

*Hugh O'Neill: free spirit, religious
chameleon or ardent Catholic?*

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Most agree that the Nine Years' War (1594-1603) was at least partly religious in motivation. Curiously enough, while we do know something of the religious issues which protagonists claimed as inspiration, we know little about their own religious practice or convictions. This is especially the case with Hugh O'Neill, earl of Tyrone. Religious conviction is, of course, a notoriously dangerous field of historical enquiry, but given that O'Neill propaganda presented him as a Catholic crusader, and taking into account the doubts raised by some of his contemporaries regarding the sincerity of his religious convictions, it might not be amiss to enquire, in so far as the sources permit, what O'Neill's Catholicism was like.

Traditionally, the question of the nature and quality of O'Neill's Catholicism has been refracted through the prism of his political commitments. While more recent commentators recognised the importance of O'Neill's exploitation of the 'faith and fatherland ideology', the faith component, understood as personal commitment, has remained largely unexamined.¹ This has tended to feed the undefended assumption that some sort of 'natural' link existed between early modern Gaelic opposition to Elizabeth I and Counter-reformation Catholicism. Whatever else he did for O'Neill's reputation, Seán Ó Faolain recognised the reductionist potential of nationalist plaudits that tended, he believed, to simplify O'Neill as 'an island patriot . . . denying him the long series of results that could otherwise be traced back to his inspiration'.² For Ó Faolain, the heart of O'Neill's achievement was that he 'realized the absolute necessity of conforming swiftly to [the] trend of world affairs-or of going under'. More controversially, he believed that Tyrone was broken 'not by England but by Ireland: by its deep atavism and inbreeding, so characteristic of abortive and arrested cultures in all ages of the world's history'.³ This is a harsh judgement on the Gaelic system and pays scant attention to the political, religious and personal dilemmas faced by O'Neill, but at least Ó Faolain's criticism provokes a reexamination of some of the assumptions which fail to do justice to Tyrone's complex, elusive character.

Liberty of conscience

O'Neill himself left no personal record of his religious convictions, a stark fact which throws us back on his political and diplomatic correspondence, propaganda pieces he commissioned and the testimony of his contemporaries. We know that in 1584 he celebrated Easter according to the new Gregorian calendar, but on trips to Dublin he attended Protestant services with the English governor.⁴ It is certain that by the mid-1590s he had adopted at least the political rhetoric of militant Catholic reform. In January 1596 he discomfited the Dublin government by demanding liberty of conscience. In July of the same year he sent out a circular letter in Irish addressed to the lords of Munster, requesting their adherence to a military alliance 'for Christ's Catholic religion'. A month later O'Neill and O'Donnell wrote to Pope

Clement VIII, apologising for their previous silence but assuring him that their war was in defence of the Catholic faith which they had imbibed with their mother's milk, *quam lacte nutricis hausimus*.⁵

The reference to ancestral faith is significant as it diverts attention away from the present state of their religious conviction and practice to a misty, inchoate, traditional faith. Later in the letter they draw the pope's attention to the need for good bishops in Ireland, well bred, educated and steady-handed. Politely, but not coyly, they request the *jus patronus* or the right to present to ecclesiastical offices, citing received custom in other Catholic countries as precedent.

O'Neill was capable of modulating his diplomatic jargon according to his audience. In 1597, in his negotiations with the government, he demanded as 'Item first that all the inhabitants of Ireland may have free libertie of conscience, or at least wise the benefit of her majesties positive lawe, without being combired with the law of [t?] reason'.⁶ More explicit, in this context, is his manifesto to the Catholics of the towns of Ireland two years later, on 16 November 1599 New Style.⁷ Here he accuses his audience of being the 'means whereby wars are maintained against the exaltation of die Catholic faith' and assures them that if he had to be king of Ireland, without having the Catholic religion, he would not accept the honour. He refers them to the example of the neighbouring kingdom of France in the following words:

Facing page: O'Neill's nationalistic demands of late 1599. Robert Cecil, the English secretary of state, marked his copy with the word 'Ewtopia'.



'True likeness' of Hugh O'Neill, found in *La spada d'orione stellata nel cielo di marte* (Rome, 1680). This work, by the military historian Primo Damaschino, placed O'Neill amongst the great generals of European history.

‘Articles intended to be stood upon by Tyrone’ [Nov-Dec 1599]

1. That the Catholic, Apostolic and Roman religion be openly preached and taught throughout all Ireland, as well sides as borough towns, by Bishops, seminary priests, Jesuits and other religious men.
2. That the Church of Ireland be wholly governed by the Pope.
3. That all cathedrals and parish churches, abbeys, and all other religious houses, with all tithes and church lands, now in the hands of the English, be presently restored to the Catholic churchmen.
4. That all Irish priests and religious men, now prisoners in England or Ireland, be presently set at liberty, with all temporal Irishmen, that are troubled for their conscience, and to go where they wish without further trouble.
5. That all Irish priests and religious men may freely pass and repass, by sea and land, to and from foreign countries.
6. That no Englishman be a churchman in Ireland.
7. That there be erected an university upon the Crown rents of Ireland, wherein all sciences shall be taught according to the manner of the Catholic Roman Church.
8. That the Governor of Ireland be at least an Earl, and of the Privy Council of England, bearing the name of Viceroy.
9. That the Lord Chancellor, Lord Treasurer, Lord Admirall, the Council of State, the Justices of the laws, Queen's Attorney, Queen's Serjeant, and all other officers appertaining to the Council and law of Ireland, be Irishmen.
10. That all principal governments of Ireland, as Connaught, Munster, etc., be governed by Irish noblemen.
11. That the Master of Ordnance, and half the soldiers with their officers resident in Ireland, be Irishmen.
12. That no Irishman's heirs shall lose their Lands for the faults of their ancestors.
13. That no Irishman's heir under age shall fall in the Queen's or her successors' hands, as a ward, but that the living be put to the heir's profit, and the advancement of his younger brethren, and marriages of his sisters, if he have any.
14. That no children nor any other friends be taken as pledges for the good abearing of their parents, and, if there be any such pledges now in the hands of the English, they must be presently released.
15. That all statutes made against the preferment of Irishmen; as well in their own country as abroad, be presently recalled.
16. That the Queen nor her successors may in no sort press an Irishman to serve against his will.
17. That O'Neill, O'Donnell, and the Earl of Desmond, with all their partakers, may peaceably enjoy all Lands and privileges that did appertain to their predecessors 200 years past.
18. That all Irishmen may as freely travel and traffic all merchandises in England as Englishmen, paying the same rights and tributes as the English do.
19. That all Irishmen may freely traffic with all merchandises, that shall be thought necessary by the Council of State of Ireland for the profit of their Republic, with foreigners or in foreign countries, and that no Irishman shall be troubled for the passage of priests or other religious men.
20. That all Irishmen that will may learn, and use all occupations and arts whatsoever.
21. That all Irishmen may freely build ships of what burden they will, furnishing the same with artillery and all munition at their pleasure.

'Take you example by that most Catholic country of France whose subjects, for defect of Catholic faith, did go against their most natural king, and maintained wars until he was constrained to profese the Catholic religion duly submitting himself to the holy see of Rome to the which doubtless we may bring our country, you putting your helping hand with me to the same.'

What is interesting here is O'Neill's use of the political vocabulary current among adherents of the Catholic League in France. While he does distinguish between the legitimacy of the monarch and his religious profession, he underlines the necessity of the king's conforming to Catholicism in order to be accepted as king by his people. As O'Neill sees it, Henry IV's conformity to Catholicism was the necessary condition for the return to peace and prosperity in the kingdom.

There was more than mere rhetoric to O'Neill's increasingly explicit espousal of militant Catholicism. He also had a practical programme in mind, which centred on the reform of the clergy. In his 'Articles intended to be stood upon by Tyrone' of late 1599 this programme has broadened and deepened but it is still centred on the formation of a new clergy for the Irish church. His first demand is freedom to preach the 'Catholic, apostolic and Roman religion' throughout all Ireland 'by bishops, seminary priests, Jesuits and other religious men'. Spiritual authority is to be vested exclusively in the pope, and the church is to be supported by the returned tithes and church lands 'now in the hands of the English'. No cleric or lay person is to be detained by the government on account of religion, freedom of movement is to be granted to clerics, a Catholic university is to be founded and no church offices are to be granted to Englishmen. In the same vein he wrote to Philip III in late 1599 pleading for assistance for the seminary at Douai.⁸ The country, he argued, needed seminary priests to disseminate God's Word, instruct the people and eradicate errors. Of course, the formation of seminary priests was a stock theme in reformed Catholic rhetoric. However, its use here suggests that O'Neill realised the importance of an educational infrastructure, based on the seminary, for the conversion of the country. Other sources corroborate this. In May 1599 Thomas O'Mulckloy, a Meath-born clerical student, following arrest in Dundee, testified to Cecil in the Bridewell that he had recently visited O'Neill's residence in Dungannon, but only, he insisted, to 'beg gentleman's devotion towards my studies, which is a common course that poor students use there'.⁹ O'Neill, he reported, had no money but he did arm him with commendatory letters for his journey to France, via Scotland.

A champion prophesied

It is interesting to speculate on the source of the militant Catholic rhetoric in O'Neill's communications with Dublin and Madrid. Was he using the rhetoric of religious war to garner support for political objectives? Or were his rhetoric and demands the outward, political expression of a personally appropriated religious faith? It is hard to be absolutely sure, but a few useful hints of his religious seriousness pop up in the main piece of international propaganda produced by the O'Neill regime at this time, the *Commentarius* prepared for Pope Clement VIII in 1600 by the Waterford-born theologian Peter Lombard.¹⁰ As part of O'Neill's 'charm offensive' in Rome, Lombard presented his patron as a model Catholic whose aim it was to return Ireland to the Catholic faith by extirpating heresy. In the process he adroitly fused Old English constitutional thought with Counter-reformation militarism. Curiously, however, when it comes to his treatment of O'Neill's religious commitment, Lombard begins not with a description of O'Neill's personal piety but rather with two prophecies, which, he claims, demonstrate that O'Neill is the providentially appointed champion of religious orthodoxy in Ireland and that 1600 is the propitious moment for papal

with which [the Roman cross) gleamed on both sides, a refulgence seemed to radiate to dispel the darkness of heresy and schism which for the last sixty years the English governors and oppressors of Ireland have been endeavouring to spread over that land, and there began to appear that faint light, which, as already mentioned, was foreshown to St Patrick, the first founder of religion here, nearly 1200 years ago, and which after a somewhat prolonged struggle against the darkness, at last dispelled the shadow and illumined this whole island with its own splendour.¹⁴

For Lombard, these are not the only propitious signs. On the Continent, he remarks, the Irish colleges at Salamanca, Lisbon, Louvain and Douai have begun to produce their missionary clergy. From Belgium he has heard that a company of Irish soldiers under English command refused to aid heretics and later declared openly for the Catholic cause.¹⁵ Ulster nobles, he says, out of religious conviction have risen up against Elizabeth I for the Catholic cause. Providence, Lombard argues, has chosen O'Neill as the instrument for an assault on European Protestantism.



Peter Lombard, native of Waterford and archbishop of Armagh, 1600-25. Having originally supported O'Neill's war, Lombard later changed his stance to one of rapprochement with Jame's monarchy in expectation of religious toleration (courtesy of Ó Fiaich Library, Armagh).

It is only at this stage that Lombard descends from the heights of prophetic rhetoric to the lowlands of O'Neill's personal religious conviction. It is interesting to note how palpably defensive his tone suddenly becomes. It is reasonable to assume that critics of O'Neill had access to the pope and it is likely that in presenting his account of O'Neill's piety to Clement VIII Lombard was actually refuting anti O'Neill propaganda then current in Rome. Lombard, in fact, makes explicit reference to English Catholics who have blackened O'Neill's name, questioning his Catholicism and accusing him of flouting church teaching, particularly on marriage. Although Lombard does not explicitly say so here, English Catholics were not the only ones objecting to O'Neill and his politico-religious agenda. In November 1599, Christopher Nugent, Lord Delvin, who was reluctant to join O'Neill, instructed his agents that 'you are to tell him [O'Neill] (if he pretend he doth the same of the advancement of the Catholic religion, as commonly he giveth out) that all the inhabitants of the English Pale, for the more part, and specially myself, are Catholics, and were when he was not thought to be one'.¹⁶



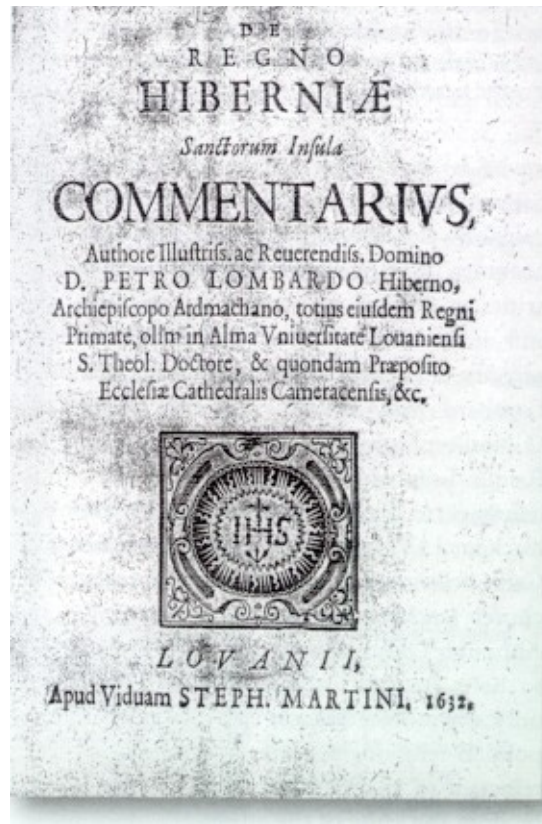
Pope Clement VIII (1592-1605) was a pro-French pope wary of Spanish ambitions in Ireland. He refused to excommunicate Old English Catholics who remained loyal to the English crown or attempted to stand neutral.

Lombard takes up the charges concerning O'Neill's religious past, referring, it would seem, to accusations that O'Neill was at least religiously indifferent. He insists that his patron was born into and raised in the Roman Catholic faith. He remained a Catholic even 'during his tutelage under the English in court and camp and never thought or professed anything other than what was orthodox in religion'.¹⁷ O'Neill was also accused, it would seem, of failing to support Catholic clergy, and Lombard counters this charge by claiming that after he reached his

majority O'Neill maintained priests in his own house and that it was, in fact, because of this that the English first thought of bringing charges concerning religion against him. We know that O'Neill made provision for the Armagh friars at the Brantry, outside the city, a gesture that in no way suggests neglect of the clergy.

'His chief and abiding aim'

Lombard, in his memorandum to the pope, does not deny that O'Neill began the present war for political reasons that had little to do with the defence of religion. He candidly reports that O'Neill 'although always a Catholic was not yet always equally solicitous, earnest and zealous in the cause of religion'.¹⁸ But when he entered the war in 1594-5, O'Neill, according to Lombard, adopted religion as 'his chief and abiding aim'. It was the test of war, apparently, and the providential nature of his success that changed O'Neill into a pious, militant Catholic. From this time, Lombard says, O'Neill attended daily Mass, even when on the field, and oftener when possible. He confessed and received communion frequently and prayed regularly. Nor was his new religious conviction of a purely private variety. Lombard observes that O'Neill insisted on the highest standards of Christian morality among his men and in his territories and was especially vigilant against theft, pillage, drunkenness and concubinage. In a possible reference to negative opinion in Rome, regarding clerical celibacy, especially in Gaelic areas, Lombard insists that O'Neill had made it his special concern to root out concubinage among the local clergy. Aware of papal sensitivity to the independence of ecclesiastical jurisdictions, Lombard adds that at no stage, however, had O'Neill, even in the pursuit of his noble objective, trespassed on the independence of the church. Recognising the limits of his secular authority in correcting this abuse, O'Neill moved first against the priests' concubines with the sternest prohibitions. In cases of recidivism, he punished them by exile, whipping or deforming their faces by branding or slitting.



Title-page of Peter Lombard's *Re regno Hiberniae, sanctorum insula, commentarius* (Louvain, 1632), a posthumously published edition of 'De Hibernia insula commentarius', his plea to the pope on behalf of O'Neill in 1600.

It is possible, of course, that Lombard is merely telling the pope what he thinks he wants to hear. However, when he says that O'Neill's soldiers were shrived before battle he is on firm ground. This detail is corroborated by James Archer Si, who was in Ulster from before August 1598 and maintained contact with the Society's general in Rome. On 10 August 1598 he wrote to Rome that 'I have administered the sacramenta in the camp since I am not able to work among the subjects in the cities'.¹⁹ Lombard is also on firm ground when he claims that in negotiations with the government O'Neill's first demand was for liberty of religious observance, though he diplomatically omits that in the peace negotiations of early 1596 O'Neill was ready to jettison this demand. Lombard also declines to examine why O'Neill decided abruptly in 1596, to the surprise of the Dublin government, to include the question of religious liberty in negotiations with the government, a matter that concerned him little up to that.²⁰ The influence of Spanish agents like Cobos, Cisneros and Medinilla, the advice of priests like Archer and the exigencies of broadening his appeal were probably all factors in O'Neill's increasingly explicit espousal of the Catholic cause. The Franciscans were, perhaps, the most important single influence here. After all, they provided pastoral and spiritual counsel to the Gaelic aristocracy in Ulster and also acted as translators, scribes and intermediaries in dealings with Spain, France and Rome. If Lombard cites

O'Neill's sentiments at the parley of Dungannon (1599) accurately, there is evidence to support a real religious conversion, underpinning the militant rhetoric:



Pope Adrian's donation of Ireland to Henry II of England by the bull Laudabiliter in 1155 painted on the ceiling of the privy seal office in the Vatican. Militant Irish Catholics hoped that the papacy, having excommunicated Elizabeth as a heretic, would use the same instrument to grant Ireland to a Catholic prince (Vatican Secret Archives).

'I confess to you that this was not the cause which first moved me to think of war, but I call God to witness that neither was it ambition, nor any other unlawful desire, as you would persuade or rather palm off upon the world, but besides those which threatened or aimed at my own destruction I have, as you know, many other just causes of war, for example intolerable oppression and servitude of the whole of my country. A passionate desire to liberate it was the first stimulus which urged me to make this war. Since however I have entered up it I will ever acknowledge that I have received such Divine aid that so far I have had glorious success therein against the most powerful and insolent heretics of all Europe, surpassing my hopes or your fears, or anything the world could have expected or perhaps even yet believes. Therefore as an act of thanksgiving I have vowed to the God of heaven, and now confirm with an oath before you that the sword which I have drawn for the liberty of my native land I shall never sheath until all heresy and schism has been expelled from every corner of Ireland and the free exercise of the one only true Roman Catholic and Apostolic religion, which I know is the crown and the surest foundation of this liberty, has been restored and established throughout the whole of this Island.'²¹

This passage, ., if it reflects the true state of O'Neill's inner life in 1599, the true state of inner life in 1599, is strongly suggestive of a conversion experience, triggered by the scale of his military success and interpreted as evidence of divine favour. Particularly significant in

this passage is O'Neill's candid admission of his baser, more secular motives on entering the war. This is classic conversion discourse that makes a virtue of initial human baseness to stress the scale and effectiveness of subsequent change. We know that O'Neill's military success against the 'greatest heretical power' in Europe impressed others but they also stirred O'Neill himself, at least according to this testimony. As Lombard presents it, O'Neill's resolve to rid Ireland of heresy and to re-establish the true religion there is a thanksgiving sacrifice to God who has providentially granted him victory.

The pursuit of liberty

Significant in this passage is O'Neill's description of Catholicism as 'the crown and surest foundation of this liberty' of his country from 'intolerable oppression and servitude'. This linking of the pursuit of liberty (understood as release from oppression and servitude) and the combat against heresy has the ring of authenticity to it. Here O'Neill links the question of religious liberty to the defence of local, 'secular' freedoms against government centralisation. As he understands it, religious freedom is a liberty, the expression of the local autonomy against outside interference. Undoubtedly, the inclusion of religion as one of many liberties to be defended by his military campaign not only helped to integrate religion into O'Neill's early and quite secular set of objectives but also served to broaden his appeal in Ireland and to make his quarrel with Elizabeth's government comprehensible to potential European supporters.

Perhaps O'Neill's 'conversion', alluded to by Lombard, was real and sincere even if used for propagandistic purposes. To be fair to O'Neill, he had to inhabit two different worlds, that of his Gaelic lordship and that of encroaching government power. He negotiated this difficult double life with intelligence and patience, relying on the tactics of delay and equivocation to test and tire his enemies, on all sides. He was probably no saint but he possessed the plasticity of mind to realise that remaining strong in his lordship entailed coming to terms with a changing outside world that was impinging more and more on the territories he influenced. The Dublin government was more demanding, Ireland was increasingly a part of broader European developments, and some things, like religion, which had been taken for granted in the past now demanded fresh attention. His realisation that religion was part of this changing environment was only one element of the overall development of his political intelligence and undoubtedly came on him gradually. Unlike most saints, but like most modernisers, O'Neill did not have much time to consider what was happening to the traditional, loosely organised religious world he had inhabited up to the 1590s. Maybe Lombard's rhetoric said more than O'Neill himself actually believed, but consistency between rhetoric and personal belief is a rare thing, even in saints. Counter-reformation clergy like Lombard might reasonably believe that in O'Neill they had found 'a human mould to hold their ideas'.²² Of course, not everyone agrees. O Faolain, in his complex picture of O'Neill, saw a calculating, almost Machiavellian element in the man:

'When the idea of a war for (among other things) religious liberty struck Tyrone's imagination it must have struck the man's consideration even more forcibly. His secular bent would have humanized it . . . Tyrone was like the eighteenth-century Daniel O'Connell—both Renaissance figures, calculating, whorled with reservations, a umming conch of *arrière-pensées*. He may have thought to use the cry of a religious war as a pennant. It blew out finto a banner. The idea ended by taking possession of him, as all germinating ideas do, by happy contagion.'²³

The image of the pennant of religious war blowing out finto a banner is not a bad one to help an understanding of O'Neill's religious evolution after 1594. O'Neill, on his own and on Lombard's dmission, began the war by using the religious issue as a political instrument but found out later, erhaps, that it had a life of its own, one which affected not only his cause but also the man himself.

Religion and the Flight

Lombard's account suggests that religion may also have worked its inspiration on O'Neill himself. Unfortunately, after Lombard's testimony O'Neill's religious conscience falls out of our historical sights and we have only fleeting glimpses to guide us. O'Sullivan Beare tells us that O'Neill went on pilgrimage to Holy Cross 'to see the piece of the Holy Cross' during his visit south in 1599 to persuade Munster nobles to join him.²⁴ Even though O'Sullivan Beare was writing some time after the events and from an explicitly Counter-reformation viewpoint, this is evidence of a genuine devotional dimension to O'Neill's religious faith. We also know, from the state papers, that when O'Neill submitted to Mountjoy in 1603 he blessed himself and uttered a prayer. Further, it is possible to interpret O'Neill's decision to leave his lordship in 1607 as partially motivated by religious considerations.²⁵ Certainly his Franciscan supporter Florence Conry said that O'Neill left to obtain freedom to practise his religion and to escape calumny.²⁶ His view is supported by the testimony of Henry Mellan, a priest, who, writing from Dundalk on 31 January 1607, declared that there were fourteen friars living in O'Neill's house in Dungannon and that O'Neill himself, in conversation with a 'heretic', declared that he might have ceased to wage war but that he would never abandon his faith.²⁷ His declaration of grievances to the king after his departure tends to confirm this. He complains, in the first article, 'That it is by public authority proclaimed in his manor of Dungannon that none should hear Mass upon pain of losing his goods and imprisonment and that no curate or ecclesiastical person should enjoy any cure or dignity without swearing the oath of supremacy'.²⁸ Not all historians read this as support for a religiously motivated flight. Micheline Kerney Walsh, for instance, held that 'the so-called Flight of the Earls was neither a panic decision nor a journey into voluntary exile, but a planned, tactical retreat and an attempt by O'Neill to secure military aid by presenting his case in person to King Philip'.²⁹

However, there are other hints of something more than politics and strategy. Tadhg Ó Cianáin, in his account, reports an intriguing detail of O'Neill's departure, to wit that during the sea voyage, when assailed by storms, 'a cross of gold which O'Neill had, and which contained a portion of the Cross of the Crucifixion and many other relics, being put by them in the sea trailing after the ship, gave them great relief'.³⁰ There is as much superstition as Counter-reformation religion in this incident but it suggests that his visit to Holy Cross in 1599 was not only a gesture to reassure Munster Catholics but also an expression of religious devotion.

O'Neill in Italy

We know a little of O'Neill's journey to Rome from Ó Cianáin's account.³¹ It reveals that on the way to Rome O'Neill and his retinue diligently visited the many religious sites they met. While there is no doubting the deep impression they made on the author, it is impossible to gauge the effect on O'Neill of this, his first sustained experience of Counter-reformation Catholicism.³² We learn that he invoked and besought the Holy Virgin Mary and her wondrous son in that Holy Chapel [of Loreto] and that he diligently performed the pilgrimage according to the regulations of the church, but beyond this formal statement there is no insight into his religious sentiment or conviction. The earl's visit to St Peter's, his audience with Pope Paul V, his pilgrimage to the seven churches of Rome, his assistance at the canonisation of St Francesca Romana in May 1608 and his men's participation in the Corpus Christi procession of the same year are passed over, by Ó Cianáin, with frustrating rapidity.³³ Meehan probably pushes the evidence too far when he fancifully describes O'Neill in front of the unfinished façade of St Peter's and muses, 'who can describe the devotion with which [he] thanked God for his goodness to [him] or the rapture with which [he] beheld that vast miracle of art-that most wonderful development of man's genius'.³⁴

In any case, O'Neill's stay in Rome was dominated by concerns over the worsening situation of his dependents and property in Ireland. He considered a return to Ireland and, in 1608, was on the point of applying for a pardon to James I. As part of the deal, he hoped to secure toleration of Catholicism in Ulster and Connacht at least.³⁵ Naturally he was devastated by the confiscation of his lands in Ulster, and his anxieties grew when news came through that a new parliament had been called to meet in Dublin. He feared that the assembly would approve the confiscation of his lands and pass draconian, anti-Catholic legislation. It would appear that some in Ireland considered armed resistance at this stage. A document which was in the possession of Castro and was passed on to Philip III spoke of a new Catholic league in Ireland, set up at a meeting presided over by David Kearney, archbishop of Cashel.³⁶ The league was supposed to have a Roman agent called Don Guillermo Miagh, whose news, the document claimed, cheered the earl.³⁷ Like so many other plans for a return to Ulster, it came to nothing.

Conclusion

When O'Neill died on 20 July 1616 his cause was in tatters. In the end, his lasting significance on the religious plane was the link he forged between religious freedom and political liberties. This had the potential to appeal to a wide constituency in Ireland, most particularly the Old English legal and ecclesiastical élite. While it is true that few Old English came over to his side and that those who did rapidly deserted him when his star began to fade, it is also true that O'Neill's idea of Catholicism as a liberty could serve to channel and organise political and cultural discontent in Ireland, as the Confederate Wars later demonstrated. The problem, however, with the consequent politicisation of Catholicism and its relativisation as another aspect of lost liberty was that Irish Catholicism became politically potent without being pastorally organised. True, there was pastoral care in the Gaelic areas, at least among the aristocracy and their immediate dependents, assured in large part by the Franciscans. But the absence of a parochial structure was a brake to the preaching of reformed Catholicism to a larger audience. There was a danger that, outside the pastorally privileged Gaelic élite, a religious formalism at best and superstition at worst would characterise the religious experience of the mass of the people. It might be argued that this set of circumstances exaggerated an existing quality of European Catholicism that tended to stress the efficacy of the formal celebration of the sacraments without enquiring very deeply into the spiritual effect on either the celebrating priest or the assisting laity.³⁸ Would it be possible to suggest that Catholicism, understood as a personally appropriated piety, a consistent moral code and a culturally integrated commitment was less widespread in Ireland than either Protestant critics or Catholic propagandists liked to believe? No pastoral infrastructure existed to provide the environment in which religious conversion could be facilitated and, once achieved, maintained and nurtured. Could it be argued further that the principal consequence of this was that the form of Catholicism which came to be associated with the preservation of liberty and opposition to the Dublin government and its agents, secular and ecclesiastical, tended to be formal rather than personal, external rather than internal, practical rather than theological? Certainly, Irish Catholic reformers had the cards stacked against them as they struggled, with slender resources, to pay at least lip service to the ideals of the Counter-Reformation while at the same time defending practices of traditional Catholicism that Irish Protestants ridiculed.

Although it may be difficult, in the end, to describe O'Neill as an 'ardent figure of the Counter Reformation'³⁹ without some qualification, there is evidence that the earl of Tyrone experienced some sort of religious conversion in the mid-1590s which left its mark. However, it is impossible to distinguish in this conversion and its aftermath the relative importance of the counsel of his clerical advisers, the exigencies of wartime diplomacy, personal conviction and the operation of that mysterious quantity whose form and operation so divided early modern believers, divine grace. Certainly, the romantic image of O'Neill as a floating spirit, caught in a political and cultural whirl greater than himself, has to be earthed in his unromantic political agenda and his at least apparent adherence to militant Catholicism.

1. Hiram Morgan, 'Hugh O'Neill and the Nine Years War in Tudor Ireland', *Historical journal* XXXVI (1993), 17.
2. Seán Ó Faolain, *The Great O'Neill* (Dublin, 1942), 278-9.
3. *Ibid.*
4. PRO, SP 63/206, no.100: Loftus and Wallop to Walsingham, 26 March 1584.
5. *Archivium Hibernicum* II (1913), 280-1.
6. PRO, SP 63/201, no. 114: 'The humble petition of hugh Erle of Tirone to the lord lievtenaunt generall of her majesties army'. See also Hiram Morgan, 'The 1597 ceasefire documents', *Dúiche Néill: Journal of the O'Neill Country Historical Society* (1997), 9-33.
7. For a text see J. P Meehan, *Fate and fortunes of Hugh O'Neill, earl of Tyrone and Rory O'Donnell, earl of Tyrconnel* (3rd edn, Dublin, 1886), 21-3. See also Hiram Morgan, 'Faith and Fatherland or Queen and Country? An unpublished exchange between O'Neill and the State at the height of the Nine Years War', *Dúiche Néill: Journal of the O'Neill Country Historical Society* 9 (1994), 9-65.
8. Meehan, p. 83.
9. HMC, *Salisbury ix*, pp 155-6. O'Mulckloy mentioned that he had met a classmate of his own in Dungannon. He appears to have been a member of O'Neill's household.
10. Peter Lombard, *De regno Hiberniae, sanctorum insula, commentarius* (hereafter *Comm.*), ed. PE Moran (Dublin, 1868). Lombard's ardour for O'Neill's cause later cooled. See John J. Silke, 'Tater relations between Primate Peter Lombard and Hugh O'Neill', *Irish Theological Quarterly* 22 (1955), 15-30.
11. Jocelin, *Vita S. Patricii*, ch. 175. On the use of ancient prophecy in the 1590s see Morgan, *Tyrone's rebellion* (Woodbridge, 1993), 143.
12. *Comm.*, p. 133: '*vidit modicam prius lucem in Ulidia exorientem, diu cum tenebris concertare, tandem iisdem effugatis sua fulgore totam insulam illustrare*'. See Edmond Swift, *The life and acts of Saint Patrick the archbishop, primate and apostle of Ireland* (Dublin, 1809), 234.
13. *Comm.*, p. 134: '*. . . ut non tantum ipsi sint effecti coeci, sed corpus totum, quod deberent lumine suo dirigete, conentur excoecare*'.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 149.
15. This is a referente to the betrayal of Deventer to the duke of Parma by two of Leicester's commanders in February 1587. The town was retaken by the Dutch rebela in 1591.
16. Cited in Hiram Morgan, 'Faith and Fatherland or Queen and Country', p. 25.
17. Matthew J. Byrne (ed.), *The Irish wat of defence 1598- 1600: extracta from the de Hibernia insula commentaries of Peter Lombard . . .* (Cork, 1930), 35.
18. *Ibid.*
19. Cited in Thomas Morrissey, *James Archer of Kilkenny* (Dublin, 1979), 19.
20. See Hiram Morgan, *Tyrone's rebellion*, pp 198, 204. Morgan sees O'Neill's use of the religious issue as politically motivated, first as a ploy to forte other government concessions and second as an attempt to widen his support base.
21. Byrne, pp 39-41.
22. Ó Faolain, p. 206.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 175.
24. Byrne, p. 130.
25. On this question see John J. Silke, 'Outward bound from Portnamurray', in Enrique García Hernán, Miguel Ángel de Bunes, Oscar Recio Morales and Bernardo J. García García (eds), *Irlanda y la monarquía Hispánica: Kinsale 1601-2001. Guerra, política, exilio y religión* (Madrid, 2002), 423-45.

26. Mehan, pp 195-7.
27. Edmund Hogan, *Hibernia Ignatiana . . .* (Dublin, 1880), 208.
28. Meehan, pp 122-3.
29. Micheline Kerney Walsh, *'Destruction by peace': Hugh O'Neill after Kinsale* (Armagh, 1986), 143.
30. Tadhg Ó Cianáin, *The flight of the earls* (ed. Paul Walsh) (Maynooth, 1916), 10 (11).
31. Tadhg Ó Cianáin, op. *cit.*
32. *Ibid.*, p. 99.
33. *Ibid.*, pp 169, 171, 175, 185, 189.
34. Mehan, p. 169.
35. Micheline Kerney Walsh, *Irish Sword VII* (1965-6), 6-7. De Aytona to Philip III, 11 November 1608; O'Neill to Philip III, 4 January 1609, *ibid.*, pp 8-9.
36. *Ibid.*, pp 331-12. De Castro to Philip III, 8 December 1611.
37. William Meagh, the Cork city recorder, went into exile after the 'Recusancy revolt' of 1603.
38. See Leszek Kolasowski, *Chrétiens sans Église* (trans. Anna Posner) (Paris, 1969), 23-31.
39. Tomás Ó Fiaich, in his introduction to Micheline Kerney Walsh, *'Destruction by peace: Hugh O'Neill after Kinsale* (Armagh, 1986), xii.