

Peter Crooks and Seán Duffy (eds), *The Geraldines and Medieval Ireland: The Making of a Myth*. Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2017. 446pp. €50.00 (hbk), €29.95 (pbk). ISBN 978-1-84682-571-2 (hbk); ISBN 978-184682-627-6 (pbk)

The Geraldines are undoubtedly one of Ireland's most famous aristocratic lineages. Arriving in the late twelfth century in the vanguard of the Anglo-Norman conquest, the FitzGeralds quickly came to establish a prominent position within Irish politics, founding two of the most powerful dynasties in Ireland — the FitzGeralds of Desmond, and their kinsmen the FitzGeralds of Kildare — and numerous cadet branches such as the FitzMaurices of Lixnaw in modern day Co. Kerry, and the famous Knights of Glin in west Limerick. By the early fourteenth century the main lines of Kildare and Desmond had confirmed their positions as powerful regional strong-players in Leinster and Munster, respectively. Their rise to prominence and growing importance within the wider Plantagenet dominions was reflected in the subsequent creation of the earldoms of Kildare in 1316 and Desmond in 1329. While the period leading up to the creation of the earldoms saw the Geraldines consolidate their position in Ireland, the ensuing two and a half centuries saw them beset with a series of challenges, both internal and external to Irish affairs. With the decline of colonial power in Ireland in the face of the Gaelic resurgence and the preoccupation of the English crown with the Hundred Years War from the mid-fourteenth century onwards, colonial families such as the Geraldines and their Butler counterparts came under growing regional pressures, resulting with an increasing disengagement from colonial politics on the part of the Desmond branch. While their kinsmen in Kildare retained a strong (if not the dominant) position within colonial politics during the late fifteenth century, the advent of the Tudors set both dynasties on a collision course with the expanding early modern English state.

A considerable (but by no means exhaustive) body of research has been completed on aspects of Geraldine lordship in medieval Ireland.

Studies however, have tended to focus primarily on the exercise of lordly power at local or regional level; little attention has been devoted to exploring the development of the wider Geraldine dynasty across the broader medieval (and early modern) period (c.1200–c.1600). For example, the work of Robin Frame, Peter Crooks, and Brendan Smith has greatly enhanced our knowledge of both colonial politics and the colony's place within the wider Plantagenet domains during the later middle ages. Their research has nonetheless dealt mainly with the period c.1300–c.1460. By comparison, while offering enlightening insights into the fortunes of the Desmond and Kildare lordships in the sixteenth-century, Anthony McCormack's study *The Earldom of Desmond, 1463–1585: The Decline and Crisis of a Feudal Lordship* (Dublin 2005) and Vincent Carey's *Surviving the Tudors: The 'Wizard' Earl of Kildare and English Rule in Ireland, 1537–1586* (Dublin 2002) pay cursory attention to how developments in the fifteenth century shaped the Tudors' later relationship with the Geraldines.

The diffuse nature of secondary scholarship has allowed many of the myths (both historical and literary) surrounding the dynasty to proliferate: the Geraldines' relationship with the Gaelic-speaking world has been a particular bone of contention for many historians. Writing in the aftermath of the Irish Civil War (1922–23), Edmund Curtis and his doctoral student, Donough Bryan, viewed their assimilation into the socio-political world of Gaelic Ireland as setting an historical precedent for closer co-operation between the native Irish and colonial communities. Brian FitzGerald's study, *The Geraldines: An Experiment in Irish Government, 1169–1601* (London 1952), while offering a broad survey of the wider dynasty, did little to challenge these perceptions. *The Geraldines and Medieval Ireland* therefore comes as a welcome and important contribution to our understanding of medieval Ireland and the place of the Geraldine dynasty therein. As outlined in the preface (17), the objective of this study is to 'probe' the Geraldine 'myth' by (i) investigating their origins and

establishment in Ireland, and (ii) assessing why certain myths and misconceptions have ‘encrusted’ around the wider dynasty in scholarship.

The broad inter-disciplinary approach is highly merited and draws upon elements of historical research, archaeology, and literature to deconstruct some of the main myths surrounding this topic. Containing fifteen essays, the book is, broadly speaking, divided into three main sections (though there is, of course, significant and complementary thematic overlap throughout). The first section contains six essays that deal with the origins and establishment of the Geraldine dynasty in Ireland during the late twelfth and thirteenth centuries. The importance of locating their Irish enterprises within the context of the wider Irish-Sea world, as well as the broader Angevin and Plantagenet domains, is a central theme running through these early chapters. Drawing upon his extensive knowledge of Welsh and English source material, Seán Duffy investigates the history surrounding the eponymous Gerald of Windsor (d.1116), founder of the Geraldine dynasty. Duffy meticulously traces the activities and ancestry of the early Geraldines in Normandy and Wales. In doing so he questions some of the historical traditions surrounding Gerald’s ancestry, positing instead, for example, that Gerald’s mother was not Gwaldus — daughter of Rhiwallon ap Cynfyn — but the Norman noblewoman, Beatrice (31–3). Building on the Welsh dimension, Huw Pryce examines how the writings of Gerald of Wales (d.1223) have shaped our understanding of the Geraldines. Pryce argues cogently that Gerald’s writings (such as the *Itinerarium kambriae* and the *Expugnatio hibernica*) should not be viewed as a family history or chronicle of the family’s achievements; these texts instead served to fashion a collective dynastic identity for the Geraldines, one that was based on the coherence of the wider kin-group.

Colin Veach and Linzi Simpson both focus on the military dimension of early Geraldine lordship in Ireland. Veach emphasises how Gerald of Wales’s attempts to portray the conquest of Ireland as a Geraldine-driven

enterprise have inflated the role played by the family in the formation of the Anglo-Norman colony. The reality — as Veach carefully outlines — was far more complex. Indeed, as he argues, it was not until after King John’s decision to convert Ireland from a peripheral province to a colony in 1210 that English could begin expanding effectively in Ireland. Using a series of archaeological case studies couched in surviving primary sources, Linzi Simpson demonstrates how the Geraldines’ ‘castle building pedigree’ allowed them to gain a foothold in Ireland (152). It was, moreover, their skills as ‘project-managers’ that enabled them to establish important manorial centres in Munster and Leinster from whence they could raise taxes and cultivate their newly conquered lands (156).

Brendan Smith charts the development of Geraldine lordship during the thirteenth century. Locating their activities within the wider archipelagic context, he charts the expansion of Geraldine power from Leinster and Munster into Connacht, arguing for the necessity of viewing the activities of one branch in relation to those of the wider dynasty (or kin-group). Drawing upon Kenneth Nicholls’s unpublished Geraldine pedigrees, Paul MacCotter provides a highly insightful guide to the ramifications of the wider Geraldine family and associated sub-groupings. Charting the formation and proliferation of the smaller cadet-branches across the southern half of Ireland, MacCotter has provided an invaluable source guide for local and family historians.

The next section of the book (comprising five essays) focuses on the development of Geraldine lordship during the later middle ages (chiefly the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries). In two complementary essays, Robin Frame and Peter Crooks offer new readings on the history of the earls of Desmond. Frame, in an essay on Maurice FitzThomas (d.1356), first earl of Desmond, explores how the Geraldines in western Ireland interacted with the English Crown and wider English polity. Frame argues that while the imposition of local lordship enabled the Desmond earls to dominate much of Munster, the maintenance of cordial relations with the

Plantagenet monarchy was essential for ensuring the smooth transferral of power to the next comital generation. Traditionally it has been assumed that the Geraldines' meteoric rise to prominence in the fifteenth century was derived mainly from Yorkist patronage. Peter Crooks challenges this myth by re-examining the Desmond Geraldines' relationship with the Houses of York and Lancaster during the early to mid fifteenth century. Crooks ultimately argues for a more nuanced interpretation of the Irish dimension underpinning the Wars of the Roses. Rather than being viewed solely as natural allies of the Yorkists, Crooks suggests that the Geraldines were but a 'power to be harnessed' by Richard Duke of York (d.1460) and his son Edward IV (d.1483) in their pursuit of the Crown. They were, furthermore, highly expendable on the altar of Yorkist ambitions as is evident from the beheading of Thomas, seventh earl of Desmond, at Drogheda in February 1468 — a death sentence carried out by Edward IV's henchman, Sir John Tiptoft (d.1470) (252).

The next three essays are largely concerned with the cultural and literary world of the Geraldines. Drawing upon her unrivalled knowledge of medieval Irish bardic poetry, Katharine Simms examines the Kildare and Desmond Geraldines' engagement with Gaelic Irish culture. Simms outlines how the patronage of bardic poets allowed the Geraldines to further enhance their self-image as an ancient aristocratic house; the downplaying of their Anglo-Norman heritage in many of these poems highlights their growing interaction with the Gaelic political order as well as their capacity to adapt to the political realities of late medieval Ireland. Moving beyond the Gaelic literary dimension, Aisling Byrne explores the Geraldines' wider literary tastes and their interaction with the broader aristocratic culture of renaissance Europe. Using surviving fragments such as the Kildare rental records, Byrne splendidly recreates the contents of the Kildare earls' library in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, thus offering another window in the family's perceptions of themselves. Sparky Booker returns to the issue of the Geraldines'

relationship with the Gaelic Irish. Focusing on the three key themes of intermarriage, ecclesiastical patronage, and the status of the Irish in the Geraldine lands, Booker reconsiders the often (mis)quoted phrase ‘more Irish than the Irish themselves’, elucidating that their relationship with the Gaelic world was based on pragmatism. Moreover, Booker argues that the Geraldines prioritised ‘English and colonial’ opinion over the Gaelic one in their lands (316).

The final four essays examine Geraldine lordship in the late fifteenth and sixteenth centuries (with the exception of Ruairí Cullen’s contribution, see below). Steven Ellis reviews the career of the Gearóid Mór FitzGerald (d.1513), eighth earl of Kildare. Incorporating new material, Ellis builds upon his earlier research on the Kildare ascendancy, arguing that the House of Kildare was an effective enforcer of royal power in Ireland from the late 1490s onwards. Ciarán Brady explores the myth surrounding the eighth earl’s grandson, ‘Silken’ Thomas (d.1537), tenth earl of Kildare, who was executed at Tyburn in 1537 following his failed rebellion.

An examination of contemporary material from the 1530s does not indicate that Thomas or his soldiers wore or displayed silk clothing. Brady instead posits that the idea of ‘Silken’ Thomas was propaganda conjured up by the chronicler Richard Stanihurst (d.1618) in the late sixteenth century as a means of discrediting and emasculating the executed earl and his followers. The theme of rebellion is continued in David Edwards’s chapter. Standard narratives of the Desmond rebellions (1569–73, 1579–83) have portrayed Gerald FitzGerald (d.1583), fifteenth earl of Desmond, as an unlawful, uncontrollable subject, prone to rebellion. Edwards instead reveals that Desmond was pushed into rebellion by the policies of intractable officers of the English State in Ireland — many of whom believed (incorrectly) that Desmond was a militant Catholic. Edwards’s central argument is, therefore, that the rebellions (and ensuing destruction) in Munster were avoidable. Ruairí Cullen’s essay concludes with an examination of how, during the nineteenth century, numerous

figures in Irish political and cultural life strove to appropriate the Gerladines' legacy of rebellion, loyalty, and identity to their own ends. Cullen demonstrates how many came to view their interaction with Irish culture as the chief factor shaping what eventually emerged as Edmund Curtis's predominating view of medieval Ireland in the early twentieth century.

This book is, overall, a landmark study and provides an excellent template for exploring the history and development of other lineages in late medieval and early modern Ireland. It will, moreover, be of interest to a wide audience. From an academic point of view, these essays will be of value to budding scholars and established academics alike, and provide an accessible guide to recent research as well as pertinent primary and archival sources. They will, moreover, hopefully also help stimulate further research into what is a rich, if in many ways unexplored, field. On a more general level also, this collection will be of interest to people engaged in family history and the history of locality. In sum, it is an excellent production, a must-have for anyone interested in medieval Ireland and its relevance today.

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