IRISH HISTORICAL MONOGRAPHS

The Making of the Irish Protestant Ascendancy

The Life of William Conolly, 1662–1729

PATRICK WALSH

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Irish Historical Monograph Series

ISSN 1740–1097

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THE BOYDELL PRESS

First published 2010
The Boydell Press, Woodbridge

ISBN 978-1-84383-584-4

The Boydell Press is an imprint of Boydell & Brewer Ltd
PO Box 9, Woodbridge, Suffolk IP12 3DF, UK
and of Boydell & Brewer Inc.
668 Mt Hope Avenue, Rochester, NY 14620, USA
website: www.boydellandbrewer.com

A CIP catalogue record for this title
is available from the British Library

This publication is printed on acid-free paper

Typeset in Goudy Old Style by
David Roberts, Pershore, Worcestershire

Printed in Great Britain by
CPI Antony Rowe Ltd, Chippenham and Eastbourne

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This book is dedicated to my parents

Preface

My interest in William Conolly began while still a child growing up in Celbridge and developed further while working as a student in Castletown during my undergraduate days, but the research and writing of this book only began six years ago. Over that time I have incurred many debts. First and foremost I wish to acknowledge the generous financial support of the Irish Research Council for the Humanities and Social Sciences, and the Centre for Historic Irish Houses and Landed Estates, NUI Maynooth. The latter not only provided generous financial support, but also wonderful office space in Castletown in 2008 where some of the writing and research for this book was done in the most appropriate setting possible. I also wish to acknowledge the generous grants provided by the Esme Mitchell Trust and the Grace Lawless Lee Trust, Trinity College Dublin towards the publication of this book.

I am very grateful to the staff of all the libraries and archives I visited during my research, particularly David Griffin and his colleagues in the Irish Architectural Archive who made the then uncatalogued Castletown Papers easily accessible to me. I am also indebted to the Castletown Foundation, and especially their director Christopher Moore for granting me permission to use and cite the Castletown Papers. Special thanks are also due to Anthony Malcomson for all I have learnt working with him while cataloguing the Conolly Papers under the auspices of the Irish Manuscript Commission. Several scholars including Robert Armstrong, Lisa-Marie Griffith, David Hayton and Ivar McGrath have read earlier drafts of this work and offered perceptive criticism and advice over a long period of time for which I am very grateful. I am especially grateful to Professor David Dickson for his vast knowledge, enduring support, advice and direction without which completing this project would have been impossible

My colleagues, past and present, in Trinity College Dublin, NUI Maynooth and University College Dublin have offered support, encouragement and most importantly coffee. Thanks to Juliana Adelman, Johanna Archbold, Roisin Berry, Ian Campbell, Niamh Cullen, Neil Johnston, Annaleigh Margey, Ciara Meehan, Tina Morin, Elaine Murphy, Jennifer O'Brien, Danielle O'Donovan, Kevin O'Sullivan, Trish Stapleton, Vanessa Ther and Ciarán Wallace. For stimulating conversations on the eighteenth century, suggestions of possible sources and access to unpublished material, I wish to thank Toby Barnard, Michael Brown, John Bergin, Vincent Comerford, Terence Dooley, Patrick Geoghegan, James Kelly, Anne Laurence, Edward MacParland, Eoin Magennis, Ivar McGrath, James McGuire, Martyn Powell and Finola O'Kane. I also wish to acknowledge the continued interest and support of my former O.P.W. colleagues at Castletown, who have continued to allow me free rein inside the house that Conolly built.

At Boydell & Brewer, I would particularly like to thank the series editor

Professor David Hayton, as well as Peter Sowden for their advice and encouragement along the way.

Special thanks are also due to all my friends, especially Andrew, Grainne, Helen, Hugh, Léan, Niamh, Ronan and Stefanie who have had to put up with not only me but also with the near constant presence of William Conolly. Similarly my family, my brothers Cormac and Fergal and sister Fionnuala and my parents Jim and Jeanne have had to share me with the speaker. Particular thanks are due to my mother who carefully read the entire manuscript. All errors naturally remain my full responsibility. This book is dedicated to my parents in acknowledgement of the interest they have shown and the encouragement, advice and support they have given me.

Editorial Note

Unless otherwise stated, dates are given in Old Style, although the year is taken to begin on 1 January rather than 25 March, which in this period was still the formal convention. In quotations from contemporary sources spelling has been modernised, and punctuation and capitalisation standardised, except in cases where the meaning of the original is ambiguous or unclear. In other respects, the text attempts to follow, as far as possible, the editorial rules for *Irish Historical Studies*. All acreage figures have been converted to statute measure. 1 statute acre = 1.69 Irish acres or 1.29 Scotch/Cunningham acres.

Principal Abbreviations

BL	British Library
Bodl.	Bodleian Library, Oxford
CJI	*Journals of the House of Commons of the Kingdom of Ireland*, 3rd edition
Commrs' rept	*The report of the commissioners appointed by Parliament to enquire into the Irish forfeitures delivered to the honourable house of commons the 15th of December 1699. With their resolutions and addresses to His Majesty relating to those forfeitures. As also His Majesty's gracious answers thereunto; and His most gracious speech to both Houses of Parliament the 5th of January 1690* (London, 1700)
CSPD	Calendar of state papers, domestic series
CTB	Calendar of treasury books
CTP	Calendar of treasury papers
DIB	James McGuire and James Quinn, eds., *Dictionary of Irish Biography*, 9 vols. (Cambridge, 2009)
ECI	*Eighteenth Century Ireland: The Journal of the Eighteenth Century Ireland Society*
EHR	*English Historical Review*
HIP	E. M. Johnston-Liik, *History of the Irish parliament, 1692–1800: Commons, constituencies and statutes*, 6 vols. (Belfast, 2002)
HMC	Historical Manuscripts Commission
IAA	Irish Architectural Archive
IHS	*Irish Historical Studies*
IMC	Irish Manuscript Commission
Liber munerum	Rowley Lascelles, *Liber munerum publicorum Hiberniae, or the Establishments of Ireland, 1152–1827*, 2 vols. (London, 1852)
NAI	National Archives of Ireland
NHI	T. W. Moody, F. X. Martin, F. J. Byrne, and W. E. Vaughan eds., *A new history of Ireland*, 9 vols. (Oxford, 1976–2005)
NLI	National Library of Ireland
ODNB	H. G. C. Matthew and Brian Harrison, eds., *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford 2004)
Proc. RIA	*Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy* (Dublin, 1836–)
PRONI	Public Record Office of Northern Ireland
Reg. Deeds	Registry of Deeds
SHC	Surrey History Centre
SP	State Papers
TCD	Trinity College Dublin
TNA	The National Archives (Kew)
1825 Report	*Records of the commissioners appointed by his majesty to execute the measures recommended in an address of the house of commons respecting the public records of Ireland; with supplements and appendixes*, 3 vols. (Dublin, 1811–25)

Introduction

On the morning of 4 November 1729 one of the largest funeral processions seen in Dublin departed from a large house on Capel Street, on the north side of the city. This was the funeral of William Conolly, the wealthiest commoner in Ireland, speaker of the Irish house of commons, revenue commissioner, and ten times a lord justice. His house on Capel Street, demolished in the 1780s, was one of the finest, and largest, private dwelling houses in the city. It had been the centre of his political and domestic life for over twenty years, serving both as his primary residence, and as a regular venue for political and governmental cabals and cabinets. On the day of his funeral the main reception rooms and staircase were draped in black, in an ostentatious demonstration of his widow Katherine's mourning. Outside the official funeral party had gathered. The procession was led by one of seven funeral managers accompanied by six constables of the city, whose job it was to keep the anticipated crowds at bay. They were followed by sixty-seven poor men dressed in black, each one symbolising a year in Conolly's life. Next came the lord lieutenant, Lord Carteret, in his coach, followed by the lord mayor of Dublin, members of the Irish houses of lords and commons, marching two by two, and then the coffin carried by pall bearers drawn from the ranks of the privy council. There were over 700 mourners in total, each of whom was given a linen scarf, a gesture of support to the Irish linen industry that began a tradition which was to continue throughout the century.

Described by a contemporary as 'the finest funeral seen in this kingdom, for many a year', the procession continued down Capel Street, towards Essex Bridge.[1] Alongside the bridge was a statue of George I, whom Conolly had served as *de facto* prime minister of Ireland for twelve years; across the river was Thomas Burgh's Custom House where Conolly had dominated proceedings as first commissioner of the revenue for the previous fifteen years; while just visible above the houses in the foreground was Dublin Castle, the centre of the British administration in Ireland. The funeral party did not, however, cross the river; instead they continued down Arran Quay, towards the Royal Barracks, the largest barracks in Europe, built between 1701 and 1706 to house the English standing army which was stationed in Ireland. At the end of the quays the pallbearers were given a rest and the coffin was transferred to a carriage for Conolly's final journey to Celbridge, a small Georgian village on the banks of the River Liffey in County Kildare, which was to be his resting place, demonstrating a desire to be buried near his great

[1] Marmaduke Coghill to Edward Southwell, 8 Nov. 1729, in *Letters of Marmaduke Coghill, 1722–38*, ed. D. W. Hayton (Dublin, 2005), p. 77. For descriptions of the order of the funeral, see *The order of proceeding to the funeral of the Rt. Hon. William Conolly, Esq.; late speaker of the House of Commons … on Tuesday the 4th of November, 1729* (Dublin, 1729); *Faulkner's Dublin Journal*, 5 Nov. 1729; *Dublin Gazette*, 8 Nov. 1729; *British Journal*, 15 Nov. 1729.

house, Castletown, standing at one end of the village. At the opposite end was the small churchyard, where he was interred. The elaborate heraldic funeral and Conolly's choice of burial place signified his entry into the 'quality' and his status as the founder of a great Irish dynasty based at Castletown. It had indeed been a long journey for the innkeeper's son from Donegal.

I

Conolly was born in Ballyshannon, County Donegal, in 1662, just two years after the restoration of Charles II and following two decades of war and unrest in his native Ulster. The son of an innkeeper or miller, and probably of Catholic background, he rose through the ranks of Irish society 'like a meteor', dying in 1729 the wealthiest and most powerful politician of his generation.[2] During his lifetime Ireland underwent vast changes, and he had been a witness to or a participant in most of them. In 1662 the natural state of Ireland seemed to be war and civil unrest; by Conolly's death there had been a period of almost forty years of unbroken peace, a peace which would continue, against all odds, until the great rebellion of 1798. Such a period of peace was unprecedented and brought with it massive changes to the political, social, and economic fabric of the country. The aftermath of the Williamite war saw the final wholesale confiscation of Catholic property and the collapse of the Catholic political interest. The greatest single beneficiary of the land confiscation was Conolly, who acquired a large stake in the Williamite establishment. This new order was reinforced by the penal code, introduced piecemeal over the following thirty years. It was introduced by the Irish parliament, which from 1692 began to sit, more or less continuously, for the first time in two or three generations, henceforth becoming an integral part of Irish political life. Here Conolly made his mark, entering as a young attorney in 1692 and rising, through the party conflicts of Queen Anne's reign, to become speaker of the house of commons in 1715, when he was charged with ensuring the safe transfer of Ireland into the Hanoverian world. The years of stability saw economic growth and the development of a professional financial and military bureaucracy. Conolly played a prominent role in the emergence of a professionalised revenue service, contributing to the broader financial revolution taking place in the British world.[3] Ireland did, however, remain subservient to the British constitution. This subordination was reinforced by the Declaratory Act of 1720, although the Wood's halfpence crisis of 1723–5 showed the limits of the constitutional and political relationship, proving

[2] John Trenchard, *A letter from a souldier to the commons of England occasioned by an address now carrying on by the Protestants in Ireland, in order to take away the fund appropriated for the payment of the arrears of the army* (London, 1702), p. 26.

[3] P. G. M. Dickson, *The financial revolution* (London, 1967); John Brewer, *The sinews of power: war, money and the English state, 1688–1783* (London, 1989); Henry Roseveare, *The financial revolution, 1660–1760* (London, 1991); M. J. Braddick, *The nerves of state: taxation and the financing of the English state, 1588–1714* (Manchester, 1996); C. I. McGrath, *The making of the eighteenth-century Irish constitution* (Dublin, 2000).

that Ireland could not be governed without the assistance of its political representatives, chief of whom was Conolly.

The Protestant political nation, to which Conolly belonged and arguably which he helped to shape, as still fearful of its status, as evidenced by the penal laws and Protestant willingness to house and maintain a British standing army. But alongside this insecurity there was also an air of self-confident patriotism, perhaps best symbolised by the construction of two of the most important buildings erected in eighteenth-century Ireland; the new houses of parliament in College Green, a statement in stone of the Irish parliament's status, and aspirations, and Castletown, Ireland's first, largest, and arguably most significant Palladian-style house. Both bore the imprint of Conolly, whose career reflected the development of the early Georgian Irish political, cultural and ideological nation, in all its complexities and contradictions.

Despite his importance Conolly has not received the historiographical treatment his career deserves. The absence of a full-length biographical study can partly be attributed to the traditional chronological imbalance in the historiography of eighteenth-century Ireland, which began with the great Victorian historians, J. A. Froude and W. H. Lecky, and has remained remarkably durable.[4] In this regard, Conolly has not been alone; the interesting lives of Alan Brodrick, first Lord Midleton, or Henry Boyle, first earl of Shannon, have been similarly neglected by historians, while other important figures like Archbishop William King, and Nathaniel Clements have only recently been subjected to full biographical treatment.[5] The only existing study of Conolly, beyond biographical dictionaries and other works of collective biography, is a pioneering article on the Conolly family by Lena Boylan published in the *Bulletin of the Irish Georgian Society*.[6] Based on extensive and thorough research into the surviving Conolly manuscripts, her article established the facts of Conolly's life but offered little by way of interpretation. Patrick McNally, in his entries for the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* and the *Dictionary of Irish Biography*, has summarised Conolly's career and made an attempt to assess his significance, which he

[4] W. E. H. Lecky, *A history of Ireland in the eighteenth century*, 5 vols. (London, 1892); J. A. Froude, *The English in Ireland*, 3 vols. (London, 1872–4).

[5] T. C. Barnard, 'Farewell to old Ireland', *Historical Journal*, xxxvi (1993), pp. 909–28; Jacqueline Hill, 'Convergence and conflict in eighteenth century Ireland', *Historical Journal*, xliv (2001), p. 1054. For King and Clements, see Philip O'Regan, *Archbishop William King of Dublin (1650–1729) and the constitution of church and state* (Dublin, 2000) and A. P. W. Malcomson, *Nathaniel Clements: government and the governing elite in Ireland, 1725–75* (Dublin, 2005).

[6] Lena Boylan, 'The Conollys of Castletown', *Quarterly Bulletin of the Irish Georgian Society*, xi, no. 4 (1968), pp. 1–48. See also J. M. McWilliam, 'The Dickson and Conolly families of Ballyshannon', *Donegal Annual*, iv (1959), pp. 111–17; Patrick Walsh and A. P. W. Malcomson, 'Introduction', in *The Conolly Archive*, ed. Patrick Walsh and A. P. W. Malcomson (Dublin, 2010).

suggests was primarily his institution of the 'undertaker' system, by which Ireland was governed until at least the 1760s.[7]

Conolly's political career and especially his formative role in the development of the 'undertaker' system of government was first subjected to detailed historical scrutiny in the 1940s by J. L. McCracken, while J. G. Simms, writing in the 1950s, offered the first (and to date the most thorough) analysis of Conolly's dealings in confiscated estates following the Williamite wars.[8] Their work established beyond doubt Conolly's importance in the political world of eighteenth-century Ireland. It was only with David Hayton's doctoral thesis and early articles in the 1970s that their original conclusions began to be reassessed and Conolly again emerged as a key figure in his work. In particular Hayton's article on 'The beginnings of the undertaker system' provided a detailed analysis of Conolly's political management both in terms of the distribution of patronage and his electoral interest.[9] Later works by Robert Burns and Eoin Magennis, on parliamentary politics, and Patrick McNally, on patronage, have derived much of their inspiration from Hayton's work and have further highlighted the importance of Conolly's political career.[10]

The focus on political and parliamentary history in most of these works has, however, allowed only one dimension of Conolly's career to emerge. Toby Barnard has bemoaned how:

> That commanding early eighteenth century political presence, Speaker Conolly, floats free – in as far as his build will permit it – from any social or ideological context, because his wife, houses, conspicuous display and extended connections are at best perfunctorily sketched rather than integrated into the political and public lives.[11]

This book attempts to integrate Conolly's political achievements into a wider analysis of his life and career, and in doing so, to offer important insights into the world in which he operated. Conolly's lifetime saw the

[7] Patrick McNally, 'William Conolly, 1662–1729', in *ODNB*; McNally, 'William Conolly, 1662–1729', in *DIB*, vol. 2, pp. 777–80. See also McNally, *Parties, patriots and undertakers: parliamentary politics in early eighteenth-century Ireland* (Dublin, 1997), which used a portrait of Conolly, by Charles Jervas on its front cover.

[8] J. L. McCracken, 'The undertakers in Ireland and their relations with the lord lieutenant, 1724–71' (MA, Queens University Belfast, 1941); J. G. Simms, *The Williamite Confiscation in Ireland, 1690–1703* (London, 1956), esp. pp. 126–7.

[9] D. W. Hayton, 'Ireland and the English ministers, 1707–16' (DPhil thesis, Oxford, 1975); D. W. Hayton, 'The beginnings of the undertaker system', in *Penal era and golden age: essays in Irish history, 1690–1800*, ed. D. W. Hayton and Thomas Bartlett (Belfast, 1979), pp. 32–54. Hayton's articles have been revised and collected in D. W. Hayton, *Ruling Ireland, 1685–1742: politics, politicians and parties* (Woodbridge, 2004).

[10] R. E. Burns, *Irish parliamentary politics in the eighteenth century*, 2 vols. (Washington, 1989–90), vol. 1; McNally, *Parties, patriots and undertakers*; Eoin Magennis, *The Irish political system, 1740–70* (Dublin, 2000). See also S. J. Connolly, *Religion, law and power: the making of Protestant Ireland, 1660–1760* (Oxford, 1992).

[11] Barnard, 'Farewell to old Ireland', p. 926.

establishment and consolidation of the Protestant ascendancy in Ireland, which saw power and property restricted to Protestants of Irish and British descent. The new elite which emerged was not homogeneous in its make-up or as one prominent historian has reminded us the 'Irish protestant interest' or 'protestant ascendancy' was composed of 'people not marionettes'.[12] Conolly's career is particularly interesting in this regard. As a politician, he came to be identified with the Irish Protestant interest, yet his own family background was different from many, if not most of his contemporaries. Understanding his remarkable social mobility is therefore essential to a full understanding of his political career. Likewise, his importance as an architectural patron, long recognised as significant, can only be fully explained within the broader context of his life and career.[13] In turn Conolly's story helps to highlight the diversity within the Protestant ascendancy as well as explaining the career of one who did so much to shape its broader characteristics through his central role in the politics and administration of the early Hanoverian state.

This study of Conolly is not a political biography. Instead it takes the form of a thematic biography taking its historiographical inspiration from the work of Anthony Malcomson, in seeking to illuminate both Conolly's life and career, and the milieu that he operated in.[14] This, as S. J. Connolly has rightly argued, is a 'road not taken in the world of eighteenth-century Irish studies', but one which offers the potential to uncover the detail as well as the context of Conolly's career, and to rescue him from the generalisations that often served to obscure the complexity of his life and times.[15] This historiographical approach is also appealing because of the nature of the surviving primary sources, which preclude the employment of a more traditional biographical model. There are extensive surviving Conolly papers, which have been fully exploited for the first time in this book, but unfortunately they do not contain extensive personal correspondence.[16] Approximately one hundred of Conolly's letters survive, but these are largely formulaic or concerned with the minutiae of state or estate business, and give little evidence of the man behind them. Of particular regret is the absence of detailed correspondence about the construction of Castletown and the motivations that lay behind it. Similarly the close relationship between Conolly and his wife meant that they had little need to write to each other since they spent so much time together, either in Capel Street, or at Castletown. Unfortunately his portrait by Charles

12 T. C. Barnard, 'Ascents and ascendancies in Protestant Ireland', in *Irish Protestant ascents and descents, 1641–1770*, ed. T. C. Barnard (Dublin, 2004), p. 333.

13 For Conolly's importance as an architectural patron, see Edward McParland, *Public architecture in Ireland, 1680–1760* (Dublin, 2001), pp. 5, 84, 177, 182–9; Finola O'Kane, *Landscape design in eighteenth-century Ireland: mixing foreign trees with the natives* (Cork, 2004), pp. 48–50; T. C. Barnard, *Making the grand figure: lives and possessions in Ireland, 1641–1770* (London, 2004), pp. 71–2.

14 A. P. W. Malcomson, *John Foster: the politics of the Anglo-Irish ascendancy* (Oxford, 1978); A. P. W. Malcomson, *Archbishop Charles Agar, churchmanship and politics in Ireland, 1760–1810* (Dublin, 2002); Malcolmson, *Nathaniel Clements.*

15 S. J. Connolly, 'Malcomson's century', *ECI*, xvii (2002), p. 167.

16 See *The Conolly Archive*, ed. Walsh and Malcomson.

Disclaimer:

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are not available for inclusion in the eBook.

To view the image on this page please refer to
the printed version of the book.

Plate 1 William Conolly painted towards the end of his life by Charles Jervas, royal painter to George I. He is pictured wearing his speaker's robes, with his mace of office on the table alongside him.

Jervas, painted late in the speaker's life, also betrays little of the sitter's personality. Jervas, who was royal painter to George I, was not renowned for his skill at depicting his subject's personalities, but was popular in Ireland because of the favour he enjoyed at the Hanoverian court.[17] Glimpses of Conolly's personality must be sought elsewhere, in the correspondence of his contemporaries, and in his deeds. Despite these caveats, the present book provides the fullest picture yet attempted of Conolly's multifaceted life and career, showing how he rose from the 'lowest of the low' to become 'Prince Conolly' and in doing so contributed to the making of the Irish Protestant ascendancy.[18]

II

On 21 September 1709 deeds were perfected between Thomas Dongan, 2nd earl of Limerick, and William Conolly for the purchase of the Castletown estate in County Kildare. Of his many acquisitions, this would be amongst the most significant of Conolly's landed purchases. Together with his appointment as a revenue commissioner six months earlier, and his emergence as a close confidant of the lord lieutenant, Thomas earl of Wharton, it symbolised his entry into the Irish 'quality'. The purchase of a country estate had long been recognised as one of the final steps towards attaining a place in the social elite.[19] Conolly's dramatic rise from his humble origins was confirmed a year later when he was nominated to the Irish privy council, and possibly even offered a peerage. The sale of Castletown was also significant because of the identity of the vendor. Thomas Dongan, a former governor of New York in the 1680s, was a Catholic peer. He had regained his family estates in the aftermath of the Jacobite defeat in 1691, despite their initial forfeiture on account of his brother William's prominent role in the Jacobite administration. After a long and costly legal battle Thomas was restored to the family estates and title in 1703. It was to be a pyrrhic victory, as the extensive expenditure involved forced him to sell the family estates in 1709. Dongan's sale to the arriviste Conolly of Castletown, first granted to his ancestors by Elizabeth I, symbolised the arrival of a new order in Irish politics and life.[20]

Conolly has often been described as the classic case of social mobility in eighteenth-century Ireland, due to his remarkable rise from obscurity to become the founder of an Anglo-Irish dynasty. The means by which he achieved this transition provoked questions in his own day and these suspicions have continued to inform modern accounts, with adjectives such

17 Brendan Rooney and Nicola Figgis, *Irish paintings in the National Gallery of Ireland*, 2 vols. (Dublin, 2001), vol. 1, p. 298.

18 Trenchard, *A letter from a souldier*, p. 26.

19 Barnard, *Making the grand figure*, pp. 45, 63–8.

20 On the Dongans, see T. P. Dungan, *John Dongan of Dublin, an Elizabethan gentleman and his family* (Baltimore, 1996), and F. Van Wyck, *Ancestry of Governor Dongan* (Boston, 1935).

as 'mushroom' and 'arriviste' continuing to be coupled with his name. [21] His success was unparalleled with Alan Brodrick, Lord Midleton, his only serious rival in the early part of the century. The latter was, however, endowed with greater familial advantages and connections. The first four chapters of this book trace Conolly's rise, which was described pejoratively in 1701, as being 'like a meteor'. Chapter 1 examines his humble origins, and shows how partly through the advantages conferred by a fortunate marriage, Conolly established a major Anglo-Irish family. His early career as an attorney, law agent, and 'man of business', are assessed in chapter 2, which shows how the connections be built up in these areas were crucial to his establishment as a political figure. Similarly his speculative career in the complex land markets of the 1690s, and his often-torturous relationships with the officials overseeing the Williamite land confiscation are dealt with in detail in chapter 3. This in turn leads to a discussion of the nature of Conolly's fortune, and his acquisition of one of Ireland's largest landed portfolios, which created his reputation as the wealthiest commoner in the kingdom. These chapters take a thematic approach, with chapter 4 looking at the genesis of the Conolly fortune over the course of his whole life.

'I cannot think any of the Kings friends can forget the many true and faithful services my dear husband for many years of his life did for the Protestant succession and for the king's service and it is well known in this kingdom what he suffered in the queen's reign.'[22] So wrote Katherine Conolly in 1736, while recommending her husband's nephew for a vacancy on the revenue commission. Interestingly, she highlighted Conolly's experiences in the political wilderness during the periods of Tory dominance in Queen Anne's reign. In particular the last four years of Anne's reign entered the annals of Whig martyrology, becoming known as 'the worst of times'. On the return of the duke of Ormonde as lord lieutenant in late 1710, Conolly was dismissed from his dual offices of revenue commissioner and privy councillor. Having already achieved huge success, emerging as the wealthiest commoner in the kingdom, as well as an acknowledged public figure, he could easily have retired from public life, possibly taking the seat in the house of lords he was offered in August 1710. Instead Conolly was to play an increasingly important role as the Whig/Tory party conflict crossed the Irish Sea. His emergence as a major political figure in the period 1703–14, both in terms of partisan politics and importantly legislative activity in the period 1703–14 is examined in

[21] Hugh Allingham, *Ballyshannon, its history and antiquities* (Ballyshannon, 1879); Brian Fitzgerald, *Lady Louisa Conolly, 1743–1821: an Anglo-Irish biography* (London, 1950); Simms, *The Williamite confiscation in Ireland*, p. 126; Connolly, *Religion, law and power*, p. 64; David Dickson, *New foundations: Ireland, 1660–1800*, 2nd edn (Dublin, 2000), p. 54; T. C. Barnard, *A new anatomy of Ireland: the Irish Protestants, 1640–1770* (London, 2003), p. 119; A. P. W. Malcomson, 'A house divided: the Loftus family, earls and marquesses of Ely *c.* 1600–*c.* 1900', in *Refiguring Ireland: essays in honour of L. M. Cullen*, ed. David Dickson and Cormac O'Gráda (Dublin, 2003), p. 186; Hayton, *Ruling Ireland*, p. 72; Ian McBride, *Eighteenth-century Ireland: the isle of slaves* (Dublin, 2009), pp. 114–15.

[22] Katherine Conolly to unknown recipient, 2 June 1736 (TCD, Conolly Papers, MS 3974/30).

chapter 5. This chapter redresses the uneven treatment that Conolly's political career has received in previous studies, which have mostly concentrated on his time as speaker after 1715, with little attention paid to his leadership role during the political strife of Anne's reign.

His parliamentary ascendancy was partly based on his political acumen, but perhaps more importantly on his electoral interest, which grew to become one of the most significant and durable parliamentary followings in eighteenth-century Ireland. This electoral interest was based in his native north-west Ulster and was built both on his own landed portfolio, but also on the existing Conyngham connexion in County Donegal, of which Conolly assumed control following the death of his brother-in-law General Henry Conyngham in 1706. Chapter 6 examines the establishment of this electoral empire, which first showed its potency in the highly partisan election in 1713. The maintenance of this political following in the changed political world that followed the Hanoverian succession in October 1714 is also analysed, showing how Conolly used his electoral nexus to bolster his status as the leading government manager or undertaker after 1715.

Conolly's key role in the contested politics of the previous reign ensured that he would be rewarded on the accession of George I. In the fifteen years following the Hanoverian succession he held three major political offices: speaker of the house of commons, lord justice and revenue commissioner. The combination of these offices in one man, together with his political skill, enabled Conolly to emerge as the dominant political manager or undertaker of the period. His dominance was so great that he was referred to as the prime minister, in a period where this term was first gaining currency through the endeavours of Sir Robert Walpole in Britain. Conolly could never become an Irish Walpole: the dependence of the Irish legislature on Britain for guidance and support ensured that Ireland and her politicians would remain subservient to wider British interests. He could, however, establish domestic primacy, and this he did, after a long internecine struggle with his great rival, Lord Midleton. Conolly's eventual victory following the Wood's halfpence affair could be attributed to his natural disposition towards government rather than opposition, a trait not necessarily shared by the more ideologically driven Midleton. Conolly's pragmatism could be seen best in his management of the revenue service, where he oversaw the development of a more professional bureaucracy, while still managing to use it as a tool for political patronage. His role is examined fully for the first time in chapter 7, which provides the most extensive treatment of this key element of government bureaucracy to date.

Conolly's dealings with successive British ministers, as with his successful electoral and parliamentary management, owed much to this pragmatic streak. He only undertook measures which he knew could pass through the commons, even advising caution on measures he himself naturally favoured, such as the removal of the sacramental test for Protestant Dissenters in 1719 or the ill-fated Bank of Ireland project in 1721. His negotiation of the political minefield caused by the Wood's halfpence affair further emphasises this point. Conolly's achievement in raising the profile of the Irish house of commons became apparent with the construction of the world's first purpose built parliament house in Dublin in 1728–9, with the commons chamber at

its centre. Chapter 8 considers Conolly's political career in the years after 1715, looking particularly at his roles as speaker and lord justice, and how he redefined both of these offices during the reign of George I. The book concludes with a discussion of the construction of Castletown, the physical embodiment of Conolly's political career: dominant in Ireland, but impressive rather than spectacular within a wider British context. This discussion looks at Castletown not just as emblematic of Conolly's career but as part of the wider success of the Protestant elite in establishing and consolidating their position in the first three decades of the eighteenth century. This final chapter also examines Conolly's legacy, as perceived both by contemporary commentators and later historians, concentrating on his reputation as an 'economic patriot'. Thus what follows will offer a reassessment of Conolly's career and his significant contribution to the creation of the Irish Protestant ascendancy in the four decades that followed the Williamite victories at the Boyne and Aughrim.

1

The Rise of the House of Conolly, 1662–1729

By the time of his death William Conolly was an exemplar of the Irish Protestant ascendancy. He had established a dynasty that would survive into the twenty-first century, and whose power, wealth and status in the eighteenth century was symbolised by his country house, Castletown. His political career had been devoted to maintaining the 'Protestant interest' cemented by the victories on the battlefields of Aughrim and the Boyne. These victories had created the opportunity for Conolly to prosper in a manner that would have seemed impossible at the time of his birth in 1662. After all, he was not born with the inherited advantages traditionally associated with the ascendancy. Instead he had created his own place within the Irish elite through ability, hard work and devotion to the maintenance of the 'Protestant interest'. In doing so he had brought his family from provincial obscurity into the first rank of the Irish gentry.

I

The Conolly family history, in all major published genealogical sources, begins with William Conolly adding to the view expressed by one contemporary commentator that he was one 'whom fortune in a frolicsome mood raised from the lowest of the people to make him equal to the peers of the realm'.[1] The influence of 'fortune' is perhaps overstated, but Conolly certainly had risen from provincial obscurity, so much so that many of the details about his family background are contested, or are the subject of conjecture. He was born in Ballyshannon, County Donegal, in 1662, although the precise date is unknown. He was the eldest son of Patrick and Jane Conolly. Patrick Conolly has been variously described as a miller, innkeeper, or blacksmith.[2] He was almost certainly the Patrick McConnelly recorded as paying tax on two hearths in Ballyshannon in 1663 and also the Patrick O'Conolly recorded as paying £10 on the subsidy roll for Kilbarron, the local Church of Ireland parish, in 1662.[3] The different variants of the spelling of his name point towards a gradual anglicisation of their name, possibly connected to

[1] Trenchard, *A letter from a souldier*, p. 26.

[2] Boylan, 'The Conollys of Castletown'. See also McWilliam, 'The Dickson and Conolly families of Ballyshannon'; Patrick McNally, 'William Conolly, 1662–1729', in *ODNB*.

[3] J. L. T. McDonagh, 'Hearth money rolls', *Donegal Annual*, ii (1954), p. 502; Padraig O'Gallachair, 'Subsidy rolls, a few extracts from the barony of Tirhugh', *Donegal Annual*, iii (1957), p. 130; Allingham, *Ballyshannon, its history and antiquities*, p. 57.

conversion to the established church. The sums recorded on both the subsidy and hearth tax rolls were, however, substantial and suggest that Conolly senior enjoyed some prominence in the local community.

This inference is confirmed by the extent of his known landholdings. In 1680 Patrick Conolly was paying a not insubstantial annual rent of £35 for a number of holdings on the estate of Thomas Folliott, 2nd baron Ballyshannon.[4] These included the manorial mill.[5] He continued to lease these holdings until at least 1687. In that year he was joined on the Folliott rent roll by his son William who held a lease of the ten balyboes (approximately 600 acres) of Ballymunterhiggins at a yearly rent of £33.[6] It was probably as tenant of these properties that the Conollys, father and son, were included amongst those attainted in 1689 by King James II's parliament, although further research into those attainted by the 1689 parliament would be needed to establish a full picture of those Protestants singled out for confiscation.[7]

It is possible that Patrick Conolly had originally arrived in Ballyshannon during the wars of the 1640s. Ballyshannon, a small fortified port town, became a place of refuge for Protestants from across south-west Ulster during these years. It is likely that he came originally from Edenbrone in County Monaghan, the traditional home place of the Conolly clan, where members of the family continued to reside in the eighteenth century.[8] Terence Conolly, William's uncle, was a revenue official under the Restoration, rising to become collector of Killybegs, the revenue district which encompassed most of County Donegal, in the 1680s. He retained his position during the reign of James II and was one of the eleven collectors loyal to William III who were reappointed by William in one of his first acts as king of Ireland.[9] Terence Conolly's appointment as a collector even in the relatively poor district of Killybegs suggests that he must have had access to some influential patron as this was the only way to obtain such a position. Together with Patrick Conolly's attainder by James II's Irish parliament, it shows that the Conollys were not as humble as has sometimes been suggested. Patrick and Terence Conolly were both members of the established church, but their Christian

4 Rent roll of the manor of Ballyshannon May to All Saints 1680 (IAA, Castletown Papers 97/84 C/22).

5 For the importance of an estate mill and the role of the miller, see E. A. Currie, 'Landscape development in north-west and south-east Derry, 1700–1840', in *Derry and Londonderry, history and society*, ed. Gerard O'Brien (Dublin, 1999), p. 338.

6 Rent roll of the manor of Ballyshannon May to All Saints 1687 (IAA, 97/84 C/22).

7 For a list of those attainted in 1689, see Peter Manning, *The state of the Protestants of Ireland under the late King James' government: index of persons* (Kent, 1989).

8 For the continuing family links with County Monaghan, see bond between William Conolly and Phelim Conolly of Edinbrone, 3 Oct. 1693 (NAI, Conolly Papers, M6,917/82).

9 For the relationship between the two Conollys, see a Chancery bill dated 1694 (IAA, 97/84 C/33/1), for Terence Conolly's revenue career, see *CTB, 1689–92*, pp. 252–3, 256; C. I. McGrath, 'The Irish revenue system: government and administration, 1689–1702' (PhD thesis, University of London, 1997), pp. 11, 195, 207, app. 3, table 4.

names, together with those of other members of their extended family, such as Phelim and Hugh Conolly, suggest a Gaelic, Catholic, and Irish background.[10]

Conolly's maternal family were of a similar background. His mother came from a prominent Ballyshannon merchant family the Coans. Unlike the Conollys, they were Catholic. Thady Coan to whom Conolly referred as his uncle, was a nephew of the last abbot of the local Franciscan friary. In 1698, following the Bishops Banishment Act, which led to the expulsion of friars from Ireland, he was entrusted with the friary's chalices and regalia.[11] This act was, of course, passed by the wholly Protestant parliament, of which his nephew William Conolly was a member. Coan's Catholicism and connections with Franciscans did not stop him, and later his son, Terence, who also failed to convert, being employed as land agents by Conolly. Indeed, successive generations of the Coan family prospered under Conolly patronage both within the confines of the Conolly estates and within the revenue service.[12]

These continued links with his Catholic relations do not seem to have hindered Conolly's career because of the absolute monopoly of landownership enjoyed by local Protestants in Donegal, in contrast to other parts of the country where the perceived threat of the old proprietors was greater.[13] It would, however, be difficult to find any significant Irish political family that did not have any Catholic relations in the background, suggesting a plausible reason for the lack of interest by contemporaries in his relations' continued adherence to the Catholic faith.[14] One of the few pejorative hints towards Conolly's family background was the nickname bestowed on him by his political opponents in the 1720s: Sir Owen McHugh (a name which has echoes of the dominant Gaelic Irish Donegal magnates the O'Donnells). Alan Brodrick, Lord Midleton, and his son St John were Conolly's greatest political rivals, and their power base in Cork rivalled that of Conolly in north-west Ulster. They were also a new family, having arrived in Ireland during the Cromwellian conquest, so were more comfortable in referring to Conolly's native antecedents than to his arriviste status. They used this nickname in their private correspondence

10 Boylan, 'The Conollys of Castletown', p. 1.

11 For the Coane family, see Abagail Cone Leibell, *The Coane family of Ballyshannon* (privately printed, 2002). For Thady Coan's connection with Donegal Friary, see Padraig O'Gallachair, 'Inscriptions from the Abbey cemetery, Ballyshannon', *Donegal Annual*, iii (1957), p. 99.

12 For their correspondence with Conolly for the years 1703–19, see the Castletown Papers (IAA, 97/84 C/25). Anthony Coan entered the Irish revenue service in 1718 under Conolly's patronage and rose to become superviser of the hearthmoney in Sligo: minute book of the revenue commissioners, 28 Jan. 1718, 7 June 1718, 25 Sept. 1718, 21 Mar. 1724 (TNA, CUST 1/14 unfoliated; CUST 1/15 unfoliated; CUST 1/17, p. 129).

13 On the makeup of the Donegal gentry, see Kevin McKenny, 'British settler society in Donegal, *c.* 1625 to 1685', in *Donegal: history and society: interdisciplinary essays on the history of an Irish county*, ed. William Nolan, Liam Ronayne and Mairead Dunlevy (Dublin, 1995), pp. 325–55.

14 David Fleming, 'Conversion, family and mentality', in *Converts and conversion in Ireland, 1650–1850*, ed. Michael Browne, C. I. McGrath and Thomas Power (Dublin, 2005), pp. 290–311.

but it also entered public discourse in 1723 during a contested by-election in County Westmeath when it was used as the title of a mocking ballad. [15] The playing of this ballad at a Dublin theatre in the same year caused a riot between supporters of the two political factions. These references to Sir Owen McHugh, however, seem to be the only occasions on which political uses were made of Conolly's native background. His Anglicanism overrode his native antecedents. As the contemporary historian and politician, Sir Richard Cox put it: 'we know no difference of nation but what is expressed by Papist and Protestant. If the most ancient natural Irishman be a Protestant, no man takes him for other than an English man.'[16]

Much more common were slurs based on his father's supposed profession as an innkeeper. As we have already seen, Patrick Conolly was employed as a miller on the Folliott estate in Ballyshannon. It was not uncommon for seventeenth-century millers to combine their milling interests with operating an inn. The presence amongst the Conolly holdings in Ballyshannon of an intriguingly named property called the Four Sheafs, which sounds suspiciously like a seventeenth-century inn, only adds to this possibility. [17] Certainly some of Conolly's contemporaries believed that he was an innkeeper's son. In 1717 Sir John St Leger deplored Conolly's impending appointment as a lord justice writing: 'This gentleman was lately an attorney, his father keeping an ale house in the north of Ireland, this being too notorious to be stifled.'[18] The St Legers themselves were descended from an Elizabethan adventurer, who had established the family interest in north Cork, putting into question their status as 'old gentry'.[19]

In 1727 another Irish success story, the banker Ephraim Dawson was described acidly by his neighbour, Pole Cosby, as a 'a mean, very mean upstart, for his father kept an ale house at the sign of the cock in Belfast'. In reality as Daniel Beaumont has pointed out, Dawson's father was a revenue collector in Carrickfergus.[20] Like St Leger with Conolly, Cosby wished to stress his target's low birth. Being the son of an innkeeper seems thus to have

15 D. W. Hayton, 'Two ballads on the Co. Westmeath by-election of 1723', *ECI*, iv (1989), pp. 27–9. St John Brodrick to Lord Midleton, 11 Mar, 14, 21 Apr. 1724 (SHC, 1248/6, fols. 161–2, 7–8, 9–10); Lord Midleton to St John Brodrick, 26 Apr. 1724 (SHC, 1248/6, fols. 13–14). For the riot in the theatre, see Martyn J. Powell, *The politics of consumption in eighteenth century Ireland* (Basingstoke, 2005), p. 107.

16 Richard Cox, *Hibernia Anglicana or the history of Ireland part one* (London, 1689), quoted in S. J. Connolly, *Divided kingdom: Ireland, 1630–1800* (Oxford, 2008), p. 226.

17 For the importance of an estate mill and the role of the miller, see Currie, 'Landscape development in north-west and south-east Derry', p. 338. For the Four Sheafs, see Conolly's legal accounts for 1692 (IAA, 97/84 B3/1–10).

18 Sir John St Leger to Lord Chief Justice Parker, 21 Feb. 1717, quoted in Boylan, 'The Conollys of Castletown', p. 6.

19 Michael Quane, 'Speaker Conolly', *Dublin Historical Record*, xxv (1971), p. 27.

20 Walter Fitzgerald, 'Autobiography of Pole Cosby of Stradbally, Queens County, 1703–1737', *Journal of the Kildare Archaeological Society*, v (1906–8), p. 174; D. M. Beaumont, 'The gentry of the King's and Queen's Counties: Protestant landed society, 1690–1760', 2 vols. (PhD thesis, TCD, 1999), vol. 1, p. 141.