Cormac Ó'Cléirigh

Irish frontier warfare – a fifteenth-century case study

In the summer of 1418, an Irish expeditionary force journeyed to France to take part in the wars of King Henry V of England who at that point was besieging Rouen, the capital of Normandy.[1] The Irish contingent was led by Thomas Butler, a son of the earl of Ormond, one of Ireland's greatest magnates. Butler's troops, who were said to number approximately 800 men, were ethnically mixed, being composed of both native Irish, or *Gaedhil,* and the descendants of the colonists who had settled in Ireland in the wake of the late twelfth-century Anglo-Norman invasion of Ireland, the *Gall,* or Anglo-Irish.[2] Consequently, the expedition received praise from both quarters. For example, an Irish annalist commented that 'not often has so numerous and so well-born a host embarked' from Ireland.[3] Similarly, an Anglo-Irish chronicler recounted their exploits with some pride. He noted that King Henry ordered Butler and his troops to defend the northern flank of the besieging army from French counter-attacks, and that while doing so "no men were more praised or did more damage to their enemies, for surely their quickness and swiftness did more prejudice to their enemies than their barded horses did hurt or damage the nimble Irishmen".[4] However, more objective commentators adopted a rather less sympathetic viewpoint. For example, the writings of Jean de Wavrin, a contemporary French soldier-turned-chronicler, preserve some pointed remarks about King Henry's Irish subjects. First, after noting that they were mainly foot soldiers, de Wavrin observed that they had "a shoe on one foot and none on the other". Moreover, he continued, "they were poorly equipped, each one having a shield, and short spears with large knives of strange fashion; and those who went on horseback had no saddles". He did allow, however, that "they rode very skilfully on good little mountain horses". Jean then went on to compare the Irish unfavourably with their English allies, stating that "they carried no weapons with which they could do much harm to the French when these encountered them". Nevertheless, the behaviour of Butler's troops ensured that they made a major impression upon de Wavrin. He reported that they "often overran the country of Normandy, and committed evils beyond estimation, carrying a great deal of booty to their camp. The said Irish even took little children in their cradles, beds and other baggage which they put upon cows, then mounted on the top and brought all to the camp".[5]

In general, it is clear that the tactics employed by the Irish aroused widespread distaste. In particular, King Henry himself became concerned at the damage being inflicted upon his prospective subjects, and ordered Butler to induce his Irish followers to obey the normal laws of military discipline.[6]

De Wavrin's rather caustic comments about the Irish contribution to the siege of Rouen highlight a general truth about the nature of Irish warfare. Throughout the middle ages

and for some time afterwards, outside observers consistently stated that the practice of warfare in Ireland differed perceptibly from what they considered to be the norm, both in terms of the tactics adopted and of the equipment used.[7] This paper will attempt to explain how and why this was the case. It will concentrate upon the military endeavours of one Irish dynasty – the O'Connor Falys, lords of Offaly, over a timespan ranging from the arrival in Ireland of King Richard II of England in 1394, to the death in 1513 of Gerald, eighth earl of Kildare. Hopefully, by describing the mechanics and objectives of their campaigns, it will be possible to shed some light on the factors which enabled the distinctive features of Irish warfare to persist.

Before turning to the O'Connor Falys, it might be worthwhile to provide an outline of the political conditions within Ireland. Throughout the last century of the middle ages, the entire island of Ireland was nominally a single lordship in the possession of the English crown, with a government based in Dublin which claimed to exercise jurisdiction throughout the island. However, in reality, Ireland was divided into a complex mosaic of distinct political entities of diverse sizes, structures and cultural affinities. In fact, by the time that Butler led his expedition to France, the government was only able to exercise direct control over the four densely-populated eastern counties situated near Dublin, which were known to contemporaries as "the four obedient shires", and later as the Pale. Beyond the Pale, the administration's relationships with the island's other political units ranged from the amenable, if semi-detached, to the downright hostile.[8] This exceptional political fragmentation meant that by definition, Ireland was a land of many frontiers. Consequently, it was also a land of continuous warfare, as neighbouring lordships struggled with each other for localised supremacy. It should be noted that the endemic strife was not primarily motivated by ethnic tensions between the native Irish and the colonists, but rather by aristocratic ambition. For example, two great Anglo-Irish families, the Butlers of Ormond and the Fitzgeralds of Desmond, spent the greater part of the fifteenth century locked in a bitter contest to gain supremacy in the prosperous southern province of Munster, while in the northern province of Ulster, two powerful Irish dynasties, the O'Donnells and the O'Neills, displayed consistent enmity towards one another.[9] In fact, throughout most of the island, it was normal to find representatives of the two ethnic groups fighting on both sides in the course of any particular conflict.

Somewhat paradoxically then, the wars waged by the O'Connor Falys did in fact have some basis in ethnic and cultural animosity. By 1394, the region under direct governmental control, the Pale, was virtually surrounded by a ring of hostile Irish lordships, whose aristocratic rulers were known to the Dublin administration as 'the king's Irish enemies' or simply as 'the wild Irish'. In the following half-century, these lordships repeatedly made war upon the Pale to the point where warnings were sent to the king that the colony was threatened with imminent destruction.[10] The O'Connors of Offaly were one such dynasty, and in the words of one historian "they maintained the most continuous pressures of any Irish group" upon their Anglo-Irish neighbours.[11] In terms of geographical location, the lordship of Offaly was situated in the Leinster midlands. Territorially, it was quite compact, being some 32 km in length and 40 km in breadth.[12] Nevertheless, its topography

ensured that it exerted a greater influence than its small size would normally warrant. For Offaly was a natural fortress, its heartland being "an island surrounded by almost impenetrable bogs and forests".[13] Furthermore, the Anglo-Irish counties of Meath and Kildare lay within easy reach beyond its eastern boundaries. For the first half of the fifteenth century, the main focus of Offaly's military efforts was directed towards the tempting target provided by these rich and densely populated districts.

It might be best to set the scene, by examining a vision of warfare which is contained in a professionally produced poem written in praise of Offaly's most successful lord, An Calbhach O'Connor Faly, who ruled from 1421 to 1458. The poem, which was written before 1450 and which was probably commissioned by An Calbhach himself, provides an idealised view of the manner in which warfare should be conducted. It opens with a stirring call to arms: "Words of war in the Leinster battle-host, a host by which foreign castles are fired; ... This company of warriors comes to prove that foreign towns are empty of foreigners". The poem continues by describing the lordship's preparations for the forthcoming campaign, and then how, having mustered at an assembly-point strategically located beside the Anglo-Irish settlements of Meath, the army sets out, at night, "to set the Pale ablaze". The poet then recounts how the army, moving continuously, marches through the Pale, wheeling around in a great arc from the important sea-port of Drogheda in the north, past the city of Dublin, southwards as far as the town of Carlow, before returning safely home. As they march, the army engages in extensive burning of settlements and in the destruction of fortresses, "the vigorous company ... reddens Trim for the aliens ... they let the wind through a foreign tower". In particular, they indulge in wholesale looting. For example, "the men of Offaly, as they march are laden with the pans and griddles of foreign castles; many a foreign hen and gander is borne by An Calbhach. A procession of capons coming to his house, a procession of bacon and trivets. Horseboys laden with yarn and hostages bearing vessels of gold after that excursion by the men of Offaly".[14] Now, as one would expect from a praise-poem, a great part of its detail is mere hyperbole. For example, an attack upon Drogheda, let alone Dublin, was well beyond the capacity of the O'Connor Falys. Similarly, the manifest racial animosity depicted by the poet is overly-emphasised. In fact, the O'Connor Falys frequently formed alliances with the Berminghams, one of the many Anglo-Irish lineages who had, in official parlance, become 'degenerate' by adopting Irish customs, and who were classified by the government as 'the king's English rebels'.[15] Nevertheless, the poem accurately reflects the fact that relations between the O'Connor Falys and the Anglo-Irish in general, and those of Meath in particular, were extremely poor. For example, between the years 1400 and 1450, the Irish annals record the outbreak of no less than fourteen conflicts between the O'Connor Falys and the Anglo-Irish of Meath.[16] Furthermore, the poem provides a fair portrayal of the preferred Irish method of waging offensive warfare – *the Creach*, or raid.

The tactics employed in a raid were simple. In general, the aggressors would seek to catch their intended victims unaware. If the element of surprise was obtained, the raiders would try to storm their enemies' strongholds, burn the surrounding hinterland and spoil

the crops. Next they would seize any potentially valuable prisoners, round up the available moveable goods and make for home with what they called their prey, or booty, as fast as possible, before the enemy had a chance to regroup. Cattle, which were the main manifestation of wealth in an Irish lordship were the most common form of booty. Three examples preserved in the Irish annals from the 1440s will illustrate the point. In 1443, "a confederacy of war between the Berminghams and An Calbhach O'Connor Faly, so that they preyed and burned a great part of Meath by that war".[17] Two years later, "great war made by O'Connor Faly and the Berminghams, so that he preyed and burnt towns, and cut much corn, and took many prisoners from the English by that war".[18] And, in the following year, "horrible wars betwixt O'Connor Faly and the English of Meath, so that he preyed and burnt a great part of Meath, and killed many of their men" with plundering parties from Offaly penetrating deep into the Meath heartland.[19] As a corollary, defensive war basically consisted of attempting to recover the plunder before the raiders made good their escape. For example, in 1443, several of An Calbhach's sons led a raid into the territory held by the Anglo-Irish MacRichard Butler family, where "they gathered many cattle, until MacRichard overtook them, and they being defeated, lost some scores of their horses".[20]

Obviously, raiding of this sort required a good deal of stealth and opportunism, which explains why the poet referred to the army of Offaly setting out at night. Similarly, an Anglo-Irish writer remarked on this feature of Irish tactics, noting that the Irish were "good watchers in the night, as good soldiers by night as others by day", and that "they will adventure themselves greatly on their enemies ... when they see time to do their best for their advantage".[21] In general, the success of a raid was predicated upon both high mobility and the capacity to protect the prey as it was being driven home. In order to meet these requirements, a typical Irish army contained three components, namely light infantry, cavalry and heavy infantry, each with its own specialised task to perform.

The bulk of an army was composed of light infantry, who were known as kerne. The kerne were professional soldiers, organised under captains in bands, who wandered around Ireland offering their services for hire and who were financed by quartering them upon the common people in a practice known as 'coign and livery'.[22] For example, in 1406, the Anglo-Irish of Meath hired kerne from the western province of Connacht to take part in an attack upon Offaly, while in 1436 An Calbhach employed a band of kerne from Munster.[23]

As De Wavrin observed, kerne tended to be extremely sparsely equipped. In the words of one fifteenth-century writer, "every kerne has a bow, a sheaf or 3 spears, a sword & a skene [or knife], without harness & every two have a lad to bear their gear".[24] The cavalry on the other hand, were a rather different proposition. The horsemen, who provided both the leadership and the main striking force of an army, were mainly an aristocratic body.[25] One of the distinctive features of Irish society was the way in which its liberal marriage customs encouraged the production of many offspring.[26] Consequently, a lordship's cavalry arm tended to be something of a family affair, being composed, in the main, of the ruling chief and his numerous close relatives. This was undoubtedly the case in Offaly, where

various sons, brothers, nephews and grandsons of the ruling lord predominated.[27] In addition, young aristocrats frequently travelled to other lordships to take service for a while with the local ruler. For example, in 1406, two sons of the king of Connacht journeyed to Offaly with their followers and dependants. As one annalist put it, they were entertained by the lord of Offaly in order "to offend the English of Meath, and to defend himself and his country against them".[28]

In general, Irish horsemen were considerably better equipped than were the kerne. According to a fifteenth-century writer, "every horseman has two horses, some three, a jack well harnessed for the most part, a sword, a skene, a great spear & a dart.[29] He continued by noting that "every Horse has a knave", or horseboy, and that one of the horseman's knaves rode alongside his master, bearing his harness and spears.[30] Similar observations were made in 1397 by a Catalan visitor to Ireland: "They ride without saddle on a cushion ... They are armed with coats of mail and round iron helmets like the Moors and Saracens. They have swords and very long knives, and long lances, like ancient lances, which were two fathoms (or 4 metres) in length. Some use bows which are not long – only half the size of English bows ... they wear their spurs on their bare heels".[31] To these descriptions can be added an eye-witness sketch of Irish horsemen attacking a troop of King Richard II's cavalry in 1399.[32] The details of the sketch match those in the Catalan description, and the artist portrayed the Irish horses as being considerably smaller than the English war horses, which tallies with Jean de Wavrin's description of the Irish riding 'good little mountain horses'. Interestingly, the sketch also depicts the Irish horsemen holding long thin lances above their head, ready to thrust downwards, in a manner reminiscent of the representation of Norman knights in the Bayeux tapestry, which explains the Catalan's reference to ancient lances.[33] The third component of an Irish army was its heavily-armed footsoldiers who were known as galloglasses. The galloglasses were originally Scottish mercenaries who began to appear in Ulster and Connacht in the thirteenth century.[34] However, by the fifteenth century, they had settled down in Ireland, and most fair-sized lordships had their own hereditary complement of galloglasses, who usually had been granted lands of their own in exchange for their services.[35] The galloglasses were organised in units called battles, under leaders known as constables. According to one writer, a typical battle consisted of 60 to 80 men, harnessed and on foot. Each individual galloglass had his own servant, who bore his master's armour as well as carrying either a bow or a spear.[36] As for the galloglasses themselves, their armour was similar to that worn by the horsemen, while their weapons consisted of "a great double-handed sword and a long or short-handled axe, and sometimes a lance".[37]

In the course of a raid, the kerne were the group who performed the actual plundering and burning and were also responsible for driving the prey home safely. For example, the band of kerne hired in 1406 by the Anglo-Irish of Meath looted a settlement in Offaly, and there is a fine description of one kerne attempting to make his getaway while carrying a great pot used for brewing beer on his back.[38] Not surprisingly, the kerne enjoyed a reputation for indiscipline.[39] The kernes' lack of equipment afforded them the advantage of high mobility, as well as the ability to traverse difficult mountainous or boggy terrain

with ease. Moreover, if they encountered superior forces, they could always try to run away, being, in the words of one writer, 'lighter and lustier than [English soldiers] in travail and footmanship'.[40] However, their essential vulnerability was exposed when laden with booty or when driving cattle. For example, in 1406, the band of kerne bringing away the brewing pot from Offaly were intercepted by a cavalry troop led by An Calbhach. In the running fight which ensued, the kerne tried to flee from Offaly, but their leader was rapidly killed in a bog, and in the words of one annalist the rest 'were swiftly pursued, slaughtered and vanquished' with a death toll of not less than 300 men.[41] This casualty rate was exceptionally high, but it underscores the kerne's need for protection while withdrawing homewards.

In fact, the Irish believed that the most honourable place for a nobleman to die was in the rear of his army, protecting his plunder.[42] Consequently, the annals contain many instances of retreating cavalry turning back suddenly to launch a counter-attack upon their pursuers, in the hope of routing them. Thus, in 1444, a son of the lord of Offaly took what were described as 'great preys' from one of the neighbouring Irish lordships, "and he being pursued by a great multitude of men, that put him in a very dangerous condition, nevertheless he courageously fought against the pursuers, and scattered them, and took twenty horses, eight or nine prisoners of the best rank, and brought away whole the preys".[43]

Similarly, the horsemen were in a position to try to rescue any important stragglers. For example, in the course of a raid into Kildare in 1448, An Calbhach fell off his horse outside an enemy castle and broke his leg. The defenders captured him, but his brother and grandson "returned towards him courageously, and rescued him forcibly" as the Anglo-Irish horsemen were about to bring him into the castle.[44] The cavalry's defensive role was augmented by the galloglasses, whose function was to provide the retreating plunderers with a "moving line of defence ... from which the horsemen could make short, sharp charges, and behind which they could retreat when pursued".[45] For example, in 1419, in the course of a raid within Connacht, an annalist describes how the retreating "horsemen were hurled back towards their galloglasses, but these held their ground, and fought on".[46]

While the galloglasses' armour made them considerably less mobile than either the kerne or the horsemen, this disadvantage could be offset by stationing them at a strategic point, such as a pass or a ford, along the line of retreat. To take another example from Connacht, in 1416 a plundering party were being closely followed by their pursuers. In the annalist's words, "they were in great distress until they reached their galloglasses, who were waiting to meet them. But when they reached them, both parties turned upon the pursuers, and killed 60 of them".[47] As one Anglo-Irish source elegantly put it, the galloglasses formed "a castle of bones, rather than a castle of stones".[48] Thus, this type of raiding, using these kinds of soldiers was the principal method used by the O'Connor Falys to wage war against their Anglo-Irish neighbours. The question of the military objectives underlying the incessant campaigning will now be addressed.

It could be argued that the O'Connor Falys were interested in little more than the acquisition of as much plunder as possible, and the lordship certainly benefitted from its

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raiding activities. They were especially eager to take prisoners for ransom. For example, in 1422, An Calbhach won a great victory outside the Anglo-Irish town of Trim, in which it is stated that he killed "some and captured a hundred or more, for fetters were placed on 60 foreigners together on the floor of O'Connor's house on one day".[49] In fact, during the entire period under review, O'Connor Faly raiding parties managed to capture quite an impressive haul of prisoners, including one chief governor of Ireland, two earls, sundry sheriffs, barons and knights, as well as numerous unfortunate commoners.[50] The rewards could be lucrative. For example, after a successful war in Meath in 1414, the ransom payments are said to have come to more than £1,000.[51] Similarly, a victorious skirmish could augment the lordship's armoury, and there are frequent references to the capture of weapons and suits of armour.[52] In addition to prisoners and plunder, the Irish annalists suggest that the O'Connor Falys waged war for honour and prestige. Thus, it is stated that they devastated much of Meath in 1443 in order to avenge an insult bestowed upon one of their Anglo-Irish allies, the Berminghams, by a Palesman at Trim.[53] However, overall, it would be untrue to say that the O'Connor Falys were primarily motivated to war by considerations of honour or indeed simply by the prospect of gaining loot. Katherine Simms has argued persuasively that in general, the fundamental premise of Irish warfare was based upon the island's relatively low population density.[54] Given the widespread scarcity of people to cultivate land, an Irish chieftain went to war not to kill or drive away his enemies, but rather in an attempt to subjugate them. Hence, the plundering and burning which formed the centrepiece of a raid was designed to intimidate a hostile population group into some form of submission. In order to support her hypothesis, Simms drew attention to the fact that upon acknowledgement of an aggressor's claims to overlordship, the plundered goods and cattle were sometimes returned to the victim.[55] During the first part of the fifteenth century, the O'Connors' behaviour fits this pattern of aggrandisement, as there is much evidence to show that they were expanding the physical limits of their lordship. For example, in 1416 the ruling council in Dublin reported to King Henry V that An Calbhach "had gotten under his subjection by conquest of the English above twelve leagues in land, and had given many overthrows upon your faithful subjects of the county of Meath". Moreover, in order to protect his gains, An Calbhach had built a strong castle called Caynder ... upon English land, situated beyond a great bog of the breadth of three leagues'.[56] Similarly, by 1433, the O'Connor Falys had recaptured the fortress of Rathangan, which had been their ancestral seat before the Anglo-Norman invasion.[57] Moreover, it is clear that many of the O'Connor Falys' campaigns were waged in order to extract a form of tribute, known as 'blackrent' from the colonists.[58] From at least 1414 onwards, they had succeeded in this goal, and for the rest of the century, the lords of Offaly became accustomed to receiving a sizeable annual payment, levied on the inhabitants of counties Meath and Kildare by their own government, in exchange for having peace.[59] Incidentally, it seems as though An Calbhach preferred to have his blackrent paid in the form of casks of French wine.[60]

At this point, it might be worthwhile to stand back and define the essential features of Irish border warfare as practised by the O'Connor Falys. In the first instance, waging war

was a business left to aristocrats and professionals – the common people were conspicuous by their absence. Secondly, the number of soldiers involved was small. Although on one occasion in 1461, they were stated to have led 1,000 horsemen into Meath, a more realistic estimate from the 1480s put their strength at 60 horsemen, one battle of galloglasses and 200 kerne.[61] Thirdly, their armour and equipment were evidently unsuitable for either open battle or siege warfare. On the contrary, their preferred tactics of mounting swift raids were expressly designed to avoid engagement with the enemy if possible, and in the event of encountering superior forces, they put their faith in their greater mobility and ran away. Fourthly, when contact with their opponents was actually made, fatalities tended to be low. A great victory might entail the deaths of a dozen or so of their adversaries, and they were at least as interested in taking prisoners for ransom purposes. Finally, their main military objective was to exert lordship over their Anglo-Irish neighbours in the form of blackrent, a task in which they were highly successful. The warfare continued because neither the government nor the colonists themselves accepted this state of affairs. The remainder of the paper will be devoted to outlining the attempts of the Anglo-Irish to free themselves from the constant threat of O'Connor Faly aggression.

At first glance, it seems extremely odd that a region under the rule of the victors of Agincourt and Harfleur could be hard-pressed to stave off the endeavours of a small, boggy lordship, whose inhabitants used outmoded equipment and relatively simple tactics. The difficulties experienced by the Anglo-Irish appear all the more surprising when one considers that on the most fundamental level, they always retained one crucial advantage over the Irish. Their equipment and military organisation were incontestably superior. In sharp contrast to the Irish lordships, the Anglo-Irish of the Pale were, as Steven Ellis has put it, "a society organised for war".[62] Its inhabitants "were required to keep weapons appropriate to their status and degree, and all able-bodied men between the ages of 16 and 60 were obliged to do military service for the defence of their country".[63] For example, it is recorded that in May 1468, no business was transacted at the assembly of the citizens of Dublin, as the mayor, bailiffs and commons of the city were "engaged in a hostile incursion upon O'Connor's country".[64] In terms of arms, the Palesmen favoured mounted archers with longbows and spearmen, and in the event of a pitched battle, they were always likely to emerge victorious.[65] For example, in 1460 the mayor of Drogheda with a force of archers and spearmen intercepted a raiding party led by the O'Reilly dynasty at Mapasbridge in Co. Louth, and cut them to pieces.[66] Admittedly, the reluctance of the Irish to engage in open battle combined with the geographical inaccessibility of their lordships to offset the Palesmen's superiority. For their part, the colonists consistently argued that a major military intervention by the crown would permanently resolve their security problems.[67]

In fact, it appears as though their analysis was fundamentally correct, to judge from the impact of the arrival of King Richard II in Ireland, accompanied by approximately 9,000 men, in October 1394.[68] Upon landing in Waterford, Richard launched a massive attack upon the Irish of Leinster, the O'Connor Falys included. Paths were cut into their fastnesses, and after they fled, as was their custom, their settlements were destroyed, their

cattle were seized, and, crucially, garrisons were put into place to prevent their return – a course of action which led them to submit within three months. The scale of Richard's victory was so comprehensive that practically every Irish lord on the island hastened into his presence, protesting their undying loyalty to him.[69] Ultimately, for reasons which lie outside the scope of this paper, Richard's efforts failed.[70] However, in later years, it remained broadly true that any chief governor, especially if he had troops from England at his disposal, could defeat a border lordship like Offaly at will. For example, the famous English general John Talbot, Lord Furnival, who had extensive land interests in Ireland, served as chief governor of Ireland on several occasions, the most protracted period being from 1414 to 1419.[71] While there, he earned a fearsome reputation amongst the Irish.[72] Tactically, he seems to have followed the example set by Richard II, albeit on a smaller scale. A letter from the Irish council to King Henry V has survived which provides us with a detailed account of his efforts against the O'Connor Falys in 1415-6.[73] First of all, Furnival forced their Irish neighbours to submit and join his expedition. He then "rode with his army to a strong place called Clonmyke, of one Calvagh O'Connor, ... and the same place and other towns thereabouts he did burn and destroy, by the terror of which journey the same Calvagh, and his father, ... called O'Connor Faly did humbly entreat to have peace and to make amends for that wherein they had offended against your faithful subjects". A short while later, the O'Connor Falys having risen up again in war, "your Lieutenant ordained a strong and great journey" to Calbhach's castle at Caynder, and after marching across its flanking bog "on foot, he broke the castle and razed it to the ground", capturing some of the garrison, killing others, and encamping on the site overnight, before marching home by another route. Still later, Furnival made "divers other hostings and strong journeys upon the said O'Connor and Calvagh, by the space of six days and six nights in his country, and his chief place ... and the castle of Caynder (which the said Calvagh had re-edified) ... with the corn and goods therein, he did utterly burn, destroy, forage and prey, and divers of his people he did maim and kill in such force that they are like to be banished out of their country if the war against them may be continued, which God grant". Furnival repeated this performance against the O'Connor Falys in 1425 and again in 1446, in each case forcing An Calbhach, as 'captain of his nation', to renounce blackrent, to release all prisoners and to desist from future attacks upon the king's faithful lieges.[74]

Nevertheless, it is quite evident that the O'Connor Falys were neither banished nor brought to peace. The key phrase in the council's report is "if the war may be continued". In practice, during the course of the first half of the fifteenth century, the crown and the Anglo-Irish consistently failed to apply continuous military pressure upon border Irish lordships like Offaly. There were several complementary reasons for this. First, the problems of Ireland never weighed heavily upon the minds of the English government. Indeed, Richard II's decision to return to Ireland in 1399 in order to shore up his earlier achievements lost him his crown.[75] Second, even when the English government did respond to the pleas of the colonists by sending troops, difficulties arose in paying for their upkeep. For example, in Furnival's first stint as chief governor, his force was constantly whittled down through

desertion due to lack of pay, and ultimately, he departed Ireland leaving behind a mountain of debts.[76] Thirdly, the Anglo-Irish were riven by internal feuds. In particular, the Talbots, led by Furnival, squabbled with the Butlers, led by the earl of Ormond, over control of the administration for over 30 years.[77] Finally, one further factor benefitted the O'Connor Falys in particular. At a local level, their most powerful Anglo-Irish neighbours, the Fitzgeralds of Kildare, became notably inactive during this period, and in fact their power was temporarily eclipsed following the death of the fifth earl of Kildare in 1432.[78]

Consequently, the normal outcome of a government expedition was for the O'Connor Falys to submit, but then to resume their raiding in order to recover their blackrent shortly thereafter.[79] Nevertheless, even as O'Connor Faly power reached its zenith, the Anglo-Irish started to take some initiatives which were to turn the tide for them. From the middle of the century onwards, there were unmistakable signs that the colonists were beginning to gain the upper hand.

On a general level, it is noticeable that the raids conducted by the O'Connor Falys during the 1440s were less successful than had been the case earlier. For example, although An Calbhach's sons led two raids against the Anglo-Irish in 1443 and 1444, both expeditions were routed.[80] Similarly, An Calbhach himself launched the most extensive raid of his career in 1446 when his plundering parties reached the borders of Co. Dublin.[81] Nevertheless, the expedition must be viewed as a failure, as it led to a major attack upon Offaly by Furnival, now the earl of Shrewsbury, who, employing a force of 'six or seven hundred Englishmen', forced An Calbhach to submit on terms which included the sending "of many beefs to the king's kitchen".[82] Even more seriously, six years later An Calbhach was ambushed in the 'wilderness of Kildare' by the chief governor Sir Edward fitzEustace, and being unable to stay mounted on his horse, was taken prisoner.[83] It is not known what concessions were extracted from him in exchange for his freedom, but it is surely significant that no O'Connor Faly raids are recorded in the annals for the last six years of his reign.[84] In retrospect, the period of inactivity marks a decisive shift in the balance of power in favour of the Anglo-Irish.

Admittedly, this did not become immediately obvious. An Calbhach was succeeded in 1458 by his son Conn, another capable military leader, who, early in his career, instigated a series of raids upon the Pale which led to the re-imposition of blackrent upon the Anglo-Irish, "(as was usual with his predecessors)", according to one annalist.[85] In 1466, Conn won his family's greatest victory in the fifteenth century, when he defeated an invading army of Anglo-Irish of Meath and Leinster in an action which denuded Meath of much of its defensive capability and led to widespread plundering.[86] However, Conn's victory proved to be the highlight of his reign. Even before he succeeded to the lordship, developments within the Pale designed to prevent such spectacular defeats were beginning to take effect. As the prospect of a large-scale intervention from England receded, the colonists moved towards a stance of defensive self-sufficiency, through the means of fortification, increased vigilance and a policy of racial separation. The statute rolls of the Irish parliament are filled with legislation aimed at curbing Irish encroachments. Thus, in 1430, a law was

enacted to subsidise the construction of the small castles known as tower houses by anyone who wished to defend his land against English rebels and Irish enemies.[87] Similar measures included the levying of a tax known as 'smokesilver' to fund sentinels and spies in the border regions, the forced importation of longbows by merchants and the placing of an obligation upon Irishmen resident in the Pale to conform to English customs or to be treated as enemies.[88]

As far as the O'Connor Falys were concerned, the new policies began to take effect as early as 1447. In that year Furnival repaired and re-garrisoned Castle Carbury, strategically located in the heart of the Berminghams' territory.[89] By 1453, the Anglo-Irish began the construction of a network of defensive trenchworks along the borders of Meath and Kildare — some traces of which still remain.[90] From 1462, a series of tower houses were constructed adjacent to Offaly with the aim of securing "the perpetual annihilation of O'Conghor".[91]

These tower houses, which also helped to pacify the Berminghams, guarded the main routes employed by the O'Connor Falys to enter Meath and Kildare, and their construction undoubtedly hampered the O'Connor Falys' operational capacity.[92] In fact, the frequency and scope of their expeditions against the Anglo-Irish fell sharply, with only three raids recorded between 1466 and 1511.[93] However, the greatest impetus for restraint came about as a result of a fundamental political development within the Anglo-Irish policy: In 1456, Thomas 'fitzMaurice' Fitzgerald successfully asserted his claim to the earldom of Kildare.[94] Within forty years, the fortunes of his family had revived to such an extent that his son Gerald 'the Great earl', was undoubtedly the most powerful man in Ireland. This pre-eminence was reflected in his virtual monopolisation of the office of chief governor, in which capacity he oversaw a major recovery in royal authority throughout the island.

In essence, the Kildares' achievement was based upon their ability to protect 'the obedient shires' from Irish depredations. The Great earl in particular proved to be remarkably adept at both pacifying the Irish lordships on the borders of the Pale and expanding its borders. In a fine mixture of self-aggrandisement and reassertion of royal authority, the Great earl reconquered and refortified Irish-held lands in counties Kildare and Carlow at government expense and then proceeded to grant the lands to himself and to his adherents.[95]

The tactics employed by the earls of Kildare against the Irish were very similar to those used by Furnival.[96] However, several factors ensured that their efforts had a more lasting effect. First, the relative closeness of their estates to Dublin, combined with their permanent residence in Ireland meant that they were better able to enforce the submissions extracted from Irish chiefs than were individuals like Furnival.[97] More importantly perhaps, their commanding position within the Pale enabled them to take steps to build up a formidable military force without the need for either large subsidies or troops from England.[98]

One innovative measure adopted was the establishment in 1474 of a military guild known as the Fraternity of St George. This body, which was financed through taxation, provided the Kildares with a force of 40 horsemen and 120 mounted archers.[99] Another was the adoption of the Irish custom of quartering troops upon the general populace in the

border regions. Heretofore the Palesmen had been resolutely opposed to the practice, except in case of extreme emergency, seeing it as an alarming symptom of degeneration.[100]

Nevertheless, by 1500 the Great earl had permanently installed bodies of both galloglasses and kerne in County Kildare, for his own use.[101] In addition to increasing the numbers of troops available, the Great earl's subjugation of the Irish lordships was due in no small way to what could be regarded as his greatest military innovation – the first large-scale deployment of artillery in Ireland.[102] Although guns could be found in Ireland as early as 1361, during the following century references to them are extremely infrequent, which strongly suggests that their usage was rare.[103] In fact the first recorded Irish fatality involving firearms did not occur until 1487, when one Godfrey O'Donnell shot an O'Rourke with a handgun.[104] Kildare, however, made good use of artillery, both on the borders of the Pale and well beyond. For example, in 1488 he took Balrath castle in Meath in the first recorded use of ordnance in Ireland, and a decade later he repeated the performance at Dungannon castle in the northern province of Ulster.[105] Overall, Kildare's mixture of astute financial organisation and the consistent application of brute force transformed the relationship between the Pale and its Irish neighbours. By 1518, in a neat reversal of fortune, all of the border lordships were actually paying tribute to the earl of Kildare, who was in effect acting as an Irish overlord.[106] The O'Connor Falys were particularly deeply affected by the establishment of the new order.

As the Kildares' closest Irish neighbour, the lordship of Offaly was in fact the first to attract their attention. As early as 1459, earl Thomas defeated and captured Conn O'Connor.[107] Significantly, there are no records of O'Connor Faly expeditions against the obedient Anglo-Irish of Kildare thereafter. Furthermore, much of the earls' reconquests were at Offaly's expense. Rathangan was rapidly lost, and the O'Connor Falys spent most of the 1470s fighting a defensive war against the encroachments of Sir Roland fitzEustace, a Kildare adherent.[108] In fact, by 1485, the O'Connor Falys, now led by Conn's son Cathaoir, had become dependants of the Great earl. That year, parliament awarded 'Cahir O'Connor, captain of his nation', his wages, or blackrent, of 40d per ploughland from Meath, "as it was of ancient times usual".[109] It had not been usual, however, for an O'Connor Faly to earn his wages because of his faithful service to the king in the company of an earl of Kildare. Thereafter, for the rest of the middle ages, apart from one temporary aberration which occurred in exceptional circumstances, the relationship between the earls of Kildare and the lords of Offaly was that between an Irish lord and his sub-chief.[110] In particular, the earls made use of the O'Connor Falys' military strength in two ways. First, they were employed in the earls' far-flung campaigns which were designed to extend royal authority and their own power simultaneously. For instance in 1504 the Great earl defeated the ClanRicard Burkes, a degenerate Anglo-Irish lineage, in a pitched battle at Knocktoe, in the western province of Connacht. The O'Connor Falys participated in the battle with one Anglo-Irish source portraying Cathaoir as a trusted advisor to the earl.[111] Secondly, the O'Connor Falys served as a weapon with which to threaten those amongst the Palesmen who challenged the earl's supremacy. Certainly, later in the sixteenth century there was a

very strong link between the earl of Kildare being out of office and the O'Connor Falys being hostile to the Pale.[112] In conclusion, the Great earl died in 1513, succumbing, fittingly enough, to a gunshot wound sustained while bombarding an Irish castle.[113] By then, however, his family's dominance over the lordship of Offaly was sufficiently strong to ensure that the O'Connor Falys' political and military concerns were no longer of their own choosing.

In essence, for as long as the power of the earls of Kildare endured, expansionist frontier warfare as practised by able chiefs such as An Calbhach, ceased to be a viable option for the O'Connor Falys.

Notes

1   E. F. *Jacob*, The fifteenth century 1399-1485 (Oxford 1961) pp. 176-7.

2   A. M. *Freeman* (ed.), Annála Connacht: the annals of Connacht, A. D. 1224-1544 (Ann. Conn.) (Dublin 1944) s.a. 1419. For convenience, the terms 'Irish' and 'Anglo-Irish' will be used to denote the groups known to the annalists as 'Gaedhil' and 'Gall' respectively.

3   Ibid.

4   J. S. *Brewer* – W. *Bullen* (ed.), Calendar of the Carew manuscripts preserved in the archiepiscopal library at Lambeth (Cal. Carew MSS, 6 vols, London 1867-73) v, p. 227.

5   Jean de *Wavrin*, A collection of the chronicles and ancient histories of Great Britain, now called England, ed. W. *Hardy* – E. *Hardy*, 3 vols (London 1864-91) ii, pp. 241-2.

6   A new history of Ireland (N.H.I.), 10 vols (Oxford 1976) ii, p. 528.

7   See for example: K. *Simms*, Warfare in the medieval Gaelic lordships, in: The Irish Sword, xii (1975-6) pp. 98-9; H. *Johnstone* (ed.) Annales Gadenses. Annals of Ghent (Oxford 1985) pp. 6-7.

8   For the political background see: N.H.I., ii, pp. 533-56, 569-90, 619-37; A. J. *Otway-Ruthven*, A history of medieval Ireland (London ¹1980) pp. 339-408. For a discussion of the question of nationality see: J. F. *Lydon*, Nation and Race in medieval Ireland (= S. *Froste* – L. *Johnson* – A. Y. *Murray* (ed.), Concepts of Nationality in the Middle Ages, Leeds 1995) pp. 103-24.

9   N.H.I., ii, pp. 572-3, 579-82, 621.

10   See for example: D. A. *Chart* (ed.), The register of John Swayne, Archbishop of Armagh and Primate of Ireland 1413-49 (Belfast 1935) p. 108; D. *Bryan*, Gerald Fitzgerald, the great earl of Kildare (Dublin 1933) pp. 18-19.

11   N.H.I., ii, p. 633.

12   N.H.I., ix, pp. 44-5.

13   N.H.I., ii, p. 633.

14   *Bergin* (ed.), Irish Bardic Poetry (Dublin 1970) pp. 284-5.

15   On degeneracy see: N.H.I., ii, pp. 310, 386-90; J. *O'Donovan* (ed.), The Annals of Ireland, from the year 1443 to 1468, translated from the Irish by Dudley Firbisse, or, as he is more usually called, Duald MacFirbis, for Sir James Ware, in the year 1666, in: Miscellany of the Irish Archaeological Society (cited hereafter as MacFirbis), pp. 202, 212.

16   J. *O'Donovan* (ed.), Annala rioghachta Eireann: Annals of the Kingdom of Ireland by the Four Masters, from the earliest period to the year 1616 (A.F.M., 7 vols, Dublin 1851) s.a. 1406, 1411, 1414, 1416, 1446; Ann. Conn., s.a. 1422, 1426, 1436; O'Donovan, MacFirbis, pp. 212, 216; S. *Ó hInnse* (ed.), Miscellaneous Irish Annals (A.D. 1114-1437) (Misc. Ir. Annals) (Dublin 1947) s.a. 1402, 1404, 1405.

17   O'Donovan, MacFirbis, p. 203.

18   Ibid., p. 212.

19   Ibid., p. 214; A.F.M., s.a. 1446.

20   O'Donovan, MacFirbis, p. 201.

21   L. *Price* (ed.), Armed forces of the Irish Chiefs in the early sixteenth century, in: Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland (J.R.S.A.I.), lxii (1932) p. 206; but see: N.H.I., iii, p. 32 n. 3 for a correction of the dating of the text.

22 K. *Simms*, From Kings to Warlords (Woodbridge 1987) pp. 120-1, 127-8.

23 A.F.M., s.a. 1406; Ann. Conn., s.a. 1436.

24 *Price*, Armed forces, p. 206. For a survey of Irish weaponry and armour see: P. *Harbison*, Native Irish arms and armour in medieval Gaelic literature, 1170-1600, in: The Irish Sword, xii (1975-6) pp. 173-199, 270-84.

25 *Simms*, From Kings to Warlords, pp. 124-5.

26 K. W. *Nicholls*, Gaelic and Gaelicised Ireland in the Middle Ages (Dublin 1972) pp. 73-8.

27 See for example: *O'Donovan*, MacFirbis, pp. 201, 207-8, 219-20.

28 D. *Murphy* (ed.), The annals of Clonmacnoise, being annals of Ireland from the earliest period to A.D. 1408 (Dublin 1896) s.a. 1406.

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30 Ibid.

31 D. *Carpenter*, The Pilgrim from Catalonia/Aragon: Ramon de Perellós, 1397 (= ed. M. *Haren* – Y. de *Pontfarcy*, The Medieval Pilgrimage to St Patrick's Purgatory, Enniskillen 1988) p. 110.

32 A. *Cosgrove*, Late medieval Ireland, 1370-1541 (Dublin 1981), front cover; *Simms*, Warfare in the medieval Gaelic lordships, p. 105.

33 *Simms*, Warfare in the medieval Gaelic lordships, pp. 105-6.

34 For a detailed discussion of Galloglass see: G. A. *Hayes-McCoy*, Scots mercenary forces in Ireland (Dublin 1937).

35 J. F. *Lydon*, The Scottish soldier in medieval Ireland: The Bruce invasion and the Galloglass (= The Scottish soldier abroad, 1247-1967, ed. G. G. *Simpson*, Edinburgh 1992) pp. 6-10.

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37 *Simms*, Warfare in the medieval Gaelic lordships, p. 106; *Lydon*, The Scottish soldier in medieval Ireland, pp. 8, 12.

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43 *O'Donovan*, MacFirbis, p. 208.

44 Ibid., pp 219-20.

45 *Simms*, Warfare in the medieval Gaelic lordships, p. 107.

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49 Ann. Conn., s.a. 1422.

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52 A.F.M., s.a., 1408, 1416, 1475.

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