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“Women of the Wild Geese”: Irish Women, Exile, and Identity in Spain, 1596–1670

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IRELAND IN THE SIXTEENTH and seventeenth centuries was subject to major invasion and settlement. Tudor foreign policy towards Ireland attempted to introduce an English model of government and, during the reign of Elizabeth I, attempts were made to introduce the Protestant religion. During the sixteenth century both England and Ireland were the regular focus of European Catholic plots. This led the Tudor monarchs to invade Ireland with a double agenda: to prevent European invasion, and to subdue a country over which it had always been difficult to exercise any influence. Henry VIII invaded Scotland and France in the 1540s, and the failure of these interventions precipitated Scottish and French intervention in Ireland. The English monarchy and Scottish officials then began to enter Ireland and impose colonial government and settlement. Officials operated increasingly aggressive policies with English and Scottish Presbyterian officials moving into positions of judicial and local power. These officials were quick to cite Irish women as well as men as rebellious and influential in opposing English rule.¹ Irish Women were involved in widespread activities relating to rebellion, including diplomacy, spying, and raising troops and munitions against the English and, therefore, became a focus of criticism, blame, and expulsion from Ireland at a point in time when land was increasingly given over to English and Scottish settlers. Although the Irish successfully rejected a state-imposed religion during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries this did not prevent the wholesale expulsion of chieftains and their families after the involvement in open rebellion against the settlers.² After the final defeat and surrender at the battle of Kinsale and the proclamation of James I as king in Dublin in

¹The Calendars of State Papers of Ireland contain numerous accounts of rebellious Irish women singled out for special mention. The response appears to be more fevered than any accounts in relation to Scottish women in the same period. Hans Claude Hamilton, Ernest Atkinson and Robert Pentland, *Calendar of State Papers relating to Ireland, of the Reigns of Henry VIII, Edward VI, Mary and Elizabeth: preserved in the State Paper Department of Her Majesty's Public Record office* (London: Longman, Green, Longman, & Roberts, 1914).

²This began in 1569 with the Ormond rebellion and intensified during subsequent rebellions, including the battle of Kinsale, when the Spanish army intervened during 1601 in support of the Irish.

1603 the downfall of the Irish nobility was clear. The long-term link with Spain offered a safe haven for many, in particular those committed to rebellion against the English.

This paper will examine the close relationship between the Irish emigrants and the Spanish communities where they settled, with particular attention to the “Flight of the Earls” to Spain after 1607. Migration studies are now a well-established part of history and social sciences.³ For some years researchers have been examining Irish migration to English-speaking countries, especially during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.⁴ Less attention has been devoted, however, to an earlier migration: one to Europe between the Reformation and the French Revolution. The early seventeenth century, for example, saw the surviving members of the septs, or clans, of those Irish chieftains at war with the English colonizing forces, fleeing to several regions throughout Spain. Once in Spain they established permanent settlements. The experience of the Irish in Spain was often a positive one, with the Irish making a significant and sustained contribution to the Spanish military, and the establishment of many Irish schools, colleges, and universities. This exchange of people, ideas, and resources marked Ireland’s historical experience and had an important impact on Europe during the early modern period. The continental character of Irish migration patterns persisted until events during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries oriented Irish migrants towards English-speaking countries.

Despite its importance early modern migration from Ireland to Europe has been neglected by historians, with the result that Irish historical studies have been greatly impoverished in this period. It is important to place this migration center stage, since it linked Ireland to continental centers of intellectual, social, and economic change. Often Ireland’s historical experience has been seen in isolation, resulting in a narrow and externalized British picture of change in Ireland. Many of the sources relating to Irish experiences have been underused or not quantified in any way. Many remain in continental archives, neglected by Britain-based scholars. By contrast North American studies are better developed and focus upon broad notions of ethnicity.⁵

³See Jim MacLaughlin, ed., *Location and Dislocation in contemporary Irish society: emigration and Irish identities* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997); Graham Davis, *The Irish in Britain, 1815–1914* (Dublin: Gill and MacMillan, 1991).

⁴See Binley Thomas, *Migration and Economic Growth: A Study of Great Britain and the Atlantic Economy* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1954); David Fitzpatrick, *Irish Emigration 1801–1921* (Dublin: Economic and Social History Society of Ireland, 1984).

⁵See Dale T. Knobel, *Paddy and the Republic: Ethnicity and Nationality in Antebellum America* (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1986). Knobel makes the point that there is a need to define Irish identity through the perceptions of the Irish rather than a purely externalized view by the native population of the newcomers.

The formation of the early modern state was a complex process, which involved significant changes in how people were governed, how they practised their religion and how they behaved. By the 1520s the drive for religious reform had produced the spread of Protestantism throughout much of Europe, and by the 1540s the Catholic religion was committed to radical change. The advent of religious diversity put severe pressure on emerging early modern monarchies. In addition, religious identity was becoming a political question. The Irish were recognized by the Spanish as upholders of the true religion: Catholicism. Contemporary documents repeatedly cite the Irish as particular friends, due to their support of the Catholic religion, but also because of their bravery in the face of cruel treatment and persecution by the English.⁶ Because of this persecution and oppression the Spanish monarchy offered asylum to the Irish. However, the Spanish also expected that the Irish would contribute a variety of services which would benefit the Spanish nation.

The literary metaphor, “Wild Geese” has been popularly associated with pre-nineteenth century refugees, particularly those who followed Colonel Patrick Sarsfield to France in 1691. The general assumption was that most people leaving Ireland before 1800 were involuntary exiles, compelled by politically inspired circumstances to seek employment, primarily in the military, in Catholic Europe. However, this is a narrow focus, which has omitted the variety of professions undertaken by the Irish, particularly the women, and assumes that all migrants were victims of circumstances beyond their control.

From 1500 to 1691 the majority of emigrants were Catholics, impelled to leave Ireland because of their political and religious loyalties. Chieftain families and septs emigrated to France, Spain, Portugal and Austria at the close of the sixteenth century. As a diaspora people the Irish made significant contributions to the communities they settled in. Records reveal a demonstrable Irish influence on those countries they moved into. Equally important is the sense of belonging expressed in these records. I first need to qualify why I chose Spain as my area of study, however.

There has been a considerable amount of scholarship produced on the Irish in France and in the Low Countries, particularly Belgium. New studies have highlighted the experiences of the Irish in Barbados, but little exists on the Irish in Spain.⁷ The Irish appear to have been particularly successful in Spain in terms of making money, becoming privileged members of the military, establishing colleges, and becoming civic leaders.⁸ In fact it would appear that the Irish were arch-assimilationists. During the

⁶Estado 984, Archivo General, Simancas (hereafter cited as AGS).

⁷For the Irish in Barbados see Sean O’Callaghan, *To Hell or Barbados: The Ethnic Cleansing of Ireland* (Dingle: Braddon, 2000).

⁸The first Irish college was established at the University at Alcala de Henares in 1590.

early modern period large numbers of Irish soldiers and diplomats helped to shape the success of Spain as a European nation. On a small scale the town of Salamanca had an Irish mayor within ten years of Irish settlement in and around the town. The dedication stone laid in the castle at Simancas was dedicated to Hugh O'Donnell, who was assisted in 1602 by the military forces of Philip III when O'Donnell attempted to eject the English from Ireland during the battle of Kinsale.⁹ When the vanquished O'Donnells left Ireland for Spain they joined the Spanish army. This led to a lengthy tradition of all-Irish units in the Spanish military.

So distinguished were the Irish regiments that Irish commanders were placed over Spanish troops, thereby exerting a widespread influence over the Spanish army. Irish soldiers in the armies of Spain appear to have placed their loyalty towards one another and their units above anything else. Records show that the officers were often sept leaders who pledged their allegiance to the king of Spain.¹⁰ Early modern historians have often perpetuated the notion that the Irish as well as the Scottish acted as mercenaries for foreign powers, but this is not true of the Irish in Spain.¹¹ The Irish appear to have taken a rather dim view of mercenaries, and granted primary allegiance to Spain and the Spanish king. As thanks and acknowledgement of their dedication and contribution to Spain, Philip III granted equal citizenship to the Irish in 1608, expressed in the following terms:

The Irish established in these dominions shall keep and maintain the privileges which they have, by which they are made equal to native Spaniards; and that the formalities of the oath, to which all other nations have been forced to submit, shall not be exacted from the Irish, seeing that by the mere fact of their settling in Spain the Irish are accounted Spaniards and enjoy the same rights.¹²

Within the army the Irish regiments continued to use the Irish language, and although all written orders were issued in Spanish, the soldiers and their families continued to speak Irish among themselves. This helped to facilitate cultural continuity and the Irish language was preserved throughout the period. Letters, songs, poetry, and other records and documents tend to be in Irish, or in a hybrid of Irish and Spanish, revealing the use of both languages. This is significant as the incoming English had

⁹For a study of the battle of Kinsale which gives an account from the Irish and the Spanish sides against the English see John J. Silke, *Kinsale: The Spanish Intervention in Ireland at the End of the Elizabethan Wars* (1970, repr. Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2000).

¹⁰Estado 887, AGS includes official recognition and thanks to the septs of O'Donnell, O'Neill and Fitzgerald for their service to the Spanish army.

¹¹For an account of Irish rebels hiring Scottish mercenaries to fight the English see the preface in Cyril Falls, *Elizabeth's Irish Wars* (1950, repr. London: Constable, 1996).

¹²Resolution adopted by the Spanish Council of State, granted by Philip III in 1608.

attempted to ban and proscribe the Irish language in Ireland, although the ban had limited success. Government sources and records from the seventeenth century onwards in Ireland tended to be recorded in English, although rural local records continued to be recorded in Irish and then translated.

In Spain there was no appearance of hostility towards the use of the Irish language within communities; in fact, there would appear to be a take up of Irish words and terms, music, and songs. Records show that Irish spelling and pronunciation of family names continued, whilst first names were altered to their Spanish form. Though records of the experiences of male emigrants have been subjected to scholarly analysis, the experience of women has been neglected. Exceptions to this are the early studies produced by Micheline Kearney Walsh and Jerrold Casway. Walsh produced a seminal work on Irish women emigres in 1961, which was vital in pinpointing the gender dynamic within Irish migration to Spain.¹³ Casway focussed upon the experiences of Rosa O'Dogherty who migrated to Spain in 1607 and experienced the generosity of the Spanish government.¹⁴ Both Walsh and Casway produced some fruitful work as they both pointed to the pensions and other generous benefits Irish women enjoyed from the Spanish monarchy and governments. However, Walsh and Casway stop short of problematizing how and why these women worked in the ways they did.

The sex ratios of both genders are difficult to calculate due to the lack of consistent inventories. The evidence that does exist indicates higher proportions of women accompanied their septs abroad when exiles had some input into the emigrating decision. Data covering refugees living in Valladolid in northwest Spain who were receiving allowances in 1610 indicates that nearly eight hundred were receiving pensions from the Spanish crown.¹⁵ A similar number appear from the records in and around La Coruna in the north of Spain.¹⁶ These numbers do not include those who did not apply or qualify for financial support.

The opportunities and professions open or created by these migrants appear to be varied. Scholarship of Irish migration to Spain has traditionally focussed upon the military and ecclesiastical populations; however, the work of women would appear to be highly significant in a number of areas. Examination reveals the numerous and varied creative employments undertaken by Irish men and women. In addition to the well documented

¹³Micheline K. Walsh, "Some Notes Towards a History of the Women of the Wild Geese," *Irish Sword*, vol. 5 (Dublin: Military History Society of Ireland, 1961), 98–106, 133–45.

¹⁴Jerrold Casway, "Rosa O'Dogherty: A Gaelic Woman," *Seanchas Ardmhacha*, vol. 10 (Armagh, Ireland: Armagh Diocesan Historical Society, 1980), 40–63.

¹⁵Estado 984, AGS.

¹⁶Ibid.

military profession there appears to have been educational and training opportunities in Catholic Europe, more plentiful than in Ireland and England. A number of Irish women entered convents, though often as Dominican lay nuns rather than full officiates. Such lay nuns were holders of property and money and left wills which often contained considerable wealth or substantial properties.¹⁷ On taking holy orders, nuns swore not to own anything, hence the lay nuns appear to have had considerable power. Manuscripts in the Spanish archives show that the Dominican convent played a more important role in the Irish community than the Franciscan convent.¹⁸ Many of the Irish Dominicans figure as important links between the Irish community and the court: they appeared as witnesses and as receivers of powers of attorney in many of the notarial documents.¹⁹ This was the case with the regions of Coruna and Castille-Leon.

A number of specific case studies will be focussed upon in order to highlight the experiences of a number of women of the wild geese. During the "Flight of the Earls" in 1607, Nuala O'Donnell, older sister of the earl of Tyrconnell, exerted her influence and independence by testing her fortunes abroad. Estranged from her husband, Nuala believed her prospects were better as a political refugee in Catholic Europe, than under surveillance in colonized Ireland. Nuala's sister-in-law, Bridget Fitzgerald, did not accompany the rest of the Tyrconnell sept. Nuala built up ties with the Irish in northwest Spain and remained in Spain, supporting herself and her daughter. Nuala was the sister of Red Hugh O'Donnell, who was honored by the Spanish for his bravery during the battle of Kinsale. Nuala took the decision to leave her husband, Niall Garve, and moved from Rome to Flanders, directly against the wishes of the King of Spain.²⁰ Nuala went against her husband and the king of her adopted country. This was not typical of the behavior of the Irish in Spain who normally displayed exceptional loyalty to the monarchy. However, she continued to receive payment in the form of a pension for her work in carrying documents and information back and forth during her travels.²¹

Catherine Magennis, the third wife of the earl of Tyrone, actually did not wish to emigrate to Spain and initially refused to go with her husband.²² Eventually she agreed. After his death in 1616, Catherine's widow share of his pension was officially reconfirmed (although in practice it was often paid in arrears). She later moved to Naples, where she died in 1619. Financial support from Spain came in the form of pensions, *entretenidos*,

¹⁷Estado 887, AGS.

¹⁸Ibid.

¹⁹Ibid.

²⁰See Walsh, *Wild Geese*, 137.

²¹Estado 984, AGS.

²²CSP Ireland, 1606–8, 270.

allowances, *ventajas* or grants-in-aid, *ayuda da costas*. The terms pension and pensioner in the Spanish records are *entrettenidos*, which was a term that represented an award for services carried out for the king, and brought with it an obligation to serve. Thus, during the Armada of 1588, many Irish served without pay in the hope that they would later be given an *entrettenido* for their past services. Irish women who were awarded very generous pensions by the Spanish crown were refugees who had suffered losses from the wars and persecutions in Ireland. These pensions had strings attached. Sometimes the *entrettenido* worked as a contract between the woman and the Spanish crown and authorities. Pensions became a way of official payment for spying and intelligence work.

One of the earliest female spies in the early modern period was “Imperia Romana.” This is the only name ever used and recorded with reference to this woman. She was known to English authorities, although she appears to have remained untouchable. In a letter from John Johnson to Lord Burghley in 1581, Johnson details the actions of “an Irish woman who professes to be Spanish, who has travelled from Spain to England with the Spanish Ambassador, with the protection of the King of Spain. She carries documents from the King and stays for a good length of time in the Spanish Ambassadors house.”²³ The master of the ship she sailed on was questioned and reported that she travelled with money and lots of packets of letters. She was also said by Johnson to be a “fit instrument for such purpose (spying), insomuch as she can speak as good Spanish as if she had been born in Spain, good Irish and English.”²⁴ What made her behavior even more suspicious was that she conveyed packets to other Spaniards in and out of town. She remained with the Spanish ambassador, in a position of diplomatic immunity, so that the English, paranoid at this time about a Spanish invasion, constantly attempted to monitor her covert activities. The ambassador later requested her safe passage, which technically had to be granted, further provoking outrage amongst Elizabeth’s ministers and spymasters. There are a number of comments about the clearly perceived alliances between Ireland and Spain, but there appears to be nothing that English officials could do about a person under Ambassadorial protection.²⁵ Lord Burghley and Sir Francis Walsingham continued to comment upon Imperia Romana, but ultimately were not able to arrest her. Female spying was already established by 1581, with women able to travel through Europe with protection.

Records held in the Spanish archives reveal that by December 1610, a total of 769 Irish refugees were receiving allowances in the regions of Coruna, Santiago, and Valladolid. The figures provided in the manuscripts

²³Calendar of State Papers, Foreign, vol. 15, 1581, p. 12.

²⁴Ibid.

²⁵CSP, Foreign 1581, 13.

detail the amounts paid out in monthly intervals.²⁶ Notes in the orders cite that the women had been constant in their service to Spain. Another interesting case study concerns an Irish woman who managed to assimilate herself and her family into the highest ranks of Spanish society. Marianna McCarthy and her husband Thadeo O'Mouroghu departed from Cork for Portugal in 1622, together with their baby son, Domingo. Impoverished they went to Madrid where they were granted a royal audience. The young Spanish queen, grieving over the loss of her first child, was moved by the sight of the couple's baby, and they agreed upon the course of taking the child into the royal household to be raised at court, with the parents being allowed grace and favor apartments. This was acceptable to Irish families due to the widespread fosterage system practiced. Similar systems of fosterage existed in Spain and Ireland.²⁷ Fosterage was a long established child-rearing practice of the Celts, whereby a child was formally placed in the household of another sept. This was further buttressed by Brehon Law. Brehon law existed in Ireland from the seventh to the seventeenth century, when the English legal traditions began to be introduced. This was a distinctive legal tradition bearing no relation to English, Scottish or Welsh legal traditions. Women appear to have had high status compared to women in other European countries. The laws defining female inheritance were more generous than other European states. Women were judges, traders, musicians, they had the right to bear arms, form contracts and engage in professions such as medicine. Women were also often scholars, linguists, and translators.

In Spain the Irish continued these traditions, albeit with some constraints. In Spain Irish women continued to act as physicians but within their own communities. They continued fosterage and the extended kin system which had flourished in Ireland. A Celtic extended family included everyone in a sept who could trace their descendant from a common ancestor. Since women in Irish Brehon society could choose the person whom they wished to breed with, and because they often took multiple sexual partners to increase the chances of procreation, no man could be certain a child was his. Under Brehon law children did not know the identity of their father until their mother named him on her death bed. This lack of the legal notions of legitimacy and primogeniture horrified the incoming English colonials who felt this lack of male power over women to be at the heart of Irish barbarity.²⁸ However, intermarriage between the Irish and

²⁶Estado 984, AGS.

²⁷For fosterage systems in Spain and Ireland respectively see James Casey, *Early Modern Spain: A Social History* (London: Routledge, 1999), 192–221; Matthew J. Culligan and Peter Cherici, *The Wandering Irish in Europe: their influence from the Dark Ages to modern times* (London: Constable, 2000), 22–23, 106.

²⁸See Fynes Moryson, *An Itinerary of the present state of Ireland, part two, 1594–1603* (England, 1609).

Spanish was allowed, even approved of, and the lax marital and legitimacy traditions broke down in Spain over time. The tradition of fosterage, however, continued to flourish. Young celtic men and women placed in fosterage lived as adopted members of the sept until they reached adulthood. Sometimes fosterage was used to form an alliance between septs. A high degree of community involvement was evidenced in this tradition.

For an Irish child to be placed within the Spanish royal household was not only significant but also a very rare occurrence. However, the fosterage system allowed this type of adoption, even within the most elite households. The parents of Domingo were well cared for with lifetime allowances.²⁹ Domingo himself eventually became a high-ranking officer in the Spanish army and a knight of the Military Order of Calatrava. He married a lady-in-waiting at the court and was sent to Naples with the viceroy and later held several high posts in the king's household. This kind of assimilation was very successful. Frequent references in Spanish records refer to the award of asylum and refuge to the Irish. To the Spanish nation the Irish were particular friends. Their bravery is mentioned frequently. There are also constant references to the Irish being awarded passports and documents allowing them to travel unhindered.³⁰ This would appear as a stark contrast to the expulsion of Jews, Muslims and converts from Spain at this time. Early race policy in Spain saw the Irish as potential Spaniards.

Finally, I want to move on to the case of Rosa O'Dogherty. Rosa was born in 1588, into the O'Neill sept, a sept which had a high legal and social status in Irish Brehon society. Rosa was educated, along with many other Irish women at the time, by Irish Franciscans. When Rosa emigrated to Spain she maintained close contact with the Franciscan colleges in Santiago and Salamanca. Rosa was involved in the resistance and rebellion against the English at the end of the sixteenth century. She then left Donegal in 1607 to be met initially in Brussels by other Irish emigres. Rosa took the opportunity offered to spy. Records show that she travelled widely.³¹ She had the protection of the Conde de Castro, the Spanish ambassador.³² She negotiated her own pay and pension directly with Castro. The Spanish government was very generous to her and their other women pensioners.³³ From Spain Rosa continued in her efforts to restore her family, her people, and their religion from 1607 through 1650. She also spent her adult life combining this work with carrying information for the Spanish government. Rosa's specific roles included being a political intermediary,

²⁹Expediente 1830, Calatrava, Archivo Historica National, Madrid.

³⁰Estado 887, AGS.

³¹Estado 984, AGS.

³²Casway, *Rosa O'Dogherty*, 53.

³³Estado 984 has a list of women on the pension payroll.

lobbyist and purchasing agent.³⁴ Rosa travelled around Spain and the Low Countries on a regular basis. This was at a time when Spanish women would not have been expected to have travelled without their families. This would indicate a certain continuity in the freedom to travel which Irish women were used to; however, it also indicates that Irish women were used in this potentially dangerous area of spying. Diplomatic immunity aside, if caught, spies were usually executed, often after torture. Through their particular skills in spying Irish women were allowed and accepted as having more freedom of movement than Spanish or Low Country women. Records in the Spanish archives are particularly revealing when they record that Irish women made exceptional spies because they had “innocent faces.”³⁵ Rosa’s involvement in intrigue and counter-plots intensified as Spain considered invading colonized Ireland.³⁶ Rosa’s activities were documented in detail throughout the 1640s, the decade covering the 1641 rebellion. They confirm her continued role at the centre of intrigue. English intelligence officers in Brussels kept a close watch on Rosa.³⁷ She was under constant surveillance. Rosa, however, managed to get her husband out of Ireland in 1642, along with men, money and armaments, right under the noses of the English. Rosa’s husband, once he was installed in Spain, rarely had any knowledge of where his wife was. However, the Cromwellian settlement did massive and widespread further damage to Irish septs, and many were forced to flee Ireland and ask for papal protection. Rosa spent the final years of her life living off a Spanish pension. It was during native Ireland’s struggle for survival that conditions and circumstances gave women’s actions more exposure. Many emerge as activists in a broad international sphere. They appear in this European setting with a militant devotion to their septs, their families, their faith, and their culture; this gave them their identity. This identity maintained many elements from their lives in Ireland. These women carried on a way of life to which they were born, and responded to its defence with the actions and attitudes characteristic of that embattled generation. Women like Rosa O’Dogherty, Nuala O’Donnell, and Mariana McCarthy bridged a gap in the political and domestic roles associated with their sex.

Many women reconciled themselves to colonization. Others resisted. Some were powerless and accepted their fate. The remainder went with their septs into exile. Once in exile they assumed positive, powerful identities, facing post-colonial challenges in Spain. On the continent they continued as rebels and shared this role with the men-folk of their septs. They

³⁴Ibid.

³⁵Estado 984 notes that Rosa and Elena McCarthy had innocent faces that would help in their spying work against the English.

³⁶Casway, *Rosa O’Dogherty*, 56.

³⁷Casway, *Rosa O’Dogherty*, 57.

assimilated into Spanish society whilst continuing distinctive Irish Brehon traditions. They identified themselves, like *Imperia Romana*, as Spanish and Irish. They built merchant and banking traditions in the north of Spain and in the south, in Cadiz. This involvement in banking had been forbidden whilst they were in Ireland. The identity of these women and their septs was an active and positive one. The women of the wild geese were not simply victims of English colonialism; they were successful women, they were survivors.