

Burke (de Burgh), John (Seaan, Shane Mac Oliverus)

by Terry Clavin

Burke (de Burgh), John (Seaan, Shane Mac Oliverus) (d. 1580), 17th lord of MacWilliam Íochtair, was the son of Oliver of the Sliocht Ricaird of Tirawley and great-grandson of Richard (Richard O'Cuairsge) (qv; see under Risdeard Burgh (de Burgh)), 7th lord of MacWilliam Íochtair. Early in his career he developed his power base through his ability to hire Scottish mercenaries for fighting in Connacht. By 1570 he was regarded as the next in line to become the MacWilliam Íochtair. Unlike many of his contemporaries, Burke had little love for war and seemed concerned for the well-being of his people. Upon being reproached by an old woman for burdening his people with the maintenance of his Scottish troops, he lamented that, without them, they would be at the mercy of their enemies who would be just as burdensome. He knew Latin, but not English.

By 1570 the royal government had established garrisons in much of Connacht, but not yet in Mayo. In June of that year English forces and their Irish allies besieged Shrule Castle on the border between Galway and Mayo. According to some sources, Burke roused his clan to resist this intrusion and on 21 June led a combined force of Irish and gallowglass against the besiegers. A bloody battle followed at the end of which both sides claimed victory, but it was the Irish who drew away, and Shrule Castle fell. The MacWilliam Íochtair submitted to the crown soon after but, unlike many other leading members of the clan, Burke was not pardoned.

Following the death of the previous incumbent in winter 1570–71, Burke appears initially to have shrunk from accepting the title of the MacWilliam Íochtair as he realised that this would anger the English. But around 8 February 1571 he was formally elected, and he immediately began hiring Scots to resist further royal incursions. At the same time he opened negotiations with the president of Connacht, Sir Edward Fitton (qv), and quickly agreed to pay a fine in return for a pardon. However, in September his sons raided Galway, prompting Fitton to campaign in south Mayo in October–November, wasting large tracts of land and taking many castles.

Burke was among the nobles of Connacht who responded to Fitton's summons to Galway in March 1572. However, the sons of the earl of Clanricard (qv), known as the Mac an Iarlas, went into rebellion and attracted substantial support. While returning home Burke was captured by rebels and then ransomed. Fitton expected him to remain loyal, but the rebels were virtually unopposed in Connacht and by late April 1572 Burke had joined them. On 1 September he accompanied the Mac an Iarlas into Munster to support the rebellion of James fitz Maurice Fitzgerald (qv), but they achieved little there and soon withdrew. For the next four years Connacht was free of royal interference. While Burke realised that he could not resist English

encroachments indefinitely, it is to his credit that, while South Connacht descended into faction fighting and suffered economic collapse, his lordship remained relatively stable and attracted migrants from further south.

In March 1576 Burke submitted to the lord deputy, Sir Henry Sidney (qv), at Galway and then accompanied him to Athlone. He impressed Sidney, who knighted him and on 10 May recognised him as chief of his race and seneschal of his nation. In September of that year the Mac an Iarlas invaded his lands because he would not join them again in rebellion. Initially, Burke could do little as his gallowglass force joined the rebels and he lost many castles. Sidney arrived with reinforcements in September and with the help of Burke's partisans had quelled the revolt in Mayo by the start of 1577.

Later that year Burke joined with Sir Nicholas Malby (qv), president of Connacht, on an expedition during which Bundoran was captured. In 1579 he attended sessions held in Galway for the government of Connacht, and also sent his son William to live in the household of Sir Francis Walsingham in England. In early 1580 he joined Malby with 800 men in campaigning against Richard Burke (Risdeard an Iarainn) (qv), tanist to the Mac William Iochtar. By June he was preparing to go to England to present himself to the queen, but never went.

Burke is reputed to have had ten sons, of whom only one, William, was regarded as legitimate by the English. His grandson Theobald was twenty-first lord of MacWilliam Íochtair (1593–1600). John died in November 1580 before an order from Sidney that he be created an earl could be enacted. Before his death he commissioned a manuscript of the Burke family history from the time of the Norman invasion of Ireland, written in Gaelic and Latin and in prose and verse. It also includes detailed accounts of the lands claimed by the Burkes and of the rights and dues owed to them from those lands as well as fourteen illuminated pictures, among them one of John. The manuscript is incomplete and was probably abandoned on John's death.

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*AFM*, v; *CSPI*; *Carew MSS 1515–74*, 421; H. T. Knox, *The history of the county of Mayo to the close of the sixteenth century* (1908); Tomas O'Raghallagh, 'Seanchas Burcach', *Galway Arch. Soc.*, xiii, 50–61, 101–37; xiv, 50–61, 143–66 (1924–7); G. V. Martin, 'Random notes on the history of the county Mayo', *Galway Arch. Soc. Jn.*, xiii (1927), 23–49; *NHI*, ix; Gerard Hayes-McCoy, *Scots mercenary forces in Ireland* (1937), 110–11, 346; J. F. Quinn, *History of Mayo* (1993)