



By Joseph E. Gannon

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On Dec. 3, 1154, the day after the death of Pope Anastasius IV, the freshly gathered conclave of cardinals unanimously elected the Bishop of Albano as Anastasius' successor. The bishop of this Italian see, 25 miles southwest of Rome, was not Italian, though. His name was Nicholas Breakspear. The new pope had been born 54 years earlier in or near St. Alban's, in the county of Hertfordshire, England, where he was given the name Nicholas by his commoner father, Robert Breakspear. Nicholas took the name Adrian IV, and to this day remains the only English-born Pope, and, for the Irish, one of the most controversial.

The year after his accession, Adrian issued a "Bull," or "Laudabiliter," that authorized English King Henry II, who had petitioned him for it, the right to invade Ireland "for the correction of morals and the introduction of virtues, for the advancement of the Christian religion." Adrian is known to few people for anything he did other than issuing this Bull.

Adrian IV's father, Robert, was not a wealthy man, and Nicolas set out to the continent to better himself, like many intelligent commoners of the period, using the church to better his education and position. Nicolas eventually received the see of Albano about 1146. In 1152, Pope Eugenius III sent him to Scandinavia. On his return, Nicholas was hailed as the "Apostle of the North" for reforming what Rome considered abuses in Norway and Sweden.

He was the right man in the right place when Anastasius died shortly after Nicolas returned. He was the man of the moment, and now he was the Pope.

As Adrian IV rose to head the Church, Henry Plantagenet was crowned Henry II, King of England. Like the Norman Kings of England who had preceded him, he was more French (as we would understand it today) than English. He was born in France, he spoke French, and he spent much of his time on the continent as well. It would be the loss of their lands in Normandy at the beginning of the 13th century that would finally Anglicize the Norman rulers of England.

Henry was a very young and vigorous man when he ascended to the crown. "He never sits down," said a contemporary, "he is always on his legs from the morning till night." Henry had designs on Ireland, though he was also very busy grappling with opposition to his rule in England.

Observers have often concluded Adrian's nationality predisposed him to authorize Henry's invasion. It's impossible to prove or disprove at this point, but Adrian had many other serious problems then in and around Rome. It is arguable that an Italian Pope would have given Henry the same authorization. It is not even certain that Adrian, who probably had Saxon ancestry, considered Henry, a French-speaking Norman, a countryman at all. Henry wanted the backing of the Church, but would he move without it? Adrian may have concluded that he would, and thus looked for the best outcome for the Church.



This old tapestry shows Henry II, left, debating Thomas Becket, center.

.... provided always that the rights or the churches remain inviolate and entire ...

provided always that the rights or the churches remain inviolate and entire, and saving to St. Peter and the holy Roman Church the annual pension of one penny from each house." Adrian may have been helping Henry, but he was also getting a good deal for his Church. Obviously the conditions he laid out were not met in later centuries, and would have negated the legality of the Bull, if it ever had any legal standing.

Though this Bull has been used since to justify the idea that Adrian had authorized perpetual and unconditional English occupation of Ireland, a close reading of the Bull does not support that. Adrian wrote: "And may the people of that land receive thee with honor, and venerate thee as their master:

There is a larger question that is often overlooked by those who discuss Adrian's Bull: By what right did Adrian claim the Church owned Ireland in the first place? If one is considering whether this "Donation of Adrian," as it is sometimes called, had legal force, then ownership is crucial. On this, the question of Adrian's "legalization" of the English occupation of Ireland falls apart. The Church could not claim to own Ireland simply because there were Catholic churches there. It based its claim on a document known as the "Donation of Constantine."

The "Donation of Constantine" was a document that purported to show that, about 324, the Roman Emperor Constantine I (the Great) had granted to the Catholic Church sovereignty over all of Italy and the Western Roman Empire. It also included the phrase "and the various islands." To say that included Ireland would be a very broad interpretation, since Ireland had never been occupied by the Romans.

If the document were legitimate that issue could be debated, but nearly everyone, including the Catholic Church, has now concluded the document was a forgery. Legend has it that Pope Sylvester I had instructed Constantine in the faith and also cured him of leprosy. In return, when Constantine moved his capital from Rome to Constantinople, the grateful Constantine issued this document, granting to the Church what amounted to about half the known world at the time.

In the mid-15th century, the Italian humanist Lorenzo Valla proved the document could not be genuine. It was not written in the Latin of Constantine's day, and it described rites and court ceremonies that were not known then. But they were known in the mid-8th century, which is when it is now believed that the document was forged, in its first draft, at least. No one is sure who produced the forgery, but it was first used by Pope Stephen II in a dispute over lands in Italy that the Lombards had taken from Byzantium.

Whether Pope Stephen II knew the "Donation of Constantine" was a forgery will never be known, but it seems likely that Adrian IV believed it was legitimate.



An icon painting of

In any event, Henry made no use of Adrian's Bull for some years after receiving it. The possibility of invading Ireland was discussed after the receipt of the Bull in 1156. There was a plan to occupy the island and put Henry's brother, William, on the throne, but it was said that their mother, Matilda, objected to the idea. Her opinion carried weight.

Emperor Constantine and his mother Helena.



Henry was in no position to personally take on the Irish invasion in 1156. He had problems subduing the Welsh then, and after that his focus was on holding on to his territory on the continent. And then there were his celebrated troubles with Archbishop of Canterbury Thomas Becket, leading to the cleric's murder. Adrian IV died, perhaps from an infection from tonsillitis, in 1159 with no knowledge that his Bull on Ireland ever launched a single arrow, much less an army of conquest.

When the king of Leinster, Diarmaid MacMurrough, asked Henry to help him regain his kingdom in 1166, Henry, then in France, gave permission for his Anglo-Norman knights to assist him.

This set in motion the English invasion and occupation that the now-dead Adrian had "authorized" 10 years earlier. Though it could be argued that it was Elizabeth I's conquest of the island in the early 17th century that marks the real beginning of English occupation, English and then British governments would be involved with events in Ireland from the time of the Norman invasion to the present day.

It would seem that Adrian's Bull is more a mere interesting footnote to the history of English involvement in Ireland than any sort of significant turning point. **WGT**

Ireland prior to the Norman invasion

A contemporary map of area of Leinster in southwest Ireland that was first invaded by MacMurrough's Norman allies.

At the time of the Anglo-Norman invasion Ireland was divided into five provincial kingdoms. They still survive today: Munster, Ulster, Leinster and Connacht with Meath as the seat of the High Kings. A High King elected from the ranks of these provincial dynasties, although not having an executive function, was a symbolic recognition of the origin and singleness of purpose of the Irish peoples. According to Peter Berresford Ellis in his book "Erin's Blood Royal" this High Kingship together with the Irish legal system, a fairly standard written language and a common mythology and religion, suggested a sense of unity that was not present in many other lands — even in England itself...

Under the reign of Brian Boru (died 1014) of the Dál gCais dynasty, the High Kingship, although challenged by the Eóghnachta of Munster, was a centralised executive power. By 1118 the High Kingship was taken over by the O'Conors of Connacht. At the time of the Norman invasion, then, we can say that, given the shifting sands and power struggles generally prevalent in Europe, Ireland was a relatively stable unit. In social order, literacy, in art and science, Ireland had produced one of Europe's outstanding cultures.

Irish clerics also brought Christianity, as well as literacy, to the pagan Anglo-Saxons. The monastery of Durrow, in County Laois, founded by Columba in the 6th century, a century later had students from 18 different nations. The list of Irish accomplishments in architecture, learning and art, even in astronomy and science in the centuries preceding the Anglo-Norman invasion is extensive.

The Normans, however, in spite of their successes, never conquered Ireland. In the centuries that followed, becoming, "more Irish than the Irish themselves," they integrated into Irish society, obeyed Irish law, adopted Irish manners and spoke the Irish language. Only in the "Pale," a 30-mile wide bridgehead around Dublin was there a secure base for English law and custom to take root.

The devastation of the old Gaelic culture was not begun until the catastrophic 16th and 17th centuries. In the meantime, according to historian Liam de Paor, "something of the early Christian way of life lived on; the Irish language, Irish law and custom, Irish literature. But it was an impoverished culture, struggling for its life. ... It is clear from what is revealed by the Elizabethan writers who were engaged in the bloody conquest of the country in the late 16th century that many things in the life of that hidden Ireland had remained unchanged since before the time of the Vikings."

The Elizabethan pogroms, with brutality and savagery, swept the old Gaelic order completely away. —**Joe McGowan**

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