

Irish warrants— hidden treasures from the East (Riding)

It is a tragic irony that in Ireland's fight for independence and a new beginning in 1922 we also lost the vast majority of our historical records dating back to the Middle Ages. From one of the richest holdings of medieval and early modern manuscripts in Europe, Ireland now has the misfortune of possessing one of the poorest collections on a nation's past. Fortunately we have our neighbours across the Irish Sea to thank for preserving material, either in libraries or in private collections, which might otherwise have been lost in the Four Courts in June 1922. The Irish warrants held in the Yorkshire Archives are a case in point. A warrant is a document issued by an authority such as the monarch, privy council or other administrative body within the government, conferring on a person some particular authority or empowering him to perform a specific act or task (e.g. make a payment or arrest, conduct a search, etc.). Dated between c. 1633 and 1636, these Irish warrants shed significant light on political, religious, social, cultural, economic, military and administrative affairs under the deputyship of Sir Thomas Wentworth, first earl of Strafford.

There are nearly 30 warrants relating to ecclesiastical affairs. Many involve appointments to rectories, deaneries, prebendaries and bishoprics as a reward for clergy who supported the conformist policies advocated by Wentworth. John Atherton, for example, was promoted to chancellor of Christ Church Cathedral, while Henry Tilson was offered the position of dean of Christ Church Cathedral in addition to the profitable prebend of Monmohenock. Tilson's double appointment also reflects the parlous state of the Church of Ireland. The pluralist prebendary of St Mary's in Elphin diocese held for good measure the vicarage of St John's in Sligo, a rectory in Killala and several more vicarages in the nearby diocese of Achonry.

Other warrants point to a vibrant Irish economy in which merchants traded wheat, corn, wool, pipe staves, wine, whiskey and tobacco. This is all the more remarkable considering the disruption caused by piracy. The documents not only reflect the administration's reaction by improving the navy but also uncover the radical military reforms that Wentworth implemented to ensure sustained peace, stability and growth throughout the country. Such changes are in evidence within the political system too: the numerous warrants relating to government appointments demonstrate the lengths to which Wentworth was prepared to go to make a clean sweep of the Irish administration.

Above all, this collection affords fascinating insights into Irish society. There are several warrants relating to criminal activity. In one scenario the lord chancellor was ordered to apprehend burglars in Wexford and Kilkenny, while the high sheriff of Carlow was commanded to arrest 'two notorious malefactors', James and Edward Gormogan, who committed robberies in Wicklow, Kildare and Carlow. Similarly, a warrant (left) was issued for the capture of a fugitive from the liberty of Thomas Court jail who, in the process of fleeing, stole goods belonging to the keeper, Abraham Eastwood. Another warrant is strongly reminiscent of our current financial troubles: Cormac McDonnell from Sligo, for instance, was detained for owing £80 to merchants (the early modern equivalent of bankers). We are also informed of the suicide of Alan Rutledge, who was in possession of a good estate 'in goodes, chattells, debts and credits'. Meanwhile, an unnamed man from Kildare was given permission to beg at church, markets, fairs and other social events after losing his child, wife, livestock and house to a fire.

A striking feature of these warrants is the light they throw on a wide range of cultural engagement in early seventeenth-century Ireland. This could take the form of a government

initiative, such as the warrant granting Christofer Syms the sole right to print a children's textbook entitled *The art of teaching the Latine speeche*. There are references to fairs and markets in Dublin and Athlone. They were important because they provided a forum for trade and commerce as well as for popular entertainment and social interaction. Alcohol was never in short supply at these events—indeed, one warrant sought to reduce ‘the needles multitude of alehouses to a lesser number in this kingedome’. More interestingly, such venues attracted members of the entertainment industry. There are two warrants of particular note in this regard: the first licenses stage players to travel the country, while the second authorises a husband and wife to exercise ‘their quality of dancing on the ropes and other feats of activity’ in any city, town and corporation. Their value is not just that they clearly demonstrate an appetite for the theatre and theatrics among the public. Crucially they pre-date our earliest surviving records on drama and the performing arts in seventeenth-century Ireland.

This valuable collection from the East Riding of Yorkshire Archives will be supplemented with comparable warrant books housed in Marsh's Library, Dublin, and the Bodleian Library, Oxford, for the forthcoming publication by the Irish Manuscripts Commission. They will provide access to a rich source of hitherto unknown documents for anyone with an informed interest in any aspect of early modern Irish history. I

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Further reading

M. Empey (ed.), *Early Stuart Irish warrants* (Irish Manuscripts Commission, forthcoming).