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East Ulster 1606

The Private Enterprise of Hamilton & Montgomery

Antrim and Down - the two counties closest to Scotland - were not part of the later Plantation of (west) Ulster. These two counties were the focus of a privately-funded settlement project masterminded by two Ayrshire Scots, James Hamilton and Hugh Montgomery, both of whom were allies of the new King James I.

They had grown up as little as three miles apart - possibly with Hamilton's father, the minister at Dunlop, being kept and salaried by Montgomery's father, the Laird of Braidstane - yet they were bitter rivals. In May 1606 the first boatloads of Lowland Scottish (almost entirely Presbyterian) settlers began to arrive at Donaghadee, to take up the offers of tenancy on the new Hamilton and Montgomery estates. It was these people who established the first permanent Scottish settlement in Ireland, and it was these people who just a few years later would first be described as "Ulster Scots".

Background

Three great regions straddled County Antrim and County Down, centred around the two loughs of Belfast Lough and Strangford Lough. These three regions were known as Upper Clandeboye, Lower Clandeboye and the Great Ardes. In the late 1300s these had been claimed by a branch of the O'Neills and by 1600, Irish chieftain Con O'Neill was the claimant. His headquarters was at Castle Reagh. However the entire region of East Ulster had been wasted and depopulated by decades of English/Irish warfare.

Around Christmas of 1602, O'Neill was arrested for "levying war" against Queen Elizabeth I of England and Ireland. In reality, one of O'Neill's men had killed one of the Queen's soldiers, but Con was arrested and imprisoned in Carrickfergus Castle. Sir Arthur Chichester generously offered to execute Con without a trial - no doubt to create an opportunity for Chichester to claim Con's vast estates as his own. Fortunately for Con, Queen Elizabeth I died, and the next in line to the throne was King James VI of Scotland. In July 1603 James was crowned as King James I of England - the Union of the Crowns. A new King with a new outlook and a host of old friends that he owed favours to...

The Plan

Con O'Neill's wife saw an opportunity. She made contact with Hugh Montgomery and put a proposal to him - free Con, get him a Royal pardon from the new King, and as a reward receive half of the O'Neill estate. Hugh Montgomery agreed and a jailbreak plan was hatched. Con was sprung from Carrickfergus and was taken across the North Channel to Largs, and then on to the

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“
 ...Ulster is
 as obscure
 and unknown
 to the English
 here as the
 most inland
 part of
 Virginia is yet
 unknown to
 our English
 colony there...
 ”

Sir John Davies
 Attorney General for
 Ireland, writing to
Sir Robert Cecil,
 Patron of the
 Virginia Company,
 24th August 1609

Montgomery seat at Braidstane Castle. There they finalised the deal and celebrated Con's freedom, and set off for the Royal Court in London to gain the Royal pardon.

However, before they arrived, James Hamilton discovered the plan and through a contact he had at the Royal court, proposed to the King that the O'Neill estates should be divided into three portions - one for Con to retain, one for Montgomery and one for Hamilton. The King agreed and in April 1605 the deal was signed. O'Neill and Montgomery travelled back to Ulster together (via Scotland), whilst Hamilton sailed to Dublin to show the enraged Sir Arthur Chichester his spoils. Guy Fawkes' Gunpowder Plot of 5th November 1605 could have destroyed the entire settlement scheme, but it was foiled and Fawkes was arrested and later executed.

The Arrival of the Scots

With Con back in Castle Reagh, having secured his life and a third of his wasted estate, the two canny Scots offered cheap rents to attract new tenants across the water. The Settlement was a runaway success. Montgomery's main port was established at Donaghadee and he later moved to Newtown(ards) with another branch of the family moving to Greyabbey. Today's Montgomeries still live on that same family estate at Greyabbey. Hamilton established his first headquarters at Bangor (on the site of the present Town Hall), and then moved south to Killyleagh Castle, where today's Rowan-Hamilton family still live.

George Montgomery

It's important to point out that, as part of the Royal deal with Con O'Neill, Hugh Montgomery's brother George was appointed Bishop of Derry, Raphoe and Clogher - the first Scottish bishop in Ireland. This title gave George control of huge areas of church lands and, perhaps inspired by the plans of Hugh in east Ulster, in the Spring of 1607 George began to bring tenants from Glasgow, Ayr and Irvine into west Ulster, through the ports at Derry, Donegal and Killybegs.

The Settlement Grows

As the Settlement began to spread, some settlers moved on. For example, the Bailies came first to Inishargy (one of the highest vantage points on the Ards Peninsula) then on across Strangford Lough to Ringdufferin, and finally on to James Hamilton's later estates in County Cavan where they established the village of Bailieborough. The Edmonstones had come to Donaghadee with Hugh Montgomery - they later moved to Broadisland or Ballycarry in East Antrim where in 1609 they brought Rev Edward Brice, the first Presbyterian minister in Ireland. A steady stream of Presbyterian ministers followed, and whilst there would be no distinct Presbytery in Ulster until 1642, the ministers and people worshipped in parish church buildings. And it would be four of these ministers - Rev Robert Blair of Bangor, Rev John McClelland of Newtownards, Rev John Livingstone of Killinchy and Rev James Hamilton of Ballywalter - who commissioned the famous ship The Eagle Wing, the first ship to attempt emigration from Ulster to America. She sailed from the harbour at Groomsport on the morning of 9th September 1636, the morning after Sir Hugh Montgomery's grand Scottish state funeral in the Priory of Newtownards.

Ulster and Virginia

King James I may have admired the tenacity - and ruthless competitiveness - of his two old allies, who made the Settlement concept succeed where so many others had failed. Perhaps their success made him overly-confident when the later Plantation of Ulster project was being planned. What we do know for sure is that exactly one year after the Scots began to arrive in "swarms" at Donaghadee in May 1606, the first English settlers arrived at Jamestown in May 1607. Jamestown would eventually be led by Captain John Smith, who in his youth also had many powerful contacts in Scotland and who himself tried to become one of King James' courtiers when he was still King James VI of Scotland.

The 1606/1607 Settlements of East Ulster and Virginia were deeply intertwined. The Ulster-Scots-American connection was born.

Notes:

- The story of the Hamilton and Montgomery Settlement of 1606 was superbly told in the BBC Northern Ireland programme "*The Dawn of the Ulster-Scots*", presented by Flora Montgomery and first broadcast in December 2006. The programme was made for BBC Northern Ireland by Straightforward Productions.
- More information on the Settlement is available at <http://www.HamiltonMontgomery1606.com>