

## NATIONAL AND LOCAL HISTORY

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### **The Last Cavalier: Richard Talbot (1631–1691)**

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By Pádraig Lenihan

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Dublin: UCD Press, 2014.

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268 pp. €40.00

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Richard Talbot, earl of Tyrconnell, has long been over-shadowed by the more popular figure of Patrick Sarsfield. As Tyrconnell appeared to dither and debate surrendering to the Williamite forces in 1690, Sarsfield seemed to leap to the defence of the country. History has been kinder to the second man.

Pádraig Lenihan's biography of Talbot redresses the balance. The man who emerges from this book is simultaneously an opportunistic and ambitious career politician and a man who had a consistent, though ultimately unsuccessful, plan to restore Irish Catholics to their rightful place which the Cromwellian conquest and plantation had wrest from them.

Talbot came from an Old English Pale family whose strategy after the Reformation and especially under the early Stuarts was to combine loyalty to the crown and to their Catholic faith. His brother, Peter, a Jesuit and later archbishop of Dublin, epitomised this stance and the younger man followed this lead. He came to prominence with a providential escape at Drogheda in 1649 and this was the first of what was to be a series of derring-do escapades over the next decade including an improbable plot to assassinate Cromwell, being held in the Tower of London and first being offered a reward to change sides and then escaping once more. While in exile with the Stuarts he attached himself to the Duke of York, the future James II, and Talbot remained a favourite right up to his death.

The biography tells a complicated story of Stuart court politics and other unsavoury incidents, some involving Oliver Plunkett, in a readable fashion. It leaves you with the feeling that sticking with the Jacobites was not a great option. But it was probably the least worst one for Irish Catholics and remained the only one for much of the century that followed. Lenihan is most comfortable with the military history of the period and his chapters on the years after 1688 are required reading for anyone who wants to better

understand the 'War of the Three Kings'. The Williamite, Jacobite and French forces only rarely took much account of Irish Catholic and Protestant interests. Despite these circumstances Talbot's influence remained strong and he argued successfully that the French had more to lose by William holding Ireland. Even after Aughrim, Lenihan may be right to argue that Talbot was the better bet for securing concessions than Sarsfield was to prove. His death in August 1691 ends this speculation.

Pádraig Lenihan is to be congratulated on writing a very readable and concise biography of Talbot. One might quibble over whether he was a great but not a good man; however, he was certainly an important one and has found a suitably fine biographer here. The book is thoroughly well-researched, using sources in various languages, is fair to its subject and free of the padding that afflicts many biographies. UCD Press has produced an elegant and well-edited book and one that deserves to be widely read.

*Eoin Magennis*

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### **The Persian Interpreter: The Life and Career of Turner Macan**

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By Keith Haines

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Donaghadee: Ballyhay Books, 2015

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480 pp.

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In this detailed biography of Turner Macan (1792–1836), Keith Haines traces the family tree and career of a lesser-known member within a family of minor Armagh gentry. The Mac Cana family had been a significant dynasty in medieval times in south Ulster, being the Lords of Clanbrassil on the southern shores of Lough Neagh, in territory called 'McCann's Country'. In the late medieval period this area was over-run by the Cineál Eoghain or O'Neills, the most powerful clan in the north of Ireland who were forcing their way south-eastwards from Aileach in north-east Donegal to establish their seat of power in Tyrone. O'Neill invasion would continue into north Armagh, forcing the sept there (e.g. O'Hanlons and McCanns) south-eastwards into Orior, while the O'Neills themselves would extend their hegemony into mid and south Armagh, and on to the Pale. From Upper Orior the McCanns would support the O'Neill resistance to the Tudors and 200 McCann foot soldiers marched with Hugh O'Neill to Kinsale in 1601, five McCann leaders