"Comme Je Trouve:" The Butlers, Earls of Ormond, and Political Power in Kilkenny, Ireland, 1392-1452

Senia S. Foster
Utah State University

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“COMME JE TROUVE:” THE BUTLERS, EARLS OF ORMOND, AND POLITICAL POWER IN KILKENNY, IRELAND, 1392-1452

by

Senia S. Foster

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS in

History

Approved:

__________________________
Norm Jones, Ph.D.
Major Professor

__________________________
Susan Cogan, Ph.D.
Committee Member

__________________________
Alexa Sand, Ph.D.
Committee Member

__________________________
Richard S. Inouye, Ph.D.
Vice Provost for Graduate Studies

UTAH STATE UNIVERSITY
Logan, Utah

2019
ABSTRACT

“Comme Je Trouve:” The Butlers, Earls of Ormond, and Political Power in Kilkenny, Ireland, 1392-1452
by
Senia S. Foster, Master of Arts
Utah State University, 2019

Major Professor: Dr. Norm Jones
Department: History

Examining the political importance of the Butler family, in this thesis I establish the importance of the Earls of Ormond both on the national scene and in the local government of Kilkenny, the Butlers’ seat of power. The embodiment of Anglo-Irish lordship after the 1172 conquest of Ireland, the 3rd and 4th Earls utilized their English connections and Irish allies in their positions as Lord Lieutenants of Ireland and military leaders. Their ability to adapt to both cultures meant that the Butlers were simultaneously considered loyal English citizens and one of the gaill—neither fully English nor Irish. In reality, regardless of what others thought them to be, the Butlers supported whichever cause was most beneficial to them.

In order to establish the influence the Butlers had on Kilkenny, I analyze the architecture and layout of the town, focusing primarily on the castle and cathedral. It is clear from the defensive walls, the growth of the castle from a motte and bailey, and the Butler crests and graves visible in the cathedral, that the presence of the Butlers was evident throughout the town. Similarly, their power would have been recognized by the
townspeople through the government officials appointed by the Earls and the rents and land leases the Butlers would have overseen. These aspects of everyday life, in addition to the increase in economic and political importance that Kilkenny saw after the purchase of the castle in 1392, are proof of the impact the Butlers had on the city.

(93 pages)
PUBLIC ABSTRACT

“Comme Je Trouve:” The Butlers, Earls of Ormond, and Political Power in Kilkenny, Ireland, 1392-1452

Senia Foster

After the English-led invasion of Ireland, between 1169 and 1172, the country was run by Anglo-Irish lords—English and Welsh men gifted with Irish land and titles for their service to the English King. Of these families, the Butlers were one of the three most powerful in the country. The 3rd and 4th Earls of Ormond, both named James Butler, each held the highest title in Ireland, Lord Lieutenant, multiple times as well as being successful military leaders. Add to this a large income from all the wine revenues of the country, and the Butlers were a force to be reckoned with.

This thesis examines the Butlers in their seat of power, Kilkenny, to determine the connection between the two. It is apparent, by examining not only their policies but their surroundings, that the Butlers and Kilkenny had a mutually beneficial relationship. The Butlers profited from the extensive land they owned, the feudal nature of Ireland, and the trade in the city, and similarly helped the town prosper by building defensive fortifications, strengthening and expanding the city, and running the government efficiently. The actions of the Butlers and the town of Kilkenny prove that the Butlers were caught between the cultures of both England and Gaelic Ireland, as was typical of most of the Anglo-Irish ruling class.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank Drs. Norm Jones, Susan Cogan, and Alexa Sand for their invaluable expertise and assistance in this endeavor. I also extend my gratitude to: The Utah State University History Department, for providing the funding necessary to complete the research this thesis relies on; The National Library of Ireland, Trinity College, The National Archives, and The British Library for the access and use of their materials; and finally Frank Kavanaugh, former Director of Kilkenny Castle, and John Kirwan, archivist at the Kilkenny Archive at St. Kieran’s College, for sharing their expertise and enthusiasm for Irish history.

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Senia S. Foster
## CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PUBLIC ABSTRACT</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGMENTS</td>
<td>vi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF IMAGES</td>
<td>vii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MAP OF IRELAND</td>
<td>ix</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I. THE CITY</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>City Layout</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subinfeudation and Defenses</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Ormond-Talbot Feud</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II. THE CATHEDRAL</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St. Canice’s</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III. THE CASTLE</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Building</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lord Lieutenant</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patronage and Cultural Assimilation</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CONCLUSION</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIBLIOGRAPHY</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
# LIST OF IMAGES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Image</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Map of Kilkenny</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Segment of medieval wall</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Liberties of Kilkenny</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Stained glass windows in St. Canice’s Cathedral</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Butler crest in St. Canice’s Cathedral</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Footprint of William Marshall’s Castle</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>South tower of Kilkenny Castle</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Butler crest above entry to Kilkenny Castle</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
INTRODUCTION

The Butler family motto, *comme je trouve*, means literally “As I see it,” but it bears the connotation of “As I see it, it is mine” or, more colloquially, “I take what I see.” Modern sensibilities might find the irony in this statement, as the Butlers were one of the most notable ruling families of Ireland after the English conquest of 1169-72. The Butlers, Earls of Ormond, held nearly a third of English controlled Ireland, centered around the riverside town of Kilkenny. Although Kilkenny was founded nearly four centuries before the arrival of the Butlers, it was, and still is, undeniably, the “Butlers’ City.” Indeed, it would be no stretch of the truth to assert that the history of Kilkenny is inextricably linked with the history of the Butlers. But to what extent did they truly influence each other? It is clear that the Earls of Ormond were important members of Anglo-Irish society and that they had great impact on the country as a whole, but was this reflected in Kilkenny, their home?

This thesis shows that within the purview of this study (1392-1452), James Butler, 3rd Earl of Ormond, and James Butler, 4th Earl of Ormond, were the highest authorities in Kilkenny and that this is displayed within the walls of Kilkenny City. Throughout Medieval Britain, local earls were the source of political, military, and economic might, even more so than the distant and sometimes aloof king. Ireland, and its history of close-knit clans and small kingdoms, adopted the same form of decentralized government. By examining how the physical makeup of Kilkenny allowed the Butlers to excel at their political role in Ireland and England, it becomes evident that the Butlers
were the “kings” of their earldom of Ormond, which was itself an ancient Irish kingdom, and their power was shown through displays of wealth and possession in Kilkenny.

Historical Background

When Dermot MacMurrough, King of Leinster, fled to England in 1166 after an uprising threatened both his throne and his life, the history of Ireland was changed forever. Clan warfare had plagued the island for centuries; the kings of the five provinces—Leinster, Munster, Connacht, Ulster, and Tara of Meath—battled for land, resources, and renown. This violence was exacerbated by the frequent raids by Scandinavian Vikings, who, to the displeasure of the Irish, had established settlements on the western coast by 830 AD.¹ Though Brian Boru, or Boruma, had been fairly successful in his consolidation of power throughout the country, after his premature death in 1014, the clans returned to their warring ways; by the middle of the 12th century the kings were once again embattled. An alliance between the O’Briens of Munster, the O’Rourkes, and the O’Connors of Connacht enabled Rory O’Connor to successfully take the high kingship and Tighernan O’Rourke to march on MacMurrough’s lands.² Hopelessly


² For an exhaustive study of the complicated politics of Ireland leading up to 1169, see F.X. Martin, “The Trembling Sod: Ireland in 1169” and “Diarmait Mac Murchada and
 outnumbered, MacMurrough turned to England for aid. He returned with Anglo-Welsh mercenaries to support him, granting Henry II a foothold in the country. By 1171 the Angevin conquest of Ireland had officially begun.

The Angevin invasion was not, as one might romantically envision, a storming of soldiers onto the shores of Dublin, but a gradual acquisitioning of land granted in return for service to MacMurrough. That is until May of 1169, when Richard “Strongbow” de Clare, Earl of Pembroke, gathered twelve hundred armed troops and stormed Waterford. After a marriage between de Clare and MacMurrough’s daughter, their combined forces turned toward Dublin. O’Connor, who was now at war with his previous allies the O’Briens, was overrun and lost the high kingship and capital all at once. Furious, O’Connor retreated just long enough to regroup in northern Ireland before besieging Dublin for two months. This would ultimately prove fruitless.

With ethnic tensions at their height, Henry II was preparing an army for Ireland—to fight the Irish, the Normans, or both. Despite Strongbow’s assurances that the land he had captured in Ireland was being held in the King’s name, Henry feared that Strongbow would name himself ruler of Ireland. It was this more than any proactive attempt to claim Ireland that had Henry sailing to Dublin in 1171 with five hundred knights and over three thousand archers. Rather than the battle he was anticipating, Henry found Strongbow and

no less than four Irish kings waiting to pledge fealty. This acceptance of the English king as authority over Ireland was echoed in the clergy, supporting the Pope’s approval of the conquest. Henry began to organize some form of government in Dublin before trouble in England called him home again, leaving Strongbow to rein in the Irish chiefs who had not willingly recognized Henry as their ruler.

After Henry’s departure, Normans settled into their lands, subinfeudating and building defenses throughout the country. Their presence in Ireland was history repeating—the Angevin Empire had used the same method for its expansion first in England, then Wales. And yet the Irish would ultimately prove to be a much harder people to subdue than the Welsh. The March of Wales was similar to Ireland in many ways, but its proximity to England allowed for a more gradual induction into Anglo society. The initial conquest, spanning 1067-1081, was largely unsuccessful in establishing Wales as a Norman colony, but because the Angevin kings were closer to Wales than Ireland, there were many successive military expeditions in Wales, finally capturing the entire country in 1286. Ireland, conversely did not have royal attention or aid for over two hundred years, meaning the island was never fully taken and the Irish were never truly conquered.

The next royal visit to Ireland was that of Prince John in 1185, who brought with him three hundred knights and an array of cavalry and archers to set in motion “a new
epoch in the history of the Norman colony in Ireland.” Any supporters that the crown had had were lost with the arrival of the young, ill-mannered John who turned Irish allies out of their lands in favor of his own men. Despite the military retinue, John failed to capture any more land for the Normans, and only worsened the ethnic dichotomy.

It is with this 1185 party that Theobald Walter came to Ireland. Son of Hervey Walter, the Butler of England, and brother to the Archbishop of Canterbury, Theobald was a natural pick for the office of Butler of Ireland. In addition to this title, John gave Walter lands in Tipperary and Limerick, the farthest edge of Norman controlled territory. For the next two centuries, Ireland was in a constant flux with Norman jurisdiction being expanded and lost as Irish clans fought against the invading lords and each other. Times of peace were tentative and temporary, especially on the Irish marches where the English presence bordered the native Irish. Throughout this, English power in Dublin and the surrounding areas was growing stronger, with John granting Dublin their liberties before the end of the twelfth century.

The Walters, now going by le Botiller, or Butler, remained a powerful family throughout the 13th and 14th centuries. The earldom of Ormond was created and granted to James Butler in 1328, expanding his lands to include all of Tipperary in addition to

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what he already held in Limerick and parts of Kilkenny. All of these had been granted their liberties by 1300, and were centers of trade. The Butlers, by holding the title of Chief Butler of Ireland, received portions of all wine revenues in the country: as trade increased into the fourteenth century, so did their wealth and importance.

James, the second earl, succeeded his father upon his death in 1338. He was elected justiciar in 1359, at a time when Anglo-Norman lords were commanded to return to Ireland to deal with the rebellious Irish and keep their lands in order after the devastation of the Black Death only ten years previous. He was elected again in 1376, and spent most of his two-year-long term waging war against violent Irish clans, often at his own personal expense. James II passed away in 1382, only a few short months after refusing to serve yet another term as justiciar.

This is how the title stood when James, the third earl, inherited it; in debt, in a country wracked by war. These would combine to influence James to make the decision to move to a more defensible location, and in 1391, for only £1000, he bought Kilkenny Castle, which at the time consisted of a motte and bailey built by Sir William Marshal between 1207-1213. The de Spencers, descendants of the Marshals, sold him the property. Although the layout and several buildings were already established before the Butlers moved to Kilkenny, they made many changes to the castle as well as the

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surrounding town. The city of Kilkenny became the Butlers’ seat of power and continued to be home to the Butler family until the mid-twentieth century.

Situated beyond the border of the English Pale, the Earldom of Ormond occupied lands between the firmly English-controlled lands (Dublin and surrounding areas) and the completely unconquered Irish lands in the southwestern parts of the island. This geographic reality is a reflection of the punctuated moments of revolt and long periods of seeming acceptance of English rule which characterized Irish behavior. Therefore, by examining the architecture in Kilkenny, this thesis shows the impact of the English in the same way—typical Irish towns interspersed with cathedrals, castles, and town walls as a reminder of Norman power. And not merely Norman power, but specifically Butler power, whose actions were often subversive to English rule while still professing their obedience, as visible in the crests, dedicated works of masonry or artistry, and the layout of the city. When architectural analysis is applied to Ireland during the time of the English occupation, the information found in physical places can tell scholars about the Irish, who were often subjugated by and separated from the English people who settled there, as well as the impact of feudal lords who ruled them.

In places such as Kilkenny—political seat of the powerful Butler family and a city divided into “Hightown” and “Irishtown”—the study of architecture allows for scholars to place themselves in the medieval city that the Butlers, the Earls of Ormond and lords over Kilkenny, would have experienced and influenced. The Butlers, who received a percentage of all revenue from the wine trade both into and out of the country, controlled large portions of land, covering much of modern-day Kilkenny, Tipperary, and Wexford
counties. By combining archaeology, architecture, and material culture studies, these analytical methods can be used to piece together the impact of the Butlers on the development and construction of the city of Kilkenny.

This chapter illuminates this missing part of the narrative of Irish history by addressing the landscape and location of Kilkenny and its important Norman landmarks. Spanning the first half of the 15th century, the rule of the third and fourth earls was at a time when English control in Ireland was more of a nuisance than a help to England: Irish investments had ceased to be profitable after the disastrous effects of the Black Plague and famines of the 14th century, and England’s concerns and attention lay with France, where the Hundred Years War had been raging since 1337. Ireland itself was engaged in civil unrest as the O’Neills fought English rule and successfully defeated them in several engagements. Kilkenny served as a English stronghold outside the Pale. Once the Butlers moved into the castle, they began the daunting project of building protective city walls due to these continuing conflicts. (Possibly discuss strategic positioning of town/castle).

Due to the English disinvolvement in Irish military affairs, it was expected that Anglo-Irish magnates would fill the vacuum. The Butlers did so on behalf of Kilkenny as well as Ireland. The Butlers frequently held the titles of Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, Lord Justice of Ireland, and Lord Deputy of Ireland as well as being deputies to other chief governors and holding other less significant offices at various times. While the Earls of

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Ormond were not solely responsible for governing Ireland, they played vital roles in maintaining stability and preserving the English hold on the country.\textsuperscript{6}

This thesis on Kilkenny and its reflection of Butler power takes place in three parts. Part One examines the physical layout of Kilkenny town. This home to the Butlers played a vital role in their many duties as government officials and military leaders. Spanning between the castle and St. Canice’s Cathedral, the town largely laid along a main road. Divided into Hightown and Irishtown, the home of the Butlers was a physical representation of the ethnic tensions of the time. An examination of the buildings and surrounding land allows an understanding of how Kilkenny functioned under the auspices of the Butlers. Land grants and writs of indenture serve as the main evidence of the feudalistic structure of the town elite and demonstrate the importance of the Butler family in local government.

Part Two addresses St. Canice’s Cathedral, the largest church within Kilkenny and the seat of the Bishop of Ossory. The Butlers’ relationship with the church was a reflection of their medieval values and the central role that religion played in society at

\textsuperscript{6} While most modern readers view the Conquest of Ireland as the start of centuries-long oppression, it is important to remember that Henry II and subsequent English kings believed they had a divine right to Irish lands, a claim validated by the Pope, and the English noblemen leading Ireland acted under this belief. Defending their authority in Ireland should not be viewed as a moral dilemma in this discussion, but merely a political move. See A.J. Otway-Ruthven, \textit{A History of Medieval Ireland}, 47-48.
that time. Patronage of the cathedral was the easiest way for the Butlers to demonstrate their piety and wealth, and St. Canice’s still bears the marks of their affluence. Subject to their own governing, and their own allowances in terms of feudalism, the church was a powerful entity in the city of Kilkenny.

Part three analyzes the most prominent symbol of Butler power in the city: Kilkenny castle. Functioning as both a living space for the family and a center for Anglo-Irish government, Kilkenny castle was a visual symbol for the power and control of the English king in Ireland. The great hall of the castle was a meeting place for Parliament, a court, and host to both English and Irish dignitaries throughout the lives of the third and fourth earls, and yet was often inaccessible to Irish civilians. Under near constant renovation, the castle was an obvious display of wealth. Simultaneously, it had to be a fortress against possible attack, reinforcing the English propaganda that the Irish tribes were a threat to the safety of Anglo-Irish inhabitants. Summarily put, the castle was the physical embodiment of every aspect of Butler power.

This study and its placement within both the context of Irish and English politics and the role of Kilkenny within this relies on a vast foundation of scholarship. The broad history of Ireland has been the topic of many publications. Such histories discuss the

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7 For an introduction to Medieval Irish history, see Art Cosgrove, *A New History of Ireland, Volume II: Medieval Ireland, 1169-1534*, (New York: The Clarendon Press, Oxford University Press, 1993); Rees Davies, and Brendan Smith, ed., *British Isles in the Late Middle Ages*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); and Brendan Smith, ed.,
Norman conquest of Ireland in detail, as well as the development of society and intermingling of language and culture that took place in Ireland between the twelfth and sixteenth centuries.\(^8\) Particularly noteworthy is *A New History of Ireland. Volume II: Medieval Ireland, 1169-1534*, a thorough and compelling series of essays on a broad range of themes, edited and collated by Art Cosgrove, a premier scholar in the field. There are also many works on Medieval Ireland and its role on the political stage, especially in conjunction with the rest of the British Isles and the power of England and 

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the English monarchy.\textsuperscript{9} Examining the patterns of settlement and dominion by the Norman lords is just as vital to understanding the true political scene of the time.\textsuperscript{10}


Ireland during the lordship period (that is, the period between the conquest of Ireland and the creation of the Kingdom of Ireland in 1542 in which most of the island was governed by feudal lords) acted as a testing ground for those who wished for political power in England—they would live there and fight the unconquered Gaelic areas in an attempt to win favor from the crown and gain lands in England.\textsuperscript{11} The native Irishmen fought the Anglo-Norman invaders tirelessly, and in retaliation the English parliament and local lords in Ireland passed restrictive laws throughout the 1300s. These reforms, and the impact they had not only in Ireland, but in Scotland and Wales as well, are of great importance to many scholars.\textsuperscript{12} The similarities of English occupation in Ireland has prompted comparison to other conquered lands throughout the expanding rule of the English king, such as the March of Wales, where English rule was much more successful.

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\textsuperscript{11} Art Cosgrove, \textit{A New History of Ireland}, il-lxii.

A history of Hiberno-Norman Ireland would be incomplete without due attention being paid to the powerful families who were simultaneously peacekeepers and aggressors to all those around them.\textsuperscript{13} The Butler family of Ormond, one of the three

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most important families in terms of political influence along with the Fitzgeralds of Desmond and Kildare and the Talbots of Wexford, has been studied somewhat rigorously, though these often focus on a later era and examine the Butlers in a more biographical light than this thesis.\textsuperscript{14} Of the publications on the executive power of the Earls of Ormond, very few address them within the context of their own lands.\textsuperscript{15}

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\textsuperscript{15} C. A. Empey, “The Butler Lordship in Ireland, 1185-1515” (Ph.D. diss., Trinity College Dublin, 1970), accessed April 25, 2018


http://etheses.dur.ac.uk/1977/1/1977.pdf?EThOS%2BL; and W. G. Neely, \textit{Kilkenny An Urban History}. Neely’s work aligns most closely with mine, though the scope of his
This interdisciplinary study is situated within a larger historiographical analysis. Scholars have examined the broad subject of power in architecture around the world, ranging from small villages in Sri Lanka, to the effects of the Berlin Wall, to the complexity of building a modern city around the ancient remains of a millennia old civilization such as Rome.\textsuperscript{16} When applied to the British Isles, a few scholars have examined the impact of architecture within Wales and Northern Ireland.\textsuperscript{17} There are only three study is larger in regards to both time and method. Regardless, his work has proved to be an invaluable resource.


a handful of studies devoted solely to the architecture of Kilkenny. For example, *The History, Architecture and Antiquities of the Cathedral Church of St. Canice, Kilkenny* written by James Graves and J.G. Prim in the mid 19th century, discusses many of the nuanced aspects of St. Canice’s, which is a foundational source for this subject.\(^{18}\)

However, the method of examining architecture for evidence of political influence has never been applied to Kilkenny, and very rarely to Ireland as a whole, particularly in the English lordship period (1172-1542).\(^{19}\) This chapter fills this lacuna in the scholarship of


\(^{19}\) While historical studies of Irish architecture do exist, I am not aware of any that predate the forming of the Kingdom of Ireland in 1543, and most political analyses examine 18th-21st century architecture. For examples of Kilkenny studies see John Bradley, “Canice and Kilkenny,” in *Kilkenny Through the Centuries*, ed. John Bradly (Kilkenny: Kilkenny Borough Council, 2009), 1-23; Cóilín Ó Drisceoil, “Kilkenny reclaimed: the archaeological evidence for medieval reclamation in Kilkenny city,” in *Old Kilkenny Review 2003: Journal of Kilkenny Archaeological Society* (Kilkenny:}
Irish history, utilizing Kilkenny as an optimal example of the impact of English rule in Ireland.

The primary sources I use for this thesis are an assortment of annals, deeds, justiciary rolls, and the extant architecture of Kilkenny itself. While many historical documents were lost during the Irish War of Independence, the ones that remain are a helpful insight into the government of the time. They are focused almost solely on English concerns of the time, mentioning the Irish mostly in terms of rebellions and troublesome clans. This is not unexpected, as the English did their best to keep the natives out of government: even the more powerful Irish clans still relied on marriage alliances, military, and monetary support to impact the English, rather than offices. The inherent biases demonstrated in these documents are a reflection both of the opinions of the time and of the systematic suppression by the English, and should be considered with that in mind.

The Butlers played an undeniable role in the course of Irish history. Whether this was through their service in government positions or their military might, the Butlers were among the most powerful figures in Ireland for centuries. The relocation of their seat allowed Kilkenny to flourish from a moderately sized trading town to a ‘second Pale’

under the auspices of the Butler family. Serving as the *de facto* capitol of Ireland when the Butlers were Lord Lieutenants, Kilkenny became one of the greatest case studies for Anglo-Irish relations in the early fifteenth century. Examining both the Butlers and Kilkenny together is a missing piece of Irish history that must be filled to see the full picture of the impacts of Hiberno-Norman lordship in Ireland.

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Empey’s use of the term ‘second Pale’ refers to the general prosperity that Dublin and the rest of the Pale was seeing in this time. The Pale was the best defended area of Ireland, the center of English trade, and had the most access to government. The comparison with Kilkenny implies that it, too, was affluent and well-governed, despite its position outside of the 15th C. boundary of the Pale.
CHAPTER I

THE CITY

Kilkenny County lies in the center of Leinster, in the south-eastern section of Ireland. This, as well as County Tipperary and parts of County Wexford, comprised the ancient Kingdom of Osreigh (Ossory) and, after the English Conquest, the feudal lands of the Butler family. Kilkenny City is the largest city in the county and was, for several hundred years, the largest inland city in the country, with a population between fifteen hundred and two thousand in the mid-1400s.\textsuperscript{21} The large population of the city was primarily due to the political importance that it held, first as the seat of the Butler family even before their purchase of the castle, which encouraged the migration and settlement of English colonists.

Kilkenny was a hub for travelers and trade: the Irish Parliament convened in Kilkenny every four years in addition to its being a major stopping point for the king’s justiciar; the Bishop of Ossory relocated his diocese to Kilkenny in 1202 and it later became home to many religious orders, such as the Knights Hospitaller of Saint John of Jerusalem, and Dominican and Franciscan friaries. The market in Kilkenny saw goods ranging from Italian cloth to French salt as early as 1217.\textsuperscript{22} The import of French and


\textsuperscript{22} Ibid., 2-10. The Irish Parliament convened in Kilkenny twenty-four times between 1325-1409, second only to Dublin in frequency.
Spanish wines was the most valuable trade in Kilkenny, and indeed much of Ireland, by the 14th century. The city was large enough to merit a royal charter in 1207.\textsuperscript{23} Indeed, medieval Kilkenny “could stand in comparison with any middle-sized European city of the period.”\textsuperscript{24}

With knowledge of the city’s history comes the question: how did the Butlers impact the city’s wealth and importance? Was their power evident to the common people who lived in the town? Does the town reflect Butler ideals and allegiances in its organization and development? Or were they simply aloof nobles, separate from the goings-on of the town itself? This chapter examines the physical town, from organization to building materials to the division of the English and Irish, to determine the level of involvement the Butlers had. The local governing of the town is also discussed, in order to truly understand the political role the Butlers played on even the smallest level: while much of their rule was by delegation, ethnic biases are clear in the election of seneschals and all rents would have been paid to the Butlers. This, along with the arrangement of government buildings near the castle, shows that the Butlers did have a hand in the development of the town. In the typical manner of Anglo-Irish nobility, the Butlers renovated and added to the town as they saw fit and utilized these opportunities to imprint signs of their power upon the city. Additionally, the improvement of Kilkenny

\textsuperscript{23} Rachel Moss, ed., \textit{Art and Architecture of Ireland, Volume One: Medieval, c. 400-c. 1600} (London: Yale University Press, 2014), 379.

\textsuperscript{24} W. G. Neely, \textit{Kilkenny An Urban History}, 6.
would have been seen by other Anglo-Irish magnates as a sign of their affluence and significance.

**City Layout**

Built with the 9th century round tower and the remains of Richard “Strongbow” de Clare’s 12th century motte and bailey as the furthermost points of the city, Kilkenny was a fairly compact town, covering less than four square miles, with a market along the main road, called Kingstreet (now Castle Street/High Street). The town covers both banks of the River Nore (*An Fheoir*), which runs southeast from Tipperary to Waterford. A tributary, Breagagh, bisects the town, forming a natural border between Irishtown and Hightown.²⁵

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²⁵ Image 1: John Hogan, "Map of the City of Kilkenny, Constructed from Rocque's Survey, 1757, the Ordnance Survey, 1841, and from Personal Inspection of the Respective Localities," *The Journal of the Kilkenny and South-East of Ireland Archaeological Society*, New Series, 3, no. 2 (1861), 352-53. While this source is not contemporaneous with the period of study, there is written evidence that the buildings and walls discussed were present at the time. This map is merely for a visual approach to the layout of the town.
This was a strategic location in both its trade and defensive abilities—the river and sloped banks made any attack from the east side of the castle impossible. These tactical advantages encouraged Strongbow to choose Kilkenny as his defensive center during the battles against the Gaelic-Irish in 1173, and were the reasons William Marshal rebuilt the destroyed motte and bailey in 1192. It was also the incentive behind the Earls of Ormond shifting their residence from Gowran, a town thirteen miles away, where the third earl had built a fortification only ten years previously, to Kilkenny.

Hightown occupied the land between the castle and the Breagagh tributary, along the western bank of the An Fheair and to the northwest of the Castle Parade, covering nearly a kilometer of the main road. The town originally developed on the land closest to the castle, and slowly expanded toward the boundaries of Irishtown, though this
expansion was halted for much of the 14th century as a result of the Black Death, which struck Kilkenny particularly hard.\textsuperscript{26} Within these boundaries were the Coal Market, the Butter Slip, Kyteler’s Inn, and the Market Cross (no longer there), all of which would have been centers of commerce and social interaction for both the Irish and the English. Indeed, the establishment of the Market Cross was of such importance to the people of Kilkenny, Friar John Clyn, a famous annalist from Kilkenny, recorded the celebration of its erection in his entry of 1335.\textsuperscript{27}

Hightown contained all of the government buildings, such as the court house and Grace’s Castle—home to the wealthy Grace family until the city bought it and converted it to a prison in the 15th century. The larger halls were typically located closest to the castle, used for tax collection, possible storehouses, and the king’s court when the Butlers weren’t in town.

Even when the earl was away in Dublin or abroad in England, his authority was still present in Kilkenny. The administration of the liberty was divided into two branches: the regalian and the seigniorial. Overseeing both of these was a seneschal, who was appointed directly by the earl or by a council of burgesses, nearly all of whom were


\textsuperscript{27} Bernadette Williams, trans., \textit{The Annals of Ireland by Friar John Clyn}, 218.
vassals to the Butlers. He was in charge of most aspects of the governing of Kilkenny, but his primary responsibility was law-keeping and the execution of justice, as well as some military duties.\textsuperscript{28} It was a position, Empey suggests, much like that of the justiciar to the king.\textsuperscript{29} The seneschal acted technically as a representative of the king, meant to be a check of the earl’s power, but tended to function under the authority of the earl even when it did not fully align with the king’s wishes, and had great incentive to follow his orders, both because the position of seneschal had no set term and merely functioned at the earl’s pleasure, and due to the fact that the seneschal was able to pocket any extra money he happened to collect.

In the regalian branch of local government, there was also: Justice of the Liberty, who advised the seneschal regarding legal matters and attended court, though not as judge; Chancellor, another legal position of the chancery court; Treasurer of the Liberty; Sheriff, who summoned juries and enforced the seneschals declarations; Keeper of the Market, who regulated trade and markets; and finally, the Coroners, who recorded the pleas of the crown in court. The seignorial branch was smaller, dealing with the Butlers’ personal resources. It consisted of the Seneschal of the Household—sometimes divided into Seneschal of the Hall and Seneschal of the Lands—Treasurer of the Household, the Marshal (possibly responsible for care of the earl’s cavalry), Captain of the Kerns, responsible for maintaining a standing army, and the Constables, who were charged with

\textsuperscript{28} C. A. Empey, “The Butler Lordship in Ireland, 1185-1515,” 88-89.

\textsuperscript{29} Ibid., 430.
the defense of the castle in the Earl’s absence. These officials would meet with the Earl whenever he came around, typically every other month or so, to report on their duties and turn over any rent or fees that they had collected in his behalf. Most, if not all of them, were well-respected Anglo-Irish, who answered solely to the Butlers and filled their roles until the earl decided to replace them.

Hightown would have been the epicenter for this entire city government and it showed. Constructed of local Kilkenny limestone, these buildings would have been some of the few lasting structures in the town; just like the city walls and castle, also paid for by the Butlers. Only the highest ranking Anglo-Irish lived in the shadow of the castle and only one or two of these would have been able to afford stone homes, such as the Grace family. Most houses appear to have been built with timber. Walking down Highstreet to Irishtown, one would see stone buildings gradually give way to wood, the size often decreasing at the same rate. Guildhalls, located near the market square, would probably have been the only non-government buildings with stone, and even that is uncertain.

Hightown also housed St. Mary’s Cathedral, Kilkenny Castle, and the Butler family properties. Defensive walls surrounded the entire area, except the east side, where the River Nore provided sufficient protection: Built with local limestone, these walls

30 Ibid., 426-460. Empey focuses on the government of Tipperary, but often notes that older liberties are very similar with only a few exceptions.

were up to ten feet high and five feet thick with towers interspersed along the west side. These walls also separated Hightown and Irishtown, even with the Breagagh River running between them, both as a means of further dividing the Irish and English and as a defensive measure should the Irish revolt.32

Irishtown, spanning a mere .3 kilometers of the main road, contained St. Canice’s Cathedral and the Black Abbey, though even the former was outside the walls surrounding Irishtown. Though none survive, it is clear that, both here and in Hightown, “there would have been many houses, however, little better than cabins.”33 The walk

32 All images were photographed by the author unless stated otherwise.

from Hightown to Irishtown was a literal descent through the city: the castle, settled on
the highest hill in Kilkenny, towered over the town, and the remainder of the city lay on a
gradual downward slope before once again climbing at the gates of St. Canice’s.
Ironically, the junction between Irishtown and Hightown is the lowest geographical point
in the city. While the Irish were free to travel throughout all of Kilkenny City, there was a
distinct separation of the neighborhoods, reflecting the English opinion of the time that
the Irish were not only lesser than the English, but a different race entirely.\(^{34}\)

The presence of the English was impossible to ignore in 14\(^{th}\) century Kilkenny.
Not only were all government documents of the time written in Middle French or Latin,
but the language of trade was English. It is also likely that in much of the city, English
was spoken more widely than Irish, as evidenced by Bishop de Ledrede, who composed
his own reverent tavern songs in response to the bawdy English verses he heard in the
local pubs. Indeed, Neely asserts in his 1989 dissertation that, in language as well as

\(^{34}\) “A Statute of the Fortieth Year of King Edward III, enacted in a parliament held in
Kilkenny, A.D. 1367, before Lionel Duke of Clarence, Lord Lieutenant of Ireland,”
translated by James Hardiman, compiled by Karen O’Brien, Corpus of Electronic Texts,
University College Cork, accessed November 18, 2017,
http://www.ucc.ie/celt/published/T300001-001/ refers to the Irish as both “enemies” and
the English who practice Irish culture “dogs”; see also Len Scales, “Medieval
Barbarism?” in \textit{History Today} 49, issue 10 (1999), 42-44, for discussion of Medieval
concepts of race and alienism.
architecture, “There is no evidence of an Irish subculture in the town,” merely the omnipresence of English practice.\textsuperscript{35} In the late 1300’s, these strict divisions began easing slightly, as a few English burgesses purchased land in Irishtown, and one scholar of medieval Ireland claims that all Anglo-Irish colonists were, at that point, at least somewhat receptive of Irish culture.\textsuperscript{36} Despite this claim, historians both in the medieval time and present confirm a struggle in almost every city with mixed population concerning identity and a “traditional hatred” between the Irish and English.\textsuperscript{37}

**Subinfeudation and Defenses**

Throughout the 1300s, the Irish pushed back against the English possessions and by 1430 had taken control of nearly half of the northeastern sections of what was technically the Butlers’ property.\textsuperscript{38} This challenge of power, in addition to tense relations with other Anglo-Irish lords meant that having a strong, loyal army was essential to holding one’s land. Indeed, medievalist Bernadette Williams describes Kilkenny as being

\textsuperscript{35} W. G. Neely, *Kilkenny An Urban History*, 8.


\textsuperscript{37} W. G. Neely, *Kilkenny An Urban History*, 8, quoting Archbishop Fitzralph of Avignon, 1349.

\textsuperscript{38} C. A. Empey, “The Butler Lordship in Ireland, 1185-1515,” 88-89.
“on the fringe of a military zone.” James relied on the “Gaelic practice of coign and livery to support an army which could be used to subdue and overcome opponents.”

There are numerous documents recording agreements from Butlers regarding grants of land from all over their vast properties. Most of these were manorial estates given to Anglo-Irish in exchange for annual rent, which was paid in the form of money, labor, foodstuffs, military service, and in room and board should their liege lord ever call on them to provide it, a custom called *coinnmheadh* ("coyne"). These last two were especially important, often grouped together as “coyne and livery.” Indeed, J. A. Watt declares that “to be the right-hand man of a fourteenth-century Anglo-Irish earl... was warfare all the way.”

Upon the death of his father in 1382, James the third was still a minor. Until he reached his majority nearly three years later, the lands of the Earldom of Ormond were

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returned to the Crown as was custom in feudal oaths. At James’ coming of age, Richard II issued an edict stating that:

“… to our dear cousin James le Botiller … we have granted … that he, who is now in our land of Ireland, for the safeguard of the same, may enter our realm of England and come and do homage to us for the lands and tenements which were his father’s …”\(^{43}\)

With his lands restored, James set his sights on Kilkenny and purchased not only the castle, but all of Despencer’s lands, manors, and services in County Kilkenny.\(^{44}\) Now thoroughly enfeoffed, James set about dividing the land among his own vassals. Having ecclesiastics and men-at-arms wearing Butler livery in exchange for land was a small price to pay for protection of Ormond.

While Kilkenny was a thriving center of trade, most residents would have been farmers, working the land surrounding the city walls. However, Ireland, as much of the medieval world, was a feudal society—a system they would have reached eventually on their own, but which was sped up drastically by the arrival of the English. The land could not be bought, but rather, those who wished to farm had to become vassals to a higher


ranking lord, the highest of which was the King of England. The King’s appointed Earls, called tenants-in-chief, who received land directly from the king were then expected to subinfeudate the land, primarily to Englishmen and receive rent, services, and foodstuffs in return. In Kilkenny, all vassals would have ultimately been under the Earl of Ormond—which means all rent was paid, in essence, to the Butler household in one way or another.

Each manor would have had two types of laborers—free and indentured. Free tenants—tenants-at-will, farmers, and cottagers at the bottom of the economic ladder—leased tenures of land for specific lengths of time. Most tenants and farmers were Welsh and English immigrants, lured to Ireland by the thought of available land. Cottagers tended to be fairly evenly mixed between Gaelic Irish and foreigners. The indentured laborers were almost always Irish: they were called betaghs in English (from Irish biad, meaning “one who gives food”). Tellingly, they were called nativi, or Hibernici in Latin.

Kilkenny town, being a city rather than a manor, would have been run somewhat differently, as there were a large number of guildhalls, each of which would have had shops from which to sell their wares, all technically on Butler land. As such, they

45 J. F. Lydon, The Lordship of Ireland in the Middles Ages, 83.

46 Ibid., 84.

required their own grants, allowing them to sell within the city. One particularly interesting grant is in regards to a windmill near Kilkenny Castle. The use and maintenance of the mill is designated as the responsibility of the miller, and all profits belong to him apart from a small yearly rent, so long as he swears to do any woodwork in Kilkenny Castle for no pay, only daily rations.\textsuperscript{48} Similar indentures are written to farmers promising a portion of their yield.

Despite having someone else collect the various rents, of both money and food, everyone would have known to whom their money, time, and goods were truly going.\textsuperscript{49}

The seneschals, governors, and sovereigns were all representatives of the Butlers. The fact that most of them were Anglo-Irish, and placed there specifically by the Butlers, would have been a staunch reminder of the real rulers of Kilkenny. While paying the local tenant-in-chief for the right to use his land was merely a facet of feudalistic society, it would not have escaped the notice of the Irish that they were paying their invaders; the very conquerors that paid their own tenantry debt through military service to the King, both in Ireland and without.

\textbf{The Ormond-Talbot Feud}

Spanning over three decades (1414-1447), the famous Ormond-Talbot feud was a political disaster that demonstrated the precarious nature of Irish government in the early 15\textsuperscript{th} century. In 1414, while James the 4\textsuperscript{th} was away in France on military service, John Talbot was brought to Ireland from Wales to be the Lord Lieutenant: an appointment that James was not in favor of when he returned in 1420, exacerbating a relationship that was already tenuous due to arguments about property lines. Over the next twenty-seven years, the two traded the position between them several times, and with each change in...

Lieutenancy, the entire government would shift in favor of the man in charge. The powers of the Lieutenant were granted by the king individually to each appointee, meaning that sometimes James was allowed to get rid of any supporter of John who held a position of power, while John was not allowed to do the same, or vice versa. Any man who did not pick a side was never chosen for government position, as both Talbot and Ormond were careful to reward their loyal friends.

The quarreling was escalated when one Giles Thorndon, treasurer and a friend of John Talbot, accused James Butler of embezzlement. James went to England to argue the charges, was acquitted, and then returned the slap by claiming the Talbot was guilty of extortion and siding with the Irish rebels, while James himself had renounced any association he had with them. Talbot was similarly acquitted while in England, and the cycle continued. The fighting soon became more than upper-class verbal sparring. In 1430, Kilkenny was engaged in a battle against the Talbots that “killed nearly all the men of the town.”

James the White Earl had to spend most of his income maintaining defenses and keeping a standing army, but Kilkenny and its surrounding land never fell into Talbot, or Irish, hands. While that was the bloodiest engagement of the feud, through the following years, the accusations and sabotage on each side reached a fervor: by 1447 both Talbot and Ormond had been repeatedly accused of treason, fraud, extortion, ruining the King’s peace, etc., and had both been cleared of all charges. Eventually the King himself stepped in and put a stop to the madness, enforcing a political marriage between the families. It ended with both sides at the same place they started—equally vying for

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the Lieutenancy. The feud had involved many affluent Anglo-Irish families, though none had made any gains in terms of influence or position, except the Desmond Fitzgeralds. Once the Talbot feud was over, James returned to Kilkenny to find that the Desmonds had managed to seize a large portion of the prosperous Butler lands during the commotion, costing the Butlers more land and money than any Irish clan had ever managed. Indeed, Kilkenny “could not have survived if it had not been for the white earl,” who recaptured most of the land before his death in 1452.\(^{51}\) Apart from the skirmishes, there were few lasting consequences for the Anglo-Irish lords, and the years of feuding serve as a lesson of the way the government, and law itself, was merely a tool in the hands of these powerful men.\(^ {52}\)

The Butlers were not the only ones to adopt Irish methods of warfare. It became common to exact tribute and hostages from a defeated or surrendered enemy, as was custom among the Irish kings. It was so accepted to do this that the troops who accompanied Richard II in 1395 followed the example of the Anglo-Irish.\(^ {53}\) Demanding tribute was a way to lessen war costs, and therefore reduce the strain of military exactions on the populace, whose taxes were “heavy in time of peace and virtually unlimited in

\(^{51}\) Ibid., 16.

\(^{52}\) Margaret C. Griffith, “The Talbot-Ormond struggle for control of the Anglo-Irish government, 1414-47,” *Irish Historical Studies* No. 8 (September 1941), 376-397.

\(^{53}\) J. F. Lydon, *The Lordship of Ireland in the Middle Ages*, 241.
time of war.” In fact, warfare in Ireland was so expensive that, in the mid 14th C. when King Edward III was struggling to handle the financial strain that Ireland was putting on his already stretched wallet, his solution was to turn all defensive responsibilities over to the Anglo-Irish tenants-in-chief.

The task of complete military self-reliability was not an absurd request. Irish culture felt it “an accepted principle … that local defence [sic] was a matter for the local community.” This claim is supported by the rise of Anglo-Irish magnates to the positions of ‘peacekeepers’ between the English and Irish even before Edward’s withdrawal of military support. An earl’s household would include many knights tied to him by indentures of retinue, as seen in the Ormond Deeds. Despite the apparent Ormond military might, James Butler still saw fit to occasionally hire Scottish mercenaries, called gallóclaig (galloglass) meaning ‘foreign vassals’ for assistance. The corresponding rise in taxes in 1392 was significant enough to merit inclusion in the Liber Primus Kilkenniensis. Though the galloglass would only have been called upon at

54 Kenneth Nicholls, “Gaelic Society and Economy,” in A New History of Ireland, 425.

55 J. F. Lydon, The Lordship of Ireland in the Middle Ages, 194.


particularly violent times, Robin Frame, Professor Emeritus at Durham University, claims that the Butlers’ ability to call on foreign aid when desired, “reflected the fact that their power … spanned more than one social environment.”58

While the Ormond-Talbot feud was, on some level, a petty squabble, the loss of land that came with was a reason for concern for the Butlers. Within the structure of feudalism, land meant money and often soldiers. The lower level fiefs or surfs working the land would have no strong of loyalty to their lords, especially in outlying towns that were more likely to be ignored in regards to traveling justices. They would pay their rent-in-kind to whomever strong-armed them enough. And between two families already so closely matched in land and power, a little bit was enough to tip the scales in favor of the Talbots. With this in mind, it seems a little more reasonable that the Butlers reacted so poorly to the encroachment of the Talbots.

Conclusion

Still occasionally referred to as “the Butlers’ city,” Kilkenny town was the seat of Butler power for a reason. The bookended city, with the church on one end and the castle on the other, was a physical reflection of Butler ideals, the castle at the highest point while the rest of the town spread out below them, with only the church standing as high as the government. While the founding of the city happened before the Butlers arrived, it was their presence that allowed the city to flourish and their protection that saved it from invading Irish and Anglo-Irish forces.

Their power was clearly evident in the city, both through deliberate demonstrations such as the castle and administrative buildings, and through inadvertent manifestations that were merely apart of society such as collecting rent and enforcing the King’s Peace, often to the detriment of the Irish. Despite these shows of power being an expected part of medieval feudalistic society, it is undeniable that the Irish were not under the rule of a distant king, but that of the Butlers. Functioning as its own little kingdom, Kilkenny was, without question, the dominion of the Butlers.
CHAPTER II

THE CATHEDRAL

St. Canice’s Cathedral lies on the north end of the town, amidst what was Irishtown. It was the first construction in Kilkenny town—indeed the name Kilkenny means “church of Cainneach.”\textsuperscript{59} St. Canice’s was originally founded as a Benedictine monastery under the direction of Canice—who was a pupil of St. Columba, one of the patron saints of Ireland. Though purposefully founded in a place of solitude, as was the custom of ancient saints, a town gradually grew up around the monastery and its ideal trade location. As the town expanded, St. Canice’s remained on the outskirts, settled on a low hill. Once the castle was built in the 12\textsuperscript{th} century, the two buildings acted as bookends to the small city.

In the 14\textsuperscript{th} and 15\textsuperscript{th} centuries, after two more churches were built within the city walls and another on the opposite river bank, St. Canice’s became the church the Irish would have attended for Sunday worship. The Butlers and other prominent families went to St. Mary’s Church, right next to the castle. And yet, despite the Butlers attending a different church, the cathedral is full of examples of patronage and power, including the tombs of several of the Earls of Ormond. Though much of the physical evidence has been corrupted by time, these elements of the city allow us to conceptualize the importance of the Butlers in medieval Kilkenny. In addition to these visual reminders, the church also had a close working relationship with the Butlers as part of the chain of feudalism: land

\textsuperscript{59} Canice is the Latinized form.
grants and indentures were common between the two bodies.

The relationship of Anglo-Irish lords with the church is an interesting one. Technically entrenched in their own branch of feudalism, bishops and episcopates had expectations in regard to the level of patronage they receive from the local magnates. It seems likely that the Butlers met those expectation considering their prominent patronage in St. Canice’s. However, could this patronage be considered aimed at the Irish, rather than a mere reflection of the feudalistic relationship between the Butlers? Was their presence more evident in this church, the one the Irish would have attended, than St. Mary’s, the church for the noble Anglo-Irish? The Butlers had a close relationship with the church as a result of their station and the religious-minded power structure of the time: how did this influence the amount of money and land the Butlers gave to St. Canice’s? By exploring the relationship between the Butlers and the church to its full extent, it’s clear that the church was in and of itself a major political player and that the act of patronage was mutually beneficial to the Butlers and the Catholic church.

Throughout Medieval Europe, the Catholic Church was a powerful political entity. High ranking clergymen were on par with noblemen and government officials in terms of influence and connections. While they followed the social structure of feudalism—and often led the social structure, considering kings would swear fealty to the Pope—they were usually exempt from payment via military service unless they had their own vassals to serve in their place, but in exchange agreed to provide council and church services to their liege lord. The church was seldom pardoned from paying rent, however, on their feudal land—the church was wealthy and nobility were unafraid to take advantage of that. In a particularly interesting letters patent, the Dean at St. Canice’s
agrees to “provide forever four suitable and honest priests” to perform masses daily or at the whim of the Butler family. Should the church fail to provide the priests at any time, they were to be charged forty pounds of silver each time, a very large sum. Land grants to the church were made fairly regularly to small parishes and churches throughout Ormond. For example, in 1314, the bishop of Killaloe quitclaims a previously gifted piece of land; five carucates for which he was paying five marks sterling and ten pounds of wax every year. While these were not directed at St. Canice’s, it does show evidence of the importance of the church in government and society.

**St. Canice’s**

The first iteration of the church dated to the latter half of the 6th century. The Round Tower of St. Canice’s Cathedral is the oldest structure in Kilkenny, dating to the 9th century, and is therefore the only significant building in Kilkenny that the Anglo-Normans did not construct, rebuild, or renovate. However, as it is merely a hundred-foot, unadorned tower with interior ladders, and its purpose is still unknown, it provides little information apart from reinforcing the Irish practice of building round towers, remnants of which are seen throughout the country. The tower abuts St. Canice’s, which is younger by over three hundred years, and has a long history, including two fires which destroyed it completely before William Earl Marshal rebuilt a stone cathedral on the grounds of the previous wooden ones in 1202. Indeed, it is clear he spared no expense in the

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61 Ibid., no. 499.
reconstruction, as much of the stone used is limestone imported from Somerset, England, which would have been extremely difficult and costly to transport, despite the abundance of local quarries.62 The cathedral is in English perpendicular style, taking the standard form of a cross, spanning 212 feet across and 117 feet in depth.63 There are nineteen sepulchers within the cathedral, most of which date from after 1500—many of the Butlers prior to this date were buried in Dublin or at their other home in Gowran, and almost all the graves older than the 16th C. have been lost to time. Of the extant tombs, nine are elevated, eight of which are carved with effigial representations—seven of these are tombs for members of the Butler family. Each of these tombs have carvings along the base, with the house crest adorning the sides, where all who attended the church would have been able to see them clearly.

The cathedral boasts eight stained glass windows, of modern make, though these are replacements for medieval work, shards of which were found in an excavation near the north east tower in 1846.64 All but the largest, eastern window were made of ‘grisaille’ glass, which was white and allowed ‘pearly’ light into the cathedral, and would have been adorned with leaves and geometric patterns. The famous eastern window,


which overlooked the choir, depicted the life, passion, and resurrection of Christ and was provided for the cathedral by Bishop de Ledrede in 1354 after the tower collapsed and was rebuilt.\textsuperscript{65} The windows were supposedly so remarkable that an Italian archbishop named Rinuccini, living in Kilkenny during 1648, attempted to buy them for £700 so he could take them to Rome, but were destroyed only a few years after his offer in the Cromwellian attacks.\textsuperscript{66} The colored glass for all the windows was likely sourced out of a Dublin glass-house, several of which operated in the mid-thirteenth century. The colors evident in the window shards include several shades of blue and green, yellow-brown, purple, red, and pink, which is remarkable considering only one other church in Ireland is known to have had pink glass as it was particularly difficult to color. As stained glass was expensive, the work would be sponsored by wealthy families, which would then be commemorated by inscriptions or crests in the glass.\textsuperscript{67}


\textsuperscript{66} Michael J.C. Buckley, “The Ancient Stained Glass of St. Canice’s Cathedral, Kilkenny,” 241.

As the windows were first paid for by Bishop de Ledrede, only subsequent window repairs would have hosted the Butler crest or a dedication. Though the glass was originally imported, it had to be cut to size on site, which would have been done by traveling craftsmen, who went from job to job, as was common in this time. Similarly, fragments of glazed tiles were found around the cathedral, showing that the artists worked on location at the cathedral.

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The stonework of the entryways and interior is minimalistic, with columns and pointed arches acting as supports, a primary feature in the Gothic architecture that was very popular in Norman England at the time. Churches built immediately before the English conquest in 1169-1172 are marked by pre-Romanesque, flat lintels, usually topped by a Maltese cross. The western door of St. Canice’s, in contrast, is described as “the finest of the early Gothic doorways to survive in Ireland,” featuring angels carved outside the portal, acting as guardians, which was a motif that could be found throughout England and the European continent at this time, but had never before been used in Ireland, demonstrating the influence of the Anglo-Irish lords in Kilkenny. And indeed, the use of local stonemasons meant that the cathedral had, by the mid 1400s, taken on a distinct architectural identity that was a cross between Irish and Norman English fashions. If the interior columns were given decoration, it was usually in the form of English foliage, occasionally with Ecclesiastics emerging from the leaves. Two of the largest columns, directly under the main vaulting of the roof and in front of the choir seats, included a carving of the Butler crest on the base, crowned and split with a saltire over trefoil, meaning defender of Ireland. The fact that the Butlers were ‘defending’ the country from the native Irish rather than on their behalf is yet another list of ironies that the Butlers embodied.

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Typically, mainly the Irish would have attended St. Canice’s for worship, though the congregation might also have included lower class Anglo-Irish. The Butler family and other English nobility, such as the burgesses and seneschals, would worship at St. Mary’s Church, located directly next to the castle. However, there are several accounts of

The Butlers were most likely patrons of all the churches in Kilkenny, including St. Mary’s and the Franciscan Friary built on the other side of the Nore, but these were both much smaller, less grand, and the presence of their crest and name seems to have been less prominent than in St. Canice’s.
funeral processions for the Butlers and other high-ranking English families, such as seneschals and knights going from the castle to St. Canice’s, where it would have been visible to everyone along Kingstreet. Regardless of the makeup of the congregation, the priest would have been English, or of English descent, as the Irish were forbidden from taking the office of clergy. While most of the original details of St. Canice’s would have been added during the building process, and therefore sponsored by Marshal, the upkeep and any subsequent artistic additions—of which there were clearly many by the current state of the cathedral—would have been patronized by the Butlers. Consequently, those who were most under the power of the Butlers were exposed to the symbols of that power in their church. Similarly, the weekly procession of the elected sovereign along with the ‘great twelve’ men of the city—an assortment of treasurer, sheriff, seneschal, constables, and justice of the liberty—to St. Canice’s was “an outward and visible sign of the unity between church and civic authority.” Regardless of this, the impact of the Butlers is not, and certainly would not have been, unreasonably prominent within the cathedral. Rather, it is likely that their willingness to fund such costly improvements was

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73 “A Statute of the Fortieth Year of King Edward III, enacted in a parliament held in Kilkenny, A.D. 1367,” Articles XIII-XIV, pp. 49-55. It is difficult to determine how strictly this was enforced, but there are no mentions of Irish clergy through the Annals of Friar John Clyn (Williams) or the Liber Primus Kilkenniensis (Otway-Ruthven).

to impress their fellow Anglo-Irish lords and nobility: firstly as a symbol of their devotion to the Church, in a time when spirituality and status were intrinsically linked; secondly, the Bishop of Ossory was an important figure in Irish religion. He often held high government positions in addition to the bishopric, though not typically local to Kilkenny, unlike the remainder of the clergy in the cathedral—“the church,” Neely states, “was there to be exploited,” by families with ambitions for government positions. With the seat of the Bishopric in Kilkenny, the cathedral that he oversaw would be a reflection of both Kilkenny and the Butlers.

Conclusion

St. Canice’s Cathedral was a landmark in medieval Kilkenny and played an essential role in the town. The Irish peasants that would have attended church there would have seen the evidence of Butler wealth within the cathedral, in the form of repairs gifted to the cathedral, tombs of the earls and their wives, and the magnificent stained glass windows present even in the 15th century. The willingness of the Butlers to pour money into the cathedral and land into the church was a sign of the importance of religion in medieval life and the role it played in Irish government. Through land grants and other agreements, the church made itself a powerful entity within the country and, as with other significant families and clans, the Butlers made close friends with the most important players. Although they themselves did not attend St. Canice’s for regular service, they were careful to show their power and wealth within the church.

75 Ibid., 37.
CHAPTER III

THE CASTLE

The presence of castles in medieval history is undeniable, but often the purpose of these structures is glossed over. Although the main function of a castle was as a protected home for lords and ladies, castles were also the most impactful means of conveying power and wealth. In a conquered land such as Ireland, this power was often a symbol of domination. In the case of Kilkenny castle, sitting on a hilltop and visible from nearly every part of Kilkenny town, it was a clear demonstration that the Irish were to fall under the rule of the English.

Built as a fortification following the English Conquest, Kilkenny Castle started as a motte and bailey built by the original English lord over Kilkenny, William Marshal. The Butler family took ownership of the castle in 1391 after descendants of the Marshal family, the de Spencers, sold it to the 3rd Earl. After this purchase, the castle was remodeled and expanded extensively in order to form a more inhabitable structure, but the foundation of the original stone structure still remains showing that the castle has been a landmark in the city from the moment it was first constructed.

While the castle would have been visible to everyone within the town, how evident were the Butlers in the appearance of the castle form the outside, where the Irish would have seen it? Certainly, there was more of a Butler presence on the interior of the castle, where nobles and Anglo-Irish would often be welcomed: was this typical of Anglo-Irish lords at the time? In what ways could power have been apparent apart from physical reminders? To fully understand the impact of the castle, the structure and
building process are examined extensively. The Butlers displayed their power largely through symbols and displays of wealth throughout the castle, and the near-constant remodeling of the castle was another aspect of that. The various uses of the building will also be discussed: the castle was much more than a home for the Butlers, but where court would be held, where dignitaries would stay, and where the Butlers would often fill their positions on a local and nationwide scale. A brief discussion of the kind of lives the Butlers, specifically the third and fourth earls of Ormond, would have led aids in fully understanding their rule over Kilkenny in that time. With this overarching view of the castle, it becomes clear that the castle was the best means at conveying power for the Butler family and that their wealth and political importance was apparent to all who saw it.
The Building

Kilkenny Castle sits on one of the five hills that make up Kilkenny’s strategic landscape and overlooks Hightown.\textsuperscript{76} Built in the ringwork style, a design not uncommon

in Ireland, though less used than the bailey design, four round towers and four connecting walls comprised the fortification. Today’s castle forms a U-shape, as the south wall was destroyed in 1650 after Oliver Cromwell besieged and captured Kilkenny, and the slighted castle was never refortified.  

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77 Rachel Moss, ed., *Art and Architecture of Ireland, Volume One: Medieval*, c. 400-c. 1600, 335;

An extensive archaeological survey completed in the 1990s proved that the base of three of the four towers and the linking curtain walls were built with original stone castle in 1207-13. Ben Murtagh, lead archaeologist for the castle renovations, stated that “surviving remains of the pre-nineteenth-century castle were more extensive than had been previously recognized,” and that the arrow-loops, base-batters, and sally-ports on the moat side of the castle could be dated to the original stone structure.\textsuperscript{78} The southeast tower, pictured above, required the least restoration once it was turned over to the state in 1967. The lowest chamber of this tower still bears a contemporaneous willow wicker and mud ceiling, which acted as both support for the stone above and insulation. The castle required enough land and resources to provide for its inhabitants comfortably, which The Ormond Deeds, 1172-1350, enumerate as “a dovecot…, a garden, a fishery at the river, a weir there, six acres of land in le inches, and castle orchard, eleven acres of meadow.”\textsuperscript{79}

Across from the main gate was a large castle green, or unfarmed gardens and lawn, likely used for sport or training: a luxury only the rich could afford. As the town grew in the fifteenth century, James the fourth allowed some of the land between the castle and its surrounding walls to be used for the home of Robert Chamberlynn and his wife, as well


\textsuperscript{79} As cited in W. G. Neely, Kilkenny An Urban History, 13. A weir is a fish trap. There are no remnants of a stone wall surrounding the lawn, but the Ormond Deeds do make reference to the ‘inner and outer walls’ of the castle; Ormond Deeds, iii, no. 115, p. 106.
as a few mills, one of which he allowed the Prior of St. John the Evangelist to use in
exchange for daily Mass, held in the chapel of the castle. Some of these grants were
written as a means of aiding the Butlers in their many castle renovations, beginning only
a few years after they originally bought the castle in 1392, such as the miller performing
woodworking duties at the Butlers request.  

Many crests and symbols of the Butler family can be seen throughout the castle,
on everything from fireplace mantles to stained glass windows to seat cushions. The
Butlers’ most notable symbol, the three covered chalices, are displayed on the second
quarter of the per cross shield, though originally they used only the chief indented azure,
seen on the first quarter. The supporters are a swan and griffon rampant, signifying that
they were both warriors and ‘lovers of harmony.’ It is crested by a knight’s helm, a title
which the earliest Butlers would have born and which carried on through the generations.
Indeed it is likely that the Butlers became Knights of the Bath circa the onset of the
fifteenth century, as James the fifth was a member of the personal retinue of Henry VI,
and was knighted along with him and several other notable families who bore the title.  

80 See above, p.
81 See E. A. E. Matthew, “The Governing of the Lancastrian Lordship of Ireland in the
Time of James Butler, Fourth Earl of Ormond” (Ph.D. diss., Durham University, 1977),
219, and Fionn Pilbrow, “The Knights of the Bath: Dubbing to Knighthood in
Lancastrian and Yorkist England,” in Peter Coss and Maurice Keen, eds. Heraldry,
The crowns seen below are symbols of the positions of Duke and Marquis, which would be awarded to the Ormond heirs in later centuries, but which likely replaced the crown of an Earl, a representation of both the Earldom of Ormond and that of Wiltshire, bestowed upon James the fifth in 1449, three years before he inherited Ormond from his father.  

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Pageantry and Social Display in Medieval England, (Suffolk: The Boydell Press, 2002), 211.

Despite the abundant examples of this crest in the castle today, nearly all of these were added in the last two centuries, and it is difficult to discuss with any certainty the presence of such demonstrations of power prior to the restorations. As Tadghe O’Keeffe, Irish castellologist, wrote, “There is always a limit to how intimately a castle can be known without being able to step back into the middle ages, see the medieval world through contemporary eyes, view a building as it was then, and talk to and listen to the observations of others also viewing it.”

However, the original function of the castle is without question. As with all castles, their primary function is defense. Without the crenellations, strategic positioning, and fortified structures, a castle would merely be a manor house. Kilkenny Castle reflects this, both with the easily maneuverable porticos adorning the roof, as well as arrow slits, tightly winding staircases, and underground tunnels which allowed for escape should the castle be overrun. These defensive capabilities were in addition to the outer wall surrounding the castle and its land and the city walls, which were completed in 1400 in 83 By the mid-1800s, the Butler family was experiencing terrible debt and losing land and power quickly. I think it very likely that the additions of the Butler crest throughout the castle, their last major medieval property, were added as a purposeful reminder of the power they once held, but this has never been confirmed.

response to massive Irish uprisings as close as Carlow and Gowran—compared to Kildare, the seat of the Kildare Fitzgeralnds, which did not have its liberties or a defensive wall until 1515, this shows that Kilkenny was much larger and wealthier than even the other major cities of Ireland save Dublin.\textsuperscript{85} The unrest, led by the MacMurrough and O’Carroll clans, had been brewing for nearly two decades by the time James the third purchased Kilkenny Castle, and was one that plagued all of Leinster through the first half of the 15\textsuperscript{th} century.\textsuperscript{86} Kilkenny was not one of the 148 castles that fell into Irish hands between 1375-1435, protected as it was by “the great wall of Kilkenny,” a dry moat, and the garrisoned castle itself.\textsuperscript{87} Such effort to defend the city on the part of the Butlers was for two reasons: one, it was their duty as “keepers of the King’s peace” to protect the land they were entrusted with; second, and far more important, was that Kilkenny was an investment to the Butlers—the revenue from trade in addition to the feudal fees and rents paid them allowed the Butlers to become extremely wealthy, and losing the city to the Irish would have lost them that income. With its position beyond the Pale, Kilkenny was incredibly vulnerable to attack from the Irish, and relied solely upon the aegis of the Earl


\textsuperscript{86} James Graves and J.G. Prim, \textit{The History, Architecture and Antiquities of the Cathedral Church of St. Canice, Kilkenny}, 150.

\textsuperscript{87} The walls of Kilkenny are referred to in this way several times in the Ormond Deeds: see for example \textit{Ormond Deeds, 1350-1413}, no. 227.
of Ormond, who was responsible for military tactics and planning defenses. Despite many attempts, such as during the early 1400s, Kilkenny successfully stood against attacks, and the victory was attributed to the governing of the White Earl.\(^{88}\)

Beyond its military purpose, the castle functioned as living quarters for the family for at least part of the year until they changed residency to one of their other homes for a few months to complete business and allow the castle to be cleaned. When the Butlers were gone, the castle was still garrisoned with soldiers—they were likely housed in the lower western wall, which was the most exposed part of the castle. The main residential area was in the southeast tower and the eastern wall. A portion of the remaining space functioned as guest rooms. Parliament was often held at Kilkenny, second only to Dublin in frequency, during the Butlers’ Lieutenancies. While such congresses were occurring, the lords, knights, and any local representatives summoned would have been guests of the Butlers, typically around forty men and any entourage they may have brought. The most important of these, the \textit{maiores terrae}, would have been housed in the castle itself, while the lower-class Parliament attendees likely utilized the rooms at Kytler’s Inn. In 1392, King Richard II himself was housed there. The great hall was the heart of the castle; where feasts and entertainment would have been held, as well as court and the King’s Council.\(^{89}\)

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\(^{88}\) W. G. Neely, \textit{Kilkenny An Urban History}, 16.

Lord Lieutenant

Earning the title of Lord Lieutenant (also called Chief Governor or Justiciar) no less than eight times between 1420 and 1452, James the fourth was in office more than he was out of it.90 His father, while having spent less time in royal appointments, served at least twice. The position of Lord Lieutenant, the highest authority in Ireland functioning directly under the King and on his authority at all times, was appointed by the King himself.91 The Chief Governor was able to “summon parliaments, proclaim royal service, issue writs in the king’s name, and, generally, exercise many of the prerogatives which were reserved to the king.”92

Despite Ireland being technically under the English Common Law, new law in Ireland was the sole responsibility of the Irish magnates under the guidance of the Lieutenant, who was the head of the Irish Parliament. Laws in Ireland were only subject to English Parliamentary rule after a law passed by Henry VII in 1494. Poynings’ Law


92 James Lydon, The Expansion and Consolidation of the Colony, 1215-54,” in A New History of Ireland, 170.
required that laws henceforth had to be approved by the King and ratified at Parliament in London before being sent to the Anglo-Irish lords. Previous to that there were few checks and balances put in place over the Irish Parliament. The powers of Governor were purposefully left undefined, allowing the appointee to exercise his pseudo-monarchial authority as he deemed necessary.

The role of Justiciar was not merely to run the government from an office in Dublin. In fact, only a small portion of administration was conducted in a fixed location. Rather, the Justiciar and his retinue—including judges, chancellors, and twenty troops—would travel to disputes and meet with clan leaders to “knock local heads together, and to mulct the men and communities he visited.” Collecting taxes and scutage, the standing military tax that supported the army in instances when they needed to be called upon, was a primary function of Justiciar, but he usually had to retrieve it in person. As such, being able to move throughout the country securely and to gather money without need for a show of force was key to an effective Lieutenancy.

The reason the Lieutenants did not require large military forces to accompany them into the Irish-controlled areas of Ireland is because the Butlers were allied with several prominent Irish clans. While few, if any, of these were long-term agreements, they were taken very seriously by both parties. In a treaty with the O’Kennedy’s, James,

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the first Earl of Ormond, states that if any of his troops slay an O’Kennedy, the body of that “traitor” should be brought to the Earl. 95 The punishment for failing to uphold their side of the treaty was excommunication from the church. As Lord Lieutenant, James the fourth was no less willing to make alliances with Irish clans on an even broader scale than merely in Kilkenny: his parleying with Gaelic chiefs aided greatly in the success of his first term (1426-7) largely because of the financial freedom it granted him. 96 Funding for the Lord Lieutenancy was minimal and any other money needed for travel, supplies, etc. was taken almost directly from the appointee’s personal purse; which included local resources from his own seat of power and support from allies. James’ Gaelic connections allowed him to consistently raise necessary defensive funds throughout his terms as Governor. 97

Though the Butlers’ Earldom of Ormond lay primarily in Tipperary, they also held significant properties in Kilkenny, and the city and environs were the center of their power. Their influence and connections, however, extended far beyond the farmland of


97 Art Cosgrove, “The Emergence of the Pale, 1399-1447,” in *A New History of Ireland*, 539.
Kilkenny, throughout Ireland, Wales, and Norman England. The Butler power and influence was greater than most Anglo-Irish families of that time because of connection to royal family, the trifecta of Earldom, palatinate, Lord Lieutenancy, and extremely strategic political marriages. Both as relatives of and loyal servants to the King, they had his ear as well as the ability to rally Irish clans to their service when desired. The position of Lord Lieutenant was one that allowed the Butlers to utilize their English connections and Irish culture. It was an office few men were truly capable of handling.

**Patronage and Cultural Assimilation**

In the medieval age, nobility displayed their wealth lavishly, and it is therefore to be expected that the Butlers had many things which were considered luxuries at the time, such as books and art on display in their library, a rare commodity even among the wealthy of the time. The Butlers were known for their extensive patronage of artists both in England and Ireland who produced works in Latin, French, English, and even Irish Gaelic, particularly James the 4th, whose famous *Book of the White Earl* (ca. 1404-1452) is written in both English and Irish. Additionally, large numbers of pottery shards

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98 For a discussion of the library in Kilkenny ca. 1500, see F. Henry and G. Marsh-Micheli, “Manuscripts and Illuminations, 1169-1603,” in *A New History of Ireland*, 803.

were found during the archaeological survey in the 1990’s that date back to medieval
times.\textsuperscript{100}

Only the Anglo-Norman nobles and visiting Irish dignitaries would ever have
been allowed in the castle. The local lower-class Irish would have only entered the castle
as workers, or perhaps on religious holidays, when it was common for nobility to throw
large parties, which peasantry were allowed to attend and to partake of, quite literally, the
table scraps of the wealthier nobles. And even then, it is unlikely the Irish would have
been allowed further than the gate, where remnants of the meal would be handed out.\textsuperscript{101}

From afar, the castle would be viewed primarily as a defensive fortification, one that only
the very wealthy could afford, but anyone seeing it along the river banks would have
immediately known that the Butlers were the rulers of the city.

It would be impossible to study any of the Anglo-Irish families without discussing
the process of gaelicization. The adoption of Irish culture was a significant problem in the

\textsuperscript{100} Ben Murtagh, “Kilkenny Castle: An Outline of its History, Architecture and
Archaeology,” 294.

\textsuperscript{101} Karen Ralph refers to these feasts as “for the learned classes of Ireland,” which
certainly would have excluded the common Irishman, but mentions nothing of their
participation in the handouts after the banquet. However, as peasants were forbidden
from partaking of certain foods based on their class, it can be assumed they were not
included in this practice; Karen Ralph, “Medieval Antiquarianism: The Butlers and
Artistic Patronage in Fifteenth-Century Ireland,” p. 17.
eyes of the English crown, to the point that they felt the need to establish the Statutes of Kilkenny in 1366, essentially outlawing any Irish practices, ranging from speaking Irish to playing Irish sports, and particularly English marrying Irish natives. These laws were well established by the time James the third came of age and were still enforced during the life of James the fourth. Despite being Lord Lieutenants several times, and therefore responsible for enforcing these laws, the Butlers were themselves flagrantly disobedient to them. A 1399 “Report to the King’s Council” says that:

The English families in all parts of the land which are rebels, as the Butyllers … will not obey the law nor submit to justice, but destroy the poor liege people of the land, and take their living from them and rob them, will needs be called gentlemen of blood and idlemen, whereas they are sturdy robbers and not amenable to the law, and will make prisoners of the English and put them to greater duress than do the Irish enemies.102

And yet, in spite of the negative report, the Butlers were still considered the most loyal Anglo-Irish family. This seems fairly oxymoronic, but as Frame sums up quite nicely, “If magnates employed Irish minstrels, that was partly because, as Gerald of Wales long ago

remarked, theirs was the best music."\textsuperscript{103} Or, to extrapolate, disobedience of the Irish magnates was not, generally, the result of malicious disregard for the English crown, but rather a result of their circumstances. The Irish chiefs were clients of the English lords as often as they were opponents, and in order to do business, successful Anglo-Irish magnates had to understand their culture and customs. James, the third Earl, demonstrates this flexibility in 1395, during the visit of Richard II, when he was chosen as personal interpreter between the King and the Irish clans who swore homage to him.\textsuperscript{104} That he spoke Gaelic, despite being technically forbidden, was never addressed as an issue, and seems to suggest that the Statutes were used as a means of limiting Irish benefits rather than punishing the Anglo-Irish.\textsuperscript{105}

The Butlers display of Irishisms blurs the line between Irish and English. The Irish referred to this mixed race as \textit{gail} (singular \textit{gall}), while they themselves were \textit{gaedhil}. The English, in comparison, were \textit{sasanach}—Saxons. This distinction between the three was not only an Irish convention. Richard II, in a letter to his uncle the Duke of York, writes, "There are in the land of Ireland three kinds of people; the wild Irish, our enemies; the Irish rebels; and the obedient English."\textsuperscript{106} The Butlers seemed to be in two

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\textsuperscript{103} Robin Frame, \textit{Ireland and Britain, 1170-1450,} 213.
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\textsuperscript{104} Ibid., 213.
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\textsuperscript{105} A.J. Otway-Ruthven, \textit{A History of Medieval Ireland,} 293.
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\textsuperscript{106} Raymond Reagan Butler, \textit{Warriors of the Pale: An Irish Saga,} 105.
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of these categories at once, but so did the other Anglo-Irish magnates. It was a difficult balance to achieve, but one that the Butlers managed with great skill.

Conclusion

The castle was the Butlers’ best means of conveying power throughout the city. They utilized the opportunities to display their crest and allegiance, as well as their wealth and status, but the primary purpose of the castle was defense and living quarters, and that is visible in the design and structure of the building. The castle was the center of government within the city and was used as a court and meetinghouse for Parliament while the Butlers were present in the city. Their wealth allowed them to pay for extensive additions and renovations throughout their time owning the castle, and they utilized both English and Irish craftsmen.

Throughout the lieutenancies of the third and fourth earls, they fulfilled their roles as defenders of the King’s peace through many means, such as utilizing their alliances with Irish clans and hired galloglass, but also through building defensive walls around Kilkenny and strengthening the defensive capabilities of the castle itself. Although they tended toward Irish customs, the Butlers were still considered high-ranking members of the English court, and were honored for their loyalty in such times as the royal visit from King Richard II.

The purchase of Kilkenny castle by the Butler family made a lasting impact of Kilkenny—the towers of the castle loomed over Kilkenny city, evident from practically the entire town, a constant reminder of the power they held over not only the Anglo-Irish, but the Irish living within the city.
CONCLUSION

“So this city is commonly named Kilkenny... On the north stands boldly forth the large and magnificent cathedral church sacred to St. Canice, the abbot; southwards, and verging towards the east, rises the castle, or rather a fortress guarded by many castles and bulwarks. From this twofold source sprang the civic community—the temple and the fortress were the nurses of its infancy—the civil and ecclesiastical polities contributing equally to the growth of its buildings. To the inquirer as to the period of its foundation I reply that it is coeval with the English conquest in Ireland.” 107

As the above quote shows, Kilkenny, although founded several centuries earlier, would not have been the flourishing trade center, the military stronghold, the second capital of English-controlled Ireland that it was in the 15th century without the arrival of the Butlers. The city prospered under the aegis of Butler power and affluence.

The Butlers displayed their wealth through architecture and patronage. In the city itself, their importance could be seen in the city walls, built to protect the residents of Kilkenny from rebellious Irish clans and culminating in Kilkenny Castle, where all military might would have been focused. The castle allowed the Butlers to fill their vital roles as protectors of their land while simultaneously serving as the political epicenter of

the city. Serving multiple times as Chief Justiciar of Ireland, the Earls of Ormond were vital members of Plantagenet government. The running of Ireland was primarily their responsibility and one that both the third and fourth Earls were rather successful at; both James’ had alliances with several Irish clans, raised more money than previous years, and remained in good favor with the king. Military leaders as well as political ones, the Earls embodied the ideal of true medieval nobility. Even their use of Irish tactics in battle was not mar the family name enough to prevent them from earning the title and political prestige of “Knight of the Bath” in the mid-fifteenth century. They also played their roles as liege and vassal in the feudalistic society, gaining land and wealth from their respective fiefs and lords. Overall, the Butlers understood the demands of society and did what was necessary to be important; and did it very well.

The crest of the Butler family was visible in St. Canice’s Cathedral, where the Irish attended services on important occasions, displaying the duel notion of the Butlers being dedicated servants to the Church and lords of the land, unafraid to collect their rent and services. The pomp and ceremony that surrounded their relationship with religion was another medieval custom of showing prosperity and one that the Butlers indulged in without fear of seeming impious or prideful.

The stonework and prominent placement of governmental buildings up and down King’s Street was a mark of their importance in the English-run town and the appointment of Anglo-Irish seneschals and governors a clear message of who truly ruled the city. The division of Irishtown and Hightown was another reminder of the control by the Anglo-Irish and the prejudices they brought with them.
Despite the notion that the Irish were lesser people, the Butlers and other prominent families adapted to their culture quickly and without regard to the laws forbidding such acclimation. The Anglo-Irish inclination toward Irish language, music, sport, and their inter-national relations led to them eventually being considered a separate identity, distinct from both English and Irish society. Rather than hindering them, this dual culture allowed the Butlers to thrive in England and Ireland, allowing them to treat with Irish clans and aiding in their appointment to offices.

Regardless of their success, the Butlers had many ‘black marks’ on their record, as it were. Their feud with the Talbots was one, resulting in several raids on Butler lands and loss of property, and becoming so disruptive as to earn the notice of the king. In light of their Irish ways, the Butlers were referred to several times as ‘in rebellion’ to the English crown by other noble families, and generally thought of as lesser than true English nobility, even if this seemed to do little to dampen their importance in Court. This opinion was not helped by the many political marriages of Butler men to Irish women. And yet, this was not atypical for the time and place, and was merely a facet of being an Englishman living in Ireland.

The Butlers were truly men of their time. While it can be argued whether they were more Irish or English, whether they were good leaders or not, it is undeniable that the third and fourth Earls of Ormond were prominent political players, both at home and abroad. English control of Ireland grew in their lifetimes, as did their personal revenue. Kilkenny, the seat of their power, saw several decades of stability and trade despite still
re recuperating from the effects of famine and plague. The town grew under the leadership of the Butlers from merely an up-river port-town to a political center that played host to Parliament and the King himself.

The physical appearance of Kilkenny is a visual metaphor of the political realities of the time: a divided population, with the bastions of God and the Crown marking the borders of society. And, as was typical of a medieval, feudal society, the presence of a powerful family was clearly apparent in the city. While Kilkenny was a regional trade center from before the Norman conquest, once the city became the seat of power of the Butlers, their presence and protection encouraged a significant increase in commerce and kept Kilkenny on the political stage for the next four hundred years.
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