

# Fermanagh

a story in **100** objects



## Siege of Enniskillen Castle Map, 1594

by Paul Logue

On February 2nd 1594 Captain John Dowdall wrote to the Lord Deputy in Dublin stating that after a short siege he had captured Enniskillen Castle from the 'rebel' Hugh Maguire.<sup>1</sup> At that point Enniskillen Castle was already over one hundred and fifty years old, its erection being traditionally attributed to Hugh 'the hospitable' Maguire who died in AD1428. On February 7<sup>th</sup> 1594 Dowdall penned another letter from Enniskillen Castle to the Lord Deputy and accompanied it with a finely drawn black and white sketch of the siege action.<sup>2</sup> (appendix 1) He wrote that 'a servant' of his had presented him with the sketch and that he enclosed it with his letter so that the Lord Deputy could understand the siege and capture of the castle 'more perfectly'.<sup>3</sup> The sketch showed the castles outer wall being attacked by Dowdall's men along with the camps of the besieging Crown soldiers, their boats on the Erne and their cannon firing at the castle. Various locations on the sketch are labelled A-G but these are better discussed using the more detailed coloured picture of the siege,<sup>4</sup> which is the subject of this paper. (appendix 2)

The coloured picture, which was evidently worked up from the original sketch, depicted Captain Dowdall himself right at the heart of the action and belongs to a genre of coloured

<sup>1</sup> Capt. John Dowdall to the Lord Deputy, February 7 1594, Cal. S. P. Ire. 1592-96, 207-208

<sup>2</sup> Capt. John Dowdall to the Lord Deputy, February 7 1594, Cal. S. P. Ire. 1592-96, 211; MPF 1/80, extracted from SP 64/1 (item 13)

<sup>3</sup> Earl of Belmore 1896, 'Ancient maps of Enniskillen and its Environs', in *Ulster Journal of Archaeology*, Second Series, Vol. 2, No. 4 (Jul., 1896), 225

<sup>4</sup> BL Cotton Augustus I.ii.39

illustrations which depict territories, battles and events from the period known as the Nine Year's War (AD1594-1603) in Ireland. The genre has come to be dominated by the famous and much studied artist and cartographer Richard Bartlett. However, the Enniskillen castle artist, a man named John Thomas who styled himself with no more pretension than 'soldier', easily holds his own against Bartlett both in aesthetic terms and for the wealth of information included in his picture. We know nothing more about Thomas but, as the coloured picture places Dowdall as its central figure and is so close in composition to the original sketch, we may presume that he was the 'servant' of Dowdall's mentioned above. Thomas's illustration was drawn to accompany a particular narrative of the siege submitted in writing by Dowdall to his superiors. As such, it does not depict a certain point in time but a sequence of events leading to the capture of the strategic castle standing at the crossing point between upper and lower Lough Erne.

The castle was attacked because its then lord, Hugh Maguire, had gone in rebellion against the Crown in the summer of 1593. In October 1593, his forces lost a battle with a Crown army under Sir Henry Bagenal and Hugh O'Neill at the Ford of Golune, near Belleek. That October, the Crown also captured Maguire's castle at Lisnaskea, part of which is still preserved within the plantation period castle there, Castle Balfour. The Crown now turned its attention to Enniskillen and the castle there was placed under siege by Captain John Dowdall in January 1594. The Thomas illustration and accompanying narrative identify Enniskillen Castle as the key place at the heart of Fermanagh, the rebel Maguire's caput, which had to be captured to bring him to heel.

We join the action on February 2<sup>nd</sup> 1594 as Dowdall's men disembark from a boat and hack their way through the castles outer wall using pick axes. That scene is depicted centre-right of the illustration, at the bottom right-hand corner of the castles outer wall. There you can see the breach, or hole, in the wall with the words 'the Breach' written above. Dowdall's men enter through it and the end is nigh for the Maguire garrison within (the breach assault is marked with the letter D in the original sketch). This is the most important event shown by Thomas but it is only one small part of the picture and there is much more to be

seen and discussed. In the bottom left of the illustration, Thomas drew Captain Dowdall's camp (it is marked with the letter E in the original sketch). There, at the centre of a square formed by the soldiers' tents is the Crown munitions store and, beside it, the heads of three Irish rebels on stakes. The viewer is informed of their ethnicity through the addition of prominent beards, a feature then noted of many natives. They are the only rebels to be pictured and Thomas must have depicted their heads as a symbol of the fate which awaited all rebels against the Crown. To the right of the camp men are gathering firewood, which is being ferried to the shoreline beside the camp in small boats, or cotts, some of which Thomas labels 'for the use of the campe'. On the open ground above the camp the soldiers of Dowdall's battle (a term applied to contemporary army formations) are drawn up for combat. The majority of the men are depicted as being armed with pikes and their sergeants can be seen at the four corners of the square formation armed with halberds. Captain Dowdall is shown close to the centre of the picture standing on the small island of Enniskillen Castle. Dowdall appears to be wearing a cabasset, or high almond-shaped helmet, but it is more ornate than those worn by everyone else in the Crown army, befitting his status. He points with a baton-like stick in his right hand, further defining his role and rank as commander, and he carries a pistol in the other. The only armour he wears is a breast plate, probably with back plate too, and beside him his horse boy (young servant) holds his shield, then known as a target. To the left of Dowdall is small detachment of soldiers stationed to reinforce the attack on the breach if needed and above them 'the sowe'. The sow (pronounced like the female pig) was a wooden screen mounted on wheels, the timbers and boards used to make it were thick enough, it was hoped, to stop a musket ball. Behind this screen the reinforcements would have advanced to the castle if needed. The sow could also be used to screen men while they dug the trenches, or saps, within which the Crown musketeers and cannon were placed to fire upon the castle and its defenders. In front of the sow is a trench with four musketeers firing at the castle and, to their right, is a larger trench containing another four musketeers with three Falcon cannons. A Falcon fired a 3 or 4 pound iron ball, which would have been too small to significantly damage the castle or its outer walls. However, well aimed or fortuitous shots could have entered through windows or doors and ricocheted around a

room, killing or maiming those within. Dowdall wrote that, during the siege, some of Maguires garrison were indeed killed by cannon fire entering 'through their spikes',<sup>5</sup> meaning through the narrow slit windows of the castle shown by John Thomas in his drawing. In the framed caption, at top right of the drawing, Thomas also described the narrow slit windows of the castle as 'spike holes'. Dowdall named the men in charge of the three cannons in front of the castle as Thomas Browne and George Flower.<sup>6</sup>

Across the River Erne to the right-hand edge of the picture are a further five musketeers in a trench with, behind an earthen bank, another Falcon cannon and a Robinet cannon too. The Robinet, which fired an even lighter ball of around half-a-pound, was really an anti-personnel gun and would have been useless against the stonework of the castle. We know that one Robert Hewes was in charge of the cannons on Bingham's side of the River<sup>7</sup> and perhaps some of his shots were those that entered the castles windows killing men within. However, in the main, the Robinet was used along with the Falcons to demonstrate the power of the Crown and to build a level of fear and tension within the Maguire defenders, most of whom would never have heard cannon fire before. We know that the castle also contained thirty-four women and children during the siege<sup>8</sup> and the noise of the cannons must have been terrifying to small children brought up in a world much more silent than the present day. Behind the Robinet stands Captain George Bingham, a cousin of Sir Richard Bingham the Governor of Connacht, later to be murdered by Ulick Burke in Sligo castle. Bingham is attired similarly to Dowdall but does not appear to carry a pistol and his helmet is plain, possibly an illustrative device by Thomas to show that Dowdall, not he, commanded. Shown below Captain Bingham are the tents of his camp and above him are his men drawn up for combat, if required. In the key on the original sketch Bingham's camp is denoted by the letter F but that letter is now missing from the right hand side of the sketch, where the camp is depicted.

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<sup>5</sup> Belmore 1896, 224

<sup>6</sup> Belmore 1896, 224

<sup>7</sup> Belmore 1896, 224

<sup>8</sup> Declaration of Connor O'Cassidy, February 1594, Cal. S. P. Ire. 1592-1596, 208-09

The cannon and musketeers all aim at the castle which is at the heart of the illustration. Enniskillen castle is shown by Thomas to sit on an island in the River Erne. At the left-hand edge of the island Maguire had built defences to stop the Crown moving boats up the river to attack his castle. It didn't work and the garrison retreated into the castle, which was divided off from the island with a ditch. Opposite Dowdall is the land gate to the castle, accessed via a bridge over the ditch leading to a gateway closed by a wooden door with iron hinges (the bridge gate is marked with the letter B in the original sketch). In the panel to the upper right of the illustration Thomas states that the width of the ditch at this point was 36 feet and it has been confirmed by archaeological excavation to measure 11m.<sup>9</sup> It is surprising that the Maguire garrison did not destroy the wooden bridge ahead of the Crown attack; there must be a reason why they did not. To the left and right of the wooden door are gun loops in the bawn (enclosure) wall of the castle. Thomas shows the bawn wall to be made up of stone blocks presumably held in place with lime mortar. There is no wall walk and only the stretch to the left of the site is shown as being crenelated. It is very likely that the entire circuit was crenelated but that Thomas chose not to depict crenelations along the right-hand side of the site as it would have interfered with his drawing of other features – a demonstration, perhaps, of a limitation in his skill as an illustrator but also a marker of his drive to tell a story as clearly as possible.

The right-hand section of the bawn wall contains the water gate which would have been accessed from boats (the water gate is marked with the letter C in the original sketch). At the lower right-hand corner of the wall, adjacent to a building outside the bawn, is the breach where the Crown soldiers are shown fighting their way in – we will return later to this act. To the left of that action the bawn wall has a circular gun loop in it. The gun loop is shown in a different colour without blocks evident. This is Thomas depicting a plastered section of walling where a circular area of original walling has been removed and then rebuilt with a loop at its centre to accommodate a small cannon, or musket, to fire upon the easy landward approach to the castle. Above the circular loop are two slit loops and all

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<sup>9</sup> Eoin Halpin (1994) 'Excavations at Enniskillen Castle, Co Fermanagh' *Ulster Journal of Archaeology* (3<sup>rd</sup> series), Vol. 57, 124

three would have been accessed by defenders from within a building attached internally to the bawn wall. The building has one stone-built gable end to the right and its other gable was formed by the wall of the tower which flanks the land gate. The ghost of that left-hand edge of the building and its roof can be clearly seen in the stark difference between the light-coloured plastered tower walls above the un-plastered, once internal, surface below. Between the two gable ends runs a roof line with covering depicted as running down to the bawn wall in front. However, this roof is somewhat lower than the apexes of the two gables and must be a rebuild. The original roof line would have joined the tips of the two gables and have had a high ceiling probably open to the rafters. It would have been the public hall for the castle with large central fireplace and where much of the day-to-day activities of ruling the Maguire lordship would have been undertaken. Thomas's depiction of the gables of this hall building has sometimes been mistakenly believed to be a representation of the later Watergate at the castle. The gate tower (marked G on the original sketch) beside the hall is at least three stories in height with a little cap-house on top with no chimney evident. While the gate tower and hall would have provided decent accommodation within the castle complex they also played vital roles in defending the castle's landward entrance. Beyond the gate tower within the castle's enclosure are two timber framed buildings shown with green sod or thatched roofs. These ancillary buildings would have been for lesser status guests, servants, stables and general storage.

The castle (marked A on the original sketch) is shown to have an un-plastered sloping (battered) foundation with grey-white plastered walls above. This light colour of the castle walls in Thomas's 1594 picture may corroborate 'the smooth walls of the white rampart'<sup>10</sup> described at Enniskillen Castle in 1589 by the Gaelic poet Tadhg Dall Ó Huiginn. Thomas drew the castle door as being wooden with iron hinges; like the land gate, it did not have the added defensive feature of an outer iron grill, known as a yett. The castle has four storeys topped with a slated roof and doorway to the battlements. Thomas's key to the

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<sup>10</sup> The bardic poems of Tadhg Dall Ó Huiginn (1550–1591), 'Enniskillen', in *UCC Corpus of Electronic Texts Edition* - accessed 14/09/14, <http://www.ucc.ie/celt/online/T402563.html>, 51 line 24

illustration states that the castle measured 56 feet in height and 56 feet north-south by 38 feet east-west. The protruding muzzles, smoke and bullets show Maguire's men firing at the Crown army from the castles narrow slit windows. The large heavily shuttered window, facing the viewer at the top floor of the castle, probably marks the main room, or hall, in which only the most favoured guests were entertained. In more peaceful times Maguire could have looked out from that hall window, or delivered a speech to crowds gathered below in the courtyard.

The presence of a hall on the upper floor places Enniskillen Castle within a tradition of Irish castle building which had elaborate halls, sometimes open to the roof, heated by a fireplace in the centre of the room.<sup>11</sup> Sherlock suggests that this castle type has a western distribution in Ireland and he dates them predominantly to pre-1500. That the Maguires made a later change to their upper hall is shown by Thomas's depiction of a plastered wickerwork chimney and gable at roof level. This chimney would probably have been added, with fireplace below, during the later 1500s helping to provide more comfort for the occupants and also complying with contemporary change in architectural fashions. The new chimney was accompanied by a slated roof in contrast to the thatched roofs shown at the castles of Belleek and Ballyshannon in another of John Thomas's illustrations.<sup>12</sup> Consequently, we may view Enniskillen Castle as a place more in touch with architectural fashion than elsewhere in the region.

Fashionable hall and all, the castle was captured by the Crown on February 2<sup>nd</sup> 1594. The official version claimed that Dowdall captured it by first breaching the bawn wall 'with pick-axes' (his cannon could not do the job) as shown by Thomas and then threatening to blow the castle up with gunpowder.<sup>13</sup> Some thirty-six fighting men and thirty to forty women and children then surrendered and emerged from the castle.

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<sup>11</sup> Rory Sherlock (2010) 'The evolution of the Irish tower-house as a domestic space', *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy* Vol. 111C, 120-28

<sup>12</sup> BL Cotton Augustus I.ii.38

<sup>13</sup> Declaration of Connor O'Cassidy, February 1594, Cal. S. P. Ire. 1592-1596, 208-09

Alternative accounts, such as that by Captain Thomas Lee,<sup>14</sup> contradict this version and claimed that the Maguire garrison surrendered on terms that were later reneged upon. Much later, in 1621, Don Philip O'Sullivan Beare suggested that the ward was first betrayed and then slaughtered.<sup>15</sup> We may never know the truth. The capture of the castle led to another siege, this time of the new Crown garrison, under one James Eccarsall, by the forces of Hugh O'Donnell allied with Hugh Maguire. In August 1594, an attempt was made by the Crown to lift this siege. A relieving army and supply train was dispatched under the command of Sir Henry Duke and Sir Edward Herbert. This Crown army was routed by O'Donnell and Maguire at a ford of the Arney River in Sessiagh and Clontymullan townlands south of Enniskillen.<sup>16</sup> Due to the Crown soldiers abandoning their supply train (which contained hard-tack biscuits) in the river there, the engagement became known as the 'Battle of the Ford of the Biscuits'. In November 1594, as a reaction to these troubles in Fermanagh, Elizabeth I ordered the withdrawal of two thousand Crown troops from Brittany in northern France.<sup>17</sup> Those troops had just helped their Protestant French allies capture the Spanish Fort of El León located at the northern tip of the Crozon peninsula, south of the important port town of Brest. Within months they were sent to Ireland and many of them then saw action at the battle of Clontibret in July 1595. Thomas's depiction of the siege of Enniskillen Castle is a rare view both of an Irish castle and of a sixteenth-century siege in Ireland. The events he depicted are at the beginning of a chain of conflict that would become known as the Nine Year's War and bring devastation and death to Fermanagh. These events would ultimately lead to the Flight of the Earls, plantation and the end of Gaelic Ulster. Thus, the illustration depicts an Ulster lordly castle on the eve of momentous change. However, despite that change the castle has endured to this day, albeit in altered form. More than five hundred years after it was founded it remains a special, central place at the heart of modern Fermanagh.

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<sup>14</sup> Hiram Morgan (1993) 'Tyrone's Rebellion: The outbreak of the Nine Year's War in Tudor Ireland', 155

<sup>15</sup> Michael J. Byrne. ed. & trans. (1903) 'Ireland under Elizabeth: chapters towards a history of Ireland under Elizabeth by Don Philip O'Sullivan Beare', 72-73

<sup>16</sup> Paul Logue and Barney Devine (Forthcoming) 'The Battlefield of the Ford of the Biscuits'

<sup>17</sup> Analysis 359, List and Analysis of State Papers: Foreign Series: July 1593-December 1594, 312

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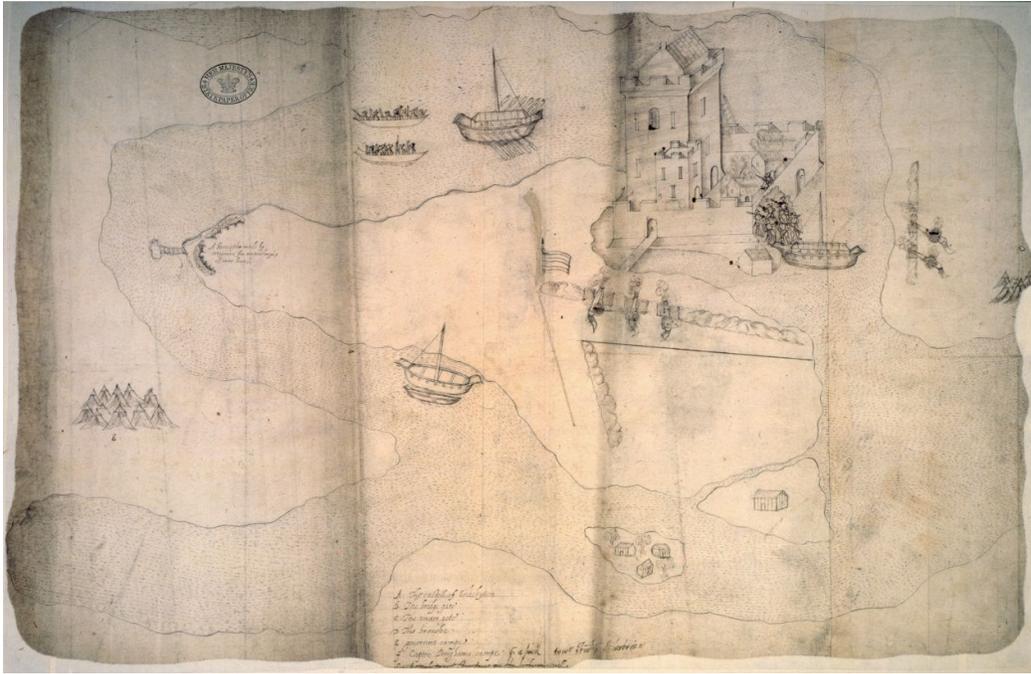
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<http://www.ucc.ie/celt/online/T402563.html>, University College Cork, Corpus of Electronic Texts [accessed on 14/09/14].



Appendix 1: MPF1-80 Ireland, Castle of Enniskillen, 1594 Copyright The National Archives



Appendix 2: C13343-69 © The British Library Board, Cotton Augustus I. ii. 39

'Fermanagh: a story in one hundred objects' is a project involving people from the local community, historians and students from the University of Ulster.

Supported by the Esmée Fairbairn Collections Fund, this project is part of our 'Fermanagh Heritage Gateway' activity programme. The research project tells aspects of Fermanagh's diverse history through the selection and interpretation of one hundred key objects. Objects are locally important as well as of wider international significance.

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