

Burke, Ulick

by Terry Clavin

Burke, Ulick (d. 1601), 3rd earl of Clanricard and military leader, was eldest son of Richard Burke (qv), 2nd earl of Clanricard, and his first wife, Margaret, daughter of Murchadh O'Brien (qv), 1st earl of Thomond. In 1564 he was a member of the household staff of Thomas Radcliffe (qv), 3rd earl of Sussex and lord lieutenant of Ireland. From a very early age he was engaged in a deadly rivalry with his half-brother John Burke (qv) (d. 1583), who cast doubts on Ulick's legitimacy. In 1567 the lord deputy of Ireland, Sir Henry Sidney (qv), sent the warring siblings as prisoners to Dublin castle for a time so as to restore peace to the lordship of Clanricard.

The establishment (1569) of the presidency of Connacht under Sir Edward Fitton (qv) caused a swift deterioration in relations between the ruling Burkes of Clanricard and the crown. Although the 2nd earl remained nominally loyal, his two eldest sons, Ulick and John, who became known as the Mac-an-Iarlas, would spend much of the next decade in rebellion. John was the more rebellious of the two and often appears to have dragged his more cautious half-brother in his wake.

On 9 March 1571 Fitton indicted the Mac-an-Iarlas and hanged some of their supporters. However, both sides eventually backed down and, in an apparently conciliatory gesture, Fitton invited all the leading nobles of Connacht to meet him at Galway in March 1572. There the Mac-an-Iarlas heard a rumour that caused them to suspect Fitton's intentions; they fled the city and assembled their men, defying Fitton's entreaties to return. They went into rebellion on 1 April after hearing that Fitton had arrested their father. The government was preoccupied with a rebellion in Munster and could spare no troops for Connacht, which allowed free rein to the Mac-an-Iarlas and their 2,000-strong army, composed of their own supporters, the Mayo Burkes, and Scottish mercenaries. After demolishing most of the castles in the lordship of Clanricard and burning Athenry, they plundered much of south Galway, Roscommon, and Westmeath. Then they turned west, attacked Galway city, and plundered Connemara. This campaign continued into the autumn, known supporters of the government being the primary target.

The government released Clanricard in August, but his sons did not yield to his (possibly disingenuous) appeals that they desist from their military activities. In September 1572 they crossed into Munster in support of the rebellion led by James fitz Maurice Fitzgerald (qv), but soon withdrew. Only in November did they request a pardon from the government, which was refused. During 1573–4 the brothers remained unopposed in south Connacht and, when not harassing pro-government Burkes and the townsmen of Galway, feuded against each other. Finally (August 1574) they formally submitted to the crown, though the house of Clanricard remained dangerously estranged from the administration. In a bid to mend fences, the Mac-

an-larlas appeared dramatically at a church service attended by Sidney at Galway in April 1576 and offered their submission to the lord deputy. An unforgiving Sidney had them arrested and sent to Dublin castle, but then relented and granted them permission to visit friends outside Dublin on condition that they did not return to Connacht. They broke these terms in late June, launching another revolt. They burned Athenry but were driven away from Loughrea, whereupon Ulick invaded the territories of John mac Oliver Burke (qv) in Mayo, who remained loyal to the crown. He quickly overran mac Oliver's territories, attracting much support there, but English reinforcements arrived in September, and in January 1577 he was forced to flee south into Clanricard territory.

The royal forces, led by the ruthless president of Connacht, Nicholas Malby (qv), had the measure of the rebels, and the Mac-an-larlas were driven into the wilds of Clanricard, where they continued to fight a forlorn guerrilla war. By summer 1577 the brothers were once more at loggerheads, and Ulick indicated to Malby that, but for fear of his father's and brother's vengeance, he would be loyal. This may explain the government's decision to decree on 9 December 1577 that Ulick was the rightful heir to the earldom of Clanricard. Nonetheless, only in April 1579 did the crown accept Ulick's surrender. In autumn 1579, true to his newly made allegiance, Ulick ignored a written plea from a papal agent in Ireland, Nicholas Sander (qv), to support the rebellion that was under way in Munster. In 1580 he and John were restored to most of their father's estates, which led to renewed conflict between them that summer.

In August 1580 the Mac-an-larlas campaigned alongside Malby against the Irish in Sligo and Leitrim; they joined him again that autumn in Munster against the Fitzgeralds of Desmond. However, John remained unwilling to accept the new order and seized Loughrea from an English garrison in October 1580. Initially Ulick remained aloof, but – perhaps influenced by the fact that John held one of his sons as hostage – he joined the rebellion and was formally proclaimed the MacWilliam Uachtar (the prohibited Gaelic title of the Clanricard Burkes). As before, Malby soon contained this rising and the Mac-an-larlas submitted in summer 1581.

Following the earl's death (August 1582), Ulick and John went before the privy council in Dublin to plead their respective cases for the earldom. In September the government decreed that the Clanricard territory be partitioned between the two; Ulick succeeded as the 3rd earl and took immediate steps to restore order to his lordship, but John attempted to undermine him by protecting outlaws. On 11 November 1583 Clanricard ruthlessly tricked John into coming unprotected to Ballyfontane, Co. Galway, where he killed him. Nobody believed Clanricard's claims that John had died in a skirmish with rebels, but Malby, who may have been a party to the murder, defended him. He was formally pardoned for the murder on 28 June 1584 and seized John's lands, claiming (falsely) that John's children were illegitimate and that he was accordingly heir to these territories. On 9 November 1585 a government commission accepted his plea and disinherited John's children.

In October 1584 Clanricard sent his eldest son and heir to be educated at court in London, a further indication of his having made his peace with the government.

Clanricard's greatest coup was to negotiate very favourable composition terms with the crown early in 1585. Under the composition of Connacht the traditional and inefficient system of levying military exactions was replaced by the payment of fixed rents by vassals to their lord. This new dispensation enabled Clanricard to assert control over the lordship after years of chaos. The price of this favour was unwavering loyalty to the crown, a yearly payment of £200–£300 to certain highly placed royal officials for the rest of his life, and the conveyance of the castle and adjoining lands of Ballinasloe to Malby. In the decade after 1585 he repeatedly accompanied Malby's successor, Sir Richard Bingham (qv), on campaigns in Mayo, Sligo, and Leitrim, showing conspicuous bravery on numerous occasions. Now a pillar of the crown, he became a member of the council of Connacht on 11 July 1588 and in 1594 was given responsibility for collecting the composition of Connacht. Bingham protested unavailingly against the latter favour as it greatly enhanced Clanricard's power in the province. Clanricard made no attempt to modernise his landholdings and relied primarily on his military prowess to advance himself. Unsurprisingly, he remained in financial straits, but his political influence shielded him from his creditors and from the citizens of Galway and Athenry, who hounded him for restitution for his past depredations.

However, his contacts were of little use against the confederation of Ulster lords who were in rebellion against the crown from 1594. In particular the success of Red Hugh O'Donnell (qv) in destroying the government's grip on north Connacht during the late 1590s left Clanricard very exposed. Clanricard nevertheless contemptuously dismissed O'Donnell's request to marry his daughter, though he could do nothing to prevent repeated raids by O'Donnell into his lands from January 1597. A more immediate threat came from his nephew Redmond Burke, son to the murdered John, who emerged as a leading military commander in the rebel forces. In summer 1598 Redmond established a base in the midlands on the east side of the Shannon, directly abutting his father's briefly held barony of Leitrim. During talks with the government during 1598, the rebels demanded Redmond's restoration to his father's former holdings. However, Clanricard was unyielding, declaring that he would not give his nephew sufficient land to be covered by his cloak. In August 1599 Redmond invaded Clanricard's lands, but was repulsed.

Relatively bereft of government assistance, Clanricard was left to shift for himself and came to an informal accommodation with the rebel leaders. During spring 1600 he appears to have promised them that he would join them that summer, but this was probably an attempt to buy some time. In summer 1600 O'Donnell marched through Clanricard's territory in force, but did not plunder it, while Clanricard made no attempt either to obstruct his passage or to warn the inhabitants of Thomond who were O'Donnell's intended victims. In return, O'Donnell forced Redmond to desist from attacking his uncle, much to Redmond's discontent. Clanricard's half-

hearted opposition to the rebels soon attracted biting criticism from other royal commanders. His lethargy can be partly ascribed to the constant need to ward against his nephew's menacing presence on his eastern border. Further, many of his natural supporters sympathised with the rebels. Indeed, he was accused of staffing his company in the royal army with known rebels, although providing such men with a royal salary may have been a prudent means of buying their neutrality. Nonetheless, during 1600, some royal officials, particularly Sir George Carew (qv), president of Munster, pressed for Redmond Burke to be restored to his father's lands as a means of securing his support. In the end, nothing came of this, for fear that it might push Clanricard into rebellion.

Notwithstanding her servants' criticisms of Clanricard, the queen continued to value him, as evidenced most spectacularly by her offer to him on 9 January 1600 of temporary command of the royal forces in Connacht. Preferring to remain in his lordship, he declined, but his son and heir Richard (qv), Lord Dunkellin, briefly gained this prestigious command instead, thereby arousing the ethnic jealousy of the overwhelmingly English officer caste. Interestingly, Dunkellin, who had been educated in England, was said to be strongly loyalist, for which he was hated by his younger brother Thomas, who presumably leaned towards the rebels. Clanricard was described as favouring Thomas over his heir. This apparent sibling rivalry was a striking reenactment of Clanricard's own relationship with his brother and father during his youth, and either reflects the inveterate disunity of the ruling Burke dynasty or represents a cunning ploy designed to provide that dynasty with a foot in both the rebel and loyalist camps.

By the start of 1601 Redmond had despaired of any furtherance from the crown and travelled to Ulster to demand the right to avenge his father. Perhaps realising that Clanricard would not join them and eager to retain Redmond's services, the Ulster rebels furnished him with a large army of about 1,000 men. They entered the Clanricard territory in force in late March. Although Clanricard had long anticipated such an incursion and had posted a watch to provide advance warning, Redmond achieved complete surprise, suggesting that he had significant support within the lordship of Clanricard. A series of evenly contested battles ensued for four to five days before Clanricard's forces were overwhelmed by the arrival of further rebel forces. He retreated with difficulty to Loughrea, leaving the field to the rebels. Before long, royalist reinforcements poured into the lordship from Galway city, Munster, and Dublin. Assisted by Clanricard's sons Thomas and Dunkellin (who had arrived with his own company from Dublin), the crown forces pushed Redmond across the Shannon into Leinster by the end of April. However, Clanricard played no part in this, having fallen terminally ill at Loughrea. He lived long enough for his sons to report their victory in person, and died 20 May 1601 at Loughrea. He was buried at Athenry.

Clanricard married (25 November 1564) Honora, daughter of John Burke of Clogheroka, Co. Galway; they had five sons and at least one daughter.

---

F. Moryson, *An history of Ireland from the year 1599 to 1603* (1735), 142; *AFM*, v; vi; *CSPI*, 1509–73, 1574–85, 1571–75, 1586–8, 1588–92, 1592–6, 1596–7, 1597–8, 1598–9, 1599–1600, 1600, 1600–01; *Carew MSS*, 1589–1600; G.E.C., *Peerage*; B. Cunningham, 'From warlords to landlords: political and social change in Galway, 1540–1640', G. Moran (ed.), *Galway: history and society* (1996), 97–130

Downloaded from <http://dib.cambridge.org> by IP 100.103.238.216 on Mon Jan 18 04:21:13 UTC 2021 Dictionary of Irish Biography Online © 2021 Cambridge University Press and Royal Irish Academy. All rights reserved. Not for commercial use or unauthorized distribution.