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CHAPTER 8

Colonial Society in Co. Louth, 1150-1450

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Had the ambitions of the earliest English intruders in Louth been fulfilled, the 'wee county' would have extended from the Irish Sea to the Atlantic Ocean. Although its boundaries were not finally delimited until the establishment of County Monaghan in 1585 and County Armagh in 1608, the current dimensions of County Louth are recognisable from the second quarter of the thirteenth century. Some features of the modern county – its relatively dense population, the prominence within it of towns, its close ties with Dublin, its location on a sometimes-troubled border – are also in keeping with its medieval character. The contours of the medieval county were shaped not by venerable patterns of authority or geographical coherence but by political developments involving the English crown, its local representatives in Louth, and the Irish who lived in its environ. Sizeable portions of its western and northern boundaries were contested throughout the period, while its existence as a distinct administrative entity was unchallenged. Such elements of instability and continuity served to produce a local society of notable diversity and dynamism. Medieval Louth was at once a frontier and a heartland, both cosmopolitan and distant from centres of power, habitually and intensely loyal to the English crown while capable of rebellion and episodes of murderous internal strife. For many it was a place of final, permanent settlement, for others a stop on a journey to more distant destinations. An Aragonese pilgrim travelling to St Patrick's Purgatory on Lough Derg in Donegal at the end of the fourteenth century remarked in passing that Drogheda reminded him of Tarragona. He also told how he had been warned before setting out from Dublin that once he left Louth he would be at the mercy of 'a savage ungoverned people whom no man could trust'. Students of medieval Europe habitually encounter a world that is both familiar and unutterably strange. The account presented below of the history of medieval Louth, a busy, volatile, noisy space, offers a version of this experience in miniature.[1]

The county was an English import into Ireland. It was a statement of the authority – already achieved or anticipated – of the English crown in the territory

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concerned. The process of shiring always followed at some distance behind the phenomena of conquest and colonisation. For that reason, a history of County Louth that began only in the 1220s, when the first references to shrieval organisation are found, would be flawed. The county was the administrative expression of English dominance in the region as manifested some four decades after the *adventus Anglorum*. By 1190 the foundations of that dominance were in place, but English power began altering political life in Louth almost from the moment Strongbow arrived in Waterford in May 1170. Our proper starting-point for the analysis of colonial society in County Louth in the Middle Ages, however, lies even further back in time. To explain why, one needs to remember that the conquerors referred to the county not as Louth but as Uriel.

Uriel is the anglicized version of Airgialla, the name of the Irish kingdom which included the later county at the time of the English conquest. While Irish power structures in the region were destroyed between the 1180s and 1200s, their English successor was conditioned in part – as the name of the county indicates – by what had been superseded. The kingdom of Airgialla, as encountered by the earliest English conquerors, was a political entity of recent vintage. Airgialla translates as 'hostage givers' and the accustomed status of the Airgialla as a people since the seventh century was as subordinates to the increasingly powerful Cenél nEógain grouping to the north, under its ruling dynasty, the Uí Néill. From the eleventh century, as their grip on their ancestral lands in Armagh and Tyrone loosened, the Airgialla compensated themselves with some success further south in Monaghan and Louth. This bold reversal of fortune was spearheaded by the Ua Cerbaill family, and by 1125 its leader was identified as 'king of Airgialla' in the Irish annals that record his death in battle.[2]

Donnchad Ua Cerbaill was installed as king of Airgialla in 1125 by the king of Connacht, and claimant to the high-kingship of Ireland, Toirdelbach Ua Conchobair, but Ua Cerbaill's traditional ties were with the Cenél nEógain, and in general he supported their king, Muirchertach Mac Lochlainn, in the competition for supremacy in Ireland. Through his alliance with Mac Lochlainn, Donnchad acquired parts of Meath and south Down when these were conquered by the Cenél nEógain, but he retained enough independence to eventually participate in and benefit from the downfall of his patron in 1166. It was Donnchad who slew Muirchertach at Newtownhamilton in revenge for the blinding by the latter of Donnchadh's foster-son, Eochaid Mac Duinn Sléibe, king of Ulaid. Ua Cerbaill had already transferred his allegiance to Mac Lochlainn's rival, Ruaidrí Ua Conchobair, who completed his rout of his enemies by expelling from Ireland Diarmait Mac Murchada, king of Leinster, in August 1166[3]

Donnchad did not live to see the consequences of this event as, after a political career of over forty years, he died in 1168. In noting his passing the Irish annalists paid him generous tributes, none more so than the author of 'Mac Carthaigh's Book', a source which pays considerable attention to events in south Ulster:

> Donnchadh son of Cú Chaisil Ó Cearbhaill, high-king of Oirghialla, who
> obtained the kingship of Midhe as far as Clochán na hImrime, and the
> kingship of Ulaidh, and to whom was offered many times the kingship of
> Cinéal Eóghain, chief ornament of the north of Ireland, and even of all
> Ireland, for appearance, wisdom, bravery, friendship, brotherliness, vigour,
> kingship, power, for bestowing treasure, food, bounty, and reward to
> laymen and clergy, for overwhelming all evil and exalting all goodness,
> for protecting bells, croziers, and the monasteries of canons and monks,
> and like unto Solomon for peacefulness in his own native territory and
> towards every territory around, died after repentance, having bequeathed
> much gold, silver and stock, and having partaken of the Body of Christ.[4]

The twelfth century was a time in Ireland when new practices of kingship
flourished, and Donnchad Ua Cerbaill deployed these innovations to good effect
in his lands. He expanded beyond his inheritance into Armagh, Meath and
Down; he moved the subject Mugdorna people from Monaghan to south Down,
where they gave their name to the Mournes; he imposed his son, Murchad, as
king over the conquered Uí Méith of the Cooley peninsula; and on his death
Murchad succeeded him without conflict. Always he associated himself with the
most progressive elements in the local church, and it was this alliance, above all,
which guaranteed both his earthly success and the positive impression left of him
to posterity. In the early 1130s Donnchad supported Máel Máedoc Ua Morgair
(St Malachy) in his attempt to obtain the bishopric of Armagh and, particularly
after the assassination of his greatest secular sponsor, Cormac Mac Carthaig, king
of Desmumu, in 1138, Máel Máedoc looked to Donnchad as standard-bearer
among the Irish kings for the programme of church reform. Donnchad amply
repaid this trust, and Airgialla became a flagship for reform. The status and
wealth of the local bishop – Máel Máedoc's brother, Gilla Críst, was bishop from
1135 to 1138 – were enhanced, tithes were instituted and some sort of parish
structure established. It is likely that some at least of these parishes were attached
to the houses of the Augustinian order, which was introduced into Airgialla at this
time. Augustinian houses were founded at Louth, Knock, Clogher and
Termonfeckin. Donnchadh also oversaw the establishment of the first Cistercian
house in Ireland at Mellifont. Some of the most important Irish scholars of the
day were attracted to live in these houses, and they produced impressive works
of hagiography and updated liturgical calendars. Elements of Donnchad's
remarkable legacy persisted in Louth long after his descendants had lost power
there.[5]

On succeeding his father in 1168 Murchad Ua Cerbaill continued in alliance
with Ruaidrí Ua Conchobair, and in 1171 was part of the army assembled by the
high-king to besiege Dublin which was routed by Miles de Cogan. Later in the
same year he submitted with Tigernán Ua Ruairc to Henry II, but in 1174 he was
again by Ruaidrí Ua Conchobair's side when the latter destroyed Hugh de Lacy's

castle at Trim. The English made no attempt to conquer Airgialla in the 1170s, but the construction of castles at Kells, Skreen, Navan, Nobber and Slane meant that English raids could be conducted from Armagh to the Boyne, causing destruction to the Ua Cerbaill heartland of Louth. Slane was particularly troublesome, and in 1176 Murchad destroyed it with the help of Máel Sechlainn Mac Lochlainn, king of Cenél nEógain. In January of the following year John de Courcy and his small force met no resistance from Ua Cerbaill while passing through Airgialla on the way from Dublin to Ulaid, possibly because Murchad was dealing with an attack on Louth and Machaire Conaill (bar. Upper Dundalk) launched by Miles de Cogan. Clearly pressure on Airgialla was intensifying, and Murchad was aware that less and less help could now be expected from the great Irish lords to whom his family had traditionally looked for assistance against their enemies. Ruaidrí Ua Conchobair had proved increasingly ineffective since 1174, and the Cenél nEógain were riven by conflict between the families of Mac Lochlainn and Ua Néill. Murchad was left with no option but to deal with the English, and references in the annals to 'treacherous' attacks by the newcomers on Airgialla in 1177 and 1178 suggests that by then some agreement, however poorly observed, had been reached between the two sides.[6]

By the 1180s Murchad's new patron was neither an Ua Conchobair nor a Mac Lochlainn, but Hugh de Lacy, lord of Meath, and in 1184 the two men combined in a raid on Armagh. On his death two years later, the Irish annals describe de Lacy as 'king of Meath, and Breffny, and Uriel', and it is likely that Murchad viewed the English lord of Meath in the same light as he had previously perceived his Irish overlords. It was in part to counter the dangers to his own position inherent in such perceptions that Henry II sent his young son, John, as lord of Ireland, across the Irish sea in 1185, and during his sojourn John appears to have reached an agreement with Murchad whereby the latter would remain in possession of his lands until his death, at which point English grantees nominated by John would succeed to the Ua Cerbaill lands. By the time he died in 1189 Murchad had already renounced the world; he ended his life in the habit of a Cistercian monk at the house of Mellifont, which his father had founded forty-seven years before. His achievements, though not extolled at similar length in contemporary accounts, were in important ways at least as impressive as those of his father. Whereas neighbouring Irish kings of equivalent status, such as Tigernán Ua Ruairc of Breifne and Manus Ua Máel Sechlainn of Mide, died brutal deaths at the hands of the English in the 1170s, Murchad retained real independence and managed to maintain in large part the integrity of his inheritance. The combination of pragmatism and opportunism which had characterised Donnchad's rise to power marked Murchad's reign also, and as a result the transition from Irish to English rule in Louth after 1189 may have been less traumatic for its inhabitants than would otherwise have been the case.[7]

The eastern portion of the kingdom of Airgialla had not entirely escaped the consequences of English intervention before Murchad's death. Hugh de Lacy interpreted his grant of Meath in 1170 to include Ferrard, north of the Boyne,

and bestowed land there on his followers, as well as adding to the endowment of Mellifont abbey. By 1189 construction of a castle at Ardee had begun, and burgage plots had been allotted at Carlingford. In 1185 John had divided Airgialla between two important royal servants, Bertram de Verdon and Gilbert Pipard, while keeping the area around the town of Louth for his own purposes, and some steps had clearly been taken to make good these grants while Murchad was still alive. Full-scale implementation of the new arrangements, however, was postponed until after his death. Outside of the church no place existed in these arrangements for members of the Ua Cerbaill dynasty, and not all of Muchad's kinsmen were prepared to acquiesce meekly in their own disinheritance. 1193 was a year of unrest in the area, with confrontation between the bishop of Louth and the settlers about the building of a castle on church land at Donaghmoyne and the blinding and hanging by the English of Muirchertach Ua Cerbaill, presumably as punishment for some act of resistance against the new dispensation. In general, however, there appears to have been little physical opposition to the English from the Irish of Louth, and while the position of the settlers in the region remained insecure for many years, the gravest threats they faced came from beyond, rather than within, the confines of what became County Louth.[8]

By the time he sent his son, John, to Ireland in 1185 Henry II had decided that future acquisitions there should be given to royal servants and their families upon whose talents and loyalty he could confidently rely. Among those who travelled across the Irish Sea with John were the two lords among whom the Ua Cerbaill kingdom was for the most part divided, Bertram de Verdon and Gilbert Pipard. These were men of vast administrative experience. Bertram de Verdon held estates of the king in Staffordshire and Leicestershire, but his high status derived less from landed wealth than from service to the crown. He was sheriff of Warwickshire and Leicestershire between 1168 and 1183, an itinerant judge from 1175 to 1179, and in 1177 was a member of a delegation sent by Henry II to Castile. He was a warrior as well as an administrator, fighting alongside the king against his rebellious sons in 1173, and meeting his death while on crusade with King Richard I in 1192. His career was mirrored by that of the other grantee in Louth, Gilbert Pipard. The Pipards held land in Oxfordshire, and Gilbert served as sheriff of Gloucester from 1168 to 1171, and sheriff of Hereford from 1171 to 1173. Between 1181 and 1185 he had custody of Chester and, in similar fashion to de Verdon, died on crusade in 1192.[9]

To de Verdon John granted the area covered today by the baronies of Upper and Lower Dundalk, as well as land in south Armagh. Gilbert Pipard was given the barony of Ardee, and parts of the baronies of Farney, Upper Fews, Cremorne and Dartry. Sometime between 1185 and 1189 Gilbert transferred these lands to his brother, Peter, and in 1193 the latter received an additional grant of territory roughly equivalent to the modern county Fermanagh. John kept for himself the western portion of the modern barony of Louth. The sources provide little detail about how the grantors of these lands sought to take possession of

them and are particularly unforthcoming both about the means by which existing Irish landholders were dispossessed and their subsequent fate. Charters which reveal that early English settlers received 'one carucate of the land of Macunekuleth', 'the whole land which Machudi held', or 'the land which belonged to Machlan in Uriell', provide no clue as to whether these lands were acquired by violence or by other means. It is likely that the landowning elite faced the choice of either futile resistance, flight, or social degradation under the new regime, while peasant cultivators were encouraged – as was the case in Meath under Hugh de Lacy – to remain on the land.[10]

Undoubtedly, the establishment of English rule in Louth was grounded in military power. Whole areas were denoted by the largest military structure in their vicinity, as in 'the castlery of Dundalk' mentioned by Hugh de Lacy before 1210. By the 1220s stone castles were to be found at Ardee, Louth, Donaghmoyne, Dundalk, Carlingford and Drogheda, and numerous less substantial, but militarily effective, motte-castles had been erected on the western fringes of the new settlement. Along with 'castleries', early conquerors might describe the extent of a parcel of territory as a 'knight's fee', signifying a unit flexible in size but of sufficient economic value to support a fully armed knight in the service of his lord. In Louth this service most often came in the form of garrison duty at the nearby castle.[11]

The ambitions of the earliest English lords of Louth went beyond securing military supremacy in the region to exploiting its economic potential. This could best be achieved, it was believed, by introducing settlers from England. There could be no genuine conquest without colonisation. Henry II and his son John had placed Louth in the hands of de Verdon and Pipard: it was their responsibility to attract supporters from England who would defend the settlement and make it profitable. They looked first to their own families for recruits. Bertram de Verdon involved his sons Thomas and Nicholas in his Irish adventure from the outset, while Gilbert Pipard passed his interests to his brother, Peter, before 1189 and he in turn granted them to a third brother, Roger, in the mid-1190s. Because of the relatively modest nature of their landed possessions in England, the de Verdons and Pipards could not stock their Irish lands from a pool of existing tenants on their English estates. Instead, they sought to involve their *socii* – men of status and wealth with whom they had already established relationships in the course of their years of service to the crown. In geographical terms they found volunteers most easy to come by in Warwickshire and Shropshire, with Staffordshire, Herefordshire and Derbyshire also proving fruitful recruiting grounds. Many of those tempted to Louth were already important figures in these counties. The de Wottons, for instance, who were enfeoffed north of Dundalk, were neighbours and possibly tenants of the de Verdons in Warwickshire, and also had links with Henry de London, dean of Stafford, who in 1213 became archbishop of Dublin. The Clintons, who were granted land in Louth by both the Pipards and the de Verdons, were cousins of the latter and hailed from Coleshill in Warwickshire.[12]

These families accepted the considerable challenge of involvement in Ireland not because they had nothing to lose in England, but because they had wealth and energy to spare and the imagination to speculate in a dangerous foreign venture. Land, knightly status, and royal patronage were increasingly difficult to gain in England at the end of the twelfth century, while in Ireland they were there for the taking. Furthermore, in places such as Louth a tenants' market prevailed. From the outset the Clintons and Wottons and many pioneers of similar status, accepted knights' fees from more than one lord, thus ensuring that their fortunes were not tied too closely to those of one particular noble family. The trend was exacerbated in the early thirteenth century when feuding between the de Verdons and de Lacys encouraged their leading subtenants to forge closer ties with the crown. This tradition of alignment to royal wishes among the leading English settlers of Louth was strengthened by the fact that for at least the first two generations of involvement in Ireland many of them continued to hold land in England and travelled back and forth across the Irish Sea between their estates.[13]

Routine and persistent contact with England conditioned the attitude of the leaders of the settlement in Louth to the Irish who lived there. There was little incentive to marry into Irish families of high status given the rapidity and ease with which a colonial society had been generated, while marriage partners from England and from within the new settlement were at hand. While the Uí Cherbaill appear to have migrated westward quite soon after their local supremacy was destroyed, other important Irish families, such as the Uí Bhrácáin, from whom Braganstown takes its name, continued to reside in Louth. Nor were all the Irish who stayed in the county reduced to the level of betaghs [Irish: biatach, pl. biatigh; Latin: betagius, pl. betagii = 'food provider(s)'], or unfree agricultural labourers. Some at least continued to hold their land by free tenure into the early fourteenth century, and it was not uncommon for Irishmen to retain or acquire the use of common law by moving to towns such as Drogheda and becoming burgesses there. In the countryside it appears that the legal position of the Irish worsened from the middle of the thirteenth century onwards, with betagh status being imposed on men presumed previously to have enjoyed free tenure of their lands. Betaghs suffered serious economic disadvantages since their lands were subject to partible inheritance, with the result that by the end of the thirteenth century once sizeable single holdings were supporting expanding and impoverished betagh communities. From this deliberate policy of tenurial degradation flowed the legal disadvantages under which the vast majority of the Irish population laboured. There is abundant evidence of English and Irish inhabitants of medieval Louth interacting peacefully and productively, but settler superiority was sanctioned by law and the relationship was an unequal one. [14]

Louth was never simply a part of England grafted onto Irish soil. From the outset, for instance, the English settlement was shaped by ecclesiastical concerns which were inherited rather than imported. Louth lay within the diocese of

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Armagh at the time it was incorporated into the kingdom of Airgialla and
Donnchad Ua Cerbaill's support for Church reformers was given in return for
allowing a redrawing of diocesan boundaries. The expanded diocese of Airgialla
– as it was known after 1111 – included not only the Airgialla heartland of
Monaghan but also Louth, and Donnchad oversaw the transfer of the seat of the
diocese from Clogher to his newly-founded Augustinian house at Louth. Armagh
was never reconciled to this loss of an important part of its ancient lands and
from the 1150s to the 1240s there were sporadic outbursts of conflict – at times
violent – about the issue of diocesan boundaries. These involved at various times
the Cistercian community at Mellifont, the Augustians at Louth, the bishop of
Airgialla, the archbishop of Armagh, the Ua Néill king of Ulster, the leaders of
the English settlement in Louth and Ulster and the English crown. The final
outcome saw Louth reintegrated into Armagh and the diocese of Clogher return
to pre-1111 dimensions. A strong element of English-Irish tension was evident
at times in this protracted dispute – the turmoil at Mellifont in the first quarter
of the thirteenth century is the most notable example – but the mantle of Church
reform was one that Irish churchmen coveted as much as their English
counterparts and it was rival Irish prelates at Armagh and Louth at least as much
as English or Irish lords or the English king who stoked the fires of the dispute.[15]

The Church continued throughout the Middle Ages to act as a forum for
both dispute and cooperation between the English and Irish in Louth. The
archbishop of Armagh had been recognised as the head of the Irish Church since
before the arrival of the English and while the archbishop of Dublin usually
played a more significant role in the administration of the English lordship, the
crown considered the support of the successor of Patrick as essential to its rule
in Ireland. Attempts by the settlers to extend their power over the Armagh region
were seen to have failed by the 1230s and from at least that time the habitual
residence of the archbishop was not at Armagh but at Termonfeckin near
Drogheda. Up until the middle of the fourteenth century most archbishops were
Irishmen who prioritised Church reform and viewed English rule as the best
means to achieve their religious goals. Archbishop Nicholas Mac Máel Ísu (1272-
1303), described by J. A. Watt as 'perhaps the outstanding churchman of
thirteenth-century Ireland, 'entered into numerous lawsuits during his lengthy
tenure at Armagh to regain lands in Louth lost to the Church in the early years
of English intervention. A native of what became County Longford, Nicholas
brought with him to Louth numerous relatives, negotiating marriages to
important local settlers for the women and Church benefices for the men. His
determination to secure the rights of the Church and to ensure that his family
benefited from English rule showed his ability to combine principle and
pragmatism in a successful manner.[16]

Those settlers threatened by Archbishop Nicholas's attempts to regain Church
lands which had come into the hands of laymen did not refrain from attempts
to smear him as disloyal to King Edward I on account of his Irish origin. While

the papacy rejected efforts by the crown to prohibit Irishmen from acquiring clerical office, the more general assertion of settler superiority put pressure of Irish clergy and led to tensions between individuals and within religious orders and particular religious houses. In the middle of the thirteenth century the Cistercians of Mellifont were accused of admitting to their community only those who could swear that they were not of English blood, while an Irish petition to the pope in the early fourteenth century indignantly reported the supposed assertion by a Franciscan friar of English origin living in Drogheda that it was no more sin to kill an Irishman than it was to kill a dog.[17] Archbishop Richard Fitz Ralph of Armagh (1346-61), a native of Dundalk, lamented what he called 'the traditional and inborn hatred' shared by the English and Irish of his diocese and a consist policy of occupants of the see of Patrick throughout the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, whether of English or Irish origin, was to promote peace between the two groups. A noticeable feature of ecclesiastical life in Louth in this later period was the increasing number of Irishmen serving as parochial clergy, itself a product of a larger pattern of migration into Louth by Irish individuals and families from south Ulster.[18]

Archbishop Fitz Ralph blamed the antagonism between the English and Irish of his diocese on the willingness of both peoples to follow what he called 'the law of the march or [to give it another name] the law of the devil'.[19] By the time Louth was instituted as a county in the late 1220s the impetus for English expansion further north into Armagh, Monaghan and Cavan had waned and the existence of a frontier or march in the region was signalled in the language of the both the crown and the Church. March law – a set of customs (for the most part unwritten) designed to regulate and reduce violence on the frontier – developed thereafter and coloured important aspects of life in medieval Louth.[20] Raids on Louth by Irish lords of adjoining territories were frequent and by the middle of the fifteenth century the county was occasionally menaced by Irish attacks launched from as far away as Donegal and Offaly. The most notable of such raids involved the burning of towns such as Dundalk, Carlingford and Ardee but more typical were persistent small-scale incursions that undermined the economic viability of rural settlements. Weirs, fisheries and mills were destroyed and tenants of both high and humble status taken prisoner. In the late 1420s Archbishop John Swayne laid out before the Irish government the suffering of his flock in Louth and Meath in the following terms: 'the pore housbondmen that have nothing to liw [live] by bot [but] hare [their] housbondrye hare corne is brent [burnt] and they have nozt [nothing to] sowe and be nozt of pouer [are powerless] to by [buy] corne and so they be undo for evyre [undone forever]'.[21]

The customs of the march offered some protection to the settlers by regulating the practices of Irish lords who could not be defeated militarily. The most pernicious of these practices from the perspective of rural dwellers was the large-scale and destructive driving and pasturing of cattle by the Irish on meadow lands

required for the maintenance of the manorial economy. Attempts to regulate the 'creaght' – as the practice was called – began in the late thirteenth century and continued into the fifteenth.[22] By that time not only the neighbouring Irish but also some settler families were sponsoring creaghts. Nor was this the only Irish institution that the settlers in Louth became familiar with as they came to terms with life on the frontier. From the late fourteenth century at the latest both local settler lords and visiting chief governors exacted free lodging and provisions from the general population to maintain their armed retinues, as well as their horses and dogs. Although such a system of extortion, unconvincingly clothed in the garb of military necessity, was hardly unique to Ireland in the late middle ages, in the minds of the settlers it was associated primarily with the Irish custom of 'coign' or *coinnmheadh* and was regularly, if ineffectually condemned as such by the Irish parliament.[23]

The spread of such customs in Louth in the late medieval period was but one sign of the extent to which the county was being coloured by its Irish setting. Archbishops of Armagh, with the consent of the crown and in order to end conflict, arranged marriages between members of prominent settler families and neighbouring Irish dynasties, while settler leaders fostered their children with heads of Irish lineages and stood as godfathers to the children of these lords. The resident Irish population in Louth was supplemented by the migration into the county of individuals and families from neighbouring Irish lordships who were responding to the social and economic changes brought about by the arrival of plague in the middle of the fourteenth century. Such new arrivals did not seek to destroy the English settlement but the increasing use of anglicised forms of Gaelic words in a range of documents relating to the region suggests that as well as continuing to speak English many settlers also communicated through Irish. As a march of frontier region, Louth saw both warfare and assimilation between the English of the county and the independent Irish who lived on its borders. While the leaders of settler society broadcast with increasing shrillness throughout the late middle ages warnings that the English position was on the point of collapse, not least as a result of cultural borrowing from the Irish, the reality was that it was such openness to adaptation which ensured the survival of English Louth.[24]

Between the 1180s and 1240s Louth had been integrated into an English political, economic and cultural world with a speed and thoroughness that helped guarantee the subsequent longevity and vibrancy of the colony. Louth's connections with England and further afield were multi-faceted and intense. The county was among the most heavily urbanized parts of late medieval Ireland and in Carlingford, Dundalk and Drogheda contained three ports through which maritime trade with other coastal parts of Ireland and with England and beyond could be conducted. Drogheda was one of the leading ports within the domains of the English crown, and its merchants traded with places as distant as Gdansk and Genoa as well as with Chester and Bristol across the Irish Sea and parts of the continent with which England had political connections such as Flanders

and Castile. Gascony had been part of the English crown since the middle of the twelfth century and links between Drogheda and Bordeaux were strong. Drogheda merchants also traded with Calais and Brittany after they came under English control in the middle of the fourteenth century. English merchant families such as the Prestons were prepared to relocate to Drogheda while at least one mercantile settler family from Louth, the Evertons of Rathdrumin, cut their links with Ireland and settled in the English midlands at the end of the fourteenth century. The union in 1412 of the towns of Drogheda in Meath and Drogheda in Uriel, and the elevation of the new entity to the status of a county was a sign of its continuing importance in the eyes of the crown. The first mayor of the united town, William Symcock, was possibly an immigrant from England or had moved from another Irish town and had played a leading role in Drogheda politics since the 1370s. He traded with Gascony and Spain, acquired property in the hinterland of the town and often held civic office before becoming mayor. His successful career reminds us of the opportunities available in Louth even as Irish pressure on the frontier escalated.[25]

The integration of Louth into the wider contemporary European world was also facilitated by the role played within it by the Church. Since the 1200s the archbishops had chosen to live on their estates at Termonfeckin near Drogheda or Dromiskin, south of Dundalk and they played the role of important lords within the English community in Louth, bestowing patronage on local settler families and holding important synods in Drogheda. While no other archbishop in the Middle Ages approached the eminence of Richard Fitz Ralph, one-time chancellor of Oxford and a leading theologian of the age, other holders of the see of St Patrick were men of wide horizons familiar with Rome and Avignon as well as with English centres of power in London and Dublin. Perhaps one-third of the land of Louth was held by the Church, most of it in the hands of religious houses based either in Louth, in Dublin and Meath, or in England and Wales. As well as the Cistercians and several orders of Augustinian canons and nuns, Louth came to play host to communities of Carmelites, Dominicans and Franciscans, thereby ensuring that it kept abreast of wider religious developments beyond its borders. Pilgrims *en route* to St Patrick's Purgatory – a shrine promoted by Fitz Ralph in the middle of the fourteenth century – passed through Louth, while pilgrims from Louth are recorded travelling to the Holy Land and Santiago de Compostela as well as to the most popular pilgrimage destination, Rome.[26]

Few parts of late medieval Ireland were as well connected with the wider world as Louth. The price to be paid for such openness was revealed in the summer of 1348 with the arrival in Drogheda of plague. The death-toll in the town and county of the first onslaught of the disease was high, and its regular recurrence thereafter worked against a recovery of population levels. One consequence was a growth in migration to England, where jobs for both the laity and the clergy were plentiful and security concerns less pressing. This in turn provided opportunities within Louth for Irish people of humble status from neighbouring areas to escape the harsh conditions of Gaelic lordship and begin new lives.

Plague also tied the economy of Louth more closely to that of England as grain from eastern Ireland was shipped through Drogheda to feed famished communities in north-west and south-west England. Men from Louth were also to be found in the armies that English kings led into France and Scotland during the conflict we know as the Hundred Years War.[27]

From the outset, those English settlers who made Louth their home were determined not only that they should maintain close relations with England but also that such relations would be conducted on terms of their own choosing. A series of events and developments in the early fourteenth century both illuminated their settler identity and helped to define it more sharply. The Bruce Invasion of 1315-18, which saw Scottish and Irish forces devastate much of the county, allowed the Louth settlers to demonstrate their loyalty to the English crown while emphasising their self-reliance. Already in 1312 a serious rebellion had broken out in Louth in response to government attempts to curb the corrupt and oppressive practices of its leading men. When, in the aftermath of victory over the Scots in 1318, King Edward II elevated a settler from the Kildare-Offaly borders, John Bermingham, to the position of earl of Louth and gave him power over the county, trouble could be expected. It came in June 1329 with the massacre at Braganstown of the earl and 160 others, including members of his family and household, his Irish bodyguards, and the Irish musicians engaged in entertaining him when his party was attacked.[28]

The audacity of the settlers was matched only be their astute reading of the wider political situation. The government of the young King Edward III was in the hands of Roger Mortimer, an enemy of the earl of Louth, whose possession of the lordship of Trim and role in defeating the Bruces in Ireland had brought him into close contact with the settlers in Louth. After Roger's downfall and execution in 1330 Edward III did not seek vengeance against Bermingham's killers and following the restoration of their fortunes and acquisition of the earldom of Ulster in the 1360s the Mortimers provided leadership and a new focus of loyalty to the English in Louth. In 1460 the heir to the Mortimer estates in Britain and Ireland ascended the throne of England as King Edward IV. The Gernons, Verdons, Pentonys, Clintons, Bellews, Dowdalls, Whites, Taafs, Plunkets and others who had established a colonial society in Louth in the decades around 1200 still thrived there 250 years later and would continue to do so for many centuries to come.[29]

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