The Scottish Migration To Ulster In The Reign Of James I


The plantation of Ulster was a major event both in Irish and British history. The two Tudor settlements, in the midlands under Catholic Mary and in Munster under Protestant Elizabeth, did little more than install a landowning class once the conquest was complete, but James I's plantation was much more thorough-going. In Ulster the conditions to which the undertakers had to subscribe were more rigorous; the maximum size of an estate was to be 3,000 acres as against 12,000 in Munster, and on each 1,000 acres twenty-four English or Scottish tenants were to be settled. The result was the planting of a whole society, from great landowners down to small farmers, merchants, artisans and labourers, a society that has endured to this day. But, by an irony of history, what was originally projected as a foundation-stone of British 'civility' in partibus infidelium has now become a stumbling-block in the way of present-day British and Irish governments seeking a final answer to the Irish question.

James's plantation different from its Tudor predecessors in more than success, for with the union of crowns Scots, previously excluded from Ireland by distrustful English monarchs, were admitted to a share in the spoils of conquest. In this third volume of the Ulster-Scots Historical Series Professor Perceval-Maxwell writes of their part in the plantation, a part which he sees as constituting the first Scottish venture of its kind in a colonising era. It is a painstaking and thorough work which recounts, as far as the limited sources allow, the territorial and occupational origins of these Lowland Scottish planters, the economic conditions in Scotland that favoured their emigration, their distribution in Ulster and the rapidity with which they made their venture profitable, as the quickly established excess of exports over imports testifies. The maps, short biographies of the Scottish principals in the plantation, a list of Scottish ministers in Ulster and an extensive bibliography, will be welcomed as much by historians unmoved by ancestral pietas as by Ulster-Scots in search of their forebears.

Though the author's dramatic sympathies are with the colonists he does not gloss over the seamier side of the venture, whether it be in the 1605 prologue in Antrim and Down, where Montgomery and Hamilton, who were later to quarrel over the spoils, exacted two-thirds of his land from Con O'Neall as a price for securing him a pardon, or in the six escheated counties that formed the plantation proper in the next decade. The new arrivals included a not inconsiderable number of black sheep, some deported from the feud-ridden Scottish border region, others broken men hoping to mend their fortunes
without too nice a regard for the means, and yet others simple fugitives from justice. Certain features of post-conquest Ireland made an early appearance, absentee landlordism, pluralism (George Montgomery held the three sees of Derry, Raphoe and Clogher for five years before his translation gave him Meath instead of the first two) and complaints from officials that the Episcopalian clergy were less diligent than their Catholic, or later their Dissenting counterparts. And in the shadowy background were the dispossessed Irish, who occasionally were accepted as tenants on the principle that pecunia non olet, especially when the rent exacted from them was higher than that from British tenants.

Professor Perceval-Maxwell does not attempt to estimate the respective proportions of Scots and English in the whole of Ulster, but his lists make it abundantly clear that the Scots formed a solid majority of the planters, a majority that was reinforced by heavy immigration in the late 1630's. He has found no evidence to suggest that religious controversies in Scotland promoted immigration into Ulster during his period (his terminus ad quem is 1625), though he stresses the Calvinist sympathies of the settlers, sympathies that in the next two decades were manifested in the emergence of Presbyterian congregations. Thus a fourth group was added to the Catholic Irish and Old English and the post-reformation Episcopalians who already divided Ireland. The new group found itself in an ambiguous position, for if Ulster-Scots had in times of trouble to make common cause with members of the established church against Catholics, and rely on an English army for effective security, they had their own grievances as nonconformists. Not until the nineteenth century did they consummate the political marriage that constituted a solid Protestant bloc in Ulster eastern counties. And by then it was a mariage de convenance for both parties faced by the rising tide of Irish nationalism.

Professor Maxwell's conclusion is occult, if not downright perplexing: 'James I sent his countrymen to Ireland in order to bind his three kingdoms more closely together; the effects of his policy are still at work over 350 years later. He might well be satisfied.' Might he, in the 1970's?  

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