an eighth-century forgery, whereby the papacy claimed all islands converted to Christianity. In 'Laudabiliter' Pope Adrian IV refers to this while neatly stating papal supremacy: 'Ireland, and indeed all islands on which Christ, the sun of justice, has shed His rays, and which have received the teachings of the Christian faith, belong to the jurisdiction of blessed Peter and the holy Roman Church is a fact beyond doubt, and one which Your
Majesty recognizes.' In return for papal support in entering Ireland, Henry II was required 'to pay to St Peter the annual tax of one penny from each household, and to preserve the rights of the churches of that land intact and unimpaired'. The Pope's blessing was clear:

We regard it as pleasing and acceptable to us that you should enter that island for the purpose of enlarging the boundaries of the Church, checking the descent into wickedness, correcting morals and implanting virtues, and encouraging the growth of the faith of Christ; that you pursue policies directed towards the honour of God and the well-being of that land, and that the people of that land receive you honourably and respect you as their lord.

This was the start of England's formal claim to Ireland; a claim which, if the Irish were obedient to the head of the Church, was to be accepted without opposition.

Controversy has raged as to whether 'Laudabiliter', like the 'Donation of Constantine', was a forgery or a later invention of Norman–English kings to justify their Irish exploits. No copy of the bull is in the Vatican Library, and the only existing text comes from the Norman–English Giraldus Cambrensis' untrustworthy Conquest of Ireland written between 1186 and 1189. However, there is other contemporary evidence for 'Laudabiliter' and it is now generally accepted that it was not a forgery. Most important, the Irish accepted it without question at the time.

A year after the Pope had granted Henry II the lordship of Ireland, the high king, Turloch O'Connor, died. The O'Connor family had ruled Connaught for several generations before becoming dominant throughout Ireland during the twelfth century. Ten years later, in 1166, Turloch's son Rory became high king. Before he could properly establish his authority, however, Henry II, fourteen years after he had been granted them, decided to claim the rights set down in 'Laudabiliter'. He was prompted to do so by Diarmuid MacMurrough, king of Leinster.

MacMurrough has been remembered only as a villain, the man singly responsible for Ireland's domination by Britain. He was a villain, but he was more besides. Under his auspices the Book of Leinster was written, a great anthology of literature and history. He built churches and monasteries (he also destroyed some), and was a master of Irish politics and position. He was ruthlessly cruel: in 1132 in an attempt to place a relation of his as abbess of the convent at Kildare, he had the rival abbess raped by a common soldier to render her unfit to continue office. He was also a man of passion, and therein lay his own and Ireland's undoing. In 1152 he ran off with the wife of a rival king, Tiernan O'Rourke, prince of Breffny. O'Rourke never forgave Diarmuid for this and plotted his revenge. In 1166 he managed to gather the other sub-kings and chiefs of Leinster in his support and succeeded in forcing Diarmuid to flee Ireland, little realizing that Diarmuid's implacable determination to retain his kingship matched O'Rourke's hatred of him.

Diarmuid travelled to Bristol where he had religious and trading friends and there learnt that Henry II was in France. In the early spring of 1167, Diarmuid caught up with the roving Henry II in Aquitaine, sought his support to regain his kingdom, swore fealty to him and, if he did not already know, learned about 'Laudabiliter'. For Henry II, the Irish exile's request for help no doubt presented an opportunity to distract his own unruly subjects in Wales and the Welsh Marches from causing him trouble (underemployed knights, Henry had found, generated lawlessness), and so he gave Diarmuid money and authority to recruit support in Britain. Diarmuid returned to Bristol, but was disappointed with the local response to his cause. Then he was approached by Richard FitzGilbert de Clare, earl of Strigul, known today as Strongbow. Strongbow was sulking and restless because Henry II had not confirmed his title of earl of Pembroke and had given to others some lands to which Strongbow thought he was entitled. He agreed to support Diarmuid in Ireland, and in return Diarmuid promised Strongbow his daughter in marriage and the succession to the kingdom of Leinster over the rights of Diarmuid's sons. Men whose surnames are now amongst the most common in Ireland joined the enterprise. Robert Fitz-Stephen, a Norman–Welsh adventurer whose mother through a succession of husbands and lovers made him related to a host of connections in Wales and at Henry II's court, was the next to throw in with Diarmuid, together with many of his relations. Strongbow's first cousin and FitzStephen's half-brother, Maurice FitzGerald, agreed to join in return for Diarmuid's promise that he would share with FitzStephen the town of Wexford and some surrounding lands. Diarmuid also managed to secure the services of a group of Flemish mercenaries led by Richard FitzGodebert de Roche, and they accompanied him when he returned to Ireland in the summer of
1167. In this piecemeal fashion began the British invasion of Ireland, the consequences of which are still with us today.

In Ireland, Diarmuid rallied support in south Leinster, and then bided his time for nearly two years, all the while urging his new allies to come and intervene on his behalf. On 1 May 1169 or thereabouts, the first of Strongbow’s expeditionary forces landed at Bannow Bay, Co. Wexford, consisting of about ninety horsemen and three hundred archers and men-at-arms, led by FitzStephen. Within a day another strong force landed at Bannow Bay under the command of Maurice de Prendergast, who was (apparently) from a Flemish colony in Pembroke/stephe and not related to the Strongbow/FitzStephen family. Under FitzStephen, the Normans first captured Wexford town, using the longbow and cavalry — both new to Ireland — to great effect. Naturally alarmed by this new invasion which, although small in number, was obviously militarily formidable, the high king Rory O’Connor marched against Diarmuid. Events played into O’Connor’s hands. De Prendergast and two hundred of his men, faced by the prospect of being overwhelmed by O’Connor’s army, asked Diarmuid for passage back to Wales. Diarmuid arranged for no ships to be available, and so de Prendergast promptly changed sides. Diarmuid then chose prudence and recognized O’Connor as high king in return for freedom of action in south Leinster, and O’Connor left unaware of the strength of the Norman threat.

Diarmuid immediately wrote to Strongbow to send reinforcements, and so brought about the battle which later generations of Irishmen were to regard as crucial. Strongbow sent an advance guard under the command of Raymond Carew (‘le Gros’), another FitzStephen/FitzGerald/Strongbow relation, with ten knights and seventy archers. In May 1170 they landed at Baginbun on the Wexford coast and quickly defeated a local Irish army that marched against them, securing their bridgehead. They were joined on 23 August by Strongbow himself who landed at Crook, near Waterford, with a major force of 200 knights and 1,000 soldiers. Together with Carew, two days later Strongbow in one day successfully besieged Waterford, pausing in the town’s Cathedral to marry Diarmuid’s daughter as had been agreed three years earlier. Within a month, on 21 September, Diarmuid and Strongbow had captured Dublin, and Leinster, Ireland’s richest province, was completely in their hands.

The superior weaponry of the Normans played a large part in their success, but so did the personal courage and military skill of their leaders: at Baginbun, Carew had stampeded a herd of cattle against his enemies, thus routing them and securing victory for his own miniscule force. They used to great effect the longbow, which 250 years later was to destroy the flower of French chivalry on the field of Agincourt. The Irish, accustomed to fighting on foot, without armour, had no real defence against the arrows and cavalry of the Normans.

Ironically, because of his success, Strongbow now found his whole enterprise at risk. Henry II, alarmed that his vassal might secure sufficient wealth and power in Ireland to challenge his authority, simply ordered Strongbow and the other adventurers to return to their homes by Easter 1171, and in order to prevent further reinforcements reaching them, he also placed an embargo on all sailings from England and Wales to Ireland. For any who refused to obey, the penalty was to be forfeiture of their lands in England, Wales and France. Strongbow and his colleagues tried to change Henry II’s mind by promising to hold their newly won lands in the king’s name. While waiting for Henry II’s reply, however, in May 1171 Diarmuid MacMurrough died and Strongbow had to undertake a new campaign in Leinster — because of Henry II’s embargo, without hope of reinforcements — to force acceptance of his claim to the kingship. He found himself under such severe pressure from Rory O’Connor, who laid siege to Strongbow in Dublin during the summer of 1171, that he offered to submit to him, ‘to become his man and hold Leinster of him’. O’Connor would only agree to the Normans keeping the towns of Dublin, Waterford and Wexford, and Strongbow refused to accept these terms. He was saved from defeat only by the courage and skill of one of his lieutenants who, with a surprise attack, routed O’Connor’s army and lifted the siege. In September, Strongbow heard from Henry II that he could, after all, keep his new lands on condition that he held them in the king’s name and that the king himself would have Dublin, Waterford, Wexford and extensive tracts of land in Leinster. Henry II, forced by Strongbow’s success to intervene in Ireland, found that the Norman conquest of Ireland was now underway.

On 17 October 1171, Henry II himself landed at Waterford with 500 knights and over 3,500 men-at-arms and archers. It was a formidable army, calculated to impress not only Strongbow, but also
the native Irish. The following day Strongbow did homage, and most
of the kings and chiefs of Leinster and Munster followed suit as
Henry travelled to Lismore and then to Cashel where he arranged for
a synod which, while dealing with matters of Church practice, also
secured the recognition by each Irish bishop to Henry’s overlordship
of Ireland. The synod also helped Henry make peace with the papacy
which, since the murder of Thomas à Becket, archbishop of
Canterbury, in 1170, had threatened him with excommunication.
Pope Alexander III, Adrian IV’s successor, as a result of the synod of
Cashel, wrote congratulating Henry personally, conferring on him
the title ‘Lord of Ireland’; congratulating the Irish bishops for
accepting Henry, and congratulating the Irish leaders who had
sworn him fealty. It was almost inevitable that in 1175, three years
after Henry himself had returned home, Rory O’Connor should
travel to England and, with the Treaty of Windsor, swear allegiance
to Henry. By 1250, less than eighty years after Strongbow first
landed in Ireland, three-quarters of the country was under Norman
control, with only the rock lands of Connaught and west Ulster not
penetrated. Within a generation of the conquest, most of the leading
churchmen in Ireland were Normans, and they secured the wishes of
the papacy, decreed by the synod of Cashel, that ‘the divine offices
shall be celebrated according to the usage of the Church of England’.
They also ensured that the Church in Ireland would be loyal to the
British crown. This loyalty, even in the centuries after the Reforma-
tion, remained in the Irish Church. After the Reformation, popes
often supported British Protestant monarchs because they recog-
nized, as the British Empire expanded, the usefulness of having an
influence on those who ran the Empire through the ever-faithful
Catholic Irish.

The Normans brought to Ireland not only a strong military
tradition, but also a different Norman–British legal structure of
Common Law based upon the personal ownership of land and not,
as in Irish Brehon Law, ownership vested in an extended family or
clan. To protect their lands, and to enforce their British laws, they
built castles, at first with earth and timber, but in a short space of
time with stone and mortar. Dublin Castle, which was to become the
seat of British government in Ireland, was begun in 1204 on the site
of the old Norse fort which dominated the city from the southern
banks of the river Liffey. The walled towns of Galway, New Ross,
Athenry and Drogheda were founded, and other towns built all over
Ireland. The fortified nature of Norman buildings testified to their
own warlike qualities as well as to the fact that they were clearly
conquerors, surrounded by hostile and resentful Irishmen. Gerald de
Barry, known as Giraldus Cambrensis, one of Strongbow’s cousins,
chronicled the Norman conquest in a work of brilliant propaganda
designed to cast a rosy glow on the exploits of his relatives while
castigating the native Irish as immoral and undisciplined and thus of
no real threat to upright, courageous and ever-vigilant Normans:

For this hostile race is always plotting some kind of treachery under cover of
peace...This wily race must be feared far more for its guile than its capacity
to fight, for its pretended quiescence than for its fiery passions, for its
honeyed flattery than for its bitter abuse, for its venom than for its prowess in
battle, for its treachery than for its readiness to attack, and for its feigned
friendship than for its contemptible hostility.

Perceptions such as this were to colour British views of the Irish for
centuries afterwards, and still find an echo today.

Giralduis Cambrensis, with some perspicacity, stated what he
thought was necessary for effective government in Ireland:

Since in such matters an excess of caution does no harm, and indeed even the
most elaborate precautions are scarcely adequate, as soon as this race has
fully submitted to the yoke of obedience, then like the people of Sicily it
should be completely forbidden the use of every sort of arms by public edict,
and a severe penalty should be laid down for any contravention of this law...
Ireland should pay tribute to Britain in the form of gold, or the birds
which are so plentiful there.

The yoke of obedience was never properly positioned by the
Normans in Ireland, but at several times Norman–Irish legislators
attempted to impose penal laws of the type suggested by Giraldus.
The first Irish parliament was recorded in 1264, established on the
British model, with Norman–Irish representatives coming from
every part of the country except Connaught and west Ulster. By 1300
some towns and boroughs were also represented, but with the
exception of brief periods in the seventeenth century, not until 1922
did an Irish parliament represent the mass of the native Irish people.

One of the first laws passed by the thirteenth-century Irish
parliament prohibited the Norman–Irish from wearing Gaelic dress
because it confused relationships between the governors and the
governed. The relationship that parliament established with the bulk
of the Irish people was to last five centuries. It was a parliament of and for the ruling group in Ireland and, unlike Britain where parliament came to represent wider and wider interests, in Ireland parliament remained the possession of narrow interests always conscious of their fragile position. There were not enough Norman–Irish ever to release them from dependence upon the political disorganization of the native kings and chiefs they lived amongst, and from time to time this dependence itself was challenged. In 1258 the leading native Irish leaders united behind Brian O’Neill, the senior member of the great Ulster family, and declared him king of Ireland. This unity was short-lived, but in 1263 a number of Irish leaders invited King Haakon IV of Norway to lead them against the Normans. One of the most severe threats to Norman–Irish security came in 1315 from Scotland after the defeat the previous year of King Edward II of England by Robert the Bruce at Bannockburn. Conquest of Ireland was a natural step in the Scottish king’s dream of a Celtic kingdom. His brother, Edward Bruce, landed at Larne in September 1315 and within a year controlled most of Ireland north of Dublin. Had Edward Bruce and his troops been less rapacious, the invasion would probably have received widespread Irish support and succeeded. As it was, the Bruces lost their early Irish allies and when in 1317 Pope John XXII supported Edward II by excommunicating Bruce’s clerical allies, the back of the invasion was broken. Edward Bruce was defeated and killed at Dundalk the following year by a Norman–Irish army reinforced from England.

In the first two hundred years after the conquest, the Norman–Irish were able to look, in extremis, to support from England. But when in 1337 the Hundred Years’ War between France and England began, Norman–Irishmen had no choice but to accept and make the best of their minority position. This was not too difficult since willingness to compromise was one of their attributes, and since the conquest also brought some benefits. They offered peace and stability to those who submitted to them, in contrast to the feuding which had characterized the relationships between native Irish kings like MacMurrough and O’Brien. They did not, in general, attempt to dismember Gaelic society, preferring instead to encourage native Irishmen to continue to farm and herd as before. Only the Gaelic nobility was displaced, and then only because they challenged the Norman–Irish for power. Individual Gaelic leaders who accepted Norman–Irish sovereignty were treated as equals, and intermarriage was common. As the years went past, succeeding generations of Norman–Irishmen became more and more Gaelicized in their ways, adopting the Brehon Laws and customs of the country. Just as in previous centuries with previous invaders, the Gaels assimilated the Norman–Irish too. A measure of the extent of this process is illustrated by the Statutes of Kilkenny, promulgated by the government in 1336, which decreed that the two races, Norman and Gaelic, should remain separate: marriage between the races was made a capital offence, and Norman–Irishmen were forbidden to play the Irish harp or speak Gaelic. The fears underlying these edicts were largely justified, and the Statutes themselves were a confession of defeat.

The government responsible for the Statutes was effective only in an area of Leinster around Dublin that was coming to be known as the English Pale. The wealth of the province and of the city had attracted the attention of most of the Norman settlers as well as of the British crown. Thus it naturally became a haven for British immigrants and of British law and practice. The Statutes, which remained in force until 1613, were part of a constant effort to prevent the English Pale from being assimilated in the same way as the Norman–Irish. As the Statutes of Kilkenny explained:

Whereas at the conquest of the land of Ireland and for a long time after, the English of the said land used the English language... Now many English of the said land, forsaking the English language, fashion, mode of riding, laws and usages, live and govern themselves according to the manners, fashion and language of the Irish enemies, and also have made divers marriages and alliances between themselves and the Irish enemies.

By the close of the fourteenth century, the Norman–Irish had become more Irish than English, and many of them contributed to the revival of Gaelic literature and culture that took place during the period 1200 to 1400. Gerald FitzMaurice, third earl of Desmond, who from 1367 to 1369 served as justiciar (the king’s deputy) of Ireland, was known to his contemporaries as ‘Gerald the Poet’ for his Gaelic compositions (he is credited with being the originator of Gaelic love poetry) and, as the Annals of the Four Masters later declared, he ‘excelled all the English and many of the Irish in knowledge of the Irish language, poetry and history’. Resurgent Gaelic chieftains, often with the support of Gaelicized Norman
families, gained control of more and more land. Art MacMurrough in 1376 was able to re-establish a Gaelic kingdom of his own in Leinster. The cost of defending the Pale and of buying off neighbouring chiefs and warlords like MacMurrough, began to tell heavily upon the royal exchequer. King Richard II during a lull in the Hundred Years' War came to Ireland to reassert royal authority with a large army in 1394. He was the first British king to set foot in Ireland since Henry II in 1171–2. MacMurrough submitted to him, only to rebel immediately after Richard's departure, killing in battle Roger Mortimer, the childless king's heir. Richard returned to Ireland in 1399 to bring MacMurrough to terms, but instead found his own crown challenged in England by Henry Bolingbroke, duke of Lancaster. The king sailed back to England to meet deposition and death in the Tower of London. For the next hundred years, British rule in Ireland was in practice confined to the area of the Pale.

From the Tudors to Cromwell

The Church from the fourteenth to the seventeenth centuries, like the Norman–Irish, also became more and more removed from British influence and control. The religious orders – the Cistercians, Dominicans, Franciscans and Augustinians – which had arrived at the time of the Norman invasion, had been instrumental in reforming the Irish Church, helping to enforce the payment of tithes and establishing a diocesan episcopate and a parochial system. However, by the early thirteenth century, the discipline and practices of the Irish Church degenerated, and the Synod of Kells' acceptance of papal authority had associated the Irish Church with the papacy at the most sordid period in the history of the popes. As early as 1221 a visiting French monk noted, 'In the abbeys of this country the severity of Cistercian discipline and order is observed in scarcely anything but the wearing of the habit.' The Irish clergy were noted for the hereditary character of their profession. In 1250 the bishop of Ossory complained to the Pope about hereditary succession in the churches of his diocese. Decrees from the primate of Armagh (always from the Pale, a foreigner or an Englishman) and from various provincial synods in the fifteenth century had little effect. A visitation made in 1546 to the rural deanery of Tullaghoge, Co. Tyrone, revealed some of the clergy as 'concubinary'. Bishop Turlough O'Brien of Killaloe (1483–1526) had a son, Mahon, who became bishop of Kilmacduagh (1503–32), and married a cousin. Their son, Turlough, also became bishop of Killaloe (1556–69) like his grandfather, and like his father also married a cousin, the daughter of the first Earl of Thomond.

Amongst the laity, Gaelic customs predominated. Divorce, secular marriage, fosterage and common property ownership remained widespread, among native Irishmen and the Norman–Irish outside