

What kind of man was Oliver Cromwell?

The Irish rebellion

Having stabilised England, Cromwell left for Ireland to put down the Irish Civil War. In Ireland the Roman Catholics had been in revolt since 1641 and held much of the island. As an extreme Puritan, Cromwell hated the Catholics and had never forgiven them for their alleged massacre of Protestants in 1641 (Source 1). He therefore felt he was justified in seeking revenge and was responsible for the Massacre of Drogheda in September 1649 (Source 2). He used terror to 'tame' the Irish. He ordered that all Irish children should be sent to the West Indies to work as slave labourers in the sugar plantations. He knew many would die out there - but dead children could not grow into adults and have more children. Cromwell left a dark stain on the history of Ireland.

On 15 August 1649 Oliver Cromwell landed at Ringsend, near Dublin, with an army of 3,000 battle-hardened Ironsides. The civil war in England had ended, and King Charles I had been executed seven months earlier. From Dublin Cromwell marched north to Drogheda, which was defended by an English Catholic and royalist, Sir Arthur Aston. When his surrender demand was ignored, Cromwell stormed the city and ordered the death of every man in the garrison, describing this as "a righteous judgment of God upon these barbarous wretches" (Source 3).



Source 1.

An illustration of the alleged massacre of Protestants by Catholics in 1641



Source 2. Cromwell leading the charge on the town of Drogheda in 1649.

Source 3. Cromwell's letter to the House of Commons, 17 September 1649

"Our army came to Drogheda on 3 September. On Monday 9th the battering guns began. I sent Sir Arthur Aston a request to surrender the town.

Receiving no satisfactory answer, the guns beat down the corner tower, and opened breaches in the east and south walls.

On Tuesday 10th, after some hot fighting, we entered. Several of the enemy, including Sir Arthur Aston, retreated into Mill Mount, a place very difficult to attack. Our men were ordered by me to put all to the sword. I also forbade them to spare any people in the town who had weapons.

In the great church almost 1000 of them were put to the sword, fleeing there for safety. I think that night we put to the sword in all about 2000 men. This is the righteous judgement of God upon those barbarous wretches who have dipped their hands in so much innocent blood. It will help to prevent bloodshed for the future".

There are two important 17th Century rules of warfare you need to know about:

- A successful army could give 'quarter' to the enemy. This meant if the enemy surrendered and gave up their weapons, it was wrong to kill them.
- If an attacking army broke into a town and the defenders did not surrender, they could be all put to death.

<p>Source 4. Written by Clarendon in 1668-70. He was in France with Charles I's son at the time of the Irish rebellion.</p> <p>"The soldiers threw down their arms on an offer of quarter. The enemy entered Mill Mount without resistance. They put every soldier to the sword and all the citizens who were Irish, man, women and child."</p>	<p>Source 5. From a letter written by the Marquis of Ormonde, 29 September 1649.</p> <p>"Cromwell's soldiers promised to spare the lives of any who laid down their arms. But when they had all their power, the word 'No quarter' went round."</p>
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Cromwell's expedition to Ireland had three purposes:

- First and foremost was the need to defeat the Catholics and Presbyterians who had rallied behind the Royalist banner.
- The second purpose was to remove anyone associated with the Irish rebellion.
- The third objective was to convert all of Ireland to the Puritan faith.

Cromwell's army swept through Ireland in a single campaign that lasted nine months and effectively crushed the opposition staged by both Catholic and Presbyterian Royalists. An estimate has been given that approximately 616,000 people died during the course of the campaign, some from famine and plague incidental to the actual warfare.

Cromwell himself had been in Ireland a mere nine months, but his brutality left an indelible impression on the native Irish. "The curse of Cromwell on you" became an Irish oath.

QUESTIONS

1. Look at Sources 3, 4 and 5 what do they agree about?
2. What do they disagree about?
3. Which is the most reliable of the three sources? Decide for each Source: was the author an eye-witness and whether the author had any reason for lying.
4. What reasons does Cromwell give for the slaughter?
5. What were the aims of Cromwell's expedition to Ireland?
6. From what you now know about Cromwell and events in Ireland do you think that he was justified in his actions and why? Remember to look at the rules of warfare.

