LIVES OF ILLUSTRIOUS AND DISTINGUISHED IRISHMEN: FROM THE EARLIEST TIMES TO THE PRESENT PERIOD, ARRANGED IN CHRONOLOGICAL ORDER, AND EMBODYING A HISTORY OF IRELAND IN THE LIVES OF IRISHMEN, VOL. III.- PART I, PP. 1-240

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JAMES WILLS

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HISTORY OF IRELAND IN THE LIVES OF IRISHMEN.

EDITED BY

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Author of Letters on the Philosophy of Unbelief, &c., &c., &c.

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FOURTH PERIOD.

I.—POLITICAL SERIES—*continued.*

LIVES

OF

ILLUSTRIOUS AND DISTINGUISHED IRISHMEN.

Miles Bourke, Viscount Mayo.

DIED A. D. 1649.

Of the ancestral history of the family of Burke, Bourke, and de Burgo, common variations of the same illustrious name, we have said enough in these pages. The nobleman whom we are here to notice was the representative of the MacOughter branch. It is known to the reader, that near the middle of the 14th century, William de Burgo, earl of Ulster, was assassinated by his own people. His countess, with her infant daughter, took refuge in England. The possessions of the earl were left unprotected. In the north they were seized by the O'Neiles; in Connaught by two collateral descendants of the De Burgo race. To escape a future demand of restitution, these ancient gentlemen, embraced the laws and manners of the surrounding septs of Irish, and assumed the names of MacWilliam Eighter and MacWilliam Oughter. Of these, the latter, and we suspect the other also, were descendants from the second son of Richard de Burgo, grandfather to the murdered earl.

The viscount of this family, whom we are now to notice, demands this distinction on account of the very peculiar and unfortunate circumstances of his history. He sat as viscount Mayo, in the parliament of 1634. When the troubles of 1641 commenced, he was appointed governor of the county of Mayo, conjointly with viscount Dillon. By virtue of the authority with which he was thus intrusted, he raised six companies of foot, and during three months kept the county in a quiet state without any aid from government.

As, however, it was not long before the convulsions in England threw a cloud of uncertainty upon every question at issue between parties; the rebels were soon divided into factions, each of which contended, and was ready to fight for the shade of loyalty or of opinion maintained by itself. It is not easy now to settle with precision, by what strange course of previous politics, or from what reasons of right, real, or supposed, the lord Mayo acted in direct opposition to the

principles, on the understanding of which he had been employed. Many of the circumstances are such, indeed, as to ascertain a feeble, uncertain and complying character; and indicate a degree of timidity and subservience, which it is necessary to assume as the most merciful excuses for unprincipled compliances, of which the result must have been foreseen by a little common sense, and guarded against by an ordinary sense of duty.

The accounts of the dark and bloody transactions in which this nobleman's name has been implicated, have been considered worth restatement by Lodge,* with a view to clear his memory from the unjust imputation of having been a party to their guilt. From such a stain, we can have no doubt in declaring him free; but our voice must be qualified by some weighty exceptions.

The approach of the rebellion was early felt among the rémote and wild mountains and moors of the county of Mayo. The condition of the peasantry was poor, their manners barbarous, and their minds superstitious: their preparations for the coming strife were rude, and being under comparatively loose restraint, but little concealed. Early in the summer of 1641, their smiths were observed to be industrious in the manufacture of their knives or skeins, well known as an ancient weapon of the rudest Irish war. And these rude implements were soon to be employed. The time quickly came, and the work of plunder and destruction began. As the incident here to be related is one of the most memorable which disgraces the annals of this period, and has been made the subject of much comment with which we cannot concur, we shall preface it by a few brief remarks to recall to the reader's mind that the principle upon which we have hitherto endeavoured to frame our statements, has been to give the facts as they have occurred, with an entire disregard to all uses which have been made of them. If we admit that the crimes of lawless and ignorant barbarians, which is the unquestionable character of the lower classes of the 17th century, may indirectly be imputed to the *cause* of which they were the instrument, yet we do not assent to the further implication that those atrocities can be charged directly to the principles of that cause or, (unless in special cases), to its leaders and promoters. One distinction will be found to have a general application, and may be adopted to its full extent; the conduct of the actors in the multifarious and complicated maze of crime, suffering, and folly, which is to occupy the chief portion of this volume, will be observed to be conformable to the personal characters of the agents, and not to any abstract principles or special dogmas. In this we do not mean in any way to vindicate the soundness of these supposed opinions, but simply to maintain that so far as our assertion is applied, they are utterly unconcerned. We do not mean to say that they who could place the

* We are unwilling to find fault with Lodge, or indeed (knowing as we do the difficulties of our history) with any writer on the score of confusion. But on this as in many other instances, we have had reason to lament the perplexity of arrangement which renders it hard to mould a clear narrative from his statements. In the long note from which we have drawn the facts of this memoir, there is a disregard to the order of events, such as to give a strange confusion to a narrative written in clear and simple language, and full of strong facts.

assassin's knife in the hands of lawless men, for the purpose of maintaining any principle, are to be acquitted: the truth of God is in higher hands—than those of the assassin. But we are far from assenting to the zeal, which for the sake of effect, would charge the worst falsest tenets with the crimes of men who would have sinned in the defence of the best and truest: the impulse, in whatever principle it originates, is propagated from its centre by means of the natural love of adventure, spoil, and lawless indulgence, common to those who have nothing to lose, and little but the fear of law to constrain them. Whether the zeal of opinion, or party animosity, move the centre—whether the cause be righteous or unjust—if its partisans be low, rude, and unimpressed by moral restraint, it is but too sure to be maintained by demonstrations, by which the soundest cause would be dishonoured; —robbery, murder, and the wanton cruelty of the passions and lusts of the most base and depraved minds: for it is unhappily these that float uppermost in such times. On this, we are here anxious to be distinctly and emphatically understood: often as we are, and shall be compelled to repeat accounts, which have been as the battle-fields of parties, contending in rival misrepresentations, and anxious as we are to stand aloof from the feelings by which the narratives on either side are more or less tinged; and at the same time to state these facts which we regard as inductive examples in the history of man, fully, and as they appear to our indifferent reason. We find it expedient to accompany them with the precaution of our most guarded comment. We cannot agree with those writers, who have manifested their desire to be held liberal by useless attempts to qualify, misrepresent, and understate such facts as have an irritating tendency: neither do we concur with those bold and zealous assertors, who are desirous to make them bear more than their full weight of consequence. Had such been silent on either side, the truth would be an easy thing, and the comment straight and brief. We, for our part, reject the statements of the first, and the heated and precipitate inferences of the latter: so far as they are directed to convey reproach to the general character and principles of action of their antagonist party.* We cannot assent with some of our fellow-labourers in the mine of Irish history, (a mine of sad combustibles,) that the most fierce and inhuman outrages were not committed by the peasantry in the name of their church and creed; but we are just as far from imputing the murders and massacres of an ignorant and inflamed populace who knew no better, to any church or creed. The insane brutality of O'Neile, the fiend-like atrocity of MacMahon, are no more to be attributed to a religion (in which they had no faith,) than the monstrous and profligate crimes of Nero and Caligula are to be imputed to the religion of Brutus and Seneca. We do not here mean to deny, or in any way to advert to any direct charges against the church of Rome as a church: with the effects of a fanaticism we are also well acquainted. Neither of these form the *gravamen* of

* We do not mean to disclaim party opinion in our individual person. But as editor of these Lives, we are earnestly desirous to keep self out of view. Whatever we may *feel* under the influence of these excitements, of which the world is composed, it is our desire and study to repress it, in the discharge of a duty of which impartial justice is the end, and indifference the principle.

the alleged imputations: the massacres of 1641, committed, as crime is ever but too likely to be committed, under holy pretences, and in duty's name, were committed by miscreants, whose actual impulses were neither those of religion or duty. Moore committed neither robbery or murder: nor Mountgarret or any of the noble lords and gentlemen whose various motives led, or impelled them to take up arms in the same cause. But when the whole lives, the recorded declarations, the preserved correspondence, and the well-attested courses of conduct of the leaders in crime are viewed; and when the state of the people is considered, it will be easy to see that they would have done the same in the name of Jupiter as for the Pope; for the creed of mercy as for the church of Rome. One more last word, and we shall proceed: we would remind many of our humane and philosophical contemporaries, that nothing is gained by attempting the charge of exaggeration, when the statements do not very strongly justify such a qualification: if thirty were butchered, the crime was just the same in degree as if it had been a hundred—having been only limited by the number of the victims exposed to the mercy of popular fanaticism. The reader will we trust excuse these tedious distinctions, as a preface to facts that demand them.

The rebellion in the county of Mayo commenced with the robbery of a gentleman of the name of Perceval. He brought his complaint to lord Mayo, and sought that redress which was to be looked for from one of the governors of the county. Lord Mayo marched out to recover the property of this complainant, whose cattle had been driven away and lodged within a mill near Ballyhaunis. This building the robbers had fortified, and while his lordship was considering what to do, he was visited by messengers from an armed rabble, who had collected at a little distance, with the avowed design of supporting the robbers in the mill. Several messages passed between them, and we are compelled to assume, that his lordship, on due consideration of his forces, found himself not prepared for a more spirited course: he "granted them a protection," a proceeding which each of the parties seem to have understood in a very different way. The crowd on this came forward, and mingled among his lordship's followers, "with much shouting and joy on both sides;" and no more is said about the mill and the property of Mr Perceval. In the midst of this motley concourse, his lordship next moved on to the abbey of Ballyhaunis, where the whole were entertained for the night. The friars of this abbey had been deprived of their possessions in the former reign: and on the first eruption of disturbance in the kingdom, a party of friars of (we believe,) the order of St Augustine, had returned to take possession of an ancient mansion of their order, which the approaching revolution that they expected, would, they hoped, enable them to secure. Altogether different in principles, opinions, and public feelings, from the secular clergy of the church of Rome, these men had no home interest in the community, with whom they had no relations: they were the faithful and unquestioning instruments of a foreign policy, and if they had any individual or private object at heart, it was to secure their newly acquired possession. These were not the persons most likely to act as moderators in the outset of demonstrations on the