



*The Last Armada: Queen Elizabeth, Juan del Águila, and Hugh O'Neill: The Story of the 100-Day Spanish Invasion* by Des Ekin.

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*The Last Armada* narrates that tragic episode in Irish history when a Hiberno-Hispanic alliance faltered and the prospect of Irish independence slipped away. Ironically, Spain's last armada was, journalist and historian Des Ekin observes, "destined to be the most successful Spanish invasion ever mounted against England. Unlike the renowned Great Armada of 1588, this expedition actually established a bridgehead on English-controlled territory and captured a string of key ports." Foremost among them was Kinsale, "one of the least defensible towns in Europe" (14) and site of the climax of the Irish Nine Years' War in January 1602. The Spanish loss at Kinsale had Europe-wide significance, for no Catholic ruler again threatened Protestant England as formidably until the reign of France's Louis XIV, when Ireland, once more drawn into Europe's confessional struggles, was again brutally subjugated.

The portentous events and outcomes of the siege of Kinsale and the striking confluence of picturesque personalities drew Ekin to his subject. His skills as an investigative journalist breathe life into historical figures in ways traditional academic historians rarely attempt. In an almost nineteenth-century prose style, he rescues historical reputations trampled by both contemporaries and later historians. His book's protagonist in this regard is the remarkable Juan del Águila.

The book's thirty-eight chapters weave together the experiences of Ekin's characters. Hugh O'Neill, formerly in the Queen's military service, had returned to Ireland and put to use the martial skills he had acquired over decades. Under his leadership, the "native" Irish routed Elizabeth I's armies in the late 1590s, threatening to overrun English settlements. In today's parlance, a "national liberation" was close at hand. Philip II of Spain seized the moment and dispatched an amphibious force to succor O'Neill. Ekin's tale revolves around the attempts at coordination between the Irish and Águila's *tercios* (infantry), ensconced in the port of Kinsale. This much-desired union of Catholic forces failed to take place in time for the final pitched battle. Kinsale was indeed a major setback in Ireland's tortuous quest for self-determination. Impressed by Spanish gallantry, the English commander Baron Mountjoy granted Águila's force a withdrawal with full honors and the Last Armada sailed home to Iberia. The surviving garrison was spared and Irish partisans dispersed to fight another day for liberation: that day never arrived.

In style, temperament, and intentions, Ekin achieves an admirable objectivity, avowing that

this is a post-Good Friday Agreement book. I am not interested in bitter recriminations, laments or partisan rants about what ought not to have happened in the past. Rather, I view the Kinsale saga as a bit like those beautiful Georgian houses that line Dublin's squares. A generation ago, many were torn down and viewed as hated symbols of Ireland's colonisation. Now, they are cherished and protected because we all appreciate that they are part of our shared history. The story of Kinsale—where Irish people fought with equal commitment on either side—belongs to us all. (17)

So, this is a people's history—in two senses. First, it is written for the public as a whole, in Ireland especially, not exclusively for the proletariat or the gilded remnants of aristocracy. Nothing here re-

veals whether the author is Catholic, Protestant, or atheist. Second, the work is informed by Ekin's belief in free will: human frailty and competition shape historical events. The flaws of his "heroes" intrigue him as much as their achievements.

Unsurprisingly, then, the book is written more in the style of Lytton Strachey than of Fernand Braudel (though Ekin has a deft feel for topography). It advances no overarching theory of economic determinism or Whig Interpretation of History. A few high priests in the Temple of Clio may doubt the value of such history, but this is a work intended for a broad, nonpartisan readership. Furthermore, postmodern theory has persuasively shown that all forms of history are literature. Some degree of subjective interpretation inescapably enters the creative process. Even Thucydides was captivated by human psychology of a sort.

Concerning the evidentiary foundation of *The Last Armada*, Ekin assures his readers that he has spent several years researching this story, poring over every relevant line of the main original English and Irish sources; reading a great deal of the extensive Spanish *legajos*, or bundles of correspondence; peering over the shoulders of the well-informed Venetian ambassadors; and tapping into some obscure 1600s histories to gain angles and insights which rarely make their way into mainstream books.... [T]he main sources for this book are the original 17th Century documents. (16–17, 360)

Notwithstanding these assertions, Ekin has not become knowledgeable about the events and personages he treats by examining manuscript collections.<sup>1</sup> In his preface, he disarmingly admits that, by training and methodology, "I am a journalist by profession—not an academic and certainly not a qualified historian" (16). But he is, nonetheless, an excellent historian with an uncanny talent for evoking the personalities of his long dead subjects. He also exhibits a sound macrocosmic grasp of the strategic situation in western Europe during the era of the wars of religion. His book is an informed and inspired history but is not based on close inspection of the original manuscript sources.

Most manuscripts relevant to the topic of Ekin's book may be found in the State Papers, Ireland (SP 63), housed in the National Archives at Kew in Greater London.<sup>2</sup> They comprise both personal and "professional" (bureaucratic) correspondence. The many treasures preserved at Kew include the declared accounts of the Anglo-Irish military establishment in the Exchequer of Receipt and boxes of little explored documents germane to the Nine Years' War, to name but a few.

In 1903 and 1905, editors published "Calendars" of SP 63, arranging the documents chronologically. Military historians have found that documents in the *Calendars* detailing logistical arrangements, such as victualing, receive only terse descriptions with little or no commentary. Further, the editors were more interested in personalities (especially elites) than in dusty administrative records. In short, the materials in the stout volumes of the *Calendars* have been filtered by editors who favored certain types of historical subjects.

To evaluate Ekin's book as historiography, one must ascertain what specific evidence he used in its composition. He mentions consulting various archives and acknowledges assistance he received in doing so, but his endnotes do not cite manuscript particulars—volume or item numbers, foliation, etc. The modern spelling in his direct quotations confirms that he has consulted the *Calendars* rather than

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1. For examples of studies that effectively tap manuscript evidence in writing about sixteenth-century Irish military history, see Stephen G. Ellis, "The Tudors and the Origins of the Modern Irish States: A Standing Army," and Ciaran Brady, "The Captains' Games: Army and Society in Elizabethan Ireland," in Thomas Bartlett and Keith Jeffrey, eds., *A Military History of Ireland* (NY: Cambridge U Pr, 1996) 116–35, 136–59.

2. A precarious location, since the Thames flows nearby and the National Archives lie almost directly under the flight path to Heathrow Airport.

original documents. Summaries prepared by nineteenth- and twentieth-century editors are no substitute for seventeenth-century manuscripts.

Ekin states that the *Calendar of State Papers, Ireland* “has flaws that would ideally require every page to be checked against the originals at Kew” (353), yet, as is typical in the secondary literature on this period, he never seems to pursue that ideal. This even though manuscript collections are rapidly being digitized and published at archival websites. Indeed, microfilm reproductions of the SP 63 documents were made and sold publicly decades ago.

Ekin praises Hiram Morgan’s fascinating essay “Disaster at Kinsale”<sup>3</sup> for its “forensic” approach that “expertly slices through all the layers of myth and misinformation to reveal the underlying truth” (352). But two-thirds of Morgan’s references to SP 63 are simple *Calendar* citations. By contrast, Darren McGettigan’s *Red Hugh O’Donnell and the Nine Years War*<sup>4</sup>—not cited by Ekin—covers Kinsale with due attention to the original manuscript sources. Though other well known scholarly accounts of Kinsale similarly feature manuscript evidence,<sup>5</sup> Ekin oddly claims there are really only three English-language monographs on Kinsale (351). He is a poor judge of the best secondary sources, as well. All this casts doubt on the assessment of historical evidence in *The Last Armada*.

However compelling and colorful we may find Ekin’s narrative, it cannot fill the need for an exhaustively researched study systematically based on manuscripts at Kew, Lambeth Palace, the British Library, the Bodleian Library, and elsewhere (including Spain). This is particularly problematic for Irish history because of the relative paucity of extant manuscripts from the Irish historical actors, which is partially the result of the English conquest. That means scholars must milk every available Irish source, both documentary and archaeological, as well as critically reading the copious English manuscripts.<sup>6</sup>

In conclusion, then, *The Last Armada*, though not a work of “hard” academic research, offers a welcome and gripping narrative that makes their historical heritage accessible to the public that pays for the upkeep of universities, libraries, and archives. In a world descending into illiteracy and present-mindedness, Des Ekin’s stylish rendering of military history is a pleasure to read.

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3. In Hiram Morgan, ed., *The Battle of Kinsale* (Bray, IE: Wordwell, 2004).

4. Portland, OR: Four Courts Pr, 2005.

5. The siege boasts a rich international scholarship, partly because of evidence found in Spanish and papal archives. See, e.g., the twenty-seven articles in *Irlanda y la Monarquía Hispánica: Kinsale 1601–2001: Guerra, política, exilio y religión*, ed. García Hernán et al. (Madrid: Univ. de Alcalá, 2002).

6. Fortunately, Irish military history is enjoying a renaissance in the work of a new cadre of professional archival historians, many of whom study architecture and archaeology and employ quantitative analyses absent in the earlier historiography. See, e.g., James O’Neill and Paul Logue, “The Battle of the Ford of the Biscuits, 7 August 1594,” in Claire Foley and Ronan McHugh, eds., *An Archaeological Survey of County Fermanagh*, vol. 1.2 (Newtownards, NIR: Colourpoint Books, 2014) 913–22, and Eduardo de Mesa, *The Irish in the Spanish Armies in the Seventeenth Century* (Rochester, NY: Boydell Pr, 2014). We may yet see a magnum opus on Kinsale thoroughly grounded in international archival sources.