

Justification: How the Elizabethans Explained Their Invasions of
Ireland and Virginia

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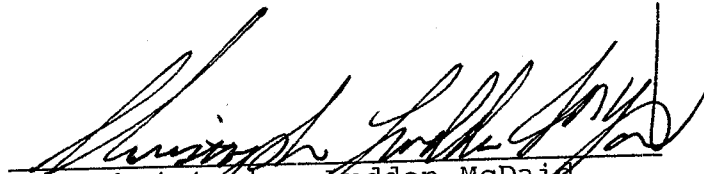
Christopher Ludden McDaid

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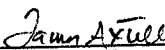
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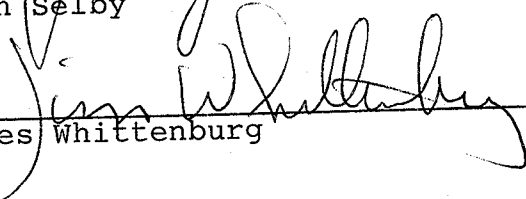

James Whittenburg

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Abstract:

The Elizabethans who attempted to conquer Ireland and Virginia needed to know that their actions were just. Regarding Ireland, the English easily justified their actions by believing that the Norman conquest of the twelfth century had secured the right to rule all Ireland for the English crown. The English had to work harder to justify their invasion of Virginia since it had no historic precedent.

Ireland had been invaded by Norman subjects of Henry II, king of England. Although that conquest was at best incomplete, it gave the English a basis for a claim to control Ireland. During the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, Ireland became a hotbed of Yorkist activity. This convinced Henry VIII that Ireland needed to be pacified. Henry and his Tudor heirs attempted to pacify Ireland and bring it in line with the rest of the crown's land. English activity in Ireland through this period, while brutal, was basically political. It was the Irish themselves who began to use religion as a tool to motivate themselves and possible allies against the English.

In Virginia the English faced a more difficult situation. With no Henry II to follow, the English needed to find reasons for going to a strange land and occupying it. The answer was religion. The English believed it their duty as good Christians to deliver the Indians of Virginia from the Devil and the Pope. Thus the English knew they brought to the Indians all the benefits of civilization, which helped legitimate the whole endeavor.

While the English discussed why and how they should colonize Virginia, the Powhatan Indians attempted to defend their land. Although the attack of 1622 failed to destroy the English colony, it did give the English an extremely powerful and easily justifiable motive to destroy Powhatan resistance, as they had previously destroyed Irish resistance.

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Introduction

The Elizabethans who conquered Ireland concerned themselves more with hows than with whys. Many of the Elizabethans who thought about expanding into Virginia concerned themselves with whys. In Ireland, the Elizabethans believed they had clear legal right to the entire island. Questions arose about the legality of their occupying Indian-held Virginia.

Elizabeth I believed herself entitled to rule all of Ireland. Her father, Henry VIII, had been crowned king of Ireland by the Irish parliament in 1541 and all the major Irish chieftains held noble titles granted them by the crown. Even Shane the O'Neill's father, Con Bacach, had been the earl of Tyrone, and Shane was the queen's most dangerous enemy in Ireland. In fact, Shane himself had come to London to explain to the queen why he and not his brother Matthew should be the second earl of Tyrone.

The queen and her advisors knew they had unquestionable legal rights to the whole of Ireland. This led to little discussion about motive or justification during the attempts

to subdue the Irish. The English viewed those who resisted as rebels and any means needed to pacify them as acceptable.

The opposite proved the case as the English moved into Virginia. In Virginia, the question of land title still vexed European legal minds.¹ The English were not sure they had legal rights to occupy the native's land. For the first several decades of the English expansion into Virginia, those English who thought about expansion in Virginia went to great lengths to justify it, a difficulty that had not been faced in Ireland.

The question of justifying English expansion into Virginia became moot in 1622. That year the Powhatan tribes of Virginia launched a surprise attack on the English colony, hoping to drive the English into the sea. This event gave the English all the reason they needed to subdue the Powhatans.

The English in the late sixteenth century had started to view themselves as God's chosen people.² When they entered a new land they began to see it as their promised land. They had tempered the role of God's chosen people with the teachings of the New Testament. Rather than

swarm into the "promised land" and start destroying the inhabitants, the English hoped to convert the natives to their brand of Christianity. Only if the natives rejected this offer would the English resort to violence. The Powhatans' attack altered their standing from New Testament Gentiles whom Christ hoped to save to Old Testament Canaanites who stood in the way of God's Nation.

After the uprising of 1622 the English felt no qualms about using violence in dealing with the Indians. It was after this point that the lessons learned in Ireland came in most handy. Many of the "extra-legal," actually terrorist, techniques used to crush the Irish were used against the Indians. Destroying crops, taking hostages, and building a pale or palisade - all had been tried in Ireland. The English practiced what would later be called "total warfare" against the Indians and the Irish.

One major reason many of the same techniques were used both in Ireland and in Virginia was that many of the same men were involved in both endeavors. Many of Elizabeth's courtiers who were interested in acquiring estates in Ireland were also interested in America. The great wealth the Spanish had brought back from their plundering of the Aztec and Inca kingdoms had aroused

great interest in England. Many subjects of Elizabeth hoped to find similar wealth and glory in America. Unfortunately for the English, they began to exploit America after both the Spanish and French had a crack at it. This meant they had to settle for the middle part of the American coast, well away from the wealth of Mexico or Peru or even the fishing wealth of the Grand Banks.

The English attempted to found a colony on Roanoke Island in 1584 which failed and then one on Jamestown Island which did not. In the course of establishing these colonies the English found themselves faced again with the question of how to treat the local populations they encountered. The English hoped to change the natives, Irish or American, into people more like themselves. This called for modifying many aspects of native culture, the most significant of which was religion. In Ireland, the English saw the need to reform the Irish Church on an English model. In Virginia they saw the need to introduce Protestant Christianity altogether.

Due to the legalistic nature of the English Reformation, the English could not reform the Irish Church until the crown controlled the entire island. The English Reformation had been based on royal authority. The crown

could not dictate politics or religion to those areas not under its control. The reform of the Irish Church would have to wait until the English crown actually controlled all of Ireland. However, by that time the connection between Irish patriotism and the Roman Catholic Church had been forged.³

In Virginia the hope was to simply introduce Christianity, not reform it. Missionaries, in fact all educated Englishmen, could begin to show the Virginia Indians the basics of Christianity. It was hoped that the Indians would then actively seek more knowledge of Christianity. English adventurers and ministers alike believed that the Virginia Indians had potential. Many English were persuaded that with just a little help the Indians would become Christian.

Like the Irish before them, the Indians, confused and angered the English by adopting only some of the offered culture. The Indians took those aspects of English culture they wanted and tried to ignore the rest, maintaining much of their own culture. The continuing pressure placed on the Indians to adopt English ways came to a head in April 1622.

In 1622 the leader of the Powhatan Indians, Opechancanough, attacked the English settlements, hoping to drive the English out of his domain. His eventual fate was much like that of Irish leader Brian MacPhelim O'Neill, whom the English captured and killed. Many English colonists survived and, as in Ireland, used the uprising to claim more land and to justify the removal of the Indians from the areas of English settlement.⁴

While no longer hoping to include the Indians in the English nation, Englishmen still hoped to include the Indians in the house of God. In November 1622 the Quarter Court of the Virginia Colony learned that George Ruggle had left a bequest of 100 pounds to educate Indian children.⁵ This gift continued the hope that the Indians could be converted to Christianity. However, many English now believed that Indians should be kept separate from themselves. This belief manifested itself in the construction of a large wooden palisade running from the York River to the James River.

In Virginia, the English had hoped that contact would convince the Indians to adopt English religion and manners. In Ireland they had reached the conclusion that only force could reform the Irish. After 1622 the English began

to treat the Indians more like the Irish. The hopefulness of early contact had been replaced by distrust and fear. The English began to see the Indians as possible sources of corruption of white society and so kept them at arm's length. That type of separation had not been possible in Ireland. Even though legislation and a physical barrier attempted to keep English and Irish separated, Irish laborers were needed on most English plantations.

The Tudor plantations in Ireland were not the beginning of English involvement in Ireland. In the twelfth century subjects of Henry II invaded Ireland, nominally to aid the Irish chieftain Dermot Mac Murrough in his fight with a rival clan. Dermot had asked Henry for aid and received permission to recruit for his cause. Dermot brought many of Henry's subjects with him to Ireland.⁶

The Norman invaders were able to establish control over large portions of Ireland. Traditionally, Ireland is divided into four provinces: Ulster (the northern), Leinster (the eastern), Munster (the southern) and Connaught (the western). By the end of the thirteenth century the Norman invaders had taken Leinster, much of Munster, portions of Connaught, and a few secluded strongholds in Ulster.⁷ In those areas where the Normans established

a strong presence an Anglo-Norman community developed throughout the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.⁸ In those parts of Ireland where the Normans lived near and with the Irish, they found themselves adopting many Irish ways of life. This cultural transformation, the "Gaelicization" of the Normans, led to the creation of a distinct cultural group in Ireland that was neither English nor Gaelic Irish. This group came to be called the "Old English" in order to distinguish them from the Elizabethan invaders of Ireland, the "New English."

In Ireland at the opening of the fifteenth century there were four distinct groups of people: the Gaelic or native Irish, the Old English, the New English, and a settlement of Scots in Ulster. Throughout the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries the Old English had controlled the occupied portions of Ireland, while the Gaelic Irish chiefs continued to rule the Irish portions of Ireland.

The English portions of Ireland were pulled into the "Wars of the Roses" in the fifteenth century because the Old English were Yorkists. The use of Ireland as a Yorkist base caused Henry VII to begin a policy of bringing Ireland and her powerful Old English and Irish leaders to heel. The fear that enemies of the House of Tudor, like Philip

II of Spain, could use Ireland as a base continued through the reign of Elizabeth I. This fear, combined with the crown's desire to centralize its authority in Ireland, led to increased attention being paid to Irish affairs throughout the sixteenth century.⁹

While the English were attempting to pacify Ireland, they also started thinking about overseas exploration and colonies. On June 11, 1578 Sir Humphrey Gilbert received from Elizabeth I the privilege of establishing an English settlement between Maine and Florida, provided that he intruded upon no Christian prince or people.¹⁰ Sir Humphrey and his ship, The Squirrel, went down off the American coast on September 9, 1583.¹¹ While Gilbert's death was unfortunate for himself and his crew, it may have been extremely lucky for the native populations. Gilbert had received his knighthood for serving Elizabeth in Ireland, where his reputation for cruelty was unrivaled. The most frequently cited example of his tactics was when he lined the path to his tent with human heads and made those surrendering crawl between the heads of their friends and family to grovel at his feet.¹²

Upon the death of the murderous Sir Humphrey, his patent for colonizing North America went to his

half-brother, Sir Walter Raleigh. Raleigh could be as ruthless as Gilbert. Raleigh had supervised the massacre of the papal garrison at Smerwick during a period of Old English rebellion in Munster.¹³

After receiving Sir Humphrey's patent, Sir Walter sent several missions to explore his vast New World domain. In the 1570s century there had been an attempt to found a colony on Baffin Island. There Martin Frobisher and John Davis found only bitter cold, hostile natives, and abject failure.¹⁴ Sir Walter hoped to avoid that fate. The Spanish and French were already fighting over Florida so Raleigh's men tried to stay out of the fracas. This decision left only the middle portion of the Atlantic coast for reconnaissance.¹⁵

After several exploratory trips, Raleigh attempted to establish a colony on the southern rim of the Chesapeake Bay. Instead that colony was founded on the Outer Banks and became the fabled "Lost Colony." During the closing decade of the sixteenth century little attention was paid to Virginia by the English. As the seventeenth century opened, the English had for the moment crushed native power in Ireland and begun to look overseas again. In 1607 the colony at Jamestown was founded, which placed the English

once more in close contact with people radically different from themselves.

Notes for Introduction

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11) Kenneth R. Andrews, Trade, plunder and settlement: Maritime Enterprise and the genesis of the British Empire 1480-1630 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 196-197.

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13) David Beers Quinn, Raleigh and the British Empire (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1947), 33-34.

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Chapter One:

The house of Tudor believed that it had the legal right to rule Ireland. That simple fact explains why the Elizabethans rarely bothered to justify their conquest of Ireland. The English based their claims to Ireland on two points: the first was the success of the twelfth-century invasion of Ireland by the subjects of the king of England; the second was a policy called surrender and regrant.

The Tudor dynasty owed its existence to curbing the other powerful families in England. By subduing challengers to the crown, the Tudors brought peace and more importantly order to England and Wales. They hoped to do the same in Ireland, where the crown faced not only over-mighty subjects but powerful Irish chieftains, who considered themselves subject to no one. The Irish chieftains lived primarily in the North and the West of Ireland. The most powerful of these was the O'Neill of Ulster. (Irish used their clan name as their leader's title, thus the leader of the O'Neill clan was the O'Neill and the leader of the O'Donnells was the O'Donnell.)