

## THE LACYS AND THE CONQUEST OF IRELAND

A summary by Gil McHattie of a talk given at the 2014 Spring Conference by

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*Dr Veach's research explores the political, social and cultural history of the British Isles in the high middle ages, placed in the broader context of Western Europe. His work seeks to refine our understanding of the nature of medieval society by exploring the patterns of lordship, patchworks of obligation and shifting social and cultural mores that existed in medieval Britain and Ireland. He is the author of 'Lordship in Four Realms: The Lacy Family, 1166-1241'.*

The Lacy family takes its name from the village of Lassy in Norman France where the family held land as under-tenants of the bishop of Bayeux. Two brothers accompanied William in the invasion of 1066 – Ilbert, who was given land in Pontefract and Walter, who was given land centred around Weobley. Both brothers shared the family's Norman territories, as was not uncommon with Norman knights of that time. The Weobley lands included Ewyas Lacy, Ludlow, Staunton Lacy, and Yarkhill. The family had an off and on connection to the Mortimers. One instance, quoted in the Chronicle of Wigmore, describes how Hugh de Lacy advised his friend, Hugh de Mortimer, not to allow the canons of Shobdon to move to Aymestery, but instead to Wigmore.

Dr Veach explored the English expansion into Ireland and stressed how the incoming lords had to be adaptable to be successful. The Lacys were to prove very successful at adjusting to individual local conditions. The Irish High Kingship had a similar pattern to Anglo-Saxon structure in England. In 1166 the High King of Ireland expelled Diarmait Mac Murchada (Dermot McMurrugh) the King of Leinster. Diarmait had previously allowed Henry II to use his Dublin fleet to attack Wales, so he went to Henry for support in regaining his land. Henry was in Gascony, and in the midst of other affairs that he considered more important than Ireland, but he gave permission for Diarmait to raise an army from a mercenary contingent. So this was an independent venture, not one on behalf of Henry. Diarmait's main recruit was Earl Richard Fitz Gilbert de Clare – Strongbow. He was persuaded to join by gaining Diarmait's daughter in marriage so he would subsequently inherit Leinster. Diarmait died in 1171 and his son had to step aside for the new ruler!

The English lords' land holdings in Ireland were now becoming large and so a possible threat to the English Crown. Henry II sailed to Ireland 5 months after Dairmait's death with a massive army. Faced with overwhelming force, the Kings of Ireland and the Anglo-Norman lords all submitted to Henry's rule and so he acquired the overlordship of Ireland peacefully!

Before any campaigns could start the following Spring, Henry had to return urgently to England: envoys from the Pope had arrived about the death of Beckett. Before leaving in 1172, however, Henry made a decision that greatly changed the fortunes of the Lacys. He granted to Hugh de Lacy the important Lordship of Meath. This doubled his transnational land holding and, as it was rich land, it promised great wealth. The Lacys now had lands in Normandy, England, Wales and Ireland. But Meath wasn't Henry's to give! He had only been given submissions, not ownership, and there were several men who had a stake in this particular kingdom.

Why did Henry II award Meath to de Lacy? Meath was very close to the new royal city of Dublin which had an extensive Norse trading network. The fleet controlled the Irish Sea and it was important for the Overlord of Ireland to hold Dublin as his own. De Lacy was made *custos* (custodian) of Dublin by Henry II with Meath acting as an Anglo-Norman buffer zone on one side and Strongbow's lands doing the same to the immediate south.

With this annexation of Meath one can see the construction of a medieval European lordship similar to those in the Marches, based on a knight's service. In 1166 Hugh de Lacy had six retained knights as his personal bodyguard. They had no land but were given wages - with the promise of more. When Meath was subdivided, one of Hugh's household knights got his reward. This was similar to the literary ideal of the chivalric knight

who was finally granted land - like Hugh's contemporary, William Marshall, who eventually came into a fortune in return for his service as a household knight to the king.

The size of the lordship of Meath gave de Lacy an almost unprecedented amount of land to grant, so he decided to expand his following by recruiting from other Barons. From Strongbow's following, de Lacy attracted Joscelin and Gilbert de Angulo from Pembrokeshire. From the recently defunct earldom of Hereford, de Lacy attracted William Parvus and so on. Hugh de Lacy did not find it difficult to recruit others. As he was given a free hand in Meath, he was able to circumvent claims from others. The Welsh March showed the best way to secure a region easily, without much input from the king, was to bestow royal liberties. Henry granted de Lacy "all of the liberties and free customs which I have or may have". This freedom allowed Hugh to act as a free European lord. Amongst other privileges he controlled all the courts including those giving sentences of death.

Castles in Meath were built to form progressive defensive lines within the lordship. The main castle was Trim and this was built to impress rather than for defence. It is a rather odd shape, a sort of an octagon with restricted sighting for arrows and corners that could be undermined. One can imagine de Lacy enthroned in splendour in the great hall with Irish lords submitting to him. He created nine new boroughs for trade linking up especially with his English holdings such as Ludlow. This political, social and economic domination wasn't the end of it: the de Lacys also helped to amalgamate the three original church dioceses covering Meath into a single one based on Trim.

The nobility of England considered themselves as civilised and part of the European mainstream. The Irish were viewed as barbaric and lazy with different farming systems, religion and ways of warfare. The de Lacys came to use a similar approach to warfare as the Irish and took no prisoners. Hugh's second marriage was to the daughter of the High King who was previously his enemy. His stature in Ireland was such that he was hailed by some native Irish as the new King of Ireland, and whispers at the English court suggested that his marriage had this as its aim. But he was also still an Anglo-Norman Baron with substantial holdings in England, Wales and Normandy. These families have to be viewed as transnational aristocrats, because they operated across national boundaries. They became real players in the high politics of the Angevin Empire.