

WARFARE IN THE MEDIEVAL GAELIC LORDSHIPS

by KATHARINE SIMMS

IT is possible for a modern reader to exaggerate the contrast between the cattle raids of Ireland and the art of war as practised elsewhere in medieval Europe. Sir Charles Oman and his followers¹ have written in terms of major struggles between national kingships, of pitched battles, the charge of heavy-armed knights and the serried rows of kneeling pikemen. More recently it has come to be recognised that not only in Ireland, but on the marches of Scotland and Wales, and in other parts of Europe where a strong central government was lacking,² most fighting took place in private wars between local lords, and the methods employed were very much less formal.

Nevertheless, during the medieval period foreign observers, even those familiar with march warfare in their own countries, are at pains to underline the unusual aspects of war in Ireland. In the fourteenth century the chronicler Jean Froissart, who obtained his information from an Anglo-Irish squire, comments:

It is hard to find a way of making war on the Irish effectively for, unless they choose, there is no one there to fight and there are no towns to be found...

Even Sir William of Windsor, who had longer experience of campaigning on the Irish border than any other English knight, never succeeded in learning the lie of the country or in understanding the mentality of the Irish.³

A little earlier the Scottish archdeacon, John Barbour, depicts some Irish kings as explaining to Edward Bruce

For our maner is, of this land
Till follow and ficht, and ficht fleand
And nocht till stand in plane melle
Quhill the ta part discumfit be⁴:

in other words—Our custom is to pursue and fight, and fight when retreating, and not to stand in open hand-to-hand conflict until the other side is defeated.

As I hope to make plain at a later stage, these two points: 'Unless they choose there is no one there to fight' and 'Our custom is to pursue and fight, and fight when retreating' indicate in a nutshell the essential characteristics of Irish warfare. First, however, the question arises as to why this contrast should exist between Ireland and the rest of Europe. Giraldus Cambrensis explains it in terms of terrain:

¹ C. W. C. Oman, *A History of the Art of War in the Middle Ages* (2 vols, London, 1924). A select bibliography of more recent works on the subject may be found at the back of J. H. Beeler, *Warfare in Feudal Europe* (New York and London, 1971).

² A study which supplies very interesting comparisons for the Irish situation is John Lerner, *The Lords of Romagna* (New York and London, 1965).

³ Froissart: *Chronicles*, selected and translated by Geoffrey Brereton (Harmondsworth, 1968), p. 410.

⁴ W. M. Mackenzie (ed.), *The Bruce, by John Barbour* (London, 1909), pp 444-5.

In France (war) is carried on in a champaign country, here it is rough and mountainous; there you have open plains, here you find dense woods. In France it is counted an honour to wear armour, here it is found to be cumbersome . . . In fighting against naked and unarmed men, whose only hope of success lies in the impetuosity of their first attack, men in light armour can pursue the fugitives, an agile race, with more activity, and cut them down in narrow passes and amongst crags and mountains.⁵

However, there is a further consideration. The overall impression gained from a study of Irish literature and historical documents is that while the warlord elsewhere might fight to gain possession of land, an Irish lord fought for dominion over people.

Ireland at the time of the Norman invasion shows signs of underpopulation. Again to quote Giraldus Cambrensis:

The wealth of the soil is lost, not through the fault of the soil, but because there are no farmers to cultivate even the best land: "the fields demand, but there are no hands"⁶

and while he attributes this to the laziness of the Irish farmer, it can also be seen as a symptom of what Professor Otway-Ruthven has called 'a lack of men, rather than a lack of land'.⁷ The same applies to that clause in the treaty of Windsor (1175), by which the Normans stipulated that Irish tenants who had fled from the conquered lands should be forced to return and live in peace under their new masters *faciendo antiqua servitia quae facere solebant pro terris suis*.⁸ In the fourteenth, fifteenth and sixteenth centuries there are references to competition between lords for the possession of Irish tenants, even to the point of abducting them.⁹ In conditions where land was plentiful and man-power scarce, it was natural that there should be an emphasis on pastoral farming, and this was particularly true of the north of Ireland. Although cereal crops, chiefly oats, continued to be grown in Ulster throughout the middle ages, outside observers comment on the scarcity of bread in that province, and on the great numbers of cattle, whose attendant herdsmen are said to have lived a semi-nomadic life, following them from pasture to pasture, at least in the summer months.¹⁰

Thus a chieftain's real wealth lay in the farmers who lived under his protection and the cows they tended. To conquer more land in itself could bring him no profit if he had no surplus of followers to occupy it. A mode of warfare which aimed at killing large numbers of the enemy, while seizing their territory and

⁵ Thomas Wright (ed.), *The Historical Works of Giraldus Cambrensis* (London, 1863), p. 321.

⁶ J. J. O'Meara (trans.), *Topography of Ireland: Giraldus Cambrensis* (Dundalk, 1951), p. 86.

⁷ A. J. Otway-Ruthven, 'The Character of Norman Settlement in Ireland' in *Historical Studies V* (ed. J. L. McCracken, London, 1965), p. 77; *A History of Medieval Ireland* (London, 1968), p. 115.

⁸ William Stubbs (ed.), *Chronica Magistri Rogeri de Houedene* (London, 1869), ii, p. 85.

⁹ *Calendar of the Justiciary Rolls of Ireland, 1305-7* (ed. J. Mills, Dublin, 1914), p. 326; Register of Archbishop John Prene, Lib. i, fo. 10 r (transcript in Trinity College Library, T.C.D. MS 557/5/33-4); Kenneth Nicholls, *Gaelic and Gaelicised Ireland in the Middle Ages* (Dublin and London, 1972), pp 68-9; *Calendar of the State Papers relating to Ireland 1609-10*, p. 533.

¹⁰ Nicholls, *Gaelic and Gaelicised Ire.*, pp 114-17; J. P. Mahaffy, 'Two Early Tours in Ireland' in *Hermathena* no. 40 (1914), p. 8; H. Morley (ed.), *Ireland under Elizabeth and James I* (London, 1890), pp 87, 288, 420-1, 427.

securing possession by incastellation, could serve no purpose under Irish conditions. Instead the warlord required submission from people, the acquisition of additional subjects to render him tributes and services.

There would seem to be only two viable solutions to the problem of how to conquer people without killing them or taking their land—that is, harrying and plundering. Harrying, as opposed to cattle-raiding, was a typically Viking method of warfare, and it is possible that this practice only became widespread in Ireland after the Viking invasions. Vikings often entered the hostile territory from ships, so that the amount of plunder they could carry away with them was limited. Instead, when they wished to compel a district to submit to them or to pay protection-money, they indulged in wanton destruction, by burning houses, trampling down corn, killing farm animals and raping or enslaving women. Skaldic poetry of the eleventh century describes the Norwegian kings' harrying of Denmark:

Lord of the Tronds! The shields
Thou didst strike; in wrath
Didst thou bid every house
To be burned to fire and ashes . . .

The landsmen lay fallen . . .
The housefolk bent with anguish
Fled hastily to the woods . . .
The fair women were seized.
The lock held the maiden's body;
Before thee thou didst send
Many a loath woman to the ships.¹¹

Harrying was not a scorched earth policy designed to cut off food supplies from the enemy army; it was a deliberate attack on the civilian population to terrorize them into submission. In medieval Ireland the methods used were somewhat less brutal. Attacks on women, children and clerics, though they undoubtedly happened, were frowned on¹², and this theoretical immunity might be held to include unarmed farmers;¹³ but the systematic burning of houses and destruction of crops was a normal procedure to obtain submission.¹⁴ A border country between two hostile chiefs was liable to be wasted by both sides, as in 1228 when: vast war arose between . . . the two sons of Ruaidri O Conchobair . . . for the younger did not yield respect to the elder; so that all Connacht was ruined between them and turned into a continuous desert from Ballysadare southwards to the River (Robe).¹⁵

¹¹ Snorre Sturlason, *Heimskringla*, ed. Erling Monsen, pp 498, 516.

¹² *A(nndla) C(onnacht: the Annals of Connacht (A.D. 1224-1544)*, ed. A. M. Freeman [Dublin, 1944]), A.D. 1225:14; 1230:8; 1236:16; 1293:13; 1296:9; 1310:3; 1315:12, 13; 1465:5. Note also L. McKenna (ed.) *Aitbdiogbluim Dána, a miscellany of Irish bardic poetry* (Dublin, 1939), no. 3, verses 20-22.

¹³ *A(nndla) U(ladh, Annals of Ulster* ed. W. M. Hennessy and B. McCarthy [4 vols, Dublin, 1887-1901]), A.D. 1492; A.C., 1235:14.

¹⁴ E.g. *Miscellaneous Irish Annals* ed. S. Ó hInnse (Dublin, 1947), pp 34-5; A.C., 1315:7; 1412:17; A.U. 1431.

¹⁵ A.C.

Or again we read in 1495:

MacWilliam of Clanrickard came into Lower Connacht and completely destroyed whatever O Domnaill had not already destroyed.¹⁶

Simple destruction, however, brought no profit to the attacking force, and was not calculated to woo the allegiance of prospective subjects. On both these counts the traditional practice of cattle-raiding was preferable.

The numbers of cows captured on one campaign could be considerable. Early fourteenth-century justiciary rolls show that a private raid, that is, a raid on the estate of a single nobleman, could net forty to a hundred cows.¹⁷ The Irish annals, in contrast to many Latin chronicles, normally confine their estimates of numbers to conservative and credible totals, describing 'a great rout' in which six men were killed,¹⁸ another defeat where ten men died and eleven horses were captured;¹⁹ or the battle of Moin-laghraidhe, where twenty were killed and ten taken prisoner.²⁰ These annals say that in 1355, when O'Neill raided Tír Conaill, he was reckoned to have driven off seventeen herds of cattle, besides sheep and goats and swine and three score choice steeds.²¹ In a local war in Connacht in 1462 we are told that one side captured the staggering sum of 2,400 cows, while their opponents were considered to have done very well in taking 560.²² Yet even if all the cattle were kept, and distributed as wages and booty among the soldiers, there was not as much pure profit to be gained from these raids as one might suppose: an army of 360 foot-soldiers on a ten days campaign could consume the equivalent of just over 166 cows in food and wages,²³ and even the chief's own subjects might expect to be paid if the hosting brought them beyond the borders of their own territory.²⁴

Indeed, it appears that the cows seized during such raids were not always kept. Sometimes they were only held until the defeated enemy submitted and gave hostages as a guarantee of his future loyalty and obedience, when his property might be at least partially restored to him. For instance, in 1236, during the conquest of Connacht:

Conchobar Ruad went to find MacWilliam and submitted to him and made peace; and such of his cattle as had been reaved were paid for.²⁵

¹⁶ A.C.

¹⁷ *Cal. Justic. Rolls Ire. 1295-1303*, p. 197; 1305-7, p. 176; 1308-14, pp. 210, 224.

¹⁸ A.U., 1422.

¹⁹ *Annals of the kingdom of Ireland by the Four Masters*, ed. J. O'Donovan [7 vols, Dublin, 1851], A.D. 1416.

²⁰ A.U., 1484.

²¹ A.U., ii, pp. 506-7.

²² A.C.

²³ 'The Irish Pipe Roll of 14 John, 1211-1212', ed. O. Davies and D. B. Quinn, in *Ulster Journal of Archaeology*, 3rd series, iv, supplement (July, 1941), pp. 62-3.

²⁴ M. Dillon (ed.), 'The Inauguration of O'Connor' in *Medieval Studies presented to Aubrey Gwynn S.J.*, ed. J. A. Watt, J. B. Morrall and F. X. Martin (Dublin, 1961), pp. 191, 198; D. H. Kelly and W. M. Hennessy (eds), *The Book of Fenagh* (reprinted, Dublin 1939), pp. 356-9; G. MacNiocaill, (ed.), *The Red Book of the Earls of Kildare* (Dublin, 1964), no. 168; E. P. Shirley, *Some account of the Territory or Dominion of Farney* (London, 1845), p. 20; E. Curtis, 'The "Bonnacht" of Ulster' in *Hermathena*, no. 46 (1931), p. 88.

²⁵ A.C.

And in 1464:

Aed Mac Diarmata took the preys of Tír Tuathail this year and they made submission to him in return for (the restitution of) their preys.²⁶

The reason behind this civilised behaviour emerges in a letter written by Sir Henry Docwra, the English commander at Derry in 1601. Sir Henry was trying to install the pro-English Niall Garbh O'Donnell as lord of Tír Conaill, and to this end he had just made a cattle-raid on MacSweeny, when, according to Sir Henry, Niall Garbh

came to me in a raging and violent manner, exclaiming on the injustice of the course that was held in preying a man that was ready to come in, and had assured him of the same, urging me even with these words, 'What shall I be the better for the country, when you leave me nothing in it, but the bare land desolate and destroyed?' Upon which importunity of his, I yielded to leave a great part of the prey, and freely gave back much at his earnest suit and request.²⁷

On this particular occasion Niall Garbh's words were a trick, for he himself promptly seized the cows which he had persuaded Sir Henry to return, but in the course of his argument he had voiced an important principle. An Irish king with long-term ambitions to accumulate wealth and power did not engage in cattle-raiding simply for the sake of the booty he could obtain. The submission of the territory which followed such a raid was more important. The hostages might guarantee him greater political power, greater military resources, when the new subjects joined his hosting, and perhaps the payment of an annual tribute.

Of course, in order to compel submission, it was first necessary to get hold of the cows. In the very spartan economy of Gaelic Ireland, where even the greatest lords might live in thatched houses of wattle-and-daub,²⁸ cows were the only commodity of real value, and if the inhabitants of the enemy country got warning of an invasion they drove their cattle into woods and mountains, or into walled enclosures or empty raths,²⁹ and the invaders had to vent their frustration on what was left behind, as on MacDermot's raid in Tireragh in 1336:

The cows of the country were removed before their coming, but they carried off much dead-stock, many horses, a few steeds and much small stock, killed some people and returned safely.³⁰

Because of the mobility of the spoils, surprise was a key element in the success of a raid. In 1235 the English came

²⁶ A.C.

²⁷ *Cal. S. P. Ire. 1600-01*, pp 326-7.

²⁸ An tAth. Colmcille OCSO, *Combcheilg na Mainistreach Móire* (Baile Átha Cliath, 1968), p. 157; Morley, *Ire. under Eliz. and Jas. I*, p. 430.

²⁹ A.C., 1230:3, 5; 1236:8; A.U., 1457; A.F.M., 1392; R. Stanihurst, *De rebus in Hibernia gestis* (Antwerp, 1584), p. 33; R. Crawford (ed.), *Captain Cuellar's Narrative of the Spanish Armada* (London, 1897), pp 61-2.

³⁰ A.C., 1336:8, and see *ibid.*, 1464:29.

without warning or notice into Thomond. They took vast innumerable spoils from the Munstermen, who had provided no retreat and made no preparations.³¹

On the other hand, if the alarm (*rabhadh*) had been given in time, and the cows, the peasants and the women and children had been removed to a safe place, the country might be held to have foiled their enemies without striking a blow, since the invaders would find nothing left worth the plundering. In 1230, during an English raid on Connacht, we are told of the Irish leaders:

since their cattle and folk had gone with them to Slieve Anierin and into inaccessible fastnesses, they determined to take no heed of the Galls, and to make no plans concerning them.³²

This is reminiscent of Giraldus Cambrensis' description of the first Norman foray into the West:

The men of Connacht set fire to their own towns and villages, and burnt all the corn which they could not conceal in their underground granaries . . .

The English army, however, marched forward till they came to Thomond; but after halting there for eight days in the heart of the enemy's territory, finding that no provisions could be obtained in the country, they retired towards the Shannon.³³

Such episodes underline the meaning of the complaint recorded by Froissart—'Unless they choose, there is no one there to fight'.

The moving train of refugees, women and children, cattle and farmers, escorted by the fighting-men, was called the *imirce*, the migration. Some of the worst scenes in warfare occurred when the raiders caught up with the train of refugees before they reached shelter.³⁴ Burdened as they were with herds of cows, old people and children, the refugees would have to move slowly and unless they had adequate warning and a long start, might be easily caught up. However it was equally true that if no warning was given, and the invading army collected a huge herd of cows and began to drive them home to their own territory, they in turn had to move slowly, and to stop to rest on the way, or the cows would die of over-driving.³⁵ This gave plenty of time for the owners of the cows to summon all the fighting-men of the district, arm and equip them and set out in hot pursuit. Normally, it appears, they had little difficulty in catching up. On the one hand, a large herd of cows could hardly fail to leave a clearly marked trail behind them—in a poem by the sixteenth-century Tadhg Dall Ó hUiginn there is a reference to the 'reaver's track in the grass' (*sliocht foghlaidhe i bhféar*).³⁶ On the other hand, obstacles like woods, bogs and mountains would reduce the choice of routes open to the plunderers.

Since the attackers sought to arrive without warning and to remove the prey before their victims had assembled in arms, in this form of warfare it was typically

³¹ A.C.

³² A.C.

³³ T. Wright (ed.), *The Historical Works of Giraldus Cambrensis*, p. 283.

³⁴ E.g. A.C., 1225:11, 12; 1315:12; A.U., 1433.

³⁵ Cal. Justic. Rolls Ire. 1305-7, p. 177; A.U., 1431.

³⁶ E. Knott (ed.), *The Poems of Tadhg Dall Ó hUiginn* (London, 1922), no. 13 verse 9.

when the pursuing party or *toraigheacht* caught up with the plunderers, the *creach*, that the real battle began. That is why the most honourable place for an Irish leader to die was fighting at the rear of his army: either in the rear of a train of refugees, to prevent them from being overtaken by invaders,³⁷ or at the rear of his own plundering party, to prevent the stolen cows from being recaptured by the pursuing force.³⁸ Sooner than give up his booty, many an Irish leader was prepared to die, as in 1388 when

Cormac Mac Donnchada . . . went raiding by night in Moylurg and took great preys and conveyed them to a safe place. O Conchobair Ruad . . . and many of the men of the country followed him up in an attempt to recover the prey. Cormac covered the rear of his own people and would not receive quarter from the pursuers, so that they had to kill him in the end.³⁹

This extract shows very clearly that killing one's enemy was not the object of Irish warfare, but only an incidental necessity. It also demonstrates the meaning of the Scottish chronicler's quotation: 'Our custom is to pursue and fight, and fight when retreating.' Two variations of this pattern are occasionally found in the annals—in one the side who have been plundered, instead of trying to take back their own cows, make a quick raid into their enemies' country while they know the fighting-men to be absent, and try to recoup their losses by a counter-prey.⁴⁰ In the other variation, instead of trying to hide away the cows when they get warning of an invasion, the defenders allow the plunderers to collect as many as possible and then set an ambush for them, knowing that the raiders will be slowed down and hampered by the herds of cattle, and thus less able to fight back.⁴¹

When the aims and objectives of a cattle-raid are clarified, the composition of the plundering parties becomes understandable. Two small bands whose numbers are given in the fifteenth century were composed of 140 foot-soldiers and twelve horsemen, and 60 foot-soldiers and six horsemen,⁴² a proportion of roughly ten foot-soldiers to one horseman. The ordinary foot-soldier was the kern—without armour, often barefooted and bare-headed, armed only with a sword and a few throwing-darts, though in the later sixteenth-century he might have a gun.⁴³ Such men were useful for setting fire to houses, for rounding up and driving off the cattle. They are spoken of as 'being lighter and lustier than (the English soldiers) in travail and footmanship', quick to scatter and run away, across bogs and up the sides of mountains where the horsemen could not

37 A.C., 1225:8; 1262:3; A.F.M., 1392.

38 A.C., 1306:4; 1401:26; 1444:2; A.U., 1342, 1480; M. Dillon (ed.), *Lebor na Cert, The Book of Rights* (Dublin, 1962), pp 28, 30; 'The Inauguration of O Conor' in *Studies presented to Aubrey Gwynn*, pp 190, 198.

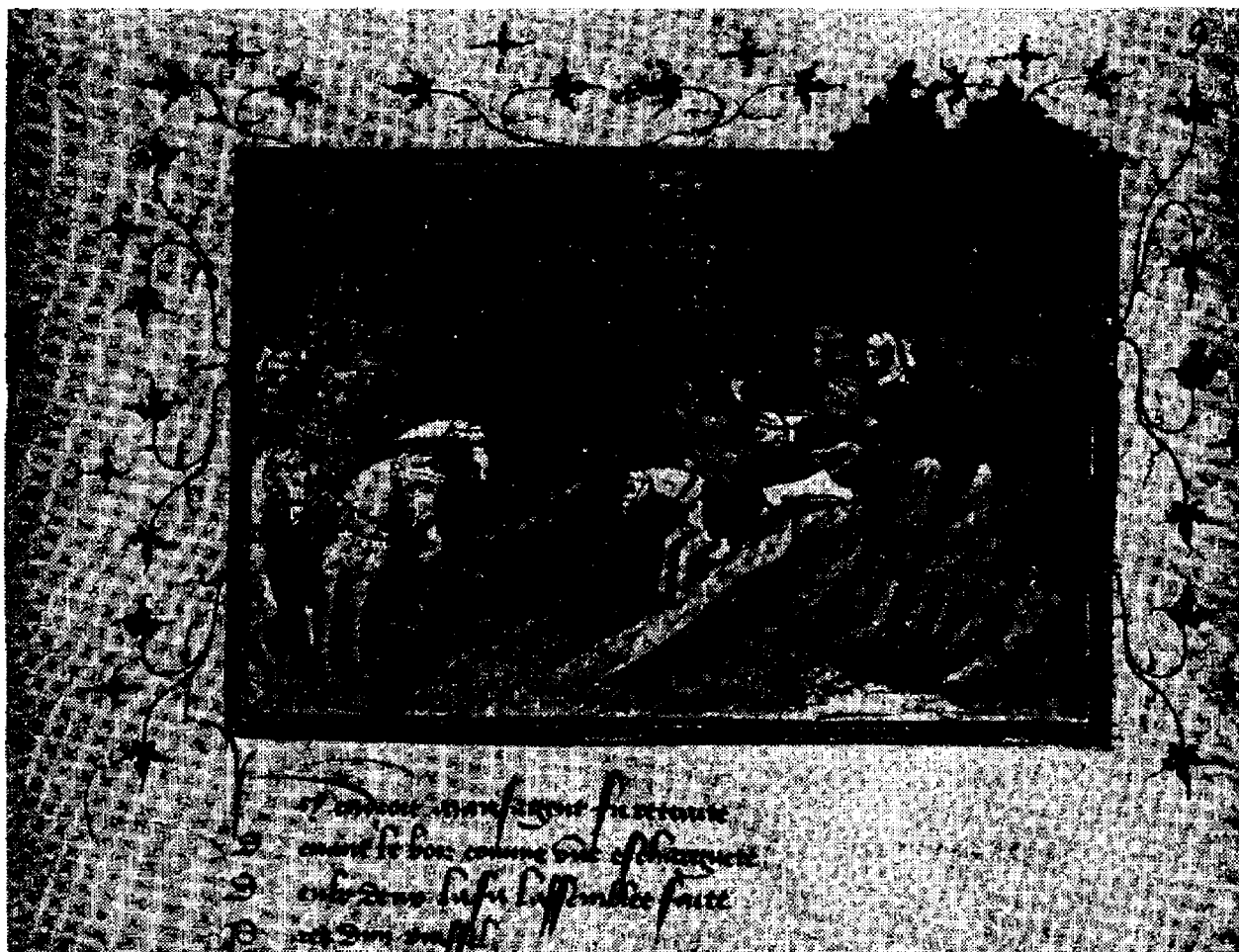
39 A.C.

40 A.U., 1433, 1470.

41 A.C., 1385:6; 1413:9. On the problem of trying to herd cattle and fight at the same time, see S. H. O Grady, *Silva Gadelica* (London, 1892), i, p. 283, ii, p. 319.

42 A.U., 1455, 1457.

43 S. H. O Grady, *Silva Gadelica*, i, p. 276, ii, p. 312; R. Stanihurst, 'A Treatise of Ireland' in *Holinshead's Chronicles* (1586), ii, p. 45.



McMurrough Kavanagh attacking the English c.1400.
 (From J. T. Gilbert (ed.) *Facsimilies of the National MSS of Ireland*, iii, pt. 2, plate xxxiii).



A Cattle raid from John Derricke, *Image of Ireland*, 1581.
 (Photograph by courtesy N.L.I).

follow,⁴⁴ and as we have seen, running away was an important part of Irish warfare. Accounts of cattle-raids show that when the pursuing-party came in sight, the raiders might send their 'rabble' or 'under-people' ahead with the cows, while the nobility remained behind to guard the rear.⁴⁵

Where the annals give definite information they invariably portray the chiefs and their kinsmen as fighting on horseback, and usually as wielding spears.⁴⁶ References like the mid-sixteenth century description of the chieftain of Clann Aodha Buidhe who 'hath eight tall gentlemen to his sons and all they cannot make past 24 horsemen',⁴⁷ suggest that the bulk of the cavalry was composed of the native nobility, warring in their own interest, but there is evidence that their ranks might be swelled by the inclusion of mercenary troops. A visitor to Ireland in 1397 said of Niall Óg O'Neill, king of Tír Eoghain:

He has indeed forty horsemen, riding without saddle on a cushion, and each wears a slashed cloak; moreover they are armed with coats of mail, and wear them girded, and they have throat-pieces of mail and round helmets of iron, with swords and sword-blades and lances very long, but very thin in the manner of ancient lances, and they are two fathoms long; the swords are like those of the Saracens which we call Genoese . . . and some make use of bows, which are as short as half a bow of England; but they shoot as far as the English ones . . . their manner of warring is like that of the Saracens, and they shout in the same way.⁴⁸

These forty horsemen of O'Neill sound like a standing troop of household cavalry, and in the sixteenth century Richard Stanihurst describes the mercenary horsemen, soldiers of fortune, who

when they have no staie of their owne, gad and range from house to house like arrant knights of the round table, and they never dismount untill they ride into the hall, and as farre as the table.⁴⁹

The arms and armour of O'Neill's cavalry in 1397 are perfectly illustrated by an eye-witness sketch of Art MacMurrough Kavanagh as he appeared in 1399, during Richard II's second expedition to Ireland.⁵⁰ O'Neill's visitor wrote that the great Irish lords 'put their spurs on their bare heels', and sure enough, the picture of MacMurrough Kavanagh shows his bare pink feet protruding incongruously beneath his coat of mail. Earlier still a bardic poem to Aodh O

44 T. Wright, *The Historical Works of Giraldus Cambrensis*, pp 321-2; *Calendar of Carew Manuscripts: Book of Howth and Miscellaneous*, p. 83.

45 A.C. 1225:10; 1388:2; 1398:24; A.U., 1434.

46 A.C., 1247:7; 1337:12; 1342:11; 1416:10; 1421:19; 1461:24; 1463:23; A.U., 1366, 1435, 1450; A.F.M., 1383, 1396, 1456; *The Annals of Clonmacnoise* (ed. D. Murphy, Dublin, 1896), A.D. 1398.

47 *Cal. S. P. Ire.*, 1509-73, p. 126.

48 J. P. Mahaffy, 'Two Early Tours in Ireland' in *Hermathena*, no. 40 (1914), p. 7.

49 R. Stanihurst, 'A Treatise of Ireland' in *Holinshed's Chronicles* (London, 1586), ii, p. 45.

50 J. T. Gilbert (ed.), *Facsimiles of the National Manuscripts of Ireland*, iii, pt. 2, plate xxxiii; J. Webb, 'A French Metrical History of the Deposition of Richard II' in *Archaeologia* xx (1824), plate iv, facing p. 40.

Conor, king of Connacht 1293-1309, 'Cóir Connacht ar chath Laighen'⁵¹ describes the king as similarly clad in a cotton undershirt (*cotún*), a coat of mail (*liúreach*), a pisane or collar of mail (*coiléar*) reaching from shoulder to breast, golden spurs (*spuir*), and armed with a sword, a spear and a white shield, on which was depicted 'a dragon (or dragons) and golden branches'. Furthermore the sketch of MacMurrough suggests that his horse—'so fine and good that it had cost him, they said, 400 cows'—was smaller than an English war-horse.⁵² Clearly he wielded his long thin lance by stabbing downwards from the shoulder like the eleventh-century Norman cavalry on the Bayeux tapestry. By the fourteenth century an English knight fought with a heavy jousting spear couched under his arm, but this method was suited to an ordered charge across a level plain, against an enemy who waited to receive the impact, and it required a saddle and stirrups. In the later sixteenth-century John Derricke's *The image of Ireland* shows the Irish horsemen still wearing light armour and stabbing downwards with a long thin lance.⁵³

It would seem that these horsemen constituted the real striking force in an Irish troop. A traditional Anglo-Irish saga from Ulster, dating from perhaps the fifteenth or early sixteenth century, gives a detailed reconstruction of John de Courcy's battle at Downpatrick, presumably fictional but reflecting later experience. In this it is said:

The King's footmen, I mean the Irish, always they looked for the King and the aid of their horsemen, amongst whom were all their gentlemen, in whom the footmen had all their trust... always looking more for the comfort and aid of their leaders, captains and gentlemen than they were willing to do that of themselves.⁵⁴

A chief might, however, strengthen his band of horsemen and kern by the addition of heavy-armed foot-soldiers. Norman mercenaries are found serving with the Irish kings in the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries,⁵⁵ and from 1247 onwards Scottish galloglass appear with increasing frequency in the armies of Ulster and Connacht.⁵⁶ Descriptions and sculptures of such men⁵⁷ show them in armour similar to that worn by the horsemen: a round helmet, a shoulder-cape of chainmail, and underneath either a coat of mail or a long-sleeved padded leather jack, reaching to the knees. They were armed with a great double-handed sword and a long or short-handled axe, sometimes with a lance. Like the horsemen

⁵¹ Early manuscript copies of this poem are in *The Book of O Conor Don*, fo. 330a and 'The O Gara MS', Royal Irish Academy MS no. 2 (23/F/16), p. 112. See S. H. O Grady, *Catalogue of Irish Manuscripts in the British Museum*, i, p. 348.

⁵² On this point see A. A. Dent and Daphne Machin Goodall, *The Fools of Epona* (London, 1962), pp 108-112, 119, 148, 152-8.

⁵³ See *Ir. Sword*, i, plate 18, facing p. 317.

⁵⁴ *Calendar of Carew MSS, Book of Howth and Miscellaneous*, pp 82-3.

⁵⁵ G. H. Orpen (ed.), *The Song of Dermot and the Earl* (Oxford, 1892), pp 82, 94-6; (*The Annals of Loch Cé*) C(é) [ed. W. M. Hennessy, reprint Dublin, 1939], A.D. 1195, 1200, 1201, 1202; A.C. 1225:22; 1256:9.

⁵⁶ A.C., 1247:7; 1259:6; 1290:7; 1304:2; 1305:3; 1309:2; 1315:7, 13, 20 etc.

⁵⁷ John Hunt, *Irish Medieval Figure Sculpture 1200-1600* (Dublin and London, 1974), ii, plates 248-51; P. Walsh, *Leabhair Chlainne Suibhne* (Dublin, 1920), pp 44-5.

they are found stationed at the rear of a plundering party, to beat off the pursuit.⁵⁸ In a book called *Weapons and Tactics, Hastings to Berlin*, the author, Jac Weller, makes some interesting comments on the use of heavy armoured foot-soldiers in the Third Crusade. He emphasizes the unprecedented nature of the problem facing Christian armies in the Middle East, particularly when under Richard Coeur de Lion they were forced into a long retreat across the desert, harassed as they marched by the Turkish light cavalry:

These horse archers would not stand a charge, but would draw the heavy Christian horsemen further and further into hot arid terrain . . . The answer to this tactical problem was to combine infantry with cavalry in the Christian armies . . . The armoured infantry and crossbowmen provided an unshakable base for brief effective cavalry charges.⁵⁹

Mr. Weller distinguishes firmly between such tactics and the normal warfare of Western Europe where 'the open stretches of semi-desert country necessary for exhausting running fights are simply not available'.⁶⁰

However, as we have seen, 'exhausting running fights' were almost the only form of warfare known in Ireland, and O'Neill's visitor in 1397 explicitly compared the methods of his horsemen to the Saracen warriors. From descriptions of battles in the annals it would seem that the heavy-armed galloglass provided the plundering party with a moving line of defence, a 'castle of bones' rather than a 'castle of stones', from which the horsemen could make short, sharp charges, and behind which they could retreat when pursued.⁶¹

The first changes in this style of warfare came when the Irish chiefs began to live in stone castles. In the fourteenth century castles which had originally been built by the Norman colonists, such as Roscommon, Ballymote, Sligo and Lough Oughter came to be occupied by Irish chiefs primarily as residences,⁶² safer than the thatched halls of wattle and daub where an enemy might take them by surprise and burn them alive.⁶³ In the fifteenth century, however, the Irish began to build castles themselves for strategic purposes, to defend the borders of their lands. This is particularly true of the castles of Bundrowse and Ballyshannon on the Donegal border, built in 1420 and 1423 respectively.⁶⁴ Thereafter the defenders could not afford simply to disappear into the hills, leaving the castle empty and unguarded. They had to employ men as a permanent garrison; and it is in the fifteenth century that the word *barda* 'a castle ward' begins to be commonly used in the Irish annals.⁶⁵

Those who attacked such a castle needed siege-machines⁶⁶ and an army which would remain in the field over an extended period. In the winter of 1470-1 it

⁵⁸ A.C., 1342:8; A.U., 1433, 1435.

⁵⁹ Jac Weller, *Weapons and Tactics, Hastings to Berlin* (London, 1966), p. 43.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, pp 43-4.

⁶¹ A.U. 1366; A.C., 1416:12; 1419:17; J. T. Gilbert (ed.), *Chartularies of St. Mary's Abbey, Dublin, and annals of Ireland* (London, 1886), ii, p. 392.

⁶² A.C., 1369:2; 1371:5; 1375:3.

⁶³ R. Stanihurst, *De rebus in Hibernia gestis*, pp 32-3.

⁶⁴ A.C., 1420:3; A.U., 1423; *Aithdiogbluim Dána*, ed. L. MacKenna, no. 21, verse 21.

⁶⁵ A.U., 1435, 1442, 1486, 1490; A.F.M., 1456; A.C., 1467:10; A.L.C., 1478.

⁶⁶ A.C., 1478:22.

took O'Neill six months to capture the castle of Omagh.⁶⁷ Already in the fifteenth century the Ulster chiefs had begun to import Scots mercenary forces, that is, seasonal armies, as distinct from galloglass,⁶⁸ and the first guns were being used by Irish troops before 1500.⁶⁹ The old custom of cattle-raiding was still being practised in Ireland in its classical form during the sixteenth and even the seventeenth centuries,⁷⁰ but it ceased to be the only, or even the most important, form of warfare. Up to the end of the fifteenth century, however, harrying and plundering, and exacting hostages and submission, could fairly be described as the only mode of warfare commonly in use among the Gaelic Irish, and it is against this background that we must judge the curious inadequacy of the high-king, Ruaidhri O'Connor, as he faced the challenge of the Norman invasion. Strongbow arrived without cows.

67 A.U., 1470, 1471.

68 E. Tresham (ed.), *Rotulorum patentium et clausorum Cancellarie Hiberniae Calendarium* (Dublin, 1828), p. 246, no. 21; A.U., 1433; A.F.M., 1461. See G. A. Hayes-McCoy, *Scots Mercenary Forces in Ireland* (Dublin, 1937), p. 13.

69 A.U., 1487.

70 Cattle-raiding is reported in Co. Down as late as 1692—see *Report of the Deputy Keeper of the Records of Northern Ireland for the year 1928*, Appendix A, p. 14.