

WILLIAM WILLSON: FROM CLARE TO DONEGAL

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THE PARISH RECORDS of Clare, a small town on the Suffolk–Essex border, are unusual both in their quantity and in the quality of their content. The archive comprises over 1,800 documents, mainly dating from the 16th and 17th centuries, when successive churchwardens assiduously preserved every scrap of paper and parchment recording parish business. From these documents it is possible to build up a clear picture of 17th-century Clare and the people who lived there. The family of William Willson, a Clare lawyer, is of particular interest. From modest beginnings in Suffolk, the Willsons were to rise to considerable wealth in Ireland and their story highlights the dramatic changes which life in the early 17th century could undergo. Sidelights are also thrown upon problems of national importance, such as the East Anglian enclosure disputes and the plantation of Ireland.

The principal matter of concern to the parish officers of Clare in this period was the administration of the common pasture, an expanse of open land on the site of an ancient fortification at the northern end of the town. For centuries East Anglian communities had relied upon strip farming for their survival. An essential part of this system was the common land where the villagers could cut timber and depasture their beasts. In the 16th and 17th centuries wealthy men throughout England resorted to intrigue and coercion to acquire exclusive use of these commons for sheep farming. Inevitably, these efforts were opposed by the rest of the community, either by legal action or by force. Ket's Rebellion, which broke out in Norfolk and the northern outskirts of Suffolk in 1549, was the most memorable of many enclosure riots which occurred in the Midlands and East Anglia in this period.

The Clare common pasture dispute was typical of literally hundreds of enclosure lawsuits, but it is of particular interest because of the fascinating background information which can be gleaned from the parish records. These do not solely comprise depositions and other legal papers, but also include a mass of notes, accounts and other working papers of the parish attorney, William Willson.

The case of the town's poor against a consortium of wealthy intriguers was taken up by several leading men in Clare and a case in Chancery followed, in which William Willson acted as attorney for the poor. Among the parish records there survives the power of attorney which bears the signatures or marks of 123 of the poor of Clare.¹ Willson's copious notes, referred to above, indicate that he took his duties very seriously indeed. He scribbled notes on everything, on the back of accounts and correspondence and even on letters from his family.

The legal processes were long and expensive, but in May 1610 the Chancellor found in favour of the poor and issued a certificate whereby fifteen new feoffees were to be appointed to control pasture for forty cattle for the use of the poor, at an annual rent of £3 6s. 8d. to the King. A pinder was elected and the profits of the pound were to go to the poor. The certificate also required £200 to be raised for the purchase of the pasture from Sir Henry Bromley.²

By the time the dispute was finally settled William Willson had spent £94 9s. 7d. of his own money on the case and presented a characteristically detailed account of his expenses to the parish churchwardens.³ The items included travelling expenses arising from numerous trips to London, Cambridge, Newmarket, Bury St Edmunds and elsewhere, and payments for learned counsel as well as money spent on tips and gifts.

Item, paid to the dore keeper when the certificates weare shewed to my Lord.	5s.
Item, paid for wyne bestowed upon my Lord's men.	2s.
Item, paid to my Lord his Seacretary and the Chamberlen for their paynes.	13s.

One large expense was the accommodation and entertainment of the Commissioners when they met at Clare to hear the dispute in March 1610. The Commissioners stayed with Willson and this seems to have put him to some considerable trouble.

Item, pade to the apothecary for consearves and biskett bread for the Commissioners, when they mett at Clare.	10s. 4d.
Item, paid to Mr. Goulding for part of the Commissioners dyett.	£4 13s. 4d.
Item, for the Comissioners dyet & thir mens at my howse and for wyne.	£4

The account was soon paid off and Willson even waived some of his expenses. The purchase price was also paid and the administration of the common was established. The results of Willson's efforts are still there for all to see, for the common has changed little in the last four hundred years. Willson's leading position in Clare society was assured. He became a feoffee of the common pasture and his signature appears on numerous parish documents after 1610.

William, son of Thomas and Anne Willson had been baptised in Clare on 1 June 1572, the eldest of at least six children. The Willsons seem to have been recent immigrants to the town, for there are no earlier references to them in the parish registers. However, they were quick to establish a good position for themselves and Thomas Willson served as a feoffee of the church estate in 1575 and as bailiff from 1575 to 1577.⁴ In view of his subsequent profession William probably attended university, but although three boys of that name were at Cambridge in the period 1584–1587, none of them graduated. Some time before 1607 Willson must have married. His wife was, presumably, from another town, since there is no reference to the marriage in the Clare registers. Three of their children were baptised in Clare church, including the eldest, John, who was baptised on 4 March 1606/7.

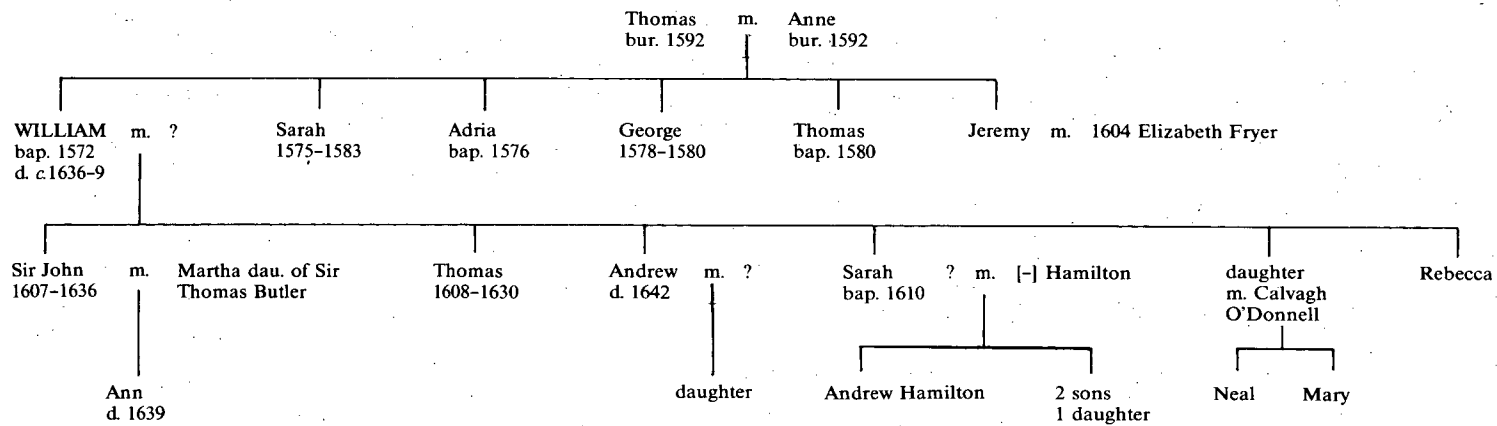
William Willson's family correspondence, upon which he scribbled his case notes, reveals some interesting insights into his private life.

Loving brother manie thanks unto you and my sister for your cheese which never came more better unto me in this hard tyme for which I thanke... you shall doe an acceptable good turne (which yf possible you can) to send me up the some of twentie shillings by the bearer herof the next week... Your loving brother Jer. Wilson.⁵

To her loving husband Mr. Willyam Willson... Onnebell my Ante commends herself unto you, lettinge of you understande that she have sent you by John How the career xl. viis. in mony & your writtings & she would praye you that you woulde remember to bye vi red brasell skynes for to make up the cushens with all & to bye frence for them. Thus with our harte recommendations we commite you to allmightie God hoe is the safe keeper of all his cheldren. Screbled hastely the viiii day of November.⁶

Jeremy Willson had married in Clare in 1604, but lived in London, where he seems to have had to struggle to make ends meet and it is likely that William often had to supplement his younger brother's diet and income, as on this occasion. William's wife clearly took advantage of his many trips to the capital on parish business to purchase luxuries which they could not obtain locally. The family must have been quite wealthy to be able to spend £10 7s. on material for cushions. It has not been possible to locate the site of their home in Clare, but it is likely that it was fairly substantial and was probably in one of the more fashionable streets, such as Nethergate Street.

THE WILLSON FAMILY



After the common pasture dispute was settled in 1610 William Willson's presence in Clare seems to have been spasmodic and after 1634 no references to the Willson family are to be found in the parish records. The later life of William Willson remained a mystery until the Suffolk Record Office received a letter from Bob Hunter of the New University in Ulster, enquiring about Suffolk men who had been involved in the Plantation of Ulster in the early 17th century. Mr Hunter had uncovered a reference to one such man, 'William Wilson of Clary', and the connection was confirmed by a brief postscript to Jeremy Willson's letter to his brother in 1609, quoted above: '*Post scriptum* as concerning your Irish affayers, I will be and am most careful thereof'.

The Plantation of Ireland had been instigated by the Tudor regime with the aim of replacing rebellious Irish farmers with loyal English settlers. The early Stuart kings extended this policy, concentrating upon Ulster. In 1607 the Earls of Tyrone and Tyrconnell fled to Rome and their lands, which comprised the greater part of Ulster and Donegal, were confiscated. The land was handed over to English and Scottish undertakers upon condition that they planted their estates with Protestant settlers.

Even before the common pasture dispute was settled William Willson's interest was turning to the opportunities the Plantation presented. On 18 July 1610 he was granted a patent to colonise Ulster. His lands consisted of 1,000 acres in Aghagalla, to which he later added a further 2,000 acres which had originally been granted to Sir Henry Docwra. Willson's property lay in Aghagalla [now Aughagault] and Convoy, in the fertile agricultural lowland of County Donegal, in the vicinity of Lifford, close to the modern border with Northern Ireland. It was an excellent investment and, predictably, the Willson family's fortunes prospered. William Willson approached his new project with characteristic energy and enthusiasm. Within a year he had settled a number of English families on the estate and was building up his livestock (Mullin 1960, 27-33).

A number of surveys were carried out on behalf of the English government to check on the progress of the Plantation. In 1618-19 Captain Pynnar's survey recorded that William owned 2,000 acres including 'a large Bawne and a Castle standing on a high Mount, all of which is thoroughly finished, himself with his Wife and Family dwelling therein. He hath made a Village consisting of 10 Houses well built' (Hill 1971, 515-16). Seventy British families, and no Irish, were said to be living on the estate. This almost certainly included many Clare men - Willson's position in the town would have facilitated the recruitment of local people for the project. Several typical Suffolk names such as Pennell and Parmenter occur in Irish documents relating to the estate, but so do a number of Irish names, suggesting that, contrary to Captain Pynnar's belief, a number of native families were living on the estate. The destruction of the Convoy parish registers and other vital records in the fires at the Public Record Office of Ireland in 1922 has so far thwarted attempts to ascertain how many Suffolk families emigrated with the Willsons.

Another survey, in 1622, describes the Willson residence in greater detail: 'A house of lime and stone and birch timber, slated, standing on a mount called Dundree, 50ft long and 18ft wide with 2 returns whereof one is 27ft long and 18ft wide and 2 stories high; the other is 33ft long, 18ft wide and 1 storey high.'¹⁷ This castle survived for many years - it burned down about 150 years ago and the present Killynure House was built adjacent to the site.

William Willson does not seem to have been so scrupulous in his business dealings in Ireland as he had been in Clare. The 1622 survey had concluded that 'The said Willson acknowledgeth that he hath made noe legall Conveyance to any Freeholder, and that he made diverse imperfect notes, purporting leases for yeares to diverse other of his Tenants'.

Since the Willsons had disappeared completely from the parish records of Clare by 1634, it is likely that the entire family moved to Ireland. William's eldest son John was certainly with him, together with at least one other son and three daughters. The younger generation of Willsons made advantageous marriages in Ireland. One girl married a member of the important Hamilton family and John Willson married Martha, eldest daughter of Sir Thomas Butler of Cloughgrenan. Like his

father, John devoted his energies to increasing the family's fortune. In 1628 he was knighted and in the following year was created a baronet, upon the nomination of his relative by marriage, Sir Frederick Hamilton (Hill 1971, 516n.). This was not simply a favour to a relation, however, since Sir Frederick may have been paid as much as £2,000 for his assistance. It is an indication of the Willsons' wealth that they could afford such largesse. A few months later, although his father was still alive, Sir John received a re-grant of the family estate to be held as the manor of Willsonsfort.

In 1636 Sir John fell ill. He made his will on 13 April, with a codicil dated 15 April, and died at Lifford the following day, aged only 29. He was buried in the cathedral of Raphoe. Sir John bequeathed the manor and other lands to 'my dearly beloved father William Willson esquire for life'.⁸ The property would then pass to Sir John's brother Andrew. The will provided for the maintenance of Sir John's only child, Ann, then aged two, and also included generous legacies to his family, friends and servants, including several Irishmen – another indication that the Willsons had not excluded Irish families from their estate to the extent suggested by Pynnar's survey.

William Willson was 63 years old when Sir John died and, although he had allowed his son to take over many of the responsibilities of the head of the family, he was still sufficiently active to serve as executor of John's will. No further references to William Willson have been found in England or Ireland and he must have died shortly after Sir John, since an inquisition held at Lifford in 1640 (Hill 1971, 515n.) stated that Ann, Sir John Willson's daughter, had died in August 1639 and that her uncle, Andrew Willson, was the next heir. It can be assumed, therefore, that William Willson died between 1636 and 1639, after a long and eventful life. Sadly, his efforts to establish a Willson dynasty were unsuccessful. His surviving son, Andrew, died in 1642 leaving only a baby daughter, and the lands passed to his grandson Andrew Hamilton. William would have gained some consolation, however, from the knowledge that this part of Donegal is still known as Willson's Fort.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am most grateful to Dr Bob Hunter of the New University of Ulster, the County Librarian of Donegal and Mr John McGlinchey of Killynure House, Convoy, for their assistance and interest in this subject.

NOTES

- 1 S.R.O.B., FL501/11/332.
- 2 For a detailed account of the dispute see Thornton 1928, 49–50, 226–27.
- 3 S.R.O.B., FL501/5/1.
- 4 S.R.O.B., FL501/11/48 and Thornton 1928, 218.
- 5 S.R.O.B., FL501/11/293.
- 6 S.R.O.B., FL501/11/392.
- 7 B.L., Add. MSS. 4757.
- 8 P.R.O.I., R.C. 5/25 (shelf no. 1a.48.114), pp. 383–94.

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- Hill, G., 1971. *An Historical Account of the Plantation in Ulster, 1608–1620*. Dublin.
 Mullin, T.H., 1960. *Convoy*, Belfast News Letter Ltd.
 Thornton, G.A., 1928. *A History of Clare, Suffolk*. Cambridge.

Abbreviations for MSS

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| B.L. | British Library. |
| P.R.O.I. | Public Record Office of Ireland. |
| S.R.O.B. | Suffolk Record Office, Bury St. Edmunds Branch. |