COLONISATION AND CONQUEST
IN MEDIEVAL IRELAND:
THE ENGLISH IN LOUTH,
1170-1330

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The relationship between Ireland and England has illustrated a long and antagonistic history. Often described as England’s first colony, Ireland was dominated by the English crown long before Great Britain’s imperial expansion in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Working within the paradigm of colonialism, Smith’s work provides an excellent insight into the roots of this relationship. Rather than random settlement by individual English lords seeking to expand their territory, Smith presented the English involvement in Louth as part of a clearly directed state policy. Much of Louth was retained under the crown’s direct control and successive kings used their power to grant these lands and titles as a political tool. Because of this direct tie, colonists in Louth were not cut off from the centre of English power but were “in some ways more closely connected with the metropolitan centre than were the English of many parts of England” (9). This state-centred nature of the English expansion into Ireland enables historians to examine this process within the analytical framework of colonialism. Although acknowledging the problems of applying colonial theory to medieval Ireland, Smith argues that the theory of colonialism provides an important analytical tool for understanding the complex and frequently interwoven relationship between the crown, English colonists, and the native Irish nobility.

In addition to the agricultural potential of the region, the English were attracted to Louth because of the relatively weak
local power structure. Rather than long-standing local nobility, the English replaced the *Ui Cherbaill* “foreign” rulers who had controlled Louth for only half-a-century. While this weakened internal resistance, Smith clearly demonstrated that the colonisation of Louth was undertaken in an “atmosphere of tension and military preparedness” (34). Since the beginning, this process was governed directly by the state, as “the king secured for himself a permanent and immediate stake in affairs by retaining substantial estates in his own hand. These demesne lands could then be used to reward favourites and influence events in the royal interest” (31). Following early-fourteenth-century rebellions, the crown again strengthened its direct influence by creating the title of earl of Louth (113). In this way, Smith clearly demonstrates that the colonisation of Louth was not an isolated process of emigration, but was directly connected to the centre of England’s volatile internal politics. Within this power structure, the key to understanding the development of the Louth settlement was the interplay between the influence of “royal command, magnate direction and sub-tenant enterprise” (47). While the Irish nobility was displaced, many Irish families continued to play an important role in the development of Louth; it is this internal dynamic that forms the focus of Smith’s work.

Beyond a simple switch from an Irish to English nobility, Smith argues that the development of Louth involved substantial English migration that was reflected in “the large number of English place-names” (51). While this may have produced a mixed English-Irish society in Louth, Smith presents evidence of the development of close relationships between English and Irish noble families. It is clear that this society developed within a framework of constant conflict and shifting alliances. For the Louth settlement, the principal threat came from the bordering territories that had not been subdued by the English. As a result, the crown placed a significant emphasis on the fortification of Louth, as many of the land grants were contingent upon the construction of new forts.

However, while the surviving records emphasize the hostility between English and Irish, this was not the only feature of this
relationship. As Smith argued, “if such relations had been as virulent as ecclesiastical and judicial sources suggest it is difficult to understand why so many Irish continued to live in the parts of Louth conquered and settled by the English, let alone explain why more joined them as the fourteenth century progressed” (75). Consequently, a system of opportunism developed in which English and Irish made and broke alliances as circumstances dictated. This focus points to Smith’s desire to understand the “colonial ambitions of native aristocracies” (8). It is only by recognizing the continued agency of the Irish, that the true nature of this tripartite relationship can be seen. According to Smith, it was the alliance system that facilitated the settlement of Louth by ameliorating “the position of tenants living in exposed areas” that the English could not directly protect (85). In this respect, rather than being great land owners, the source of English power in colonial Louth “lay instead in the alliances they made by marriage or business with their neighbours and in the service they offered to the crown both within their county and beyond” (138-39).

Service to the crown was an important aspect of the political dynamics within colonial Louth and various offences could be redeemed through military service in the King’s campaigns. As a result, nobles from Louth participated in campaigns not only in Ireland, but also in Scotland and in Europe. This participation provided settlers the opportunity to enhance their own position and, as Smith argues, “it is noticeable that the colonists were more willing to fight outside of their own regions than inhabitants of many parts of England” (154). Smith credits the proximity of the frontier and close ties to the crown with enhancing the martial nature of the Louth settlement that he describes as “competitive, bellicose and self-aware” (138).

In developing his analysis of colonial Louth, Smith provides an important insight into the nature of conquest and settlement in medieval Britain. As demonstrated, the key factor that held combative English nobility together was their common loyalty to the crown, and this loyalty, in turn, was predicated on the King’s direct control of land and his power to grant titles. In this way, Louth perhaps presents a microcosm where the transformation
from a feudal society to a nation state can be observed. This is important because Smith’s use of colonialism was based on a state directed settlement of Louth and the power of the state was effectively demonstrated throughout the work.

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