

Opinions about Cromwell vary across the British Isles. In Ireland he is widely remembered with dislike or hatred, even today (see source 1). The main reason is the behaviour of Cromwell and his army when he put down the Irish rebellion in 1649, in particular the Siege of Drogheda.

Why did Cromwell go to Ireland?

England had become Protestant under the Tudors but Ireland had remained Catholic. English monarchs gave Irish land to Protestant English settlers, which made the Irish Catholics furious. In 1641 the Irish rebelled and killed thousands of Protestants (see source 2). After Charles I's execution most Irish Catholics supported his son. They thought he would protect their religion. Fearing trouble, Parliament sent an army under Cromwell's command to invade Ireland.

What happened at Drogheda?

Cromwell landed with his army in August 1649. He needed to capture the enemy's nearest stronghold, Drogheda, quickly or his expedition would fail. Cromwell had 12,000 men and the town was defended by 2,500 of the enemy's best soldiers. 4,000 civilians also lived in Drogheda. Cromwell therefore expected the town to surrender (see source 3), but the commander refused to do so. After a fierce attack (see source 4) the walls were broken down and the defenders driven into a church tower, where they still refused to surrender, as Cromwell describes (see source 6). Cromwell did not order that civilians be put to death, but it is clear that many died at Drogheda and that Cromwell felt they deserved to die (see source 7). However, recent research has challenged the scale of civilian deaths, and some historians now argue that no massacre took place (see source 8).

In total about 3,500 people died at Drogheda. During the next 10 years of bloodshed it is estimated that about a third of the population of Ireland was either killed or died of starvation. The majority of Catholics who owned land had it taken away from them and were removed to the barren province of Connacht. Catholic boys and girls were shipped to Barbados and sold to the planters as slaves. The land taken from the Catholics by Cromwell was given to the Protestant soldiers who had taken part in the campaign. Before the rebellion in 1641, Catholics owned 59% of the land in Ireland. By the time Cromwell left in 1650 the proportion had shrunk to 22%.

Tasks

Read all the sources carefully and then complete the following tasks.

1. Explain why Cromwell expected the soldiers in Drogheda to surrender.
2. Write your own account of what happened when the commander refused to surrender.
3. Why did Cromwell behave like this? What justification could he use?
4. Do you agree with the historian in source 8 that the primary evidence does not support the idea that a massacre took place?
5. Explain what *you* think about what Cromwell did to the people of Drogheda.

Source 1: from 'Young Ned of the Hill' – a song by the Pogues (an Irish band)

A curse upon you Oliver Cromwell
You who raped our motherland
I hope you're rotting down in hell
For the horrors that you sent
To our misfortunate forefathers

(Source 2: see picture pack)

Source 3: Cromwell's first summons to Sir Arthur Aston to surrender Drogheda

(I have) brought the army belonging to the Parliament of England before this place, to reduce it to obedience. If this be refused, you will have no cause to blame me.

Source 4: a modern historian writing about the siege

Cromwell, in a furious passion, ordered that no quarter [no one to be spared] was to be granted to the defenders of Drogheda. The Parliamentarian army swept through the town, slaughtering officers and soldiers. The Royalist governor Sir Arthur Aston was bludgeoned to death with his own wooden leg, which the soldiers believed to be filled with gold coins. Catholic priests and friars were treated as combatants and killed on sight. Many civilians died in the carnage. A group of defenders who had barricaded themselves in St Peter's church in the north of the town were burned alive when the Parliamentarians set fire to the church. Around 3,500 people died in the storming of Drogheda; many of those who survived were transported to Barbados. Parliamentarian losses were around 150.

Source 5: a description of the siege of Drogheda by a modern historian

The rules of war of the time with regard to sieges were clear. If a commander refused to surrender and the town was subsequently won by storm, then he put at risk the lives not only of all his men but all those who could be held to be combatants [people who had helped in the fight]. The reason for the rule was clear; it was an age when sieges were long, wasteful in disease and supplies. It was hoped that in the end lives would actually be saved: garrisons would surrender quickly, sieges would be short and victories brief but not bloody.

(Source 6: see next page)

Source 7: the justification Cromwell gives for the massacres in Ireland

As a result they were now made with their bloods to answer the cruelties which they had exercised upon many poor Protestants.

Source 8: from Philip McKeiver's book, *A New History of Cromwell's Irish Campaign*, published in 2007

Most of the allegations against Cromwell are at best dubious, and, in the most part, not supported by original primary documents.

Source 6: Oliver Cromwell's report to Parliament about what happened at Drogheda

Dublin, 17th September 1649

Sir,

... I sent Sir Arthur Ashton, the then Governor, a summons to deliver the town to the use of the Parliament of England.

Receiving no satisfactory answer, the guns fired two or three hundred shot, beat down the steeple of the church, and beat down a tower. ...The enemy retreated many of them, into the Mill-Mount; a place very strong and of difficult access, being exceedingly high ... and strongly palisaded. Our men getting up to them were ordered by me to put them all to the sword. And indeed, being in the heat of action, I forbade them to spare any that were in arms in the town, and, I think, that night they put to the sword about 2,000 men, Many of the officers and soldiers fled over the bridge into the other part of the town, where about one hundred of them possessed St. Peter's church-steeple, some the west gate and others a strong round tower next the gate called St. Sunday's. These being summoned to yield to mercy, refused, whereupon I ordered the steeple of St. Peter's Church to be fired, where one of them was heard to say in the midst of the flames: "God damn me, I burn, I burn."

The next day, the other two towers were summoned, in one of which was about six or seven score; but they refused to yield themselves, and we knowing that hunger must compel them, set only good guard to secure them from running away. From one of the said towers, notwithstanding their condition, they killed and wounded some of our men. When they submitted, their officers were knocked on the head, and every tenth man of the soldiers killed, and the rest shipped for Barbados. The soldiers in the other tower were all spared, as to their lives only, and shipped likewise for Barbados.

I am persuaded that this is a righteous judgment of God upon these barbarous wretches, who have imbrued their hands in so much innocent blood; and that it will tend to prevent the effusion of blood for the future, which are the satisfactory grounds to such actions, which otherwise cannot but work remorse and regret.

Your most obedient servant

Oliver Cromwell

Glossary

<i>strongly palisaded</i>	heavily protected by a fence
<i>put them to the sword</i>	killed them
<i>in arms</i>	carrying weapons
<i>were summoned to yield</i>	were asked to surrender
<i>six or seven score</i>	120-140 soldiers
<i>submitted</i>	surrendered
<i>Barbados</i>	an island in the Caribbean where they would have been sold as slaves
<i>imbrued</i>	stained
<i>effusion</i>	spilling