

THE WILL AND FAMILY OF  
HUGH O NEILL, EARL OF TYRONE

[WITH AN APPENDIX OF GENEALOGIES]

EDITED BY REV. PAUL WALSH

Iomdha sochar ag Síol Néill  
fada ó do hoirdneadh iadséin  
Síol an cheinnbhile ó Bhóinn Bhreagh  
tar deirbhfine móir Míleadh

—*Tadhg Dall*

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I GCUIMHNE MO DHEARBHRÁTHAR

ÉAMONN BREATHNACH

1888-1925

# CONTENTS

	PAGE
I. O Neill's Will ... ..	9
II. O Neill's Marriages ... ..	16
III. Turlogh Lynagh's Daughter ... ..	23
IV. O Neill's Sons ... ..	29
V. O Neill's Daughters ... ..	33
VI. Relatives and Dependents ... ..	47

## APPENDIX : GENEALOGIES

I. Aodh O Neill ... ..	51
II. Aodh Dubh O Neill ... ..	53
III. Henry Roe O Neill ... ..	57
IV. Henry and Gordon O Neill ... ..	60
V. Col. Toirrdhealbhadh O Neill of Cashlan ...	67
VI. Col. Toirrdhealbhadh O Neill of the Fewes	75

# The Will and Family of Hugh O Neill Earl of Tyrone

I

## O NEILL'S WILL

**A**MONG a collection of papers discovered in 1918 in the Franciscan Convent, Wexford, by Father Brendan Jennings, O.F.M., and at present housed in the library of the same Order in Dublin in Merchants' Quay, there is one short document in Irish which possesses considerable interest. It bears the endorsement: *Testamentum Illustrissimi Domini Onelli*, and embodies an abstract or epitome of the last Will of Hugh O Neill, the great Earl of Tyrone, who left Ireland in 1607, and died at Rome in 1616. The document itself appears to be a draft of a letter written in the latter city, and addressed to Henry O Hagan, a former dependent of O Neill, who was in the Spanish dominions in Flanders in the years 1616-17. It is somewhat carelessly written, but not to such a degree as to be in any part ambiguous. It has no signature. We can, however, conjecture the writer's identity from the contents. He displays anxiety for the legacies of all the male beneficiaries of the Will except one, namely, Henry Silis. We can conclude that he himself was that person. The document is undated; but we can infer, again from the contents, that it was written before August, 1617. O Neill had, among other bequests, granted a pension of 56 crowns a month (£14) to Henry O Hagan, and the writer states that £168 would be due to him "this coming August." This implies that the Earl had not been a whole year dead at the time of writing. His death occurred on July 20, 1616. Again, the abstract of the Will probably supposes young Brian O Neill, the Earl's son, to be still alive. He died on August 16, 1617.

The document consists of two distinct portions, each written on separate pages of a single sheet of paper. The

first gives an account of the persons provided for in the Will, and states that it was drawn by a notary, who kept a copy. The King of Spain, Philip III, through his Ambassador at the Papal Court, was appointed trustee or executor to carry out its provisions. In the second portion the writer complains that O Neill's Countess was appropriating more than her share, and endeavours to interest O Hagan and Colonel Henry O Neill in the distribution of the Earl's money and plate. The latter was, at this time, and for many years before, serving with the Irish Regiment in the Spanish service in Flanders.

The text is printed below, and each portion is provided with an English translation. The few words and letters missing in the manuscript are printed in italics, and the places where a word is written twice, or mis-written, are indicated in the footnotes. To marks of aspiration added in editing it has not been thought necessary to draw attention.



Bíodh a fhios agaibh gur mar so do righne O Neill a thiomna & mar do iarr se athchuingidh ar *an* Righ :

An feadh do choimedadh a bhen phósta hi fein go honorach da choróin deg & ocht *b*fichid do bheith aice sa *mi* & anúair do dhenadh si a atharrach sin gan pighinn do thabhairt di.

& ceithre fichit do Shean O Neill mac Corbmaic. Sé coronach deg & da fhiched ag Enri O Agán.

& se coronach *deg* & da fhiched ag Sean O Agán. & se coronach deg & da fhiched d'Enri Silis.

A uirid eile ag Seon Bá.

Fiche coroin don Fherdorcha O Neill.

Fiche coroin do Ghiollaruadh O Coinne.

A uirid eile do Bhrian O Coinne.

& *a* uirid eile d'Emonn Óg Ó Maolchraoibhe.

Tuilleadh ro fhagaibh se so scriobhtha re na thabhairt don Ambasadóir ionnus go bfaiceadh an Rí he maille le na bheannacht fa mhaith do dhénuibh ar na daoibh bochta ag ar fhaguibh sin.

O NEILL'S WILL

Tuilleadh do iarr se a phláta uile do thabhairt don Choireneil acht gidhbé d'iarr se do thabhairt do Bhrían O Neill & fos ro iarr se a roibhe do thaipstrí síoda astigh & leba shíoda & culaidh aifrin<sup>1</sup> do thabhairt don Choireneil mar an ccedna & na bruit lethuir ag á mhnaoí phósta & leba eduigh. Da dherbhadh sin ata coipí ionna lebhar aige an noiteoir do scriobh an tiomna<sup>2</sup> innsa mbaile so.

TRANSLATION

Know that the following is the manner in which O Neill made his Will and besought a favour of the King :

As long as his wife shall maintain herself honourably she is to have 172 crowns a month, and whenever she shall fail to do this, not a penny is to be given to her.

And Sean son of Cormac O Neill to have 80 (crowns a month).

Henry O Hagan to have 56.

And Sean O Hagan to have 56.<sup>3</sup>

And Henry Silis to have 56.

A like amount to John Bath.

Feardorcha O Neill to have 20.

Giollaruadh O Coinne to have 20.

A like amount to Brian O Coinne.

And a like amount to Emonn Og O Maolchraoibhe. Further, he left this in writing to be given to the Ambassador, so that the King might see it ; and with his commendation to render a service to the poor people to whom he made these bequests.

Further, he asked that all his plate should be given to the Colonel, except whatever he requested should be given to Brian O Neill. And likewise he asked that all the silk tapestry in the house, and a bed of

1. Manuscript *aifrain*.

2. Altered from *a thiomna*.

3. The word *deg* has been restored in the Irish ; the writer meant to group the persons who were granted similar amounts.

silk, and a set of Mass vestments, should also be given to the Colonel. And his wife to have the leather cloaks, and a bed of cloth.

In proof of that the notary who wrote the Will in this town<sup>1</sup> has a copy in his book.

LETTER TO HENRY O HAGAN

Atamaoíd da chur a gceill dhaoíbh, a Enrí, gur cóir dhaoíbh a thaisbenadh do mhac Ui Neill mar ata an Chondaois ag ceilt<sup>2</sup> an bhennacht so ro ag O Neill aige an Rí & gach tiomna da nderna se & a rádh leis gan a bheith reigh ar chor ar bith no go bflagha se an tiomna air a láimh fein & an ní do fágadh aige na daoínibh bocht<sup>3</sup> so a chur ar a laimh fein a bfochuir a bheith ag dul amogha dhóibh da dhioghbhail & dob fherr don Choireneil a rogha cil do dhenamh leis an da fhichid deg ponta ata amuigh ag an gcethrar oganach sin lá Lughnasa<sup>3</sup> so chugainn & leis na hocht bponta & ocht bfichid ata agaibhsi amuigh an uair sin (ni oile cuid Sheón Bát ocht bponta & ocht bfichid)<sup>4</sup> & gidhbe heile do bhen si don<sup>5</sup> dá Sheán na a bheith da chur a ndrochchel mar ata ag dul.

Agus bíodh a fhios agaibh nach bionn a bfuil annso beó go brách & gur chora don Choireneil cuid an fhir do gheabhadh bás no rachadh go hEirinn a bheith ar áird aige fein no gan a bheith acasan no aige duine do dhenadh maith ar bith ris & muna ngabha an Chundaois a<sup>6</sup> chomhairle fán gcúis so ní fhuil aige mac Ui Néill acht a leigen air techt chum *na*

1. These words show that this abstract was written in Rome. See the following letter.

2. The manuscript has *ceill*. The error may have occurred because of the fifth word of the paragraph, which comes directly over this in the manuscript.

3. The manuscript has *lá la lunasna*.

4. The words in brackets are in the margin.

5. This word is written twice in the manuscript.

6. The manuscript has *an*.

O NEILL'S WILL

Rómha & as sin don Spáinn ionnas go ndiongnadh an Rí ordughadh annsa gcúis & a mhathuir do ghabhail a<sup>1</sup> mainistir chailleach ndubh.

Ní eile muna dherna se deifir<sup>2</sup> leis an bpláta do bhreith leis go gér & le<sup>3</sup> gach ní eile dar fagadh aige is dóigh lem go mbiaidh aithrech air & gidhbe duine do chuirfe aníos uime sin ní bheidh aige acht íad sin uile do chur a mbarc<sup>4</sup> abhos & a bhfagháil thíos a nAnuarb o na cenduighionnuibh & scriobhadh se aníos fa ccur s gan<sup>5</sup> a ccur as chéile úair en ghúnna ann is fiú ced go leith ponta.

TRANSLATION

We make known to you, Henry, that you ought to inform O Neill's son<sup>6</sup> of the manner in which the Countess is concealing this injunction which O Neill gave to the King, and every bequest which he made ; and you ought to say to him that it will not be executed at all until he himself gets possession of the Will, and delivers into the hands of these poor folk whatever was bequeathed to them, instead of its going to destruction and being lost to them. And it would be better if the Colonel would spend in any way he choose the £240 due next first of August to these four young men,<sup>7</sup> and the £168 due to you at that date, also John Bath's portion £168, and whatever she deprived the two Seans<sup>8</sup> of, than that it should continue to be ill spent as it is at present.

1. The manuscript has *an*.
2. Immediately before this word *sin* is written and crossed out.
3. The word *le* might be omitted without affecting the sense.
4. The manuscript has *banc*.
5. The manuscript reads *tur sgan gan*.
6. This is the customary Irish way of referring to the son of a chieftain.
7. That is, those who were granted 20 crowns a month. This allowance amounted to £60 a year, or £240 a year for all four.
8. Sean, son of Cormac Ó Neill, the Earl's nephew, and Sean O Hagan. The writer has thus mentioned all the pensioners created by the Will except Henry Silis.



And consider that those who are here still will not live forever, and that it would be more proper if the Colonel entertained expectation that he would himself acquire the portion of whomsoever may die or go to Ireland, than that neither they nor anyone who would make any good use of it should get it. And if the Countess will not accept his direction in this matter, all O Neill's son has to do is to pretend to come to Rome, and to proceed from there to Spain to secure that the King shall issue a decree in the matter, and have his mother enclosed in a convent of nuns.

Further, if he does not hurry and remove the plate, and every thing else which was left to him, I think he will regret it. And the person he shall send up<sup>1</sup> for that purpose will have only to put them in a barque<sup>2</sup> here, and they can be recovered from the merchants below in Antwerp. And let him write up to have them sent, and direct that they be carefully handled, for there is one gown here which is worth £150.

The letter here published, and the evidence it affords of the slender maintenance O Neill was able to provide for his surviving family and dependents undoubtedly deepens the tragedy in the end of the great chieftain. By his genius and his valour he made himself master of the wide principality of Tyrone, which he claimed as his birthright. In addition, when driven to rebellion by the unscrupulous emissaries of Queen Elizabeth, he consolidated all Ulster under his sway, and defied and defeated the best generals that she was able to send against him.<sup>3</sup> He annihilated her forces and exhausted her treasury.

1. In the Irishman's geography, "up" means "southwards."

2. The reading of the manuscript would mean "bank."

3. Standish O Grady put the case in a sentence when he wrote that pettifoggers, not soldiers, drove Tyrone out of the country. His authority for that view was no less a person than the right honourable Sir John Davys, attorney-general: "For us that ar heer wee ar glad to see the day wherein the countenance and majestie of the law and civil government hath banisht Tirone out of Ireland, which the best army in Europe and the expense of

He compelled the other provinces to acknowledge his authority, and, with his armies, he traversed the land from north to south like an *ard-ri* of old. He created earls like a sovereign, and set up chieftains like a dictator. He was recognised as one of the greatest soldiers of the age, and were it not for the fatal day of Kinsale, he might have lived to rule all Ireland in peace. Unable to ruin him by the sword, the English Government sought to strip him of his power by legal chicanery, until finally, apprehending treachery, which he could better ward off while at war, he abandoned his great domain and left Ireland for ever. He died after nine years of exile, and the greatness of his fall is emphasised by the comparative poverty which his last Will discloses, and by the smallness of the gifts whereby he would provide for his surviving wife and the few kinsmen and faithful servants who conducted him to a resting place "no worse than Armagh."<sup>1</sup>

two millions of sterling pounds did not bring to passe," Davys to Salisbury, September, 1607.

1. See the Four Masters under the year 1616. The exact date of O'Neill's death is vouched for by a letter of the Flemish ambassador Turnbull, to the Earl of Somerset, dated August 17, 1616: "I may now safely and truly by these confirm the news I wrote unto your honour by my last letters concerning the Earl of Tyrone, who died at Rome the 20th of July of a fever, and was there buried with great pomp and solemnity, at the charges of the Spanish Ambassador," Meehan, *Fate and Fortunes of Hugh O'Neill, Earl of Tyrone, and Rory O'Donel, Earl of Tyrconnel*, third edition (1886), page 317. This item is confirmed by the statement of Philip O'Sullivan Beara: *quae persecutio eo liberius exercetur quod Onellus Tironae princeps, in quo Catholici magnam spem positam habebant, Romae diem obiit hoc anno 1616 die vigesimo mensis Iulii, Historia Catholica*, tom. iv, lib. iii, cap. iv.