Chapter 1

An Irish military tradition?

Thomas Bartlett and Keith Jeffery

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In the *Field Day Anthology*, a massive three-volume, 1,500-page collection of Irish writing, the very first extract tells the story of Cú Chulainn, the legendary warrior of the Ulaidh or Ulstermen who in prehistoric times dominated the north of Ireland. In the *Táin Bó Cúailgne* (Cattle raid of Cuailgne), the centrepiece of Irish heroic literature, we learn that Cú Chulainn, on hearing that 'if a warrior took up arms on that day, his name for deeds of valour would be known throughout Ireland and his fame would last for ever' demanded weapons of his king, Conchobar Mac Nessa. Conchobar duly obliged, but of the fifteen spare sets of arms which he kept in his house, 'not one was left unbroken' by Cú Chulainn when he tried them out. He finally settled for Conchobar's own weapons. It was a similar story when it came to Cú Chulainn's request for a fitting chariot: we are told 'He smashed twelve chariots. So finally he was given Conchobar's chariot and it withstood the test.' Brushing aside the warning that his life would be short-lived – Cú Chulainn retorted, 'Provided I be famous, I am content to be only one day on earth' – the chariot-warrior was quickly into action, driving into enemy territory with a firm intention 'not to avoid danger', and he was soon engaged in desperate single-handed combat, with stunning success: 'In one hand he held nine heads, in the other ten, and these he brandished . . . Those were the trophies of one night's fighting by Cú Chulainn.'[1]

The story of Cú Chulainn, and other warrior sagas such as the *Fianaigheacht* or Fenian Cycle, date from the early medieval period. These story cycles merit attention on several counts. First, although classical writers had already made much of the Celts' love of battle and their martial characteristics ('war-mad', claimed one author),[2] these Irish sagas present us with a first clear sighting of those, later, hallowed characteristics of the Irish soldier – reckless daring, spectacular ferocity and indomitable courage. Second, the adventures of Cú Chulainn and others also illustrate some of those less flattering attributes which have dogged Irish soldiers through the centuries, and which had also been earlier identified by Roman writers among their Celtic adversaries: simplemindedness, guilelessness and even

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witlessness. Third, the legendary Cú Chulainn has exerted a particular fascination for later generations. Those who, like Standish O'Grady, sought to rediscover an Irish national spirit amidst the humdrum, and anglicised, conformity of the late nineteenth century, found the adventures of Cú Chulainn serviceable and enabling; predictably perhaps, W. B. Yeats was moved to give his version, and reveal his aristocratic vision, of the warrior's adventures; and Patrick Pearse, the insurgent leader of 1916, consciously sought to model the regime at the school he founded on the story of Cú Chulainn, and other martial sagas. Latterly, the enduring vitality of the Cú Chulainn legend has been again emphasised through its adoption by certain elements within Ulster loyalism as a symbol of their determination to defend present-day Northern Ireland.[3]

With Cú Chulainn, we can see an embryonic Irish military tradition centring on apparently identifiable martial qualities peculiar to the Irish soldier – a tradition which has proved remarkably resilient over the centuries. To say as much is not to concede that the tradition has substance, or to claim that its elements are self-evident, or indeed to accept that there is only one, uniform tradition. We have recently been reminded that traditions can be, and frequently are, invented.[4] The validity, thus, of an Irish military tradition and its precise constitution remain matters for argument; they were not fundamental or commonly agreed assumptions held by the contributors to this volume. Far from it, for the notion of a coherent, specifically Irish, military tradition running through the past 1,500 years would seem at first glance inherently implausible: it is surely the discontinuities of the Irish military experience, the varieties of the Irish military tradition (including a respectable anti-war tradition),[5] rather than its continuities and uniformities that are striking. And yet, the notion of a broad Irish military tradition spanning the centuries has proved serviceable in seeking to make sense of the military history of this island.

Ireland is an island whose peoples, structures, society and politics have been for centuries shaped, where not determined, by war, the threat of war or, at least, by the absence of peace; a place where armed men in uniform (formal or informal) have ever been a constant (benign or malign) presence; a small country out of which vast armies of men have poured to do battle abroad. It would indeed be curious if these persistent martial themes had left little mark in Irish culture; and it may not in fact be so surprising if, on examination, an Irish military tradition turns out to be central to the Irish historical experience, and a key element in modern Irish identity.

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In 1751, Voltaire published his history, *Le siècle de Louis XIV*, in the course of which he delivered himself of this verdict on the Irish soldier: '*Les Irlandais que nous avons vus de si bons soldats en France et en Espagne ont toujours mal combattus chez eux.*'[6] Voltaire was not of course a student of Irish history and his remarks ought

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1.1   The death of Cuchulainn, as envisaged by Patrick Tuohy, from
Standish O'Grady, *History of Ireland* (1880).

perhaps to have been ignored. They were not, however, and in 1845 Mathew O'Conor published his *Military History of the Irish Nation* which took issue with Voltaire's scathing and sweeping judgement.[7] O'Conor recalled the Irish victory over the Vikings at Clontarf in 1014 (and contrasted it unfavourably with the French submission to Rollo), and while he admitted 'our subjugation' by the Anglo-Norman adherents of Diarmait MacMurchadha, he pointed out 'the greater conquest that the English themselves had endured at the hands of the invading Duke of Normandy'. And then, Voltaire refuted, O'Conor rapidly moved on to this main purpose. He briskly dismissed the military history of medieval Ireland. 'Prior to the sixteenth century', he wrote, 'the wars of the Irish were either petty intestine feuds not worthy of historical notice or uncombined efforts in resistance to Norse and Anglo-Norman invasion.' In his view, it was the earl of Tyrone who 'may be regarded as opening the school for that national military genius which afterwards rose to so noble a pitch of fame in all the most warlike services of Europe'. O'Conor, however, found the seventeenth century wearisome and confusing – shifting allegiances, endless desertion and wholesale pillaging were not his forte – and so it was, he wrote, 'with inexpressible relief, the author finds himself at length arrived at a period in the military history of his countrymen when, taking service in the most honourable manner with their ancient allies [the French], they began that series of brilliant exploits . . . which has rendered the name of Ireland illustrious in the military annals of Europe'. He concluded his narrative of the sieges, battles and campaigns of 1690–1710 with the reflection that 'viewed carelessly at a distance, their [Irish soldiers'] varied services' might seem 'evidence of an unprincipled Praetorian race'. But, he argued, this was not in fact the case: 'examined in detail . . . they only prove an amount of patriotism, piety, and valour, which, concentrated at home to national service, would have made Ireland all we could wish her'.[8]

Voltaire's stinging apothegm had, however, not yet run its course. In 1964, the doyen of Irish historians, G. A. Hayes-McCoy, returned to the charge in his slim volume of essays entitled *The Irish at War*, and attempted a further refutation.[9] To Voltaire's indictment, Hayes-McCoy now added that of General Richard Taylor of the Confederate States of America. 'Strange people, these Irish!' mused Taylor, 'Fighting everyone's battles and cheerfully taking the hot end of the poker, they are only to be found wanting when engaged in what they believe to be their national cause.' Hayes-McCoy, however, believed that 'that taunt of inferiority' had been already effectively rebutted – 'we have Pearse to thank for that' – and he maintained that bad leadership and a lack of training explained the comparative failure of the Irish at home. 'There is no such thing as a born soldier', he wrote, 'nor do courage and strength of body alone make one: training and experience are necessary.'[10]

O'Conor's remarks are now very dated; he died before he had completed his work and it was published posthumously, perhaps ill-advisedly. But Hayes-McCoy's remarks also appear curiously old-fashioned. His preoccupation with refuting

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1.2   A loyalist mural in east Belfast (1993), using the Cuchulainn myth to
sustain the contemporary role of the illegal Ulster Defence Association in
defending Protestant Ulster. Ironically, the image of the legendary hero is
borrowed from Oliver Sheppard's statue which stands in the General Post
Office, Dublin, commemorating the republican heroes of 1916.

'taunts', and his view of military history as being essentially about campaigns and
battles, victories and defeats, belongs to an earlier, 'drum and trumpet', era. His *Irish
Battles: a Military History of Ireland*, published in 1969, confines itself to fourteen
engagements and ends with the battle of Arklow during the 1789 rebellion. The
nineteenth century is ignored because it witnessed 'much military activity in Ireland
but . . . no warfare'.[11] Equally, Hayes-McCoy's perception of Irish military history
solely in terms of 'nationalist' soldiering, whether at home or abroad is much too
restrictive. The *Irish at War* contains nothing on those Irish who fought in the
British army, and it could be argued (as did Patrick Pearse) that the setting-up,
organising, and arming of the anti-Home Rule Ulster Volunteer Force from 1912 to
1914 constituted the most robust riposte to the jibe that the Irish were always
militarily useless at home. That said, Hayes-McCoy's writings cannot be dismissed
as biassed, narrow in scope or outmoded. They merely reflected the then conven-
tional and limited view of the proper province of military history. Hayes-McCoy's
meticulous scholarship, however, lifted them well above the routine, ensuring for
them a continuing readership (and a recent reprint for *Irish Battles*).[12] His concern,
moreover, with 'reputation', 'pride', 'respect', 'honour' and 'national character'
reminds us that the military history of Ireland has ever had both political and
cultural dimensions which must be addressed. Put simply: if the Irish were militarily
incompetent at home, then that proved the point that they were not fit to govern

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themselves. Similarly, if, as Hayes-McCoy claimed, 'few peoples have served under so many alien flags', then that raised doubts about the legitimacy of the Irish state in the period 1690 to 1921 and indeed posed questions about the possibility of Irish loyalty to any Irish state.[13] In short, the military history of Ireland cannot concern itself only with battles and campaigns, army organisation and recruitment nor even about the relationships and interactions between the armed forces and society at various periods: all of these matters are important and they are dealt with fully in the essays that follow. However, the thorny issue of Irish identity should also be confronted and the role that the belief in an Irish military tradition has played in its formation should be examined.

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'Irish history is full of battles and . . . Irishmen have always been attracted by military service so much so indeed that the type and figure of the historic Irishman might well be a man in uniform.'[14] There is much evidence to support this view and the historians of early medieval and medieval Ireland (*c.* 700 to *c.* 1500) have described a country in which violence and, latterly, warfare was endemic.[15] Indeed, such was Ireland's reputation for being a perennial war zone that the very name 'Ireland' was played upon by Elizabethan writers as uniquely a 'Land of Ire' or 'Country of Wrath'.[16] Later chroniclers and historians concurred: in 1691, Bishop Dopping of Meath surveyed Irish history and concluded that there had been 22 general and 44 local uprisings in Ireland since the year 1172, and G. A. Hayes-McCoy himself totted up 200 military engagements on Irish soil down to the battle of Arklow in 1798.[17] The large garrison maintained in Ireland during the eighteenth century, and continued throughout the nineteenth century, added to this bellicose reputation.[18] And it may be added that the events both of the first twenty-five years of this century[19] and, of course, the past twenty-five years[20] have done nothing to disturb this sombre view of Ireland as essentially a land of war in which peace occasionally and fitfully breaks out.

   Such a picture of Ireland and Irish history is in large measure a caricature: there was scarcely a society in medieval Europe in which 'endemic warfare' was not a feature; Irish warfare tended to be generally episodic and localised in its impact; and the presence of large garrisons should not be assumed to mean the existence of constant lawlessness. The caricature, distorted as it is, has however proved to be one which both governed and governors were happy to collude in perpetuating. On the one hand, endemic Irish 'violence' legitimised the English civilising presence in Ireland; on the other, continual Irish 'resistance' was gratifying to Irish national pride. To the English indictment of savagery, incivility, barbarity and ineptitude, the Irish (or some of them) would cast up the battles of Clontarf (1014), the Yellow Ford (1598), Benburb (1646) and Fontenoy (1745) (an Irish battle fought on foreign soil), and add in for good measure the 'Boys of Wexford' of 1798 and the 'Bold Fenian

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Men' of the 1860s. The stereotype of the 'fighting Irish' or the 'martial race' was one of the few acceptable to all shades of Irish nationalists.[21]

One consequence of this preoccupation on all sides with the 'endemic' warfare in Irish lands has been a strong tendency for the Irish, native or newcomer, Church of Ireland, Presbyterian or Catholic, to define themselves militarily. For many, perhaps most, Protestant families of gentry stock, a military career for at least one member per generation, sometimes many more, was the convention. Many achieved high command: indeed at times the higher echelons of the British army looked like a gathering of the Anglo-Irish;[22] and, over the generations, it was inevitable that the Ascendancy would be viewed, and possibly see itself, as a military caste.[23] Certainly, families such as the Lenox-Conynghams sent so many representatives to the British army over several generations that they could qualify as members of such a martial order; and there were many other families with similar military traditions. This propensity on the part of the Irish gentry to seek commissions in the British army – in 1780 they held one-third of them, and in 1878 they were still grossly over-represented in the officer ranks[24] – can be explained in terms of a shortage of other career options. If we leave aside praying and politicking, soldiering was the only generally recognised, socially acceptable, outlet for the younger sons of well-born families settled in underdeveloped economies. Major Pierce Butler from County Carlow recalled in 1794 that he had enlisted in the British army 'not by choice but as from that necessity which flows from the injustice of a feudal system, giving to the first-born all'.[25] Scotland, similarly underdeveloped, and with an equally regressive inheritance system was also disproportionately represented among the higher ranks of the British army.[26] And yet, besides an absence of alternative employment, there were other factors at work in Irish society that made a military life both acceptable and desirable.

In the first instance, there has been a persistent military flavour to Irish life, from medieval through to more modern times, that has undoubtedly made a military career seem 'normal'. Medieval historians of Ireland have highlighted the martial ethos of the societies they describe. In the medieval period, the Anglo-Norman settlers held their lands by providing knights for the royal service, and there was usually an Irish contingent in the royal army. The sixteenth and seventeenth centuries likewise witnessed the beginnings of large-scale warfare, complete with standing armies and local auxiliaries.[27] Early modern historians have charted the emergence of the 'new ruthlessness' in sixteenth-century Irish warfare, and have considered the impact of no fewer than four separate, occasionally antagonistic, but always predatory armies operating in Ireland in the 1640s. Again, the military campaigns of the 1690s, with their battles – the nation-defining Boyne and the wave-smashing Aughrim – inevitably cast a long shadow before them.[28]

From the early eighteenth century on, Ireland was home to a large proportion of the standing British army. For most of that century between 12,000 and 15,000 soldiers were stationed in Ireland (after 1793, many more), and throughout the

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nineteenth century, there were usually between 20,000 and 25,000. These soldiers were quartered in some 100 barracks with around 400 military stations dotted around the country, thus constituting a hugely visible, sometimes reassuring and, on occasion, an intimidating presence. Moreover, in addition to the regular army, there were Militia and Yeomanry formations which in the later nineteenth century were supplemented by the Royal Irish Constabulary, an armed police force closer to the French gendarmerie rather than the English 'Bobbies'.[29] Not surprisingly, the complexities of military-civil relations – social and legal – constitute an important theme in some of the essays of this volume.[30] In short, it is incontestable that armed men in uniform were, to a degree unthinkable in England, everywhere in Ireland in the period 1600 to 1900 and after; that the military and the civil powers were tightly intertwined for most of the period; and that for the gentry, and those with gentry aspirations, military service must have seemed like a public duty, even a noble calling.[31]

Irish Protestants also believed that they owed much if not everything to their ancestors' military prowess. Since the mid-sixteenth century, a constant stream, swelling at times to a flood, of captains, servitors, convenanters and Cromwellian soldiers had poured into Ireland. These settlers, however they might like to divest themselves of their military origins (and they did aspire to rise above them), never managed (or were permitted) to do so: the whiff of grapeshot continued to hang about their armorial bearings. One of the La Touche family of Dublin bankers, for example, was laughed at for claiming in the 1820s that his forebears had been part of the Huguenot influx: everyone knew, sniffed the dowager Lady Moira, a terrific snob, that he had been merely 'a private common soldier' in King William's army.[32] Despite the social risks, however, Protestants in Ireland from the 1600s valued military training and they took a fierce and sometimes petulant pride in the military achievements of their forebears. In any case, though Ireland may have been conquered, and plantations got under way, no one could plausibly claim that the danger from Catholics was over. Protestants were pleased that they had 'far more soldiers and soldierlike men than Catholics',[33] but vigilance was still the price of security and military experience provided an added reassurance.

Gaelic society had placed a high value on the martial virtues;[34] settler society equally esteemed the soldier. One historian has highlighted the military colouring to settler society in Sligo in the early seventeenth century, claiming that military service proved a strong bond among the new landowners and tenants and arguing that 'military experience may have been an important qualification for the role of sheriff'.[35] Certainly, a military background was no disqualification when standing for election: Irish officers were better represented in the Irish parliament in Dublin than their English counterparts were in London: one in six Irish MPs held a commission in the 1760s compared to one in ten MPs at Westminster.[36]

It was expected, moreover, that when there was a military alarm or agrarian disturbances, the local Protestant gentry would take on a leadership role and that

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1.3 Women were not exempt from the allure of militarism:
Constance, Countess Markievicz in Irish Volunteer uniform, *c.* 1915.

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they and their tenants would join in posses to pursue wrongdoers. When the French commander, Thurot, landed at Carrickfergus, County Antrim in 1760, he was quickly opposed by local levies, and during the Whiteboy disturbances in Tipperary and elsewhere from the 1760s on, local magnates led out their tenants in pursuit of them.[37] Indeed, as noted below, the Volunteers of 1778–82, the Yeomen of 1796 and the Ulster Volunteer Force of 1912 and even the Ulster Defence Regiment from 1970 all drew, and the various loyalist paramilitary organisations of today continue to draw, on that Protestant tradition of independent paramilitary action in defence of their interests which has been a feature of Irish life since the seventeenth century.[38]

This rugged independence (or recalcitrance) can be seen in the military action which led to the seizure of Dublin Castle in 1659, and in the decision by the Apprentice Boys to close the gates of Londonderry in the face of King James's army in 1689. In the crisis of empire, Irish Presbyterians predominantly sided with their colonial cousins during the American War of Independence (1776–83), and showed themselves ready to turn out in 1798 to do battle with the king's forces at Antrim, Ballynahinch and elsewhere. Everywhere they were routed: but that tradition of independent military action, if necessary against the crown itself, was to prove inspirational when a hundred years later, at the time of the Home Rule crisis, Ulster Protestants found their interests threatened by the British government.

This Protestant military tradition stemmed from the needs of a vulnerable settler community, suspicious both of the 'natives' and of the home government; but it was also an unavoidable result of the type of settler – frequently a military veteran of one war or another – who made his home in Ireland. Arguably, it may also have drawn on an older, Gaelic, tradition of applauding the man in arms, the hero who displayed 'reckless bravery': Simms tells us that the Fianna were never permitted to retreat unless outnumbered by more than ten to one.[39] It should be noted, however, that while Gaelic society honoured the hero, the individual warrior fighting alone, settler society in contrast stressed rather the value of communal military action. But even with this caveat, it is clear that Gaelic Ireland had as much of a military ethos as settler society: and, as in Protestant Ireland, there were dedicated warrior families, such as the MacSweeneys of Sligo/Donegal, the MacQuillans of Antrim and the MacMurrays of Leitrim – these last described as 'hereditary cavalry to the O'Rourkes'.[40] But there was also an abundance of freelance fighters and mercenaries and these elements added to the general martial atmosphere of Gaelic Ireland.

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From earliest times, Irish warriors, mercenaries and swordsmen found employment abroad.[41] There were Irish soldiers at Calais and Agincourt in the fourteenth century: and the well-known Dürer prints depict Irish mercenaries in Germany in the early sixteenth century. From the late sixteenth century on, with the collapse of the Gaelic order, thousands of swordsmen found employment in the Spanish, French