

Thus Always to Traitors: Contending with the Legacy of Dermot MacMurrough

Isabella Fiorito '23

Hundreds of years ago a medieval Irish king boarded a ship and makes the treacherous journey to England to beg a favor for which his entire country will pay. In the 12th century, the King of Leinster Diarmait Mac Murchada (anglicized as Dermot MacMurrough) brokered a deal which prompted the Anglo-Norman invasion of Ireland. MacMurrough's story tells of how one man's political ambitions changed the course of Irish history and began centuries of invasion, colonization, and tensions that persist into the present day; how might a nation deal with the history of the man who invited the enemy to their doorstep?

Up until the invasion, Irish kingship was a complicated system that consisted of one High King who ruled over all of Ireland and several smaller kings ruling smaller kingdoms. MacMurrough was one of these smaller rulers and he had few allies among the other kings of Ireland. He had made a particular enemy of the O'Rourkes who ruled Breifne in the 11th and 12th centuries, and in 1152 he had even kidnapped the wife of Tiernan O'Rourke.¹ Having made many enemies, he was deposed as ruler of Leinster and—naturally—he wanted his kingdom back. MacMurrough was willing to go to extreme lengths for power; he had even gone so far as to burn his home and capital city, Ferns, to prevent others from taking it.² As is recorded in accounts compiled in *The Annals of the Four Masters*, these types of power plays and infighting among the Irish elite were common.³ This time, however, the outcome would lead to the end of Irish rule entirely.

To take back Leinster, MacMurrough sought the aid of Henry II and returned with an army of Anglo-Normans.⁴ MacMurrough and his party then mounted a series of raids and quickly regain Leinster. However, in 1171, MacMurrough would die of an unknown illness, never living to see the full impact of the deal he had made to regain his power on his country.⁵ The unfortunate timing of his death

so soon after returning allowed the Anglo-Normans to gain even more unchecked power in Ireland. From there, the country would not return to independence until the 20th century.

On the English side, MacMurrough is perhaps better known by his female descendants. As part of his agreement with the Anglo-Normans, his daughter Aoife would be married to Richard de Clare (Strongbow). Their union, immortalized in artist Daniel Maclise's 17th century painting "The Marriage of Strongbow and Aoife," is a chaotic scene which portrays MacMurrough standing behind his daughter and looking at the proceedings with anxious suspicion.⁶ Aoife and Strongbow would go on to have ten children, including Isabel de Clare, the wife of William Marshall and maternal ancestor of the Stuart monarchs.

For the Irish, however, MacMurrough's legacy is understandably a much more difficult subject. One of the primary accounts of MacMurrough provided by 12th century historian Giraldus Cambrensis describes him as "A tyrant to his own people, he was hated by strangers; his hand was against every man, and the hand of every man against him."⁷ While many Irish people today share a similar disdain for MacMurrough, others seek to convey a more holistic picture of the complicated man.

Present day locals in the once burned capital of Ferns, for example, take pride in their connection to the former king of Leinster. They are eager to tell his tale and are critical of him, but they are also the first to jump to his defense.⁸ "How could he have 'kidnapped' another King's wife" a staff member at the town's "Medieval Ferns Experience" says, "when she brought all of her things with her."⁹ In this case, the tale of Dermot MacMurrough is a way for the residents of his former capital to play a part in the narrative of their

national history—a history which is still being reclaimed and reconstructed after centuries of suppression.

Despite his complicated status in the minds of many Irish people, Dermot MacMurrough's story is key to understanding Ireland's colonial history. MacMurrough draws the ire of many because of the fallout of his betrayal but he also remains fascinating, and his image is constantly being reevaluated, even centuries later.

Endnotes

- 1 Geoffrey Keating, *The History of Ireland*, trans. Edward Comyn and Patrick S. Dineen, (Ex-Classics Project, 2009), 311.
- 2 Catherine McLoughlin and Emmet Stafford, *The Town in Medieval Ireland: in the light of recent archaeological excavations*, ed. Christiaan Corlett and Michael Potterton (Wordwell Books, 2021), 86.
- 3 *The Annals of the Four Masters*, ed. Myriam Priour and Stephen Beechinor (Cork, Ireland: CELT online, 2002, 2008), <https://celt.ucc.ie/published/T100005B.html>
- 4 Giraldus Cambrensis, *The Conquest of Ireland*, trans. Thomas Forester, (Cambridge, Ontario: In Parenthesis Publications, 2001), 12.
- 5 *The Annals*, 1183.
- 6 MacLise, Daniel. *The Marriage of Strongbow and Aoife*, 1854, oil on canvas, The National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin, Ireland, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23610339>, 112.
- 7 Cambrensis, *The Conquest*, 18.
- 8 Brendan Keane, "Medieval Ferns Experience Provides Window to the Past," *Gorey Guardian*, August 31, 2021. <https://www.independent.ie/regionals/wexford/news/medieval-ferns-experience-provides-window-to-the-past-40802797.html>
- 9 Evidence for this is supported by Cambrensis's claims including that it was "not against her will" (Cambrensis, *The Conquest*, 12).

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