Smith, Sir Thomas

by Judy Barry

Smith, Sir Thomas (1512–77), officer of state, author, and colonial projector, was born at Saffron Walden, Essex, son of John Smith, high sheriff of Essex and Hertfordshire, and Agnes Charnock. He entered Queens’ College, Cambridge, in 1526, and was made king’s scholar (1527) and elected a fellow of the college (25 January 1529). Though he acquired a considerable reputation as a classical scholar, he went on to study law and was appointed the university’s first regius professor of civil law in January 1544; later in that year he became vice-chancellor. Ordained in the Church of England in 1546, he entered the service of Protector Somerset in 1547 and was appointed provost of Eton and dean of Carlisle. In 1548 he became one of two principal secretaries of state and was knighted. He lost his position as secretary when the duke of Northumberland came to power in 1549; on Queen Mary’s accession he resigned his other offices and returned to scholarship. He resumed his public career under Elizabeth I, serving as MP for Liverpool in 1558–9, and as a member of commissions charged with considering the needs of the new parliament and with revising the Book of Common Prayer. In 1562–3 and again in 1572 he was ambassador to France; in 1571 he was readmitted to the privy council; and on 13 July 1572 he was appointed secretary of state.

Smith’s best known works, *A discourse of the commonweal of this realm of England* (1549), an analysis of England’s contemporary economic problems, and *De re publica Anglorum* (1565), commonly regarded as the most important description of the Tudor constitution, established him as one of the leading political and intellectual commentators of his day. Both texts show strong evidence of classical renaissance humanism in their treatment of contemporary issues and it was this approach that Smith brought to his involvement in Ireland. His interest in colonisation is thought to have been first stimulated by the Anglo-Irish reformer Rowland White (qv), who displayed a similar outlook in a ‘Discors touching Ireland’ c.1569. White had recently renewed his family’s claims to the Dufferin in north-east Ulster and was interested in attracting investment to the area. He believed that a colony could both provide opportunities for investors to exploit the abundant natural resources and serve the common good by freeing the ordinary people from the arbitrary rule of the Gaelic chiefs. This merging of public and private interests appealed to Sir Thomas; using the classical Roman colony as a model, he developed a colonising project that met with government approval. In November 1571 a royal grant of the Ards peninsula and Clandeboye in Co. Down was awarded to Sir Thomas and his son. The project, which was to be funded through a joint-stock company, was promoted by the publication of a pamphlet addressed to prospective investors, entitled *A letter sent by I. B.*
A letter is significant in that it represents the first piece of sustained argument for colonisation. Smith’s concern was to promote the benefits of the colony and to allay the anxieties of potential investors. He hoped particularly to attract the younger sons of gentry, for whom family finance would provide an initial stake in the colony. In targeting what he saw as the most dynamic section of the population, Smith differed from other Elizabethan colonisers who looked on colonies as an outlet for paupers. Moreover, he expressly rejected the idea of conquest and presented the enterprise as a noble and honourable venture which would develop land that was then waste and desolate, deploying arguments on the propriety of taking over unoccupied land which had been famously stated by Sir Thomas More in *Utopia*. Smith’s intention was to create a model environment for others to imitate, and since he saw the colony as benefiting all but the Gaelic ruling classes he felt able to predict with confidence that there would be little local opposition and that the colony, which was to be named Elizabetha, would be self-supporting after two years.

Smith’s pamphlet embodied a serious misunderstanding of the situation in Ulster, not least the implications of the fact that part of his grant consisted of lands claimed by the lord of Clandeboye, Sir Brian MacPhelim O’Neill (qv), who was incensed when he learnt of the enterprise and protested vigorously to Elizabeth, stressing his loyalty and past services and asking for the grant to be revoked. Further opposition came from the lord justice, Sir William Fitzwilliam (qv), and from Sir Brian’s patron, the constable of Carrickfergus, Capt. William Piers (qv). Neither had been consulted about the venture and both regarded Sir Brian as a valuable ally. Fitzwilliam was fearful of the adverse effect of Smith’s promotional literature on the Irish chiefs and strongly opposed the degree of autonomy conferred on the prospective colony, the governor of which (who was to be designated ‘colonel’ after the Roman precedent) was to exercise full powers of military and civil government. In February 1572 Piers reported that the country was in uproar at the news, and Fitzwilliam rightly warned that it would ‘bring the Irish into a knot to rebel’ (*CSPI*, 1509–73, 466). Smith’s failure to secure Fitzwilliam’s support was a serious setback, but he continued with his plans and sent three expeditions to the Ards peninsula between 1572 and 1574.

The first expedition was led by his illegitimate son, Thomas Smith (1547–73), who landed in the Ards on 31 August 1572 with a company of about one hundred, and established a settlement, named Newcastle Comber, south of Newtownards. In the following March Smith and Sir Nicholas Malby (qv) made an unsuccessful attempt to consolidate the colony’s position by driving Sir Brian out of the Ards. In the same month Sir Thomas sent out a second, abortive expedition that never reached Ulster. In May Sir Brian retaliated by burning and almost destroying Carrickfergus. The precarious status of Smith’s enterprise was aggravated by an agreement of 9 July 1573 by which the earl of Essex (qv) was authorised to colonise a large tract of land in north-east Ulster which included land in Clandeboye already assigned to Smith, who was now reduced to his grant in the Ards. Moreover, the Essex grant provoked fresh and widespread opposition from the Gaelic lords. On 20 October 1573 the younger Thomas Smith was murdered by a Gaelic member of his household. A
general rising followed and the remaining colonists took refuge with the Anglo-Irish family of Savage in the Lower Ards. Many of them decided to return home, but a few settlers remained under Denys Smith, a son of Sir Thomas's brother George.

The murder of his son was a bitter blow to Smith but he attempted to fulfil his obligation to defend the Ards and organised a third expedition in 1574, led by his brother George and his three sons, with Jerome Brett taking the military command. The settlement at Newcastle Comber was reestablished, but in November Essex's capture of Sir Brian MacPhelim and his execution in Dublin provoked another rising, under Niall Mac Fertagh O'Neill, and the colonists were driven into the lower Ards. This setback, together with a quarrel between Brett and George Smith, led to the collapse of the third expedition in the spring of 1575. In April Sir Thomas wrote to the lord deputy, requesting him to revoke Brett's authority and proposing that his grant be transferred to Essex. Negotiations were begun but never completed, and although the situation improved in the summer of 1575 and a few remaining colonists began to farm the lands around Comber, Smith sent no more aid. In March 1576 his health began to fail and he retired from his official duties. He died on 12 August 1577 and was buried in Theydon Mount church, Essex, where his memorial tablet bears the words *Ardae Australisque Claneboy in Hibernia colonellus.*

Sir Thomas Smith married first (April 1548) Elizabeth (d. 1552), daughter of William Carkyk; secondly (1554) Philippa (d. 1584), daughter of John Wilford of London and widow of Sir John Hampden. Smith had no legitimate children and left his land in Ireland to his nephew, William Smith, who made a final attempt at settlement in June 1579 when he landed in the Ards but was refused permission to proceed, apparently on the grounds that the grant had been voided by the failure to establish a permanent colony.

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