

Banished by Cromwell? John Hooke and the Caribbean

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Abstract

For many years and in the eyes of many Irish people, Oliver Cromwell was the ultimate historical hate-figure. Given the brutal nature of the war of reconquest fought by the army under his command in Ireland in 1649-1650, this is perhaps not surprising. However, political expediency, atavistic emotions and misconceptions have at times clouded a more complex historical reality. An excellent example of this is the case of the migration of John Hooke to the Caribbean island of Saint Christopher. Because Hooke left Ireland in the 1650s, it was assumed unquestioningly in older works that he had been forcibly expelled by Cromwellian soldiers. Revisiting and reinterpreting the sources available recast the episode as one where John Hooke made the most of close connections with the Cromwellian regime to establish himself voluntarily amidst the burgeoning English trading colonies in the West Indies.

In July 1642, Hooke Castle was attacked by a small Parliamentary force from the fort of Duncannon, County Wexford. Manoeuvring two guns ashore from the ship that had landed them, the assault party proceeded to fire on ‘the castle [for] 4 or 5 hours in vain’. Despite warnings from the captain of the ship that ‘foul weather was like to come upon them,’ the men were by this stage in too great a state of disarray to effect a quick and orderly retreat. Caught amidst ‘a very great storm and thick mist,’ the Parliamentarians ‘could not keep their muskets dry, nor their matches light, neither well see each other.’ Attacked at that moment by a force of some 200 Catholic Confederates, almost the entire party was killed or captured. Only a small number who leaped from the rocks into the sea, and who avoided drowning in the attempt, made it back to the ship. Despite this setback, subsequent attacks on the Castle were more successful and the remaining members of the Hooke family, the Castle’s long-time owners and residents, were allegedly driven out by Cromwellian troops in the late 1640s, escaping or expelled to the West Indies (O’Callaghan 1885: 328; Hayes 1949: 128).

Despite the claims made by O’Callaghan and Hayes, no connection can be made to substantiate a link between the Tower of Hook (in reality a lighthouse dating from the 1100s) and the Hooke family. While members of the Hooke family were indeed to be found on the West Indian islands of Martinique and

Guadeloupe, it is unlikely Cromwellian dispossession was responsible for their presence. Despite later misconceptions, the Hookes benefited rather than suffered from the Cromwellian conquest and settlement. This article will examine how later accounts, reflecting and infused with a romantic and strongly nationalist perception of the Irish abroad, came to turn history on its head in regard to the Hooke family. The full story is far more complex and illustrates very well that the reasons and motivations underpinning migration and diasporic identity are multifaceted and subject to ongoing change and transformation. Scholarly undertakings such as ‘The Irish in Europe’ project based in NUI Maynooth are currently endeavouring to advance the study of the Irish migrant experience in this context.

Some of the confusion surrounding the history of the Hookes stemmed from the activities of another member of the family, Nathaniel Hooke (1664-1738). Nathaniel Hooke had a quite remarkable life - born in Dublin, he transformed from a radical Protestant Whig rebel fighting against James II in Monmouth’s rebellion of 1685 to a loyal servant of James in 1688. He metamorphosed yet again in 1701 into a diplomat and soldier of Louis XIV. [2] To suit his changed circumstances, it seems quite likely that he constructed this past family connection with Hook Tower. An early seventeenth century map depicts the lighthouse

as Castle Hooke complete with fortifications (Colfer 2004: 86). A later document by Hooke refers to his possession and use of a book of maps by cartographer John Speed ('The state of Scotland, written by the earl of Lauderdale in 1690 and sent to me by M. Louis Inese, Almoner to the Queen' [with annotation by Hooke], 7 Nov. 1705, (A.A.E. CP Angleterre, supplemental, vol. 3, f. 277r). [3] Hooke wrote in praise of the usefulness of the atlas in 1705, one year before he applied for naturalisation as a French subject. For a man seeking to prove his noble ancestry, the existence of an extant Hooke Castle with suitably impressive battlements hinting at the past martial gloire of the family must have been a godsend. The naturalisation papers submitted for registration in the *Chambre des Comptes* in January 1706 traced the origins of the Hookes back to Eustache de la Hougue and the Norman invasion of England in 1066 (*Bibliothèque Nationale*, MSS Dossiers Bleus 59, f. 9351). In 1172 a descendant, Florence de la Hougue, allegedly accompanied Henry II to Ireland, established himself near Waterford and anglicised his name to Hooke. The town which he founded was called Hooke-Town, but unfortunately (if perhaps conveniently), this bourg had been eventually inundated by the ocean. The only remaining remnant of the settlement was the family chateau, still bearing the name of Hooke Castle. The document then skipped without further detail directly from the twelfth century to Nathaniel Hooke himself.

A pedigree of the family contained in a French genealogical guide draws on and echoes much of the account given in the naturalisation document (De Saint-Allais 1872: 19-22). Intriguingly, however, it then proceeds to add new information fleshing out the rather skeletal family tree presented in the original source with a much more detailed genealogy. In this version, we learn of the same claimed descent from Eustache de la Hougue's arrival in England, to Florence de la Hougue's journey to Ireland. From this point it jumps four centuries to arrive at another Eustache Hooke, of Hooke Castle, County Waterford. His existence is unconfirmed by other documentation. He is said to have lived in the 1590s and to have been

married to Helen O'Byrne of County Wicklow. His son is named as Thomas Hooke (of Hooke Castle), who married Eleanor O'Kelly from Aughrim in County Galway (or possibly of Aughrim, County Wicklow). Partial veracity of the document is confirmed by the inclusion of Thomas Hooke, Nathaniel's grandfather. Independent documentation confirms his existence, though not his place of birth, and the feasibility of his being born in 1590s (Twenty-sixth report of the deputy keeper of the public records and keeper of the state papers in Ireland 1894: 428). There is no evidence connecting him with Hooke Castle.

It is interesting to note that both of these early Hookes are purported to have married women from prominent Gaelic Irish families. Such a connection with Gaelic nobility would have served Nathaniel Hooke's purpose in 1706 by strengthening his claim to noble status in French eyes. It may also have gained him greater acceptance in Irish émigré circles in Paris. Significantly, Hooke made no mention that his grandfather Thomas Hooke had been mayor of Dublin in 1654, during Cromwellian rule, nor that he had been a lay elder of a radical Protestant church in the city. While this would have testified to the family's status, it would also have highlighted unwelcome links with Parliamentarianism and radical Protestantism in the 1640s, 1650s and 1660s. Hooke would appear to have suppressed this aspect of his past by constructing the alternative origin centring on Hooke Castle/Hook Tower.

Nathaniel Hooke was far from unusual in attempting to embellish retrospectively his ancestry, to mask the foundations of a rather too hasty social ascent. Many first and second generation arrivistes in Ireland, England and France spent much time and not a little money avoiding the stigma of being seen as a parvenu in the ranks of nobility. 'Parvenus ... sought to cover their sometimes unsavoury and usually shadowy backgrounds with a veneer of antiquity'. Similarly, 'members of the displaced élites of Old Ireland, adrift on the continent, clutched at pedigrees [which] comforted by reminding them of what they had forfeited, and

buttressed requests for fresh ennoblement' (Barnard 2003: 45-51). That even a man as eminent in the hierarchies of the French church and state as Cardinal Richelieu felt the need for a sympathetic appraisal of his pedigree demonstrates that the weight of authority and legitimacy attached to the prestige of lineage was no mere foible (Bergin 1997: 12-13). The consequences of having the legitimacy of claims accepted could be great. For a man in Richelieu's position in the highest ranks of the elite, for example, an illustrious past served to cast his rise to power in a natural light and reinforce his hold on the most influential offices of state. To those in Hooke's position, strangers in France, far below *les grands* on the social scale, the benefits of a distinguished ancestry were more practical. Economically, the acknowledgement of noble status was vitally important in avoiding taxes and making the financial position of *émigré* families more secure. Socially, it provided an *entrée* into the decidedly and determinedly select world of the French nobility.

Similar sentiments relating to the importance of social status underpin references in a manuscript in the Royal Irish Academy (MSS 24 D9, pp 1-48) relating to the branch of the Hooke family established in the Caribbean. These documents originate from a legal case concerning *dérogance* (loss of the status of nobility) taken in 1785. The people concerned claimed descent from a John Hooke who left Ireland for the island of St Christopher in the 1650s. However, the documents cast little light on when or why John Hooke left Ireland as, not surprisingly, the family members themselves were unclear by the 1780s; in De Saint-Allais' account of the Hooke family's history (De Saint-Allais 1872: 19-22), this John Hooke who migrated to the West Indies is identified as the son of Peter Hooke, brother of Nathaniel's father, John. His existence is confirmed by the Correspondence of Colonel N. Hooke (Macray 1870 II: ix). John Hooke of St Christopher would therefore have been Nathaniel's cousin. If De Saint-Allais' account is taken at face value, the political outlook of this branch of the family would have been very different to that of the rest of the family: Peter

Hooke is claimed to have disappeared after the reduction of Ireland by Cromwell, and his son John, a cavalry lieutenant, allegedly proscribed at that time also, leading to his migration to Saint Christopher.

This version of the Hooke genealogy would place Peter Hooke very much at odds with his father Thomas Hooke, a committed supporter of Parliament in politics and Protestantism in religion, and a man who substantially aided and benefited from the Cromwellian conquest. Thomas Hooke's rise to influence had been rapid. In 1654 he was elected, in a departure from the previous system of arranged succession, to the office of mayor of Dublin. He advanced steadily in power and responsibility in the civic government of Interregnum Dublin as he proved both his loyalty and usefulness to the Cromwellian regime. He became mayor, justice of the peace, revenue commissioner, commissioner for probate of wills and farmer of the petty customs of Dublin. He was directly involved in overseeing land confiscation and population transplantation after the defeat of the Catholic Confederacy. Indeed, in what can be seen as evidence of his trustworthiness and reliability he was the only non-military member amongst an eight man commission sent to the precinct of Waterford to investigate 'the delinquency of Irish and other proprietors [...] in order to the distinguishing of their respective qualifications, according to the act for settling Ireland' (Dunlop 1913 II: 378). In this context, it appears unlikely in the extreme that the Hookes were expelled from any lands in the 1650s by dint of Cromwellian action, and especially not from any holdings in Waterford or Wexford, where the only evidence we have to support their ownership is that invented by Nathaniel Hooke in 1706. How, then, did John Hooke get to the Caribbean?

De Saint-Allais gives no source for his information. As the work was printed in the 1870s, at a time of increasing controversy in print surrounding Cromwell's memory in both Ireland and England, this may have contributed to the misinterpretation of the reasons motivating John Hooke to leave Ireland.

Documentary as well as circumstantial evidence suggests that rather than being forced to leave, he may have been a voluntary participant in Cromwell's 'Western Design' to mount an expedition against Spanish territories in the West Indies. A John Hooke is recorded as Assistant to the Commissary General of Musters in Jamaica in 1657 (C.S.P Colonial, America and the West Indies, 1675-76: Addenda 1574-1674: 499). If this is the same John Hooke, his career was furthered by involvement with Cromwellianism, rather than hindered. Spain, rather than France, was England's main rival in the 1650s. Indeed from the late 1650s, England and France were allies in a war against Spain. In the West Indies, the island of Saint Christopher (colloquially known as Saint Kitts) was a shared territory, and instances of holding land in both parts of the island were not unusual (C.S.P Col., America and the West Indies: 758). With the other English settlements in the Caribbean on Barbados, Nevis, Antigua, Montserrat and later Jamaica, Saint Kitts attracted large numbers of settlers in the 1650s through the growth of the hugely profitable sugar trade. The sugar boom gave birth to 'vast and sudden fortunes' allowing successful settlers to 'establish sturdy foundations for the economic security of their

posterities' (Canny and Pagden 1987: 217). In the wake of the downfall of the powerful French political and financial figure Nicolas Fouquet in 1661, John Hooke appears to have acquired his confiscated estates on Martinique. Marrying Elizabeth Melon or Meslon, their children remained in the sugar business in the Caribbean for over a century. In an instance of historical irony, later members of the family, now thoroughly Gallicised and Catholicised, and with only a vague awareness of their Irish origins, served in the Irish regiments in the French army.

In a sense then, the Hookes in the Caribbean did owe their presence there to Oliver Cromwell and the legacy of his campaign in Ireland. Rather than the forced migration of Catholic rebels, the family had benefited from the opportunities created by the Cromwellian wars. As with many aspects of Irish migration and diaspora studies, a seemingly simple and straightforward account can with more in-depth critical investigation and with the benefit of archival research produce a more complex and nuanced understanding of the processes at work.

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Notes

[1] The author's areas of interest include Early Modern Europe, Migration, Identity, Diplomatic and Intelligence History, Colonialism and Empire, and the War of Spanish Succession.

[2] See Thomas Byrne, 'From Irish Whig Rebel to Bourbon Diplomat: the Life and Career of Nathaniel Hooke (1664-1738)' (PhD thesis, NUI Maynooth, 2006).

[3] Hooke cites the work as Speed's *Theatre of the Empire of Great Britain* (London, 1614), p. 129.

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