

Article

Religious Communities and Their Closures in Ireland during the Sixteenth Century

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Abstract: The closure of religious communities throughout England, commonly known as the ‘dissolution of the monasteries’, was commenced in 1536 and completed to all intents and purposes by 1540, resulting in what one commentator has recently described as ‘the greatest dislocation of people, property and daily life since the Norman Conquest’. This was an important part of Henry VIII’s break with Rome and served as a means not only of further establishing his new authority as supreme head of the Church of England but also as a fundraising mechanism. Ireland’s religious communities, as part of the Tudor kingdoms, now also fell (in theory, at least) under the control of the Crown and were therefore due for closure from the mid-1530s onwards. But in reality, due to the limited power held by the Crown throughout much of Ireland, the only religious houses to be dissolved were those in the Pale, the most English part of Ireland (*inter Anglicos*, encompassing mainly Counties Dublin, Meath, Tipperary and Kildare, as well as some other areas). In the Gaelic part of Ireland (*inter Hibernicos*), the king’s writ, which in theory was law, did not actually run, so much so that in one case, the commissioners appointed to inspect a religious house in Granard, County Longford, merely noted that they did not do so, ‘for fear of the wild Irish’. The dissolution process in Ireland was drawn out and took place in two stages, with a second wave of monastic dissolutions in the 1570s and 1580s, long into Elizabeth’s reign. This was just one arm of the queen’s expansionist movement into parts of the island hitherto out of the reach of Tudor administration. Although the Reformation process in Ireland as a whole can ultimately be said to have been a failure, the dissolution process (in parts of the island, at least) was a success, one of the very few triumphs of Henry’s Irish Reformation programme. Vast tracts of property and land exchanged hands, a land grab that was facilitated by characters such as William Brabazon, the Irish vice-treasurer whose corruption was notorious. Despite this, a small number of communities managed to escape closure and continued on, protected by their local communities and gentry. Since the early 1970s, Brendan Bradshaw and others have written of the Henrician ‘first wave’ of dissolutions, but little consideration has been given to the later wave of closures that took place in parts of Gaelic Ireland that had previously been out of the Crown’s reach. This essay will survey the closures of the 1530s before discussing the dissolutions that took place in the later sixteenth century, and by doing so, it is hoped, will present a new consideration of these events that irrevocably altered Ireland’s landscape and society.

Keywords: monasteries; dissolution; Henry VIII; Elizabeth I; Ireland; Reformation



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1. Introduction

The Reformation process was introduced into Ireland as part of the parliament held in Dublin between 1536 and 1537. Now, the allegiance of the Church in Ireland, along with its taxes, was due to the monarch, at this time Henry VIII, the self-styled ‘Supreme Head’ of the Church. This was following, in some ways, the moves towards Reformation that took place in England. There, the suppression of the monasteries had begun in a small manner in 1525, and in that same year, the New Testament was published in English for the first time. By 1534, new legislation, such as the Act of Supremacy, the Act of First Fruits and Tithes and the Treason Act, were being passed in England, and the 1535 *Valor Ecclesiasticus*,

along with the reports of the visitations of religious communities undertaken by Thomas Cromwell, the king's chief minister, was a precursor to the widespread suppression of religious communities across England and Wales, which began in 1535 with the passing of the Suppression of Religious Houses Act.

The initial wave of monastic dissolutions that took place in Ireland upon the introduction of the Reformation legislation in the Irish parliament in 1536 was quite different in form and outcome than the process experienced by its nearest neighbour, England, even bound, as it was, to that kingdom as a lordship (Bradshaw 1969). There were a number of reasons for this. Ireland possessed its own parliament but was stymied by Poyning's Law, which had been introduced in 1494 and meant all legislation approved in the Irish parliament required London's approval prior to its official adoption in Ireland. Not only this but the Church in Ireland, both pre- and post-Reformation, was divided into two areas: the Church *inter Anglicos* and *inter Hibernicos*. The Church *inter Anglicos* covered, as the term implies, the parts of Ireland where English law and custom prevailed—the area known as the Pale, which centred around Dublin and adjoining counties such as Meath, Kildare and Wicklow—and some of the towns and cities around Ireland, including Galway, Cork and Waterford. The Church in the remainder of Ireland, however, which was under the control of a myriad of Gaelic Irish lords, was known as *inter Hibernicos* and was markedly different in custom and tradition to the English style. Finally, of all of the religious reforms and changes attempted during the Henrician Reformation, the dissolution process was really the only aspect of the early Reformation campaign that actually succeeded. But this was the case only in the Church *inter Anglicos* (although a number of Gaelic communities were later dissolved in the 1540s, during the final years of Henry's reign); it was not until Elizabeth I's reign (1558–1603) that many of the religious communities in Gaelic Ireland were dissolved. As has been noted recently, the 'dissolution of the Irish monasteries in the Tudor period was a piecemeal event and largely depended on the strength of the English Crown to impose its will on any given area of Ireland at any one time' (Galban 2019, p. 266).

It is the intention of this paper to discuss these two waves of monastic dissolutions—from the first in the 1530s to the one of the later sixteenth century. Space limitations preclude the possibility of discussing many of the sites and their communities in detail, but a number of sites in the first wave, which were notable in various ways, are examined. This is followed by a consideration of the fates of the religious sites during the reigns of Edward VI and Mary I and ends with an analysis of the Elizabethan dissolutions, highlighting the process in one particular site in Gaelic Ireland as an indication of the dissolution practice during this period. The dissolutions radically altered the fabric of society, education, religion and charity at that time, and this is, in many ways, a sordid tale in which few of the participants acquit themselves honourably.

2. Historiography

The historiography of the monastic dissolutions in Ireland has been relatively slight. One of the primary challenges for students of monastic history throughout Ireland, England, Wales and Scotland in tracing dissolution and post-dissolution histories is the low survival rate of documentary sources. In the case of England, there is no well-preserved paper trail for the *Valor Ecclesiasticus*, and very few monastic surrender deeds still exist. Ireland even compares unfavourably to this, with almost no surrender deeds surviving, a situation exacerbated by the destruction of the Public Records Office in Dublin in 1922, although the Beyond 2022 project, dedicated to recreating that lost archive, may yet throw up some material of interest in this regard.

Aside from Brendan Bradshaw's pioneering work on the first wave of dissolutions, which was published in 1974, and the work of Gwynn and Hadcock in 1970, there was relatively little written on the subject until the publication in 1993 of Thomas Flynn's study of the Dominicans in Ireland from 1536 to 1641. This was followed in 2000 with a chapter in Mary Ann Lyon's history of early modern Kildare and shortly afterwards again by a series of essays by Brendan Scott and Colm Lennon dealing with a number of related topics,

such as the Irish Franciscans following the dissolutions to the dissolution process in Meath, Dublin and as it related to the Knights Hospitallers in Ireland and the Augustinians in the Pale (Bradshaw 1974; Flynn 1993; Lyons 2000; Scott 2005, 2015, 2019; Lennon 2009; Gwynn and Hadcock 1970). Curiously, the most recent and best survey of the Tudor reformation process in Ireland makes little mention of the dissolutions, despite it being one of the only success stories of the entire enterprise in Ireland under Henry VIII, or in the Pale, at least, and Colmán Ó Clabaigh's important study of the friars in Ireland ends at the Henrician dissolutions, with his epilogue covering this period. More recently, Bronagh McShane's important monograph on the female religious in Ireland has allowed scholars further insight into the dissolution process experienced by the female communities in Ireland, including the second wave of dissolutions during the reign of Elizabeth (Jefferies 2010; Ó Clabaigh 2011; McShane 2022). A useful, short synthesis of recent thinking on the dissolutions can be found in Lyons 2018. In terms of architecture and archaeology, an essay by Michael O'Neill published in 2009, along with essays by Roger Stalley and Rachel Moss, demonstrate the renovations and expansions to monastic sites following their closures in the sixteenth century (O'Neill 2009; Stalley 2003; Moss 2012).

3. The First Wave of Dissolutions

Following the successful quashing of the Kildare Rebellion in 1535, a parliament was scheduled to be held in Dublin the following year, which would run until 1537 (Ellis 1976). This parliament would codify the new religious reforms, which were by now on the statute books in England. With the English of the Pale now leaderless following the destruction of the Fitzgerald family of Kildare in the aftermath of the Kildare Rebellion, this was the opportunity for Henry VIII and Thomas Cromwell to assert further authority over what was, in many ways, a lordship of England in name only, particularly in the majority of Ireland, which was Gaelic in character and held no particular allegiance to the Tudors. It was in this atmosphere that Ireland's religious communities began to come under pressure. In Ireland in the immediate pre-dissolution period, there were roughly 140 or so monasteries and around 200 mendicant houses, many of them (aside from the friaries, which seemed to house larger numbers) with small communities (Lyons 2018, p. 518; Ó Clabaigh 2000, 2011; Mooney 1894–1896, 5:5, p. 130).¹ Indeed, if we take the pension lists as a reasonable indicator of the size of communities, it appears that among Cistercian and Augustinian communities, very few on the eve of the dissolutions had more than six members in situ (Bradshaw 1974, p. 36). It is, of course, important to note that the friars did not receive pensions, and it appears as though the friaries may have had much larger communities, ranging from twenty-five to thirty in some places.

Keeping abreast with events taking place in England and eyeing up possible material gains for himself, William Brabazon, the notoriously corrupt vice-treasurer in Ireland, stated that religious houses should be suppressed on the grounds that 'they nourish rebels' (*State Papers, Henry VIII 1830–1852*, vol. ii, pp. 212–13). In 1536, Robert Cowley, the chief solicitor, informed Thomas Cromwell that:

the abbayes here doo not kepe soo good Divine Service, as the abbayes in England, being suppressed, did kepe; the religious personages here lesse continent or virtuous, keeping no hospitalitie, saving to theyme silves, theire concubynes [and] childerne. (*State Papers, Henry VIII 1830–1852*, vol. ii, p. 371)

The inference here was clear; if England's religious communities could be shut down, then, in Cowley's mind, there was no doubt that Ireland's should go the same way. There were no visitations of communities prior to dissolution, as had been the case in England, but a small number of closures took place prior to the first wave of dissolutions, which began in 1537, including St Wolstan's, a small Augustinian community in County Kildare. Provision for the dissolution of St Wolstan's came in an individual commission in December 1536 and by an act of parliament in 1537. Although its dissolution roughly coincided with the first attempted wave of suppressions under the May 1536 commission, St Wolstan's dissolution remained an entirely separate business. In Easter 1536, the crown was in receipt

of St Wolstan's revenues, and in May, John Alen, Master of the Rolls, received a promise from the king of a grant of the priory.² The religious communities would, of course, have been keeping abreast of monastic suppressions elsewhere, such as in England and Germany, so would have been very aware of the threat of similar actions in Ireland. News of the intended closure spread like wildfire around the Pale, and on 26 June 1536, the prior of the abbey, Richard Weston, and his community wrote to Thomas Cromwell to let him know that they were aware of this fact. They supplicated the king to remain open and sought Cromwell's support in this action. Weston wrote that the suppression of St Wolstan's 'would be greatly to the decay and hinderance of the common weale, the decrease of English order and speech, good hospitality, and divine service there well and truly kept'. They also asked that John Alen, a Pale official who was angling for this property, be rewarded with a grant of lands elsewhere (Ellis and Murray 2017, p. 90). Their plea was ignored and the suppression was authorised on 15 September 1536, and on 28 October 1536, Weston was seized of all of the priory's possessions, although Alen was not officially granted the site until 1 December 1536 (Fiants 1994, Fiants Hen., no. 57; White 1943, p. 176; Gwynn and Hadcock 1970, p. 193; Lyons 2000, p. 118; Bradshaw 1974, pp. 48–49, 66–67).

Weston was to be looked after, however. In an unusual step, the prior was permitted to continue to live in the dissolved priory for the remainder of his life. He was to be provided with a decent chamber with a fireplace and chimney, along with a supply of wood and other necessities for his fire. A proper diet, both food and drink, and all of his provisions to the value of £6 annually were to be provided. The act also decreed that an annual sum of £4 from the dissolved priory lands was to be reserved for Weston's personal use, a payment which would cease upon the old prior's death (Lyons 2000, p. 118; Gwynn and Hadcock 1970, p. 193). John Alen immediately took up residence in St Wolstan's and renamed it Alenscourt (Fiants Hen., no. 57).

But the initial attempts to commence the formal dissolution of monasteries in Ireland received a setback when a bill to suppress some smaller houses was rejected at the second session of the reformation parliament. Some initial opposition led by a group of Pale families headed by the lawyer Patrick Barnewall (who later became a dissolution commissioner) made clear the unhappiness of some, at least initially, at the threatened closures (Woods 2009). Many of these Pale families soon began to support the dissolutions, however, once it became clear that they would be beneficiaries in the process. A small number of religious houses had been suppressed prior to the passing of Reformation legislation in 1537, and only eight closed that summer (Lyons 2018, p. 518; Bradshaw 1974, p. 70).

By September 1538, Henry VIII had settled on total suppression in Ireland, a policy issued formally in April 1539. That same year, it was declared that all religious houses in Ireland 'are at present in such a state that in them the praise of God and the welfare of man are next to nothing regarded' (Morrin 1862, p. 55). Of course, it was in the interests of those hoping to benefit from the land grab, which would follow the dissolutions, to paint the communities in as bad a light as possible. Although the activities of the so-called 'Geraldine League', a group of Gaelic families attempting to reinstall the primacy of the Fitzgeralds of Kildare, held up the work of the suppression commission, by late 1539, most of the religious communities in the Pale had surrendered, with more closing the next year (Ellis 1998, pp. 148–49). By the summer of 1540, following the work of the commissioners, forty-two houses had surrendered (Lyons 2018, p. 518; Bradshaw 1974, p. 70).

Aware of their impending closures, many religious communities would sell, lease and grant as much property away as possible before their dissolution in order to gain something from the property before its confiscation. The authorities were well aware of this, and Thomas Cusack, one of the commissioners involved in the dissolution process, in a note dated to c.1537/38, stated that if the communities of the Pale were suppressed suddenly, their goods would amount to £3000, but if their closures took longer, the king could expect to lose £1000 of that amount (Ellis and Murray 2017, p. 111). A letter from Gerald Aylmer and John Alen to Anthony St Leger in 1538 also noted a rumour in Ireland regarding the looming suppressions, which, according to the two men, was leading the heads of houses

to grant ‘out their lands and rents’ (Ellis and Murray 2017, p. 195). Brabazon also advised Cromwell to consider waiting until the communities had sown their corn before dissolving them (Ellis and Murray 2017, p. 102).³ In any case, the act of suppression in 1537 declared such property transactions in the run-up to dissolution null and void, but actions aimed at reversing such grants or sales were rarely, if ever, taken. In England also, the alienation of property and moveable goods was a regular occurrence, but unlike in Ireland, these moves were often challenged and overturned (Clark 2021, pp. 296–306, 464; Bradshaw 1974, p. 90).

The convent at Graney, County Kildare, was one of the first in Ireland to be dissolved, although the route to full suppression was a torturous one (Lyons 2000, p. 115). Lying on the border between Kildare and Carlow and occasionally referred to as actually being in Carlow (Fiants Hen., no. 71), its position made it an attractive site for strategic reasons in the wake of the Kildare rebellion. The nunnery had been highlighted in 1534 as being a monastic community that had supported Kildare during his rebellion. The following year, a commission for the suppression of Graney was granted to Leonard Grey, then marshal of the army. It stated that the site was the property of the king and that the community of nuns should be transferred to other houses. Upon payment of a fine, however, the nuns survived a short period longer (Lyons 2000, p. 116; Bradshaw 1974, p. 66). Graney also operated as a centre of education and training and managed to avoid closure for a short period partly because of the role it played in education in the locality (Collins 2021, p. 69). But the inevitable eventually occurred in May 1537 when Graney was listed in a new suppression bill (Bradshaw 1974, p. 73). Although dissolved formally as part of this bill, the revenues from it were still being withheld by the wily abbess there, Aegidia Wale. She managed to qualify for her pension, receiving a grant of £4 from 14 January 1539, even though she had granted much of her convent’s properties out before their confiscation (Fiants Hen., no. 69; Bradshaw 1974, p. 73). On 7 February of that same year, Leonard Grey, now lord deputy of Ireland, was granted the site (Fiants Hen., no. 71).

On 16 September 1538, the priory of All Hallows in Dublin was dissolved (White 1943).⁴ All Hallows was an unusual case in the dissolution process. It was granted to the city of Dublin in recognition of the ‘siege, famine, miseries, wounds, and loss of blood suffered by the citizens, and their chivalrous service in defending the city against the rebellion of Thomas Fitzgerald’ (Morrin 1862, p. 48). This case and how it benefited the city of Dublin can highlight one reason why there was not as much outrage as there may otherwise have been in relation to the dissolution programme. In fact, the city had already lobbied in 1536 to receive either All Hallows (reckoned to be worth about eighty-four marks a year) or the hospital at St John’s Newgate in ‘consideration of the ruin and decay sustained by the city in the late siege’ (Ellis and Murray 2017, p. 80).⁵ Bowing to the inevitable and possibly not wishing to make enemies of the local populace, the five-man community led by Walter Hancoke surrendered All Hallows and its possession on 16 November 1538; they said, ‘purely of their own volition “for certain just and reasonable causes which prompted their minds and consciences”’ (Fiants Hen., no. 70; Morrin 1862, p. 47; Bradshaw 1974, p. 99). The property was granted thereafter on 4 February 1539 to the corporation. But before this took place, as a later inquisition states, Hancoke, ‘knowing the house to have been suppressed and dissolved, made grants to various persons in fraud & deceit of the king & by cover& collusion’ (Griffith 1991, p. 74). Much of this property seems to have been leased to family members of the departing community there (Griffith 1991, pp. 71–74). The unusual case of All Hallows was concluded in January 1539, when the house and its holdings were granted to the city of Dublin (Fiants Hen., no. 70; Morrin 1862, pp. 47–48). It later became the site for Trinity College, which opened in 1594.

Another unusual example in Dublin was the Augustinian priory of Holy Trinity or Christ Church, as it had a twofold function of a monastic house as well as a cathedral. In reality, Christ Church carried out a threefold function—the Irish parliament also met in the refectory of Christ Church, giving it an important civic function also (Gillespie 2000, p. 157). Despite this, Christ Church was not the wealthiest community in Ireland—it was valued at £100 in 1536 and £160 in 1544, much less than other Dublin establishments such

as St Mary's and St Thomas' (*Letters and Papers 1862–1932*, vol. xi, no. 564; *State Papers, Henry VIII 1830–1852*, iii, p. 489; Gillespie 2000, p. 161). There were normally eleven or twelve canons in the priory before its dissolution, higher than was the norm in monastic and canonical communities in Ireland at the time. By the time of their dissolutions, only the Cistercian houses of St Mary's in Dublin and Mellifont had higher numbers residing within their walls. Judging by the surnames, the overwhelming majority of canons there were English or Anglo-Irish in origin (Gillespie 2000, p. 154). Most of the canons came from prominent Dublin families, such as the Balls and Stanihursts, but there were also a number of canons, including William Owen from the Augustinian house at Haughmond in Shropshire, who joined the Christ Church community when their own establishments were closed in England (Gillespie 2000, p. 154).⁶ This is perhaps unsurprising, given the number of monastic cathedrals in England, giving Christ Church a familiarity to the English monastic community that could not be found elsewhere in Ireland.

William Hassard, the prior there, resigned in 1537. An old man at this stage (he died in early 1538), Hassard possibly felt that the looming threat of dissolution was one headache too many for him. Perhaps he did not see eye to eye with George Browne, the former Augustinian friar who was now archbishop of Dublin. Browne was certainly pressuring Dean Fich of St Patrick's Cathedral to step down around this time (Gillespie 2000, p. 163). In any case, Browne refused to accept Christ Church's nomination of Hassard's successor and installed an English Augustinian canon called Robert Castle. Castle was unhappy in Dublin, however, and in 1542 pleaded for an English benefice worth £50 in order to leave Ireland. His wish was never granted, however, and Castle died in Ireland the following year, in 1543 (*Letters and Papers 1862–1932*, vol. xvii, no. 382).

The civic importance of Christ Church did, however, ensure it some measure of support in the city. In the late 1530s, the mayor and aldermen of Dublin wrote to Thomas Cromwell, chief minister in England to Henry VIII, stating that any such dissolution of Christ Church would be 'a great comfort and encouraging of our sovereign lord the king's Irish enemies', as Christ Church was viewed by Dubliners as their version of St Paul's, as Lord Deputy Grey put it.⁷ Not only that, but the council and lord deputy also defended Christ Church, citing its civic role and use as a parliament and council meeting place. Faced with this resistance, the commissioners yielded, and a compromise was struck. Instead, the monastic house was converted into a secular cathedral, and from January 1540, the prior and convent styled themselves a dean and chapter instead (Bradshaw 1974, p. 118; Gillespie 2000, p. 165). It was not officially secularised, however, until 1541, and it was reformed as a secular chapter with a dean and nine canons in May 1542. Some issues arose during this process, but by 1544, Christ Church's future as a new secular cathedral was secure. Christ Church cathedral later produced pre-Reformation vestments for use at the accession of Mary I in 1553. So, they may have been holding on to these items, as many churches did, in the hopes of a return to the old faith, as indeed Bishop John Bale reported in Ossory at this time (Gillespie 2000, pp. 166–67, 171; Ellis 1984). Certainly, St Patrick's Cathedral, Dublin, was buying vestments at low prices from England at this time—these were likely from dissolved monasteries in England (Mason 1820). The fate and experience of Christ Church does show what compromises could have been struck and how houses might have reorganised and saved themselves had there been a groundswell of support and political backing for a deal. But, unfortunately for most communities, those who may have been in a position to defend them were often the ones to benefit from the dissolution.

4. Local Support

But some communities remained extremely popular with the locals, and were protected to various degrees before, during and after the inspection of these sites by the commissioners authorised to visit the sites of the dissolved communities. A proposed act in 1611 acknowledged that, in some cases, the original grantees of monastic properties had permitted the religious communities to continue living on these properties (*Calendar of State Papers 1860–1912*, 1603–25, p. 188). The convent of Grace Dieu in north County Dublin,

which also doubled as a girls' school, was surrendered by its prioress, Alison White, on 28 October 1539, who received a pension of £6 in March 1540. Four other nuns—Margaret Coscrowe, Thomasina Dermyn, Katherine Wstace and Alison FitzSimon—received pensions of 50s. each at the same time (White 1943, p. 77; Bradshaw 1974, p. 115; Fiant's Hen., nos. 96, 102).⁸ When the site was valued on 25 October 1540, it was noted that the 'house, church and other buildings on the site are in good repair for the use and accommodation of the farmer and parishioners'. Its church also doubled as the parish church, 'from time immemorial' (White 1943, p. 73). The site was granted to Patrick Barnewall in July 1541 (Fiant's Hen. no. 235; Morrin 1862, pp. 12, 73–74; Bradshaw 1974, p. 239),⁹ but Barnewall supported the community when they moved into a small house close to Grace Dieu, and some of the community were still living there in 1577 (*State Papers, Henry VIII 1830–1852*, iii, p. 10; Gwynn and Hadcock 1970, p. 317; Hall 2003, p. 205). Barnewall used the stone from Grace Dieu to construct his house (Collins 2021).

The Observant Franciscans in Multyfarnham, County Westmeath, were also protected by the local community and the Nugents of Delvin and managed to hold onto their property. They were probably still residing on that site when it was surveyed by the commissioners in 1540, merely vacating the property for a few days while the visitation was taking place. The friary was in full working order, and no goods or implements had been taken, unlike in other dissolved communities—the orchards bore fruit, and the buildings were in 'sufficient repair' (McNeill 1922, pp. 24, 33; White 1943, p. 275; Lennon 2009, pp. 7–9). The commissioners' report noted that nobody was willing to take a lease on the site, and another record taken at the time stated that the 'goods and chattels still remain in the house . . . not at all sold or appraised'. In 1541, an island on the property used for drying nets had not been leased out as 'no-one desires to take a lease of it' (McNeill 1922, p. 14; White 1943, p. 275). The Observants were popular in Ireland, and, given its location in the marcher region between the Pale and Gaelic Ireland, as well as the influence of the local Lord Delvin, it seems that the local community worked with the friars to save the friary (Bradshaw 1974, pp. 12–13).¹⁰

In 1538, Thomas Agard was bemoaning the popularity of the Observants in Ireland, calling them:

the false and crafty bloodsuckers, the Observants, as they will be called the most holiest, so that there remains more virtue in one of their coats and knotted girdles, than ever was in Christ and his passion. (*State Papers, Henry VIII 1830–1852*, vol. ii, p. 570; Ó Clabaigh 2011, pp. 54, 62–65, 302; 2000, pp. 58–79).

In any case, the community did not survive there for much longer, in the short term, at least. In 1547, Thomas Cusack was granted the house on a twenty-one-year lease, but the community managed to return to Multyfarnham in the 1550s and continued to be fully operational in 1600, much to the annoyance of Elizabeth I, who remonstrated with Bishop Thomas Jones of Meath for allowing this situation to continue, informing Jones that the site was used as a meeting point for Jesuits in Ireland (*Calendar of State Papers 1860–1912*, 1600, p. 274). Sir Francis Shane burned the site in 1601 (the house was burned twice, and the community was raided six times between 1590 and 1617), but fifteen friars were living in Multyfarnham again in 1622, residing in a farmhouse owned by one Andrew Nugent. The community still existed in Multyfarnham in 1638, when one Henry Fitzgerald left 10s. in his will to the Order there (*Calendar of State Papers 1860–1912*, 1601–03, pp. 136–37; Fennessy 2000, pp. 236–37; Gwynn and Hadcock 1970, p. 256; Hunter 1971, p. 8; Mooney 1894–1896, 6:10, p. 292; Scott 2006, pp. 109–10).¹¹

Yet another site that was saved by the local community was the Dominican house in Mullingar, County Westmeath. As with Multyfarnham, this seems like a community that merely withdrew while the commissioners carried out their survey, only to return later on. The commissioners noted the relatively good condition of the buildings on the site (excepting the church roof) and described buildings on the site as having been occupied recently by the community—language it does not use in relation to any other religious communities (White 1943, pp. 290–91). The commissioners' report noted issues over land

ownership that the Dominicans had with a local man named Gerald Petit, who claimed that some of the Dominican property was ‘his own right and inheritance, and was formerly leased by himself to the friars, who have no other right to it’ (White 1943, p. 241). If this was the case, the commissioners could not confiscate it, which their report goes to lengths to stress. Perhaps coincidentally, the prior there was called John Petit, and it is likely that he and Gerald were related and working together to subvert the commissioners (Morrin 1862, pp. 65, 136; White 1943, p. 291).¹² Even after the main wave of dissolutions, the Observants and their property were held in high esteem. In the 1570s, the Jesuit Edmund Campion, commenting on the Gaelic character, noted that ‘they honour devoute Fryars . . . suffer them to passe quietly, spare them and their mansions’ (Ó Clabaigh 2011, p. 329). The house of Observant Franciscans in Donegal was in 1566 reported to be ‘unspoiled, a large strong house with orchards and gardens’, even though the town itself was in ruins. By 1600, the community was made up of forty people, and the impression given by Donatus Mooney, a Franciscan who joined the Order in Donegal around the year 1600, is of a fully functioning religious community well-endowed with everything that they needed for religious life, again indicating the respect that the Order commanded in the area (Cunningham 2009, p. 129; Mooney 1894–1896, 5:5, p. 130; Jennings 1934).

As mentioned above, the dissolution was one of the few reform measures to succeed in the Pale, although the accompanying wave of iconoclasm in the 1530s was also a profitable business. In 1539, influenced by the 1537 English ‘Bishop’s Book’, commissioners in Ireland were instructed to destroy only the ‘notable images or relics to which the simple people of the said lord the king were wont to assemble superstitiously’. Among some of the highest-profile casualties of this State-sanctioned wave of iconoclasm in monastic communities were the statue of the Blessed Virgin Mary in Trim, the *Baculus Jhesu* (Staff of Jesus) in Christ Church, Dublin, and the Holy Cross in Ballyboggan, County Westmeath. In the church at Materye in Meath, which was owned by the Knights Hospitallers, there had been a cross to which the people had offered oblations. This was removed, however, and the church lost a vital source of revenue (Morrin 1862, p. 115).

Christ Church in Dublin held two famous relics—the *Baculus Jhesu* and a speaking crucifix, along with other less important relics (Gwynn and Hadcock 1970, p. 171). These generated a steady revenue stream for Christ Church, as did the ringing of bells for monthly and yearly minds (£1 12s. 2d.), funerals (15s.) and other small offerings that amounted to the not inconsiderable sum of £26 6s. 8d. Indeed, proceeds from the offerings at the staff were enough to support the maintenance of the singing boys there (Gillespie 2000, p. 160).

Another image that was lost in this purge was the aforementioned statue of Mary in the Augustinian friary of the Blessed Virgin Mary in Trim. The Annals of Loch Cé recorded in 1539 that ‘the very miraculous image of Mary which . . . healed the blind, and deaf, and lame, and every other ailment, was burnt by the English’ (Hennessy 1871, vol. ii, pp. 315–17). The sale of goods and chattels from the site raised the sum of £40, the highest sum raised this way in Ireland—perhaps suggestive of items or relics associated with the statue of the Blessed Virgin (McNeill 1922, p. 14). On 15 May 1539, with the ‘surrender’ of the Augustinian community in Trim, Geoffrey Dardice, the abbot there, received a pension of £15, and eight other canons from this community were also granted pensions, a relatively high number, which may point to the popularity of this community and its Marian shrine (Morrin 1862, pp. 64, 67, 136; Fiant Hen., no. 75; White 1943, p. 305; Potterton 2005, p. 303). Some buildings on the site were also kept in good repair to be used by the lord deputy when he was in the area (Fiant Hen., no. 392; White 1943, pp. 302–3).

The abbey of St Thomas the Martyr in Dublin (Thomas Court) was dissolved by the surrender of the last abbot, Henry Duff, on 25 July 1539 (Morrin 1862, p. 56; White 1943, p. 47) (See also Gilbert 1889; Walsh 2000). He was granted a pension of £42, while the previous abbot, James Coterel, and seven other canons received smaller pensions (Gwynn and Hadcock 1970, p. 172). It has been suggested that two silver crosses known as the ‘holye crossys’ that were held by the community contained relics of the True Cross, which perhaps is the reason for Duff’s high pension and the relatively high numbers who were

also pensioned off (Ronan 1926, p. 145). Colmán Ó Clabaigh has discussed elsewhere the volume now known as TCD, MS 97, which was a copy of the *Liber Ordinis* of St Victor, which had been owned by Duff. This contained all of the texts that governed the lives of Victorine Augustinian canons and was essentially a handbook of the Order's way of life. Duff took this book from St Thomas' library prior to its dissolution, and he still possibly held out hope that the monasteries and their way of life may be reinstated. If so, this was the essential text that would be required to restart the Order in Ireland. If this was indeed his hope, it was in vain (Ó Clabaigh 2019, pp. 241, 251).

The house of Augustinian canons in Ballyboggan, situated on the Meath–Kildare border, was in quite a ruinous state when surveyed on 14 October 1540, with only the church, which doubled as the parish church, in good condition—indeed, the site's value was entered as £21 13s. 4d., as much of the property was ruined through raids and wars (White 1943, pp. 311–12). Only the paltry sum of 26s. could be raised through the sale of goods and chattels from Ballyboggan, which is surprising given that it was the site of a famous cross, the destruction of which in 1538 was bemoaned in the annals of Ulster (McNeill 1922, p. 15; Hennessy and MacCarthy 1887–1901, s.a. 1538). It could have been supposed that the crucifix would have been a popular pilgrim attraction that may have helped the community financially. And it may also be that valuables associated with the relic were hidden or sold prior to the arrival of the commissioners in Ballyboggan and other similar sites (Bradshaw 1974, pp. 105–6).

The sense of resentment at the destruction of these images seems to have only grown in the years following these events, with the *Annals of the Four Masters*, written in the 1630s, taking a very negative view of the iconoclasm that took place. Even sooner than this, the *Annals of Loch Cé*, which were written in the Elizabethan period, noted how:

Mary's most miraculous statue at Trim, in which all the Irish had from time immemorial, that cured the blind, the deaf and the lame, and all such sufferers, was destroyed by the English; and the staff of Christ at Dublin, that worked many miracles and wonders in Ireland from the time of St Patrick until then, and that was in the hands of Christ himself, was destroyed by the English in the same manner (O'Donovan 1851, s.a., 1538; Hennessy 1871, s.a., 1538).

Images outside of the Pale were not safe either. In January 1539, the ornamentation from the shrine of St Dominic was confiscated during the archbishop's visit to the Dominican priory in Limerick (Ó Clabaigh 2011, p. 327). But despite these examples, it is nevertheless likely that some of these venerated images, beloved in their localities, were rescued before they could be destroyed by local wealthy families who had possibly paid for the image or reliquary and who felt a sense of ownership over these objects of devotion (Lennon 1994, p. 140). It was reported in 1561, for example, that the *Baculus Jhesu* was being used to assist women in childbirth, so it may have escaped the initial purge (Gillespie 1997, p. 161).¹³

So, what was the fate of the members of these religious communities once they had been dissolved? Unlike in England, few members of the religious orders were executed at this time for refusal to agree to the closures and new reforms then being introduced. The only recorded instance of a member of the religious being executed in Ireland at this time is in January 1539, when a friar was hanged in Waterford, but for stealing rather than denying the supremacy (Ellis and Murray 2017, p. 227; Clark 2021, pp. 58, 210, 220, 267).¹⁴ A Dominican from Mullingar was also arraigned for praemunire in 1538. But aside from these examples, the religious mostly seem to have acquiesced to the ending of their way of life with barely a whimper, barring St Mary's in Dublin and St Wolstan's in Kildare. We have already seen the letter written from St Wolstan's in 1536, pleading in vain for mercy. The Cistercian community of St Mary's in Dublin also wrote a letter at the end of July 1539, beseeching Cromwell to allow their community to remain open, stating that they looked after 'poor men, scholars and orphans', and also claiming that they had supplied the city with 'victuals and habiliments' during Thomas Fitzgerald's siege of Dublin in 1534 (Ellis and Murray 2017, p. 236).¹⁵ In their desperation to remain open, they proposed changing

their Rule and habit as Christ Church had done and also offered a bribe to Cromwell. And although there had been some moves within the Dublin Council to save St Mary's, the pleas of the abbot there, William Laundie, came to naught, and St Mary's was dissolved in late October 1539 (Bradshaw 1974, p. 114).¹⁶

The acceptance of most of the religious to the closures in Ireland was no doubt aided by the pensions which they would now receive, although it must be remembered that the friars were not eligible for these payments, as they did not hold enough property to generate the necessary income. Pensions were paid via the office of the exchequer in Dublin Castle, unlike in England, where the Court of Augmentations was established to administer issues such as this. The pensions were paid from the profits of the lands now held in lay hands, and in 1541, five former monks of Jerpoint Abbey acknowledged their pension payment of £10 Irish, which they had received from James Butler, the earl of Ormond, who had been granted their former property (Curtis 1937, p. 202). In England, payments to the religious continued into the early Jacobean period (Clark 2021, p. 530). In Ireland, we know that pensions were still being paid in the early 1560s and had increased in at least one case, that of Anne Weldon, from the Augustinian nunnery in Lismullin (McShane 2022, p. 63). The payments seem to have then been made out of the income from the property which had formerly been in the possession of the community to whom the grantee belonged. But for the first three years of pensions being paid, from 1540–43, the treasurer paid part of the pensions, with the remainder provided by the farmers of the properties. Even in the initial years, arrears were building up in pension payments, as was the case with John Rawson of the Knights Hospitaller, who was paid £1750 of arrears for three and a half years. The corrupt practices of the vice-treasurer, William Brabazon, were beginning to come to light, and it later emerged that by 1554, Crown revenues had been depleted by over £2100 annually due to undervalued leases, many of these on monastic properties (Lennon 2015, p. 3; Ellis 1998, p. 159; Bradshaw 1974, pp. 231–32). And when those who leased the properties were not paying their rents, as was the case with Sir Francis Bryan, who in 1549 owed back rent on seven former monastic properties (Lennon 2015, pp. 60–61), what chance was there that the payments due to the former inhabitants of these communities, and many others like them, would ever receive what was due to them?

Issues regarding income from monastic sites continued throughout Edward's reign, and the privy council in London in 1552 enquired of Lord Deputy James Croft the reason for the lower than anticipated income from dissolved monasteries (Lennon 2015, p. 177). The low prices, which were agreed upon at the time of the initial dissolutions, were later bemoaned by the Tudor state as a significant loss of revenue. During Elizabeth's reign, for example, it was alleged that the leasing of the monastery in Granard to Sir Thomas Cusack at a rent of £20 per year had, by 1566, cost the Crown £132. A similar story was told in relation to Richard Netterville, who had been leased St John's Dublin. He paid his rent of £114 21*d.* for five years and then had the terms of the lease amended, which ended up costing Elizabeth £476 4*s.* (Cunningham 2009, p. 105).¹⁷ Further revenue from the dissolved sites went to the post of lord chancellor of Ireland, who was paid during the reigns of Henry VIII and Edward VI £282 10*s.* annually for his meals, money which came from the dissolutions and which was reduced to £210 10*s.* per annum due to the drop in the valuation of coinage (Cunningham 2010, p. 28). During the second wave of closures during Elizabeth's reign, one Nicholas Blake, a burgess from Galway, made his will in 1568, in which he made it explicit that should the friars be expelled from their houses in Galway, 'the legacies made to them should return to the heirs of the testator, to be divided by them amongst the poorest and neediest persons' (Flynn 1993, p. 78). This may have, of course, been the former religious themselves, but it could just as easily have been others. Issues such as these would not bode well for the former religious relying upon payments from some of these landlords and benefactors.

In December 1558, the former bishop of Meath, Edward Staples, who had been deprived of his benefice in 1554 for having married, wrote to William Cecil, Elizabeth I's chief advisor, stating that since his deprivation, he had been 'made a gesteing stocke amongst

munkes and ffreers' (The National Archives, SP 63/1/8). In that same diocese in the 1570s, Bishop Hugh Brady complained about the friars who wandered the countryside in Meath, saying masses openly (The National Archives, SP 63/58/16). Even earlier, c.1548, Lord Deputy Bellingham was referring to 'deceitful friars and priests' in the company of a Gaelic lord, possibly Callough O'Carroll, whom, he believed, were deliberately misinterpreting Latin letters that had been sent to O'Carroll, creating tension with the Dublin administration (Lennon 2015, p. 38). And around 1554, the friars of Kilcullen noted in their plea to Mary and Pole to have their former property returned to them that 'we have all been living in the mountains since the suppression' (Mayer 2003, p. 399). So, the friars, in particular the Observants, seem to have remained together in their communities, even if expelled from their properties, and kept quite a visible profile in the Pale post-dissolution, indicating that not all accepted the new way of life now being forced upon them. Interestingly, however, one former canon of St John's Priory in Kilkenny, named John Bicton, was noted in 1551 to have done more than anybody to further the king's cause in Ireland, while his will from the following year also points to a reformist viewpoint, and Richard Nangle, the former superior of the Augustinian friars in Ireland, also ended up supporting George Browne and his reforms and was appointed bishop of Clonfert by Henry VIII in 1537 (albeit to little success there), so some, at least, seem to have embraced the new reforms (Bradley 2011–2012, pp. 323–24; McCormack 2009).¹⁸

Many of the religious carried on their public presence throughout the sixteenth century and exasperated some of the Dublin administration so much that in 1582, John Perrot informed Elizabeth that 'friars, monks, Jesuits, priests, nuns, and such like vermin . . . should be executed by martial law' (Moran 1864, p. 111). In 1611, the Dublin administration stated that 'all friars and monks and nuns shall be expelled out of their dissolved houses, where for the most part, they still keep and hover' (*Calendar of State Papers 1860–1912*, 1603–25, p. 188). This proposed act would have been directed more towards the communities in what had been the more Gaelic areas of Ireland, outside the Pale area and towns and cities under English influence.

Perrot referred to nuns in Ireland in 1582, so what of the women whose communities were dissolved during the reign of Henry VIII? Women, in general, had fewer options open to them in the post-dissolution era in Ireland than the male religious, and in most cases, aside from a few noteworthy individuals such as Margaret Cusack, the abbess of the convent in Lismullin whose brother Thomas was one of the dissolution commissioners, many of these women faced uncertain futures filled with financial hardship (McShane 2022, chp. 2).¹⁹ As Marian Lyons has pointed out recently, the decision to join an Order and perhaps ascend to the position of prioress or abbess would have given some amount of women in Ireland a degree of independence and authority which would otherwise have eluded them. Their expulsions from their communities and back into the care of their families in some cases, where their independence was probably stymied to some degree, must have been especially galling for some of these women (Lyons 2023, p. 104). In the Irish parliament held in 1541, the marriage of former religious was outlawed, yet there is at least one example of a former member of female religious communities who married. This seems to have been a rare occurrence, however, and most religious never married following the dissolution of their communities (McShane 2022, pp. 69–70). But the religious life continued to attract women in Ireland throughout the sixteenth century, and in some of the communities, like Grace Dieu and possibly others, they continued to live in a communal setting on a property on their former estates or on premises nearby. A group of women called the *Mná Bochta* (Irish for 'poor women') was established in Limerick during the 1560s by the Jesuit David Wolfe, which aped the religious life for women in an era which had seen this way of life prohibited. Similar groups appeared in Louth, Dublin and Galway throughout the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries (McShane 2022, pp. 66–67, 77–78, 83–84; See also Bowden and McShane 2023, p. 233).

But between 1541 and 1547, further monastic closures took place, mostly in Gaelic parts of Ireland, as part of the policies of Lord Deputy Anthony St Leger, who was interested in

reaching conciliatory accommodations with the Gaelic lords. So, by the end of Henry's reign in early 1547, roughly 55% of Ireland's religious communities had been closed down (Lyons 2018, p. 518). But Dominican communities in Limerick, Tralee, Youghal and Kilmallock held on to their possessions for much of the sixteenth century due to the patronage of the earls of Desmond. Other Dominican communities in Athenry and Sligo also avoided dissolution through reconstituting themselves as colleges of secular priests, as had taken place in the early 1540s at Christ Church in Dublin (Ó Clabaigh 2011, p. 328).

5. Post-Henrician Dissolution Process

Following Henry's death in 1547, his young son, Edward, became king. A committed reformer, he nonetheless made little attempt to further the incomplete dissolution process in Ireland. Indeed, Lord Deputy Anthony St Leger was criticised in 1550 for the high number of friaries still operating in Ireland (Maginn 2005). This was slightly unfair, as nobody before him had managed to close them either. There was, throughout this period, however, a number of individuals who were hopeful of being granted or retaining monastic properties, including the viscount of Ormond, who was pleading in 1547 to hold on to the Abbey of Leix. The Cistercian foundation of Abbey Owney, County Limerick, it was reported in 1549, was 'as coveted as if it were a duchy'. The familial connections with these monastic properties are also evident in the request from Hugh McNeill Oge in 1552 that he be granted the friary of Carrickfergus 'where his ancestors are buried', promising to endow two secular priests to celebrate divine service there should his suit be successful. A similar suit to have the friary of Athenry 'preserved for the burial of his house' was made by Richard Burke, earl of Clanricard, in 1567 (Lennon 2015, pp. 2, 69, 193; Cunningham 2009, p. 253).²⁰ But in general, Edward's reign was not noted for any further persecution of surviving communities in Ireland; rather, it was the ownership of those properties already dissolved that seems to have exercised people the most during this period.

When the Catholic Mary I acceded to the throne in 1553, some hoped that there would be a total reversal of the religious changes introduced throughout the Tudor kingdoms during the reigns of Henry VIII and Edward VI. This was not to be, however; although the Tudor kingdoms returned to the arms of Rome, the dissolutions themselves were not reversed. To have done so would have created a legal morass and further social upheaval, which Mary, whose eventual ascent to the throne had been uncertain, was unwilling to risk. But there were attempts to reopen some communities in Ireland, on a limited scale, at least. On 27 August 1547, Oswald Massingberd, a Lincolnshire man with a dreadful disciplinary record within his Order, was appointed as titular prior of the Knights Hospitaller in Ireland on the condition that he would not assume the title officially until he was legally possessed of the priory (Scott 2015, pp. 57–58).

In reality, Massingberd was unable to further this plan until the death of Edward VI in 1553. Following Mary's accession to the throne, lines of communication were reopened between Malta and Cardinal Pole, the queen's religious advisor, with the intention of restoring the Order in England and Ireland. In 1554, Massingberd was confirmed in his appointment as prior in Ireland. This was followed on 2 April 1557, with the Crown authorising the reinstatement of the Order of St John in England and Ireland, along with the restoration of their estates that had not yet been alienated (King 1935, p. 4). In the Crown's letters patent dated 6 May 1557, it was stated that Philip and Mary 'wishes especially that those things should be restored, which in that most calamitous time had been destroyed', and they nominated Oswald Massingberd to 'have hold possess rule govern and improve' the Hospitallers in Ireland (King 1935, pp. 11, 15–16). Massingberd was also appointed to positions of influence in the Dublin administration, as had his predecessor, John Rawson (*State Papers, Henry VIII 1830–1852*, iii, p. 243; The National Archives, SP 62/2/47; Fiants Hen., nos. 201, 505; Fiants Philip and Mary, nos. 214, 222).

The Knights Hospitaller were not the only Order who sought the restoration of their former properties, but even before the accession of Mary in 1553, in 1550, Conn O'Neill, the first earl of Tyrone, was accused of having reopened religious houses that had been

dissolved by Thomas Cusack and reinstalling the friars there. This was part of a wider range of accusations levelled against Tyrone and may not actually be the case (Lennon 2015, p. 96). Nevertheless, a new regime brought hope to many of the religious orders formerly based in Ireland. In October 1557, Robert Gogan, the prior of the Dominican convent at Youghal, along with James, earl of Desmond, wrote to the queen, requesting the restitution of the priory of St Mary of the Island adjacent to the walls of Cork (The National Archives, SP 62/1/58–59). Desmond had already bought the Dominican friary in Limerick, which he had returned to the friars when Mary became queen.²¹ Also in 1557, Desmond's chaplain, Robert Remon, wrote to Philip and Mary requesting the return of the Augustinian monastery of St Katherine near Waterford, of which he had been appointed prior (The National Archives, SP 62/1/66; Jefferies 2010, p. 119). In 1558, Archbishop George Dowdall of Armagh likewise requested that the hospital at Ardee in County Louth, which he had formerly been prior of, be reopened, and Mary wrote to the earl of Sussex, lord deputy of Ireland, ordering its restoration for 'the better relief of poor and sick people' (*Calendar of State Papers 1860–1912*, 1509–73, p. 148; The National Archives, SP 62/2/63, SP 62/2/64; Jefferies 2009). In another letter dated 20 May 1558, Mary recommended the suit of the bearers, two Franciscans, who sought the restoration of lands belonging to religious houses in Trim and elsewhere (The National Archives, SP 62/2/42). This referred to friars from Kilcullen, County Kildare, who travelled to London to plead their case with Mary and Cardinal Pole that Kilcullen, Trim, Enniscorthy and Multyfarnham be reopened (of course, Multyfarnham had never truly closed). In all of these cases, the properties were still intact, and the lay grantees were seemingly willing to relinquish their titles to them (Lennon 2009, p. 11).²² So, in some cases, at least, Mary supported the restitution of religious properties confiscated and redistributed during her father's and half-brother's reigns.

6. The Elizabethan Dissolutions

But following the death in November 1558 of Mary and the accession of her half-sister, the Protestant Elizabeth I, the Hospitaller estates were soon reconfiscated, and by 1563, George Wyse was in possession of the Hospitaller lands of Crook. As the Wyse family had originally received these following the dissolution of the preceptory in 1540, it seems likely that they had surrendered them to Massingberd during the reign of Mary, only to regain them under Elizabeth (The National Archives, SP 62/2/42).²³ In 1558, three men, Thomas Siggins, John Cullen and John Katherine, had been leased, for a fee of £100, the preceptory of Kilcloghan for twenty-one years from Oswald Massingberd and the brethren of St John's in Kilmainham. This was voided by an act of parliament in 1560, which passed the new Acts of Supremacy and Uniformity, bringing the Reformation back to Ireland, and by 1567, the men were seeking recompense for their loss (Cunningham 2009, p. 251; Jefferies 1988).

Now in the reign of Elizabeth I, as the hand of Tudor administration clawed deeper into Gaelic Ireland, a fresh impetus was given to finally dissolving the remaining religious communities still open in Ireland, mostly in Gaelic Ireland. Throughout the 1560s, moves had been made to establish Tudor rule in the predominantly Gaelic provinces of Ulster, Connacht and Munster, with a council and president established in Connacht in 1569 and in Munster in 1570 and parts of Ulster being colonised by private interests in the 1570s. The shiring of Gaelic lordships into English-style counties with English justice and administration introduced in Ulster also began around this time (Maginn 2009; Heffernan 2018; Ellis 1998, pp. 297–98). This strengthened the English presence in previously inaccessible parts of Ireland, making their political and religious reform a more feasible prospect. Alongside this, the closures of religious houses in these areas became more feasible, and as part of this move to establish further control in Ireland, the dissolutions once more became more important. Accordingly, it was recommended in 1567, for example, that the abbey lands of Ulster be surveyed (Cunningham 2009, p. 245). The dissolution of houses in Munster was also well underway by the mid-1560s, and officers were charged with possessing and recovering the profits of these dissolved sites, indicating a lack of clarity regarding ownership of these properties in a post-dissolution landscape. Indeed, although one Patrick Sherlock

had a lease of the priory of St Catherine's in Waterford and paid his rent, it was reported in November 1566 that he was unable to receive the revenue due to him from the priory because of 'certain unruly persons of County Cork', where most of the property lay, who were withholding the rent from him. But there was still more to do, and reference was made in November 1568 to the abbeys and friaries in Munster that were 'not yet suppressed', with the potential revenues of these sites doubling the income which Elizabeth would have from the province should a president and council be appointed there (Cunningham 2009, p. 127; 2010, pp. 101, 112). This was not just the case in Munster only, and in 1567, enquiries were being made as to the ownership of a number of monastic properties, including Duleek in County Meath and Farney priory in County Tipperary (Cunningham 2009, pp. 8, 147).

Back in Connacht in 1567, Richard Burke, the earl of Clanricard, wrote to Elizabeth, supplicating for lands accrued to the Crown through the suppression of monasteries in that province and stating that they were 'at present waste or worth little'. In December of that year, it was recommended that he be granted fifty-nine monasteries in Connacht 'for service to the crown against rebels' (Cunningham 2009, pp. 225, 253). Two years later, an extensive survey of land belonging to religious houses in Connacht was undertaken by the surveyor, Michael Fitzwilliam. He listed thirty-four properties in Counties Galway, Mayo, Roscommon, Westmeath and Clare, which also had property in Counties Leitrim and Sligo. Fitzwilliam believed that these properties, which were realising £200 *per annum* for Elizabeth, had been undervalued and should have actually been worth £800 to the queen. He went on to report that there were many more friaries throughout 'Irish and rebellious places' in Connacht that he could not visit 'without apparent danger' (Cunningham 2010, pp. 204–5). So it was obvious that there remained plenty of property not yet in Crown hands, and, accordingly, an act was passed in the 1570 parliament held in Dublin which granted to Elizabeth 'all abbey land not yet suppressed', and further surveys of Connacht in 1574 and 1577 give more detail about the suppression of houses as they were taking place (Cunningham 2010, p. 220; *Calendar of the Carew Manuscripts 1867–1873*, 1515–74, pp. 473–75; Nicholls 1972–1973). It was during this period and into the 1580s that an estimated two or three dozen more houses, which had to this point avoided closure, were finally dissolved, although the slow run-up to these closures gave the inhabitants of these houses a better chance of reorganising themselves and preparing for the end (Lennon 2009, p. 11).²⁴

What uses were being made of these former monastic sites? Obviously, many of them, including Tintern Abbey in Wexford and Kells Priory in Kilkenny, were now converted into living quarters for those who had been leased them, and although many houses had their goods and valuables, including building materials, stripped out of them, some, such as the nunnery in Lismullin, which remained in the hands of the Cusack family, likely retained its furnishings and valuables post-dissolution. But the houses also served other purposes too, and the friary on Sherkin Island off the coast of County Cork was converted into a fishery following its dissolution (Lynch 2018).²⁵ Former religious settlements were well-built edifices, and so, by the Elizabethan period, made ideal choices as defensive outposts, including Boyle Abbey and the abbey at Assaroe in County Donegal, whose location on the River Erne meant that 'the enemy cannot then annoy Connacht'. In 1551, it was proposed that a fort be built at an unnamed abbey on the River Bann in Ulster in order to contain Scottish attackers, and in the same year, it was Nichols Bagenal who had the doors and windows of Armagh friary walled up for 'the security of the soldiers who will live there'. Other former monastic sites were used to store supplies, such as Carrickfergus abbey, which was to be packed with provisions for the military in 1567 and was being used as a stable for soldiers' horses by the beginning of Mary's reign and probably long before that. The site of the former abbey in Duiske was felt in 1549 to be an ideal point for the construction of a bridge to aid the defence of the region. Some monastic properties, such as the abbey at Glenarm, close to Ballymena, County Antrim, the monastery in Omagh and the Franciscan friary in Cavan, were, by the Elizabethan period, also being used as a barrack for soldiers, with it also being noted in 1569 that Lord Deputy Henry Sidney had 'placed Englishmen in the ... abbeys' of Connacht (Lennon 2015, pp. 70, 90, 135; 2009, p. 11; Cunningham

2009, pp. 129, 178; 2010, pp. 17, 123, 203; *Calendar of State Papers 1860–1912*, 1588–92, p. 540; Moore and Stout 2022, p. 51). Also in 1569, at the beginning of the Desmond Rebellion, it was noted that the abbey of Tracton, County Cork, was under siege from Desmond's supporters, as it was now some kind of military outpost. It was later overrun. The rebels also occupied the abbey of Owney in County Limerick at this time, these buildings being regarded as relatively strong with defensive qualities and resources (Cunningham 2009, pp. 162–63, 172). One Anthony Colcloght had complained of his difficulties in 1566 in fortifying and defending Tintern Abbey in County Wexford, which he farmed, stating that 'it lies on borders that need to be fortified against her Highness's enemies, for the better quietness of the country'. It was later agreed that Colcloght be granted the house should he fortify and maintain it (Cunningham 2009, pp. 112, 120).²⁶ These financial difficulties were real enough, and James Butler, son of the earl of Ormond, applied for the rents of other monastic sites to help him pay for the upkeep of Duiske Abbey, Kilkenny, on which he and his father had spent a significant amount of money fortifying, standing as it did 'upon borders adjoining to Irish savage people' (Cunningham 2009, pp. 98, 206). When Tralee was taken by Crown forces in 1580, every house in the town was destroyed, along with the castle, with the only building saved being the Dominican abbey there, which it was noted would make 'a very convenient place for a garrison' (*Calendar of the Carew Manuscripts 1867–1873*, 1575–88, p. 235).

The abbeys were not just used for military purposes—it was requested in 1567 by the town and mayor of Drogheda that they pay no rent on the religious houses that they were farming in order to maintain a free school 'to be always kept within the said town' (Cunningham 2009, pp. 236, 243, 254). Likewise, that same year, the decision was made to convert the friary in Athenry into a 'school house', and it was recommended in 1568 that two ruined abbeys in Armagh be renovated and converted into free schools, 'whereby the young will know to serve God and the queen'. These other uses continued through the decades, and by the early seventeenth century, the Franciscan house in Ennis was being used as a courthouse, the buildings there being described as 'very fine' and 'still in good condition' (Cunningham 2009, p. 253; 2010, p. 15; Mooney 1894–1896).²⁷

7. Case Study—Drumlane Abbey²⁸

It is with this context in mind that we discuss the case of one religious community that was dissolved during the mid-Elizabethan period—Drumlane Abbey, in the diocese of Kilmore and the Gaelic Irish O'Reilly lordship of East Breifne, which was shired in 1579 to become County Cavan in the province of Ulster—as the story of its dissolution and the subsequent ownership of the site is indicative of many other Gaelic Irish communities dissolved during this period (see note 28). As Liam Kelly has discussed elsewhere (Kelly 2017, pp. 35–41, 181–82, 204–7), St Mary's Augustinian priory at Drumlane, which was a daughter house of St Mary's abbey in Kells, was established at some point between 1140 and 1148. It occupied the site of an earlier community that had been founded in the sixth century. The priory was connected to a reliquary known as the *Breac Maadhóg*, which was created in the late eleventh or early twelfth century. This reliquary helped to promote Drumlane as an ecclesiastical foundation in Kilmore and probably was an important revenue stream for the community there. It escaped the iconoclasm drive of the 1530s, being out of the reach of the commissioners in Gaelic Ireland (Murray 2014).

The priory, like many of those in Gaelic Ireland, had escaped the initial run of dissolutions in the 1530s and early 1540s, but by the Elizabethan period, its time and luck were running out. We do not know how large the community was by the Elizabethan period, but on 9 January 1569, one Turlough McCabe from County Meath was granted 'the custody of the abbey of Trinity Island and Churchton [Drumlane] in the Breifne'. The lands attached to Drumlane were reckoned to be 'waste and [to] yield no profit to her Majesty' (Cunningham 2010, p. 125). This grant to McCabe, which did not seem to have a number of years attached to it in any formal sense, did not last long. Instead, on 26 September 1571, Lord Deputy Henry Sidney granted to Aodh Connallach O'Reilly, the chief of the O'Reillys,

‘the monastery of the canons of the B.V.M. of Dromlahen’, along with eight polls of land which belonged to the priory, together with the tithes of that land and the tithes of the rectories of Drumlane and nearby Killeshandra (Fiants Eliz., no. 1681).

For this property, O’Reilly agreed to pay an annual charge of £8 14s. 8d. But, eleven years later, on 15 July 1582, having not paid the agreed rent since 1575, the monastic lands of Drumlane were confiscated from O’Reilly (Hunter 2012, p. 36). A few months later, in September 1582, Drumlane was granted to one Hugh Strowbridge for a period of twenty-one years (Fiants Eliz., no. 4025; Hunter 2012, p. 36). It has been postulated that Strowbridge was unable to collect the rent due to him from Drumlane, and on 10 September 1586, Lucas Dillon, who was from Newton near Trim in County Meath and who was also chief baron of the Irish exchequer, became the latest to be granted ‘the site [and possessions] of the monastery of B.V.M. Drumleaghan’, this time for a period of sixty years at an annual rent of £31 19s. 8½d. (Fiants Ire., Eliz., no. 4923; Clavin 2009a). This lease lasted for eighteen years, and in January 1604, Drumlane was granted to William Taaffe from County Louth, a Catholic who had been sheriff of Sligo (Clavin 2009b). Again, this grant did not last very long, and shortly after the commencement of the Ulster Plantation in 1610, Drumlane and its properties were granted to James Dillon, a native of Westmeath who later became an MP for Westmeath, served as an officer in Owen Roe O’Neill’s foreign army, was part of the rebellion in 1641 and served as governor of Jamestown in County Leitrim (Kelly 2017, p. 206). It is at this point that the ownership of Drumlane becomes even more complicated. In 1606, Hugh Strowbridge is recorded as Drumlane’s owner, but he had lost his interest in the site in 1586, as we have seen (Calendar of State Papers 1860–1912, 1606–8, p. 60). Muddying the water further is a report from 1608, which states that Drumlane was ‘granted in fee farm to Lucas Dillan, Knight and now [are] in the tenure of his heir’ (McNeill 1931, p. 205). Again, Dillon had held the site until 1604, when it was granted to William Taffe. But Drumlane was among the first monastic properties to be held by Crown grant in what was to become County Cavan, and after its initial grant to Aodh Connallach O’Reilly, it was granted to a succession of grantees, mostly of the Old English community.

We do not know how many people made up the community in Drumlane, but it has been theorised that it was likely a small community. Liam Kelly believes that Aodh Connallach O’Reilly may have permitted the canons regular in Drumlane to remain there for a time after 1571, but without their traditional income, they could not survive indefinitely (Kelly 2017, p. 207). Whether the previous grantee, Turloch McCabe, would have allowed this seems less likely, however, so it may be that the canons left for a short time in 1569 and returned for another period in 1571, but we cannot know for sure. One thing is certain, however—the Augustinians departed from the site around this period and never returned, bringing to an end the Order’s association with Drumlane, which had begun over 400 years previously. The church attached to the site became the Church of Ireland parish church of Drumlane and remained as such until the nineteenth century.

8. Conclusions

The waves of dissolutions that took place in Ireland changed the landscape there, both physical and societal, forever. Once a common sight and figures of high standing in their communities, now the remaining religious in Ireland became a persecuted enemy of the Tudor and Stuart State. The initial dissolution process in Ireland saw most of the religious communities in the Pale close, with more in Gaelic Ireland closing in the 1540s. The membership of many of these communities was small and with pensions smoothening the way, most reintegrated into secular life. There were some attempts during the Marian restoration to reopen religious communities, but this did not generally occur, although the Knights Hospitaller did manage to appoint a titular prior to Ireland. Nor did this attempted revival have much long-term impact on the revival or continuance of monastic life in Ireland. But some communities escaped closure entirely, such as the nuns of Grace Dieu in Dublin, who continued to operate in new accommodation provided by the man who had been granted their original property. It is not known whether they continued to

operate their school as they had done on their original site—likely not. Others, such as the Observant Franciscans in Multyfarnham, County Westmeath, protected by the Nugents of Delvin, continued on site throughout the sixteenth century, much to the irritation of Queen Elizabeth I.

The passage of monastic lands into secular hands throughout this period increased the wealth and influence of powerful men, while the process, in other cases, caused friction between opposing parties who coveted these valuable properties. Various uses were made of these sites—often converted into secular housing, barracks and other military outposts—but there was also a suggestion in 1584 to convert the site of the former Dominican friary in Trim, County Meath, into a university, which was not brought any further (Potterton 2005, p. 327). But by the later sixteenth century, more monastic communities that had remained out of the reach of the State authorities, such as those outside the major towns in Connacht, Ulster and Munster, were now beginning to close down as the arm of the Tudor administration began to have a greater reach into these areas.

It is clear from this study that there are definite gaps in our understanding of the Irish monastic dissolution process, particularly during the second wave in the Elizabethan era. The lack of surviving records exacerbates this situation in Ireland. Nevertheless, a clearer understanding of the dissolutions in Gaelic Ireland during the early to mid-1540s and a fuller chronology of the second wave of dissolutions should be possible, as well as gaining a wider picture of the transfers and ownership of property post-dissolution. As such, this essay is a tentative first step in the move towards gaining a clearer insight into this period of great change in Irish society and religious life in the sixteenth century.

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Notes

- ¹ The figure of roughly 400 houses pre-dissolution has also been suggested: Gwynn and Hadcock (1970). My sincere thanks to Dr Colmán Ó Clabaigh OSB for his comments on an earlier draft of this article and for his numerous suggestions and support.
- ² Alen was born in Norfolk and was a member of the House of Commons and later lord chancellor of Ireland. The Master of the Rolls was a senior official in the Irish Chancery and was responsible for the safekeeping of patent rolls and close rolls. William Brabazon was appointed vice-treasurer in Ireland in 1534, the office of lord treasurer being an honorary one. This gave him responsibility over the king's money in Ireland. Brabazon was also treasurer-at-war, and the two posts combined made him the third most senior person in the administration after the deputy and the lord chancellor. My thanks to Professor Steven G. Ellis for his comments regarding Alen and Brabazon.
- ³ For examples of pre-dissolution leases being made by the Knights Hospitaller, see (Scott 2015, pp. 50, 52).
- ⁴ The grant of All Hallows to the city of Dublin is dated 4 February 1539 and is held at Pearse Street Library, Dublin: Dublin, City Libraries, C1/01/C74.
- ⁵ Although Bradshaw states that this should be dated to 1537, one of the editors of the relevant calendar of state papers believes that considering the siege of Dublin was in 1534 and that Thomas Fitzgerald surrendered in 1535, it would make the date of 1537 a bit late for the city to be seeking compensation. My thanks to Professor Steven G. Ellis for his advice on this matter.
- ⁶ Cromwell did at one point consider licensing some imprisoned London Observants to transfer over to Ireland: (Clark 2021, p. 220).
- ⁷ Following the precedent of the earlier state papers, recent editors have dated these letters to January 1538, but Bradshaw contended in 1974 that this dating is incorrect: (Ellis and Murray 2017, p. 169; *State Papers, Henry VIII 1830–1852*, ii, pp. 544–45; Bradshaw 1974, p. 118).
- ⁸ Not 26 October, as stated in (Gwynn and Hadcock 1970, p. 317).
- ⁹ Barnewall was writing letters from Grace Dieu in 1540 and is noted to have been living there in 1545 and 1546: (Fiant Hen., nos. 469, 510; McShane 2022, p. 71, fn. 50).

- 10 For more on the development of the Observant Franciscans in Ireland, see (Ó Clabaigh 2011, pp. 54, 62–65, 302).
- 11 Donatus (Donagh) Mooney gives a vivid first-hand account of Shane’s raid at Multyfarnham in 1601: (Mooney 1894–1896, 6:11, pp 321–23).
- 12 The Petits (or possibly the Nugents) were responsible for the foundation of this community in the late 1230s, so it is likely that they would have held an interest in retaining their interest in this property: (Gwynn and Hadcock 1970, p. 227).
- 13 Of course, this may have been a counterfeit.
- 14 During the Elizabethan period, however, a number of the religious were executed for their opposition to the Royal Supremacy: Moore and Stout (2022), p. 51.
- 15 St Mary’s had also leased away much of their possessions between 1537 and 1539: (Bradshaw 1974, pp. 87–88).
- 16 In 1568, St Mary’s Abbey was reckoned to be ‘the greatest value of any one thing that queen has in the English Pale’, being valued at £498: Cunningham (2010), p. 48.
- 17 This was not always the case, however: when James Sherlock died during the reign of Edward VI, his brother Patrick was granted the priory of St Catherine’s near Waterford, which James had held. But now, whereas James had paid £100 per annum for the property, Patrick was now paying £155: (Cunningham 2009, p. 127).
- 18 The observant Franciscans, in general, were at the forefront of the opposition to the Henrician Reformation, both in England and Ireland: (Ó Clabaigh 2011, pp. 320–29).
- 19 Margaret was able to make substantial loans to her brother Thomas in the 1560s: (McShane 2022, p. 65).
- 20 Leix Abbey was in 1551 leased to Matthew King, former constable of Dungarvan Castle, for twenty-one years: (Lennon 2015, p. 161). There are numerous examples of requests and grants of monastic properties throughout Edward’s and Elizabeth’s reigns: (Lennon 2015, pp. 67, 85, 86, 101, 104, 118, 127, 140, 141, 188; Cunningham 2009, pp. 48, 70, 125, 167, 182, 251).
- 21 John Perrot, president of Munster, requested in 1570 to have the use of this abbey, which was at that time the property of the earl of Desmond, for the Munster council in Limerick. Desmond, like others mentioned in this essay, did not always pay the rents due on all of his properties, such as was the case regarding an unnamed abbey in County Cork in 1568: (Cunningham 2010, pp. 49, 245).
- 22 That all of these former communities lay within the Pale or the Marcher regions perhaps implies that communities outside these areas continued to function normally throughout this period.
- 23 The Wyse connection endured—in 1593, Andrew Wyse was Prior of the Hospitallers in Ireland and Grand Prior of the Hospitallers in England: (Downey 2015, pp. 70–77).
- 24 One site that we know managed to escape closure, despite being mentioned in a survey from 1574 and actually being surveyed in 1576, was a Dominican house in Urlar, County Mayo, that survived until 1608: (Gwynn and Hadcock 1970, p. 231).
- 25 For further detail on how these monastic sites were redeveloped into private homes, see (Lynch 2010, pp. 199–202; Clyne 2007, pp. 512–16; Moss 2012, p. 120, fn. 28).
- 26 The grant was not made immediately, as there were issues regarding the ownership of various parts of the property: (Cunningham 2009, p. 208). The Colclough family were originally from Staffordshire, and Tintern remained in the family until the early 1960s: (Lynch 2010, p. 9).
- 27 In 1539, it had been recommended to Cromwell that six religious communities should change their ‘clothing and rule’ and continue to serve as schools for the children of nobles, as they had done. This was ignored: (Ellis and Murray 2017, p. 232).
- 28 My thanks to Monsignor Liam Kelly for our conversations and his guidance on this subject.

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