

Oliver Cromwell

The Curse of Cromwell

Though not a famous Irish Man this section cannot omit the story of a Man (or beast) who had such a profound effect on the population of Ireland.

Oliver Cromwell, born in Huntingdon in 1599, was a strict Puritan with a Cambridge education. Cromwell's hostility to the Irish was religious as well as political. He was passionately opposed to the Roman Catholic Church and the Irish Rebellion of 1641. The civil war in England had ended, and King Charles I had been executed seven months earlier.



In August 1649 Oliver Cromwell landed in Dublin, with an army of 3,000 battle-hardened Ironsides. Cromwell entered Dublin as "lord lieutenant and general for the parliament of England". A fanatical Puritan, he intended to offer no quarter to papist rebels who had massacred English and Scottish settlers. In Ireland, he could use confiscated land to pay off debts to his troops and to the so-called "Adventurers" who had financed his campaign.

From Dublin Cromwell marched north to Drogheda. When his surrender demand was ignored, Cromwell stormed the city and ordered the death of every man in the garrison, describing this as **"...that this is a righteous judgment of God upon these barbarous wretches, who have imbued their hands in so much innocent blood and that it will tend to prevent the effusion of blood for the future, which are satisfactory grounds for such actions, which otherwise cannot but work remorse and regret."** The ensuing massacre included soldiers and civilians alike. The nearby garrisons in Dundalk and Trim fled on hearing of the events. Having secured the route to Ulster, Cromwell now turned south to the port of Wexford, this time slaughtering townspeople and defenders alike also. At the Siege of Wexford in October, another massacre took place. While Cromwell was apparently trying to negotiate surrender terms, his soldiers broke into the town, massacred 2,000 Irish troops and up to 1,500 civilians, and burned much of the town. Neighboring towns quickly submitted.

Cromwell's campaign ended with an assault on Clonmel. In May 1650, he returned to England, leaving his son-in-law, Henry Ireton, in command. Within

two years Catholic resistance was at an end. Catholic land-owners holdings were confiscated and the native farmer tenants were ordered to the less fertile land in Connacht. This led to the Cromwellian phrase "To hell or to Connacht". Cromwell himself had been in Ireland only nine months, but his brutal campaign left an indelible mark on the native Irish. **"The curse of Cromwell on you" became an Irish oath.**

After Cromwell's departure, the English conquest of Ireland dragged on for another three years. The campaigns under Cromwell's successors mostly consisted of long sieges of fortified cities and guerrilla warfare in the countryside. The last Catholic held town, Galway, surrendered in April 1652. In the wake of Cromwell's assault, the practice of Catholicism was banned and Catholic priests were executed when discovered. All captured soldiers were transported to be sold into slavery. In 1650, 25,000 Irish were sold to planters in St. Kitt, and over the next few years over 100,000 Irish children, generally from 10 to 14 years old, were taken from their parents, and sold as slaves in the West Indies, Virginia and New England. Slavery, deportation, transportation, indentured servitude or by whatever name continued into the following century. In 1652, all Catholic-owned land was confiscated in the Act for the Settlement of Ireland, and given to Scottish and English settlers and English soldiers. During these years, east of the Shannon, Catholic landownership dropped from 60% of the land to a mere 8%.

Cromwell is still a figure of hatred in Ireland, his name being associated with massacre, religious persecution, and mass dispossession of the Catholic community there. **As Churchill notes, a traditional Irish curse was *malacht Cromail ort* or "the curse of Cromwell upon you".**