



Evolving Narrative

Gaelic Resistance: Two Nine Years' War Struggles in Ireland

Historical Context

The Nine Years' War of 1593 to 1603, led by Hugh O'Neill and Hugh Roe O'Donnell, was one of the most important episodes of Gaelic Irish resistance against English colonization. At its core, this war was not only a military struggle but a defense of Irish culture, land, and self-governance. The Gaelic lords rallied together to resist growing English control and the imposition of foreign laws and customs. Leaders like O'Neill adapted their armies with modern tactics, winning key victories like the Battle of the Yellow Ford. For a time, it looked as if the Irish might succeed in protecting their sovereignty. But in the end, their forces were defeated at the Battle of Kinsale in 1601, and the war ended with the Flight of the Earls in 1607, when many Irish leaders went into exile. This marked a turning point – the decline of Gaelic political power and the beginning of large-scale English plantations in Ireland. The memory of that first Nine Years' War lived on, especially among Irish Catholics and descendants of Gaelic clans. It shaped how people viewed later events, including the Nine Years' War of 1689 to 1697, also known as the Williamite War in Ireland. Although the context was different, this later war was tied to the Glorious Revolution and power struggles between Protestant William of Orange and Catholic James II. Many Irish people once again saw themselves fighting for their faith, land, and cultural identity. The Jacobites, who supported James II, hoped to overturn English Protestant dominance and regain the rights lost during earlier conquests. The Williamite War included defining moments like the Siege of Derry, the Battle of the Boyne, and the Treaty of Limerick. Although the Jacobites were ultimately defeated, the war remained a powerful symbol of Irish resistance. Much like the earlier war, this conflict ended with severe consequences for Irish Catholics. The Penal Laws that followed stripped them of land, political power, and religious freedom. Through the lens of the Evolving Narrative habit of mind, we can see how both of these Nine Years' Wars have been remembered and reinterpreted over time. For centuries, they were seen through British narratives that focused on restoring order or protecting Protestant interests. But more recently, historians and communities have emphasized the perspective of the Gaelic Irish, who saw these wars as desperate but proud efforts to preserve their way of life. The stories of these wars, both the 1590s rebellion and the 1690s Jacobite struggle, have become part of Irish cultural identity. Songs, oral histories, and literature keep alive the memories of bravery, loss, and hope. These evolving narratives challenge us to consider how different perspectives shape our understanding of history. They remind us that history is not a fixed set of facts but a living conversation between past and present, shaped by the voices we choose to hear.

Connection to Habit

For many years, the war was mainly remembered through a British lens as a victory for Protestant rule. However, over time, historians and communities have reexamined the conflict to highlight the perspective of the Irish Catholics and Gaelic leaders who saw themselves as defending their land, culture, and religion. This shift in focus helps us understand that history is not fixed. New questions, sources, and voices can change how we view past events. By studying the war from multiple viewpoints, especially the pride and resistance of the Gaelic Irish, we gain a deeper understanding of how history continues to evolve and why it matters who tells the story.

Discussion Questions

- What were the key motivations behind the Gaelic Irish resistance in the Nine Years' War of 1593–1603, and how did they reflect broader concerns about land, culture, and sovereignty?
- How did the outcomes of both Nine Years' Wars (1593–1603 and 1689–1697) shape the future of Irish land ownership, political power, and cultural autonomy?
- In what ways did the later Nine Years' War (also known as the Williamite War) reflect both continuity and change from the earlier Gaelic resistance of the 1590s?
- How did Irish memories and interpretations of these wars change over time? What role did oral histories, songs, and literature play in shaping those narratives?
- How do the stories of Hugh O'Neill and the Jacobites challenge or support traditional British narratives about the "civilizing mission" in Ireland?
- Why do you think the spirit of resistance during these wars became such a strong part of Irish identity, even though both conflicts ended in military defeat?
- Looking at both wars through the Evolving Narrative habit of mind, how might our understanding differ depending on whose voices and perspectives we center?
- How does the legacy of these wars continue to impact Irish politics, culture, or identity today, especially in discussions about colonization, nationalism, and religious divisions?

Suggested Activity

Materials Needed:

- [Hugh Roe O'Donnell Aid Request Letter \(April 8th, 1593\)](#)
- Notebook Paper
- Pencil/Pen

Step 1: Context Research [5 mins]

- Students read the Historical Context provided. Place emphasis on why O'Donnell is asking Spain for aid (defending Gaelic lands, resisting English conquest).

Step 2: Close Reading [10 mins]

- Students annotate O'Donnell's letter:
 - Highlight phrases that show urgency
 - Circle terms describing threat
- Write quick notes on what these reveal about Gaelic priorities and feelings.

Step 3: Group Discussion [10 mins]

In small groups, students discuss:

- What is O'Donnell emphasizing?
- What does the tone suggest about Gaelic morale and self-perception?
- How does this differ from official English documents that might refer to Irish as "rebels"?

Step 4: Critical Reflection [10 mins]

Students respond (written or oral) to:

- Why is it important to read Gaelic Irish voices in early modern history?
- How does incorporating O'Donnell's perspective change or enrich our understanding of the Nine Years' War?

Optional Extension #1: Compare O'Donnell's plea with an English or Catholic response to the Williamite War (1689–1697), such as an excerpt from a Williamite proclamation. Ask students to close-read both and discuss how narratives shift when told by opposing sides.

Optional Extension #2: Compare the plea with songs/poems from Irish popular culture. "O'Donnell Abu" is a song written in the 19th century about the first Nine Years' War.

Primary Source

Hugh Roe O'Donnell Aid Request Letter (April 8th, 1593)

Context: Seeking aid O'Donnell addressed the following letter to Irish nobles in Spain. Donegal, April 8th, 1593.

You will have heard, my beloved friends, how I found a means of escaping from the prison in which I was, and how after much labour and hardship I reached my own territory. There I found an Englishman, agent of the Queen, and with him many soldiers; all of whom, with the help of God's grace, I slew or drove out in a very short time, and never since have the English returned here, though not for want of will and desire to destroy me and do me all the harm they could. This is why I and the other chiefs who have united with me and are striving to defend ourselves, cannot hold out long against the power of the Crown of England without the aid of his Grace the Catholic King. Wherefore, by common consent, we have thought it well to send the Archbishop of Tuam, though his presence is very necessary here, to treat of this matter with his Majesty, and to give you, gentlemen, who are there our letters, that you may all speak to his Majesty and beg of him immediate aid to assist us in fighting and combating for the service of God, and to protect and get back our lands, for it is right that we should be all of one mind, and that we should help each other in this undertaking. This I will do for my part till death, with the aid which I hope for from his Grace and with your presence and help. I will say no more, but pray God may be with you, and enable the Lord Archbishop to return with this favour.