Godly Brutality: The Cromwellian Conquest of Ireland, 1649-1650

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Irish nationalist historians resoundingly paint Oliver Cromwell as a genocidal madman, much to the detriment of Anglo-Irish relations. However, when one dares to reevaluate Cromwell’s 1649 invasion of Ireland, one begins to question one’s long-held prejudices toward “God’s Executioner.” Cromwell’s cause was not one of genocide, but of military necessity. Analysis of the campaign, and of the infamous sieges and massacres at Drogheda and Wexford that defined it, shows that the myth of Cromwellian war crimes ignores the seventeenth century’s rules of war. Examining the whole of Cromwell’s campaign in this light, one finds a man struggling to pursue an expedient, lawful, and godly method to victory: a pragmatic method in an increasingly bloody conflict. Cromwell’s personal character as a military leader is similarly nuanced: his campaign was characterized by religious zeal, brutality, and anti-Irish rhetoric, but showed little legitimate personal hatred towards the Irish and, indeed, shocking human warmth towards them in the aftermath of the invasion. One must recognize the limits of Cromwell’s historical agency and his historical context, eliminating the term “genocide” from one’s historical understanding of Oliver Cromwell and his actions in Ireland.

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