Contexts, Divisions and Unities: Perspectives from the Later Middle Ages

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THIS volume places emphasis on the need to understand Ireland in wider settings. Since the history of the island was never self-contained, to seek some aboriginal Ireland or people of Ireland, with quintessential characteristics that can be traced down the centuries, would be to pursue a will o’ the wisp. Viewing Ireland in broader contexts does not threaten the integrity of ‘Irish history’. When well done, it enriches the analysis by opening up comparisons and contrasts, and by encouraging careful consideration of what is or is not distinctive about the Irish past. The volume also brings regional divisions and variations to the fore: Ireland was always politically fragmented, and lacked (in practice though not in theory) a settled hierarchy of lordship. From the viking period onwards, the country was also linguistically and culturally multiple. Moreover, different parts of Ireland had different relationships with the world (or worlds) beyond. All this may seem too obvious to need stating; but it contrasts sharply with a historiographical tradition that emphasised what were regarded as age-old and distinctive features of Irish history and culture, and presented external influences (save of course for Christianity) as mostly regrettable, where they were not downright malign. At no stage between 600 and 1550 does Irish history lend itself to a narrative viewed from a single central point, yet contemporaries never doubted that there was a national story, however much they might disagree about its content and its ultimate destination. Tension between the perception of some idealised unity and the complex and shifting distribution of practical power, whether political or cultural, characterises the period.

Settings and Perceptions

Interactions with the wider scene did not, of course, produce neat clusters of changes, or map precisely on to traditional political watersheds. Commercial expansion and the beginnings of monetisation pre-dated the Anglo-Norman
conquests; and the natural and man-made disasters of the fourteenth century occurred at the mid-point of the history of the Lordship of Ireland. So too, ecclesiastical reform and the cultural shifts associated with the ‘twelfth-century renaissance’ were affecting Church and society in Ireland long before 1170; the arrival of the Anglo-Normans complicated the process. Nor do we have to wait until 1170 to find Ireland involved in political structures that stretched beyond the island itself. The viking period had seen the development of a Dublin–York axis; this was followed in the late eleventh century by the establishment of Ua Briain lordship in Dublin, and beyond, on the Isle of Man. But such configurations of power were transient, and often involved extensions of influence outwards from Ireland. What happened from 1170 was different. It permanently removed from Irish control Dublin and north Leinster, which had become the essential hub of wider overlordship; and it made Ireland part of a political system with main centres that lay elsewhere.¹

The regional character of Ireland’s links with the exterior scene is readily apparent, though any brief description is bound to make the regions, which overlapped at the edges, appear too clear-cut. Distinctive dynamics are most obvious in the north-east, where the Solway basin, with the Isle of Man at its heart, together with the narrow waters of the North Channel, linked populations from prehistoric times. In the early Christian period this maritime zone formed a religious highway, with Iona as a crucial bridge. In the viking age it became the centre of an economic and political world extending from Dublin and Anglesey through Man and the Hebrides back to Bergen and Trondheim; a nexus of influence that persisted, though with diminishing force, into the thirteenth century. By that time, the region had been invaded by aristocrats with close, though sometimes difficult, links to the English and Scottish kings, whose direct and indirect grip tightened in the century after 1170. The influence of the two monarchies weakened markedly during the relatively intense Anglo-Scottish wars of 1296–1356, which saw not just the undermining of the earldom of Ulster but also the retreat of Scottish royal influence in the west. This created the space both for the establishment of galloglass dynasties in the north of Ireland, and for the emergence of the Lordship of the Isles, with a penumbra reaching from Antrim to Ross. When monarchical authority by fits and starts reasserted itself from the 1490s onwards, the north of Ireland again became the scene of diplomatic competition between the English and Scottish crowns.

Further south, dynastic marriages and movements of people in both directions in the early period characterised interactions between Leinster and Wales, together with north-west England and Severnside. The viking age added to these relationships a major slave-market at Chester. During the eleventh and early twelfth centuries, Welsh rulers tapped into military support from Ireland, and when times were bad used Dublin as a refuge and springboard for recovery. A branch of the family of Gruffudd ap Cynan (d. 1147), the partly Irish king of north Wales, acquired lands in the Dublin area.\(^2\)

In one sense, the movement of troops and settlers from south Wales into south Leinster and east Munster from 1167 onwards was a redirection of a very old relationship. But the distribution of power was now quite different; the key points on the Irish coast, from Drogheda and Dublin to Wexford and Waterford, had passed into English hands. Henry III and Edward I mobilised troops and materiel from Ireland for their campaigns and castle-building in Wales. Despite rumours of a ‘Celtic alliance’ in the time of the Glyn Dŵr rebellion, the only practical involvement of Ireland took the form of the arrival in 1405 of an expeditionary force led by the justiciar Stephen Scrope, on Anglesey, where it recaptured Beaumaris Castle for Henry IV.

The south-west and west of Ireland also had contact with the wider world. During the 1350s, English agents of the widowed Elizabeth Burgh, lady of Clare, made their way from Kilkenny and Tipperary across the Shannon near Portumna in order to gather what profit they could from Burke cadets and other leading tenants in Galway and Mayo. Two generations later, John Banbury of Limerick (d. 1404) maintained property and other associations in his home city while pursuing a career in commerce and municipal government in Bristol, whose mayor and MP he became.\(^3\) The Atlantic sea-lanes rendered the west particularly open to Continental connections and influences. In 1346 two groups of English nobles returning from Brittany were shipwrecked, one in Connacht and one in Desmond.\(^4\) In 1518 Archduke Ferdinand, brother of the future Emperor Charles V, sailing from Spain to the Low Countries, found himself in Youghal. The prominence of Cork, and increasingly also the participation of smaller south-western ports such as Kinsale and Dingle, in the wine trade with Gascony is a feature of the late medieval period. At the same

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\(^4\) *Clyn*, 236–7.
time, the wealth that came by sea, particularly after the appearance of the herring shoals in the western Atlantic, was exploited by Irish lords, giving their lordships a distinctly maritime flavour. The departure of John Cabot’s first Atlantic expedition from Dursey Head in west Cork in 1497 symbolises the opening of new vistas.

Political fragmentation and multiple connections with Britain and the Continent existed alongside widely disseminated narratives of a coherent national past. Perhaps the most distinctive feature of early Ireland was the existence of a privileged group, the filid, common to the whole island; they were custodians of law and history, and thus (in today’s parlance) the creators and preservers of a national identity. Many were clergy, who ‘switched codes’ readily between Latin and Gaelic. Another unusual feature of Ireland that distinguished it, for instance, from contemporary England was the early emergence of a standardised written vernacular. The nature of the literati changed over time, as the reform of the Church in the eleventh and twelfth centuries gradually detached the more educated clergy. The poets, historians and lawyers of the later Middle Ages were primarily secular, but they remained a privileged class, with access to the whole island, together with its Scottish cultural satellite. This class shaped a body of ideas that had crystallised by 1100; it encapsulated a powerful sense of a common past and future. The eternal verities included the existence of an Irish people, the Gaels (Gáedhil), with an identifiable territory (Ireland, though there was the complication of Scotland), together with a distinctive language, law and history. With this was associated the belief that all newcomers, however long established, remained ‘foreigners’ (Gaill). The contemporary belief, rooted in the Bible, was that since the kingdom of heaven was one, so too an earthly people should have a single ruler. Thus actual fragmentation went hand-in-hand with a potent myth of unity.

These ideas were immutable in their outlines, but in detail infinitely malleable. The eleventh-century compilation the ‘Book of Rights’ contains verses setting forth the supposed duties and obligations of provincial kings in relation to their sub-kings, on the one hand, and in relation to the ‘king of Ireland’, on the other. It opens with material asserting the right of the kings of Cashel to be kings of Ireland, but also contains verses endorsing the

suzerainty of the kings of Tara, and verses implying that other rulers such as the kings of Leinster and of Ulaid might hold the kingship. The tension between ideal and reality is constantly visible; the ideas retained their power even in works whose content seemed to undermine them. The thirteenth-century poet Giolla Brighde Mac Con Midhe in verses addressed to Domnall Mór O’Donnell presented the families of O’Neill and O’Donnell as joint heirs to the kingship of Ireland, to which, he claimed, the southern dynasties had no rights. He urged upon them a duty to cooperate:

Equal their jurisdiction throughout Ireland, equal their tribute and their tax; Equal the weight of their laws and their dominion; exactly equal is the honour due to each of them.
Let them affirm brotherhood, let them have a single king, the two noble houses of Inis Fáil; as their own horses are wont to be under them, to be together is as natural to them.
Whoever of us has been chosen, let us both make him our high king; the goodly assembly of nobles will bring about from our number alternation of the kingship again.

This elaborate attempt to promote unity tells its own tale. The same poet was to lament the defeat of Brian O’Neill at the hands of the Ulster colonists at the Battle of Down in 1260. He forbore to mention the awkward fact that members of the O’Donnell kindred are conspicuously absent from his list of recorded casualties, as they are from that in the Annals of Ulster.

The mid-fourteenth-century Thomond history, Caithréim Thoirdhealbhaigh is particularly revealing in the way it operates at several levels. Written in the tradition of Cocad Gáedel re Gallaibh, which had celebrated (and partly invented) the struggle of Brian Bórama against the vikings, it begins by presenting the narrative within the overarching theme of the conflict between Gáedhil and Gaill: ‘the government of Ireland being now in the year 1172 come into Foreigners’ hands; and regal dignity divorced from all and singular the clans of Milesius the Spaniard’s blood’. A kingship of Ireland hovers in the background, as in the depiction of Brian O’Neill and Tadc O’Brien competing in the gifts they gave each other when they met to form an alliance at Cael Uisce in 1258. But as the story unfolds, it centres on the tussle between two branches of the O’Briens, each reliant upon the backing of ‘foreigners’, respectively the de Burghs and Thomas de Clare and his son Richard. The de Clares become

hate figures, in passages that contrast the ‘nobility’ of the older settlers with such newcomers, who were presumably not fluent in Irish. Thus, at the same time as it testifies to the power of established ideas, the text adds nuance to the distinction between Gael and Foreigner. It also portrays the disintegration of provincial kingship, through the intrusion of outsiders, the segmentation of the O’Brien dynasty, and the narrowing of the gap between over-kings and their vassals – in this instance the MacNamara family.  

The Gaelic historical tradition was counterpointed by another influential narrative, that of the English in Ireland, shaped above all by Gerald of Wales. Gerald’s *Expugnatio Hibernica*, preserving versions of papal documents, told the story of the grant of Ireland to Henry II, associating it with a papally sanctioned reforming mission to root out ‘corruption’ and bad custom. Together with his *Topography of Ireland*, it presented copious evidence of the divergence of the Irish Church and people from twelfth-century metropolitan norms, depicting Irish society as backward and barbarous. It is difficult to exaggerate the importance of these works. They were translated into French, English and Irish, and formed the basis of what was said about Ireland in one of the most widely circulated English histories, the *Polychronicon* of the fourteenth-century Chester monk Ranulph Higden. Works by Gerald in English and Irish were in the library of the Great Earl of Kildare, while his son possessed versions in Latin and English; both owned Higden’s *Polychronicon* in English.

The Giraldian narrative acquired additional layers. Rather as the Normans in England had appropriated Anglo-Saxon saints, the English in Ireland took over Irish saints, a process dramatically recorded in Gerald’s story of John de Courcy’s ‘discovery’ of the bones of Patrick, Brigit and Columba at Down. The sense of English entitlement to Ireland was intensified by such appropriations, which had no necessary connection with a sense of affinity with the Gaelic tradition, any more than the Francophone Henry III’s devotion to Edward the Confessor indicated susceptibility to Anglo-Saxon culture. St Patrick’s Cathedral in Dublin was founded by John Comyn, a royal clerk, the first non-Irish archbishop, as a secular cathedral the canons of which could participate in the administration of the province; its prebends were later colonised by clerks working in the royal administration. Comyn’s successor, Henry le Blund, a Londoner experienced in royal service, was to gain

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8 *Caithréim Thoirdealbháigh*, ii, 1 (quotation); A. Nic Ghiollamhaith, ‘Kings and Vassals in Later Medieval Ireland: The Uí Bhriain and the MicConmara in the Fourteenth Century’, in Barry *et al.* (eds.), *Colony and Frontier in Medieval Ireland*, 201–16.

a reputation as an opponent of the admission of Irish clergy to high office; this did not prevent him from seeking to enhance the status of his see by promoting the canonisation of the last Irish archbishop, Lorcán Ua Tuathail (Laurence O’Toole) (d. 1180). It might almost be said that there came to be two Patricks. They confronted each other at the time of the Bruce invasion. The 1317 Remonstrance sent in the name of Domnall O’Neill to Pope John XXII set forth O’Neill’s rights as heir to a supposedly unbroken line of native kings who ruled Ireland down to the coming of the English. For its authors Patrick symbolised the beginning of a continuous history of Irish spirituality, which had ended only with the arrival of the English.\(^{10}\) A petition to Edward II from ‘the middling people of Ireland’, formulated in Dublin in 1318 in apparent awareness of the Remonstrance, bestowed upon the saint a quite different historical role. The document opens with Patrick: but here he represents the standards from which the Irish Church had later fallen away, until its rescue by the intervention of Henry II. Patrick had become the patron saint of the English in Ireland.\(^{11}\)

The petition hints at a further element in the Anglo-Irish self-image when it portrays Henry II coming to Ireland, not just at the head of an army, but with ‘men of law’. Law, with the rights it conveyed, was central to medieval concepts of national identity, and English law, explicitly extended to Ireland in 1210, became inextricably bound up with the identity of the settler elites. Although there were mechanisms through which English status could be acquired by Irish individuals and families, the underlying presumption was exclusionary: English law and liberties were the possession of those of Anglo-Norman descent. The emergence of a form of patriotism, associated with a sense of place, and accompanied by attachment to the inherited rights of loyal subjects, is neatly summed up in an account of events in the Dublin parliament of 1324, where Arnold le Poer, who was engaged in a bitter dispute with Richard Ledrede the English Franciscan bishop of Ossory, defended Ireland as a ‘land of saints’ while at the same time brandishing Magna Carta.\(^{12}\)

There was, therefore, a widely known and generally accepted narrative that gave English Ireland a firm historical base. But the retreat of

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10 Walter Bower, Scotichronicon, v, 384–403.
government control across the fourteenth century, together with pleas for financial and military help sent to England from the 1350s onwards, made the crown acutely aware of the gap between its theoretical and actual authority in Ireland. This may have encouraged Richard II to require acts of submission in novel form from Gaelic leaders, and to have these undertakings guaranteed by financial bonds to the papacy. The 1395 acts of homage and allegiance provided the English claim to Ireland with additional confirmation; the alleged subsequent violation of these acts by leading Irish lords was cited by the settlers in 1421 as a reason why the king of England should intervene in Ireland again.\textsuperscript{13}

Change and Continuity: After 1170, and before

The rival stories about the Irish past had a deep influence on later perceptions. They helped to direct scholarly activity into two separate channels, an effect heightened by the different character of the Gaelic and non-Gaelic sources, and the special skills required to exploit the former in particular.\textsuperscript{14} They also served to emphasise, and arguably exaggerate, the break around 1170. Matters of continuity and change are necessarily complex, and sometimes deceptive, as discussions of the origins of urban life and structures in Ireland suggest. Important Irish ecclesiastical and royal centres had, needless to say, tended to appear at points that were favourable for communications (by water as much as by land), defence, government or economic activity; so that it would be surprising if the sites of many Anglo-Norman urban foundations did not have earlier histories. There is, however, no doubt that the later royal cities, which were all coastal and all in the southern half of Ireland, were a product of the viking period. It seems likely, too, that forms of communal organisation within them pre-dated the documentation that survives from the late twelfth century onwards. It is understandable that some have argued that the viking intervention marked a more formative phase in Irish history than the Anglo-Norman settlements. Such arguments, however, may underestimate the depth and the geographical extent of Anglo-Norman entrepreneurial activity.\textsuperscript{15}

Although Ireland remained among the less urbanised regions of Western Europe, significant seaport and riverine towns with little earlier history were

\textsuperscript{14} Simms, Medieval Gaelic Sources; Connolly, Medieval Record Sources.
promoted by the Anglo-Normans; the more successful included Youghal, Clonmel, Carrickfergus, Sligo and Athenry. As far afield as Kerry, there were new foundations, such as Dingle, that had a continuing, though scantily documented, history. Even where towns were founded at existing centres, they might be ‘new’, not merely in that they acquired a novel legal status through charters from English kings or aristocrats, but in the fact that they occupied freshly planned sites. This was true, for instance, of Dublin and Cork, and particularly clear in the case of Kilkenny, where William Marshal’s town dwarfed in size an earlier settlement under the lordship of the bishop of Ossory. A similar situation might arise on a smaller scale: for instance, the seigniorial castle-borough of Antrim is accompanied in fourteenth-century records by a settlement described as ‘Irish Antrim’.  

A similar mixture of continuity and change is apparent in the spatial organisation of lordship and settlement. The Anglo-Normans used existing territorial and political divisions when making grants, a practice anticipated by the reforming Church, in its decisions about the territorial outlines of bishoprics and rural deaneries. Just as the potential lordships of the greatest lords were understood in terms of provincial or semi-provincial regnal units, so the Irish tricha cét – the lesser kingdom or tribute district – was often rebranded as the ‘cantred’, and grants were typically expressed in terms of cantreds, half-cantreds, or groups of cantreds.  

There is a clear parallel with the Norman England of the Domesday Book: it rested upon the shires and hundreds of the Anglo-Saxon past; these in places preserved Roman administrative units, which in turn might reflect earlier British tribal districts. But the search for ultimate origins and continuities should not deflect attention from the profound changes that took place after 1170. These were most obvious in the areas of heavy settlement in the four counties around Dublin, where existing boundaries were often redrawn, and in the river valleys and coastal lowlands of south Leinster and east Munster. Here a quite different social structure was developed, with land organised around privileged borough communities and arable farming organised for the market.

Almost more striking is the evidence for remodelling in promising areas further afield. Maurice fitz Gerald, justiciar of Ireland 1232–45, participated in and benefited from the conquest of Connacht by the de Burghs. Among

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17 MacCotter, *Medieval Ireland*.
his acquisitions were ‘the two cantreds of Ofecherath’, an area approximately co-extensive with the bishopric of Kilmacduagh, which he was to hold ‘as Yochen Ohethyn (Eoghan Ó hEidhin) at any time best and most fully held them’, in return for the service of four knights and an annual rent of forty silver marks. A remarkable clutch of surviving documents reveals his organisational energy. He was eager to develop his town of Kilcolgan, and before 1241 arranged an exchange with the bishop of Kilmacduagh, so acquiring land lying between Kilcolgan and the sea, on Galway Bay. At the same time, he obtained from Henry III a licence to hold a weekly market and annual fair at Kilcolgan, together with a grant of free chase and free warren throughout the cantreds. Originally, he had allocated Ó hEidhin a half-cantred north of Kilmacduagh; in 1252 there was further reorganisation, when Ó hEidhin surrendered direct lordship over the area to Maurice, in return for two townlands, eight plough-oxen and forty marks in cash. An extent made in 1289 offers a snapshot that reminds us that men such as Maurice, who appear in the annals as warlike barons, were also acute politicians, knowledgeable in the law, skilled at deploying manpower, with a shrewd eye for landscape and profit. The extensive ‘manor’ of Ardrahan was valued at £95; about 55 per cent of this arose from the lord’s demesnes, and 30 per cent from the rents of his main tenants, many of whom were drawn from settler families of Leinster and Munster, such as Purcell, Hacket, St Aubyn, de Valle and Caunteton. There was a castle at Ardrahan, but the burgess settlement there was valued at roughly half that of Kilcolgan, the more commercially advantageous site that Maurice had identified.

Similar sketches could be made of other outlying patches of colonial enterprise, for instance the coastal lordships of north Antrim and Derry, centred on boroughs such as Coleraine and Portrush, and exploiting the wealth of the seas and of the rivers Bann and Bush, which were developed by the de Lacy and de Burgh earls of Ulster. This area was highly profitable in the 1260s and 1270s, and remained so even in the 1350s. The powerful image of late medieval colonial retreat and decomposition should not lead us to underestimate what happened between 1170 and around 1240. Though medievalists have mostly fought shy of the word, these were ‘plantations’ as radical as anything before 1608, and considerably more widespread than those of the Tudor

19 Red Book of the Earls of Kildare, no. 23; and for what follows, nos. 28, 48, 49, 60 and 67.
20 CDI, 1171–1251, no. 2550.
period. They may not have been part of a government-organised scheme, but they were no less ‘professional’ for that.  

Harmonies and Dissonances

While traditional scholarship has tended to emphasise the differences between Irish and Anglo-Norman society, there were also underlying similarities that made them far from incompatible. For the political historian, dialogue may have been obstructed by the fact that those who wielded power in Ireland were ‘kings’. As the author of the Anglo-Norman verse chronicle of the conquest put it:

in Ireland kings were as numerous
as counts were elsewhere,
but whoever holds Meath and Leinster
and Desmond and Munster
and Connacht and Ulster,
which the six brothers held long ago,
whoever holds these are the chief kings
of Ireland according to the Irish.  

Concentrating on their ‘kingliness’ (or lack, or loss, or levels, of it), can distract attention from aspects of lordship the two societies shared. Both were hierarchical, both had an aristocratic elite that supplied leadership in war and diplomacy, both had rituals of superiority and subordination with generic similarities as well as significant contrasts.

By a paradox familiar in other frontier settings, the military arena, where conflict was most obvious, was also that where accommodations and reciprocal influences can most readily be discerned. The segmentary competition endemic in Irish society enabled the Anglo-Normans to penetrate the regions they entered through alliances with native leaders, and the manpower involved in the establishment (and later the defence) of the Lordship of Ireland was always partly Irish. The challenge of the Anglo-Norman presence, the collapse of old provincial hierarchies, together with access to external manpower and the need this brought to support hired troops, profoundly affected the infrastructure of lordship in Gaelic Ireland.  

23 Deeds of the Normans, 109, lines 2189–96.
24 Simms, From Kings to Warlords; Nicholls, Gaelic and Gaelicized Ireland.
of Irish lordship. Roger Howden tells us that Henry II built a hall in Dublin in the Irish style, possibly with a view to providing a courtly venue where he received the submissions of Irish leaders, much as he was used to receiving fealty from the Welsh. A generation later the sole surviving Irish exchequer Pipe Roll of John’s reign shows the seneschal of Meath, then in the king’s hand, receiving large cattle-tributes from Gaelic leaders; cattle were also redistributed for multiple purposes, including military wages. In 1271, James Audley the justiciar of Ireland, a Cheshire man with experience in war and administration in north Wales, delivered ‘robes, furs and saddles’ to northern Irish leaders coming to the king’s peace after the death of Walter de Burgh. This is one of many echoes of tuarastal, the ceremonial gifts given by an Irish overlord to a submitting vassal in order to express his superiority. In English society, the holding by the king of hostages of his own greater subjects betokened either the collapse of conventional political relations and the onset of tyranny, as under King John, or a state of special emergency, as when hostages were surrendered by magnates of Ireland during the Bruce invasion. In Ireland, by contrast, the holding of hostages was a normal part of the exercise of lordship. Anglo-Norman lords and royal officials both rapidly absorbed the etiquette surrounding hostages (though they sometimes brutally disregarded it), and Dublin Castle together with other royal and seigniorial castles regularly housed them.

Compatibility was not, however, complete. Donnchad Cairprech O’Brien was knighted by King John in 1210, but the next dubbing of an Irish lord for which there is clear evidence is that of Seán O’Byrne [Ó Broin] of Wicklow around 1359. Gaelic lords are conspicuously absent from the frequent accounts contained in the annals of the settlers of the knighting of members of their contingents by justiciars and colonial lords at the outset of military campaigns. Richard II’s knighting of the main Irish provincial lords in 1395 was a departure, widely commented upon in English circles. That it had an impact on the recipients is suggested by a letter to the king in which Niall Óc O’Neill entitled himself ‘knight by your creation’.

Both societies were violent, though the nature of the violence changed over time, and the conventions governing it might differ. Slavery became

26 IPR 14 John, 36–9, 48–9, 62–3, 66–7.
27 CDI, 1252–1284, no. 890.
rare in Ireland as elsewhere in Western Europe by around 1100, but savagery remained. Both societies were familiar with the pious warrior. John de Courcy was a prolific monastic patron. Around 1183 he endowed his Benedictine foundation of St Patrick’s at Down with ‘the tenth cow and every tenth animal from all my raids and from all my acquisitions and purchases of animals eastwards from the water of the Ards … for the salvation of my soul and that of my mother, and for the souls of my ancestors and descendants, and for the souls of those who gave me counsel and help to conquer Ulster’. His extensive ecclesiastical patronage, like that of kings and nobles elsewhere in Europe, was about marking out his territory and excluding rivals as well as saving his soul. 30 Irish contemporaries behaved similarly. Domnall Mór Ua Briain, the king of Limerick, was at the same period founding Cistercian houses, such as Holycross and Kilcooly in Tipperary, probably to assert his influence on the eastern outskirts of his kingdom in an area that was already being occupied by the Anglo-Normans. Likewise, the lineaments of the Leinster kingdom of Diarmait Mac Murchada and the Airgialla kingdom of Donnchad Ua Cerbaill (d. 1168) can be mapped partly by the religious houses they patronised. 31

The portrayal by twentieth-century scholars of Diarmait MacMurchada as a ‘modernising’ promoter of religious reform may not be incompatible with Gerald of Wales’s depiction of him as a barbaric warrior in the old heroic mode, picking up the heads of his fallen enemies in order to deface them (literally) with his teeth. His delight in enemy heads is confirmed by the verse-chronicle; and Gerald’s ghoulish trope recurs in Caithrém Thoirdhealbhaigh, which depicts handless, dying men on the battlefield trying to behead their half-dead enemies with their teeth: ‘to “nose-chew” them’. 12 The settlers also hunted heads. The conventionally stylised municipal seal of the city of Dublin shows the heads of outlaws in niches above the city gate. Middle English verses celebrating Peter Bermingham’s slaughter of the leaders of the O’Connor Faly family of Offaly in 1305 make sport of the leather hoods in which (it seems) their heads were delivered to the Dublin authorities. Of the one poor wretch whose life was spared, the poet remarks ‘he went unhooded

32 Expugnatio, 36–7; Deeds of the Normans, 72–3, lines 777–83; Caithrém Thoirdhealbhaigh, ii, 103.
home’. By the mid-fourteenth century the grim state rituals attendant on treason had appeared in Ireland. In 1345 the steward of the earl of Desmond, who had held Castle Island against crown forces, was drawn, hanged, beheaded, disembowelled and quartered; others in the garrison were merely drawn at the horse’s tail, and hanged. Danger of this extreme punishment might extend to Irish leaders who had been unwise enough to accept the king’s lordship in return for an exchequer stipend, and then failed to adhere to their agreements: two MacMurrough kings were ’drawn by the Galls’ in 1354 and in 1369. In 1468 state violence, at the hands of that well-educated harbinger of the Renaissance, John Tiptoft, earl of Worcester, was to claim the life of his predecessor as chief governor of Ireland, Thomas earl of Desmond.

The Church had never in practice been immune from violence, and after 1170 episodes of brutality were not the preserve of one nation. In 1323, we hear that Philip Talon and twenty-six others ‘were killed by Edmund Butler, rector of Tullow [County Carlow], and the Cauntetons, who dragged them from the church; and they burnt the church of St Mullins with men, women and children and the relics of St Moling’. In 1332, ‘the Irish of Leinster raided the English and burned churches; and in the church of Freynestown [County Wicklow] they burned about eighty men and women; and a certain chaplain of the church, dressed in sacred vestments, wished to leave carrying the Host, but they drove him back with their spears and burned him in that church with the rest of them’. More routine, especially in the Irish areas, was the intrusion by lords, their armed retinues and their herds into church estates. Invasion of the wealth of the Church was not peculiar to Irish society, but it took distinctive forms. In 1297 the English and French kings were at loggerheads with Pope Boniface VIII over the right of secular rulers to tax the clergy, something Boniface condemned in the bull Clericis laicos. In Ireland, the bull was forcefully wielded by Nicholas Mac Máel Ísu, the archbishop of Armagh, but against the Gaelic lords of southern Ulster, among whose extortions was the billeting of galloglasses (Scotici) on the tenants of church estates.

At first glance, the Church can seem more clearly divided along national lines than lay society. As Gerald of Wales’s writings show, nations and national

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35 Clyn, 176–7; Chartul. St Mary’s, Dublin, ii, 376.
36 Smith, Colonisation and Conquest in Medieval Ireland, 84, 90–1.
characteristics were part of the stock-in-trade of the educated clergy. Gerald himself had twice been denied the bishopric of St David’s on account – he believed – of the fact that by ancestry he was one-quarter Welsh. Arguments citing national bias were not slow to appear in Ireland. The disputed election to the see of Armagh in 1202, for instance, led Pope Innocent III to inform his legate, John of Salerno, ‘that a great dispute had arisen out of that election between the Irish and the English, in which the English firmly asserted that they were wholly unwilling that any Irishman should be their archbishop; and often in [the legate’s] presence certain English and Irish claimed that it would be better for that church itself and for the peace of the whole land if an Englishman were appointed to the church of Armagh’. The reference to ‘certain English and Irish’ opposing the election of the Irish candidate should make us pause: the Irish abbot of Mellifont, for one, was of the ‘English’ party. The dispute may have owed less to national animosities than to the fact that the Irish candidate concerned, Echdonn, abbot of Bangor, came from within the orbit of John de Courcy, lord of Ulster, whom the king distrusted. John eventually acquiesced in the appointment of Echdonn; not only that, he later countenanced his appointment as suffragan bishop of Exeter when the English Church was under interdict. Whatever mixture of motives lay behind the quarrel, the parties were sufficiently conscious of national distinctions to present events as driven by them, and to expect their interpretations to be believed by outsiders.

Echdonn’s service as a suffragan in England, which can be paralleled in the careers of other Irish bishops, shows the inadequacy of a simple ‘two nations’ approach, particularly in the case of the higher clergy. The demands of the reforming Church created alliances and fissures that cut across the distinction between Irish and English. Communication and collaboration between Irish and English clergy had existed for decades before 1170. Everywhere in Europe the moral prescriptions of reformers were liable to collide with ingrained social habits and human frailties; but the distance between ideal and mundane reality may have seemed wider in Ireland (and Wales) than elsewhere in the West because of the existence of alternative moral codes embodied in written laws. Archbishop Nicholas Mac Máel Ísu, for instance, like several of his successors at Armagh, both Irish and English, was hostile to the

38 Pontificia Hibernica, i, no. 52, at p. 118.
bardic class, the purveyors of Irish secular culture. He also obtained grants of English law for kinsmen who were taking up residence in County Louth. His clashes with Edward I and the earls of Ulster over the rights of his church were not very different from those between ecclesiastical and secular authorities elsewhere in Europe. A century later, Archbishop John Colton was a crucial link in the communications between Richard II and the Gaelic lords of the north. Colton was an Englishman, once head of a Cambridge college and a former chancellor and chief governor of Ireland. In 1397 we glimpse him travelling west of the Bann with a clerical and lay household (the former mostly Irish, the latter mostly Anglo-Irish) to Ardstraw and Derry, receiving hospitality and supplies, in the form of grain as well as animal products, from Irish church tenants. Churchmen had the skills to theorise about nations and nationality, and to exploit such questions when it suited them. But they were also skilled at crossing ‘thresholds’ of all sorts. Nor did they omit to preach peace among nations, as when Archbishop Richard Fitz Ralph of Armagh famously denounced the violence and prejudice of his Anglo-Irish audience in a sermon at Drogheda in 1349. In Ireland, the ecclesiastical courts, unlike those of the king, were fully open to both nations.

In Gaelic and Anglo-Norman society, as in pre-modern Europe generally, the marriages of high-born women signified alliances or reconciliations between their families. Just as young viking males found brides in Ireland, so too young military men arriving in Leinster and Munster in the early stages of the Anglo-Norman conquest are likely to have taken Irish wives and concubines, who – together with Irish wet-nurses – will have familiarised children with Gaelic. Evidence of marriages below the topmost level of society is scarce for the late twelfth and thirteenth centuries, but these must have been common, especially beyond the core settlement areas. We know, for instance, that three daughters of Diarmait MacCarthy (? d. 1234) married men named Prendergast, Kaninges and Cosyn. Examples of marriages between settler women and Irish men (possibly a better gauge of assimilation) are not easy to find in the thirteenth century, though Aed Buide O’Neill (d. 1286), a protégé of the earls of Ulster, married a Nangle woman. Except in cases such as the

Mac Gilla mo Cholmóc family of south Dublin, who were themselves being absorbed into colonial society, such marriages may have been more problematical. Under English law, in the absence of sons, daughters shared the inheritance, taking precedence of their fathers’ brothers or remoter male kin. Given high rates of infant mortality, and the greater difficulty of rearing males, all women were potential heiresses, who might carry the inheritance outside the cultural group. Several great lords of the first generation besides Strongbow took Irish wives. These marriages have tended to be viewed through the lens of ‘Gaelicisation’, but that may be misleading. Aífe, daughter of Diarmait Mac Murchada, the wife of Strongbow, and Isabel their heiress who carried their inheritance in Ireland, Britain and Normandy to her husband William Marshal, seem to have been absorbed into Anglo-Norman society.43

After the early stages of conquest, when incoming lords sought deals with Irish provincial rulers whose networks they were entering and hoping to take over, the heads of leading families, at least in eastern Ireland, normally sought wives within colonial society, or from England. Three marriages of heads of branches of the Bermingham family make the point. In his youth John Bermingham, earl of Louth (d. 1329), had been betrothed to Matilda, one of the daughters of Richard de Burgh, earl of Ulster. This arrangement had been disrupted by the arrival of agents of the earl of Gloucester, Edward II’s nephew, seeking a wife for their master. They had selected Matilda as the fairest, leaving Bermingham to console himself with Avelina, one of her sisters.44 John’s mother, the wife of Peter Bermingham, appears in the Annals of Inisfallen as a veritable Lady Macbeth: ‘the foreign woman from England … used to give warning from the top of the castle of any who went into hiding, so that many were slain as a result of those warnings’. She was indeed from England, a daughter of William d’Oddingseles, a knight of Edward I who had a career in royal service in Ireland, culminating in a six-month stint as justiciar in 1294–5. By contrast the Berminghams’ Connacht kinsman, Sir Richard (d. 1322), the victor of the Battle of Athenry, left a widow named in the record sources as ‘Finwola’.45

Until the mid-fourteenth century, an Irish mother seems not to have been a bar to inheritance, though the 1317 Remonstrance complains that Irish widows of Englishmen might face obstruction in receiving their dower. Subjecting

44 CPL, 1305–42, 209.
45 AI, 394–5; Frame, English Lordship, 50n.
such marriages to licensing was first proposed by Dublin ministers to Edward III in 1347. The king agreed ‘that no marriage take place in the future between English and Irish without special permission of the king or the justiciar’.  

This was the gist of what was finally enacted in the 1366 Statute of Kilkenny. It seems to reflect, on the one hand, the neuroses of a once-expanding colony which now felt under threat; and on the other the increasing identification in the wider English world of political loyalty with the English language (which included the use of Latin and French for formal purposes) and a set of English cultural markers. Licences permitting marriages and other forms of contact covered by the Statute were subsequently issued, and while most of these relate to the diminishing areas where the king’s writ routinely ran, there are some politically significant cases from further afield. In 1388, for instance, James, a future earl of Desmond (d. 1463) but then a younger son, was permitted to be fostered with Conchobar O’Brien, brother of Brian O’Brien of Thomond.

It may be that considerations of ethnicity were relevant and clear-cut only at an upper social level, or when an inheritance fell into dispute, and by the later fifteenth century marriages across the national divide were common, even within the counties around Dublin. Elsewhere, the spread among the well-born of extended lineage structures, together with the absence of interference by central government, served to reduce, and in the west of Ireland abolish, the differences in custom between Irish and English society. In culturally transitional areas, such as parts of south Leinster and Munster, landed inheritance and (in effect) family headship might be determined by the English procedure of entail, used to settle property on a sequence of male kin, thus barring female succession. Further afield, Irish customs for selecting the kin-head obtained. Women were thus less likely to become heiresses. In the north and west of Ireland, an aristocracy, still nationally differentiated by surname, inhabited a single society where serial marriage was common, with the migrations of high-born women often reflecting shifts in regional politics. The canonical norms of Christian marriage were ignored rather than rejected, as grants of dispensation make clear: unions were regularised when it became advisable to do so, sometimes on the basis of elaborate fictions.

46 G. J. Hand, English Law in Ireland, 1290–1324 (Cambridge University Press, 1967), 204–5; Sayles, Affairs, 189.
47 CIRCLE: PR 12 Ric II, no. 88.
Widespread intermarriage, fosterage and other forms of cultural interaction, spread across many generations, can make the persistence of national distinctions in the sources seem puzzlingly out of step with social actualities. The most important influence preserving the separate nations was the belief, rooted in the Old Testament, that identity was transmitted patrilineally. This was as true in the later Middle Ages as in the viking period, and was particularly relevant in the Gaelic world where, as in Wales, genealogical learning was a major industry. It did not mean that the mother’s identity was unimportant: in both English and Irish Ireland she might confer wealth and standing, though in different forms. In the Irish aristocratic world of serial marriage and legally sanctioned concubinage, the prospects of a son born to a noble mother with important political connections were normally superior to those of the child of a woman of lesser status.

Variations of Lordship: Towards the Sixteenth Century

Enduring images of late medieval Ireland, which derive their force and longevity from the contrasting nature and geographical distribution of the written evidence, revolve, on the one hand, around what Edmund Curtis dubbed ‘the failure of the first conquest’, and on the other, the ‘Gaelic resurgence’ or ‘recovery’, which by the fifteenth century held sway over the greater part of the island.50 Both images should be viewed with caution. The rhetoric of colonial decline is heavily impregnated with the jeremiads of royal ministers in Dublin. ‘Gaelic resurgence’ accurately reflects the predominance of the Irish language across most of Ireland, and its strong presence even within the Pale. But we should beware of a sort of mission-creep, in which the ethnic epithet becomes attached to every aspect of human society, from warfare to agriculture. Over-emphasis on ‘Gaelicisation’ as an explanation for change may lead the unwary to conclude that in Ireland, like nowhere else on earth, cultural influences flowed in one direction only.

Single-minded reliance on ‘Gaelicisation’ as an explanatory tool, for instance, leaves us unequal to the task of comprehending the career and outlook of individuals such as James Butler, fourth earl of Ormond (d. 1452). Ormond was a skilled overlord of Irish leaders and an enthusiastic recipient of Gaelic praise-poetry. He can be presented as ‘strongly Gaelicised’; he was

implicitly denounced in those terms by the Talbot faction, whose members alleged in 1441 that he had ‘made and ordained Irishmen (grooms and pages of his household) knights of the shire’. Yet this is the same earl who was from his youth upwards closely associated with Henry V and his brothers, who served in France, spent long periods in England (where he established his son, the future earl of Wiltshire), maintained his family’s association with Canterbury, and on several occasions sought to encourage increased English intervention in Ireland. It is tempting to view him as exemplifying the useful distinction that has been proposed between cultural Gaelicisation and political loyalty. But that concept may fit the lesser English lineages better than it does their superiors: Ormond and his like were both culturally and politically versatile.

Investigation of the remodelling of the regional and local polities has been one of the more notable developments in the historiography of Ireland during the last generation and a half. We are now familiar with castle-dwelling (and castle-building) lords who imposed a wide range of exactions on their subjects. These mulcts, often lumped together by English observers as ‘coign and livery’, were sometimes described by terms traceable in early Irish law. But in their late medieval form, they arose from more recent needs, particularly that to support hired troops, from Anglo-Norman mercenaries in the early thirteenth century to household kerns and galloglass bands at a later period. Lordship in Ireland, like that on the Anglo-Scottish borders – another landscape of towers and vulnerable herds − remained predatory. A surviving elegy for Tadc O’Carroll, a minor figure based in Offaly, devotes twenty-seven of its fifty-nine verses to his cattle-raids, the geographical range of which (possibly expanded by service on campaigns with the earl of Ormond) were a confirmation of his status. Tadc, like many men of gentle birth in south-central Ireland, was buried at Holycross Abbey in Tipperary, in the fifteenth century one of the chief ornaments of the Butler sphere. The military activity highlighted by the poets and annalists was not imaginary but was, no doubt, spasmodic. Disputes within and among leading families were negotiated in part by brehons, employed by Anglo-Irish as well as Irish; they were learned in Irish law, but often familiar also with canon, civil and common law and eclectic in the way they reached their judgements. The mixed inheritance is

symbolised by an entry in the Annals of Connacht for 1419, which tells of the death of Donnchad O’Connor, a grandson of Domnall O’Connor, lord of Sligo, who was fatally wounded ‘from a fall on the flagstone in front of Sligo castle, on the near side of the river, at the southern end of the bridge, at the cavalry sports’. Sligo, once developed by Maurice fitz Gerald, was on the way to becoming a prosperous Atlantic seaport town. We are not told whether Richard II was struck by the irony of receiving a letter from Toirdelbach O’Connor Donn dated at Roscommon, the castle-town on which his ancestor, Edward I, had expended a small fortune, which was now a power-centre for control of which Irish dynasts competed.  

In south-east Ireland we encounter, by contrast, what can look like a replication across the sea of English political society. Its leadership – embracing royal ministers (some born in England, some in Ireland), nobles, greater gentry (some with legal training), prosperous townsmen, and higher clergy – was politically alert and astute. The appeal to Edward III from a great council at Kilkenny in 1360, which preceded the sending of Lionel of Antwerp to Ireland in the following year, employed the most up-to-date language at a time when addresses to the king were becoming more deferential and ornate. Edward was variously addressed as ‘your most high lordship’, ‘your highness’, ‘noble and gracious prince’, ‘your excellent lordship’ and ‘your majesty’ – an early example of a new-fangled style that was to become synonymous with kingship. It was borne to Westminster by carefully chosen messengers. They included knightly representatives of the commons, among them John Lombard, who had served as sheriff and mayor of Cork: the petition was thus shown to be rooted in the wider community of the Lordship. As in England, the period saw the crystallising both of a parliamentary peerage and of a gentry class that used the fashionable English marks of social stratification, ‘knight’, ‘esquire’ and ‘gentleman’. Like John Lombard, such men often held urban as well as rural property, and overlapped with the mercantile elite.

We do not have to venture far from the heartlands of crown authority to find different structures and styles. In 1350 we encounter the settler Harold lineage of south Dublin choosing Walter Harold as its head, in the same manner as the chief of the O’Byrne family of Wicklow. As recently as 1328 its

54 AC, 448–9; Curtis, Richard II, 113–14.
57 Smith, Crisis and Survival, chs. 6, 7.
leading figure, Peter Harold, had used the court of common pleas to record an elaborate property settlement on the occasion of the marriage of his son to the daughter of a Dublin burgess, John Stakepoll. The parliament rolls of the mid-fifteenth century contain lists of well-born miscreants on the margins of Counties Kildare and Meath. ‘Christopher Cruys, gentleman’ rubs shoulders with ‘Walter Cruys, idleman’, and we meet ‘Thomas Bermingham of Carbury, brother to John Bermingham, chief of his lineage, gentleman’. Such composite addresses symbolise a society best described as ‘hybrid’. Moreover, it has recently been shown that the four counties of the future Pale had absorbed a significant Irish-speaking population from the surrounding lordships; such entrants, like the kinsmen of Archbishop Mac Mael Ísu several generations earlier, aimed, not at subversion, but at bettering themselves.

From 1399, just after the departure of Richard II, there survives a report to England from ministers in Dublin, in which they itemised the problems of governance in Ireland as they saw them. As well as the incursions of the Irish, they picked out the profusion of liberty jurisdictions that (in theory) diminished the revenues of the crown; grants made on the collective rents of cities and other revenues, which had the same effect; the power and disobedience of the ‘English lineages’ (les nacions Engleis), who disrupted the peace, colluded with the Irish and were in reality no better than ‘sturdy robbers’ (fortz larons); and the fees and annuities given to Irish as well as English, which were beggaring the exchequer. The standpoint of the authors tended to be shared by a past generation of historians, who prioritised government records and had an aversion to decentralised power, especially in the hands of aristocrats of the age of ‘bastard feudalism’. But the report might equally be read as an attack on many of the social bonds and mechanisms of devolution that gave the Lordship of Ireland what stability it possessed. Practices in Ireland have parallels in Scotland, where historians have been readier to see them as constituent parts of a polity rather than agents of its dissolution. It is revealing that in the 1350s

61 PKCI, 261–9.
Thomas Rokeby, a governor with experience of administration in northern England and occupied southern Scotland, had understood the need to use pardons as a means of keeping English marchers on side, and to award stipends to Irish lords.63

There may be something to be said for regarding late medieval Ireland, not as a ‘failed state’, or as the scene of existential conflict between those seductive abstractions ‘the two nations’, or ‘two cultures’, but rather as a fragmented polity, where the absence of a single paramount power and a single code of law demanded inventiveness. The country was a laboratory of lordship, as authorities of various sorts sought to strengthen, or indeed establish, effective political and jurisdictional hierarchies, often employing mixed customs. The result was no doubt often oppressive: it seems probable that the building of castles and towers, ecclesiastical and lay, involved something akin to forced labour. But such hierarchies also provided shelter within which individuals, kins and communities could survive, and sometimes thrive.64

Ireland in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries is notable for what might be described as forms of ‘bridging’ lordship, with generic similarities, visible in the activities of Anglo-Irish earls, royal government and ecclesiastical authorities alike. The best-known examples are the surviving written contracts between the earls of Ormond and Kildare and lesser lords, both Gaelic and Anglo-Irish, within their orbits. Characteristically, these involved variations on a set of familiar themes: surrender of hostages; performance of military service; the duty to discipline followers and keep military bands off the backs of neighbouring Englishry; compensation for damages inflicted; and extradition of offenders to the superior lord’s justice. Occasionally, there are explicit references to Irish law as when, in 1400, an agreement between the third earl of Ormond and Geoffrey O’Brennan [Ó Braonáin] stipulated that proven trespasses against the earl’s people or any of the English of County Kilkenny should incur double compensation to the earl ‘which is known in Irish as *keyn et ad keyn*’.65 Deeds of this type may often have sought to document, and so strengthen, long-established patterns of interaction. They show, in the words of J. A. Watt (consciously adopting the vocabulary used by Orpen), that ‘tribalism and feudalism have effortlessly coalesced’.66

65 COD, ii, no. 347 (2).
of the March’, denounced in mid-fourteenth-century legislation, was really a codification of the practical.

In like manner, ministers of the crown forged links with Anglo-Irish and Irish leaders which formed a set of conventions operating alongside the usual – and frequently ineffectual – mechanisms of English law and administration. Stipends were paid to Irish leaders in Leinster in return for defined services akin to those mentioned above. In 1370 Sir William Windsor made an agreement with MacNamara, who had occupied the city of Limerick after its brief capture by O’Brien. Claims by the English for future damages, Windsor accepted, would be dealt with ‘according to the practice and custom of the Thomond region, that practice being called and named Koynconhogs’. The reference is to cin confocuis or kin responsibility, a concept alien to English law (which emphasised individual and neighbourhood responsibility for misdeeds), but one that had figured in the earliest surviving legislation of the Irish parliament (1278), in relation to dealings with the Irish. The description of MacNamara as ‘chieftain of his lineage’ (sue nacionis capitaneus) reflects the crown’s practice, developed over the fourteenth century, of engaging with and working through lineage structures among both the Irish and the settlers. In relation to the greater Irish lords, recognition came additionally to be expressed through the employment of the family name as a title. In 1375 William Windsor had sought to replace Brian Sreamhach O’Brien of Thomond with his more pliant uncle, Toirdelbach Maol. Toirdelbach’s plaintive description of his failure in the role is preserved in the record of a petition heard in parliament at Castledermot in 1378. He had been ‘appointed chieftain of his lineage, that is to say made “O’Brien of Thomond”, by royal authority’, only to be driven out, for want of the aid the king had promised him, by ‘the former “O’Brien”’, Brian Sreamhach.

The search for structure and hierarchy comes into particularly clear focus in the strategies adopted by the archbishops of Armagh to identify and legitimate secular powers through whom they might work. In 1427 Archbishop John Swayne urged Art Magennis [Mág Aonghusa] ‘chieftain of his lineage’ to compel Ross Magennis and Colum MacCartan [Mac Artáin] ‘chieftain of Kinelarty’ to restore cattle that Adam Oranga, a canon of Dromore, insisted they had stolen. Swayne was prepared to gloss over Adam’s allegation of Art’s complicity in the theft:

The archbishop does not believe that such things, though committed by said Art’s subjects, are, or have been perpetrated against ecclesiastical liberty by

69 Parls. & Councils, no. 54.
Art’s authority or command ... He therefore exhorts said Art to compel his subjects, if guilty, to make condign satisfaction, lest on further complaint of Adam, the archbishop have cause of proceeding against Art, the aforesaid being true.\textsuperscript{70}

Not for nothing had the archbishop cut his diplomatic teeth at the Roman curia in the period of the Council of Constance.\textsuperscript{71} Endorsement of Gaelic leadership reached its peak in the attendance of Archbishop Mey at the inauguration of Henry Ó Néill in 1455, when various vassal lords ‘and the successor of St Patrick went with him to Tulach-óg and he was made king there by them honourably by the will of God and men’. In Armagh diplomatic Henry remained, not a king, but ‘chieftain of his lineage’, though the addition of the word \textit{principalis} may hint at his exceptional position.\textsuperscript{72}

The distribution of power in Ireland had shifted markedly since the time of Edward I. While we should not exaggerate the range and regularity of Edwardian government, much less of Ireland was now administered regularly from Dublin, allowing new alliances to be made among leading Gaelic families. In 1250 or even 1350 contact between the native lords of Donegal and Offaly barely existed, but by 1423 it was possible for Niall Garbh O’Donnell to marry a daughter of An Calbach O’Connor Faly.\textsuperscript{73} Anyone familiar with the period 1250–1350 who reads the Irish annals of the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries will be struck by the freedom of movement enjoyed by major lords, both Irish and Anglo-Irish; the power of northern leaders such as O’Neill and O’Donnell and their direct interactions, not just with the Dublin government but at times with the English and Scottish courts; and the geographical range of military campaigns conducted by the Kildare earls as chief governors, which in the early 1500s included Antrim, Tyrone, Donegal and Galway. A convincing case has been made for some recovery of Dublin’s jurisdiction and collecting-power in the late fifteenth century.\textsuperscript{74}

But crown authority was more dependent on personal networks and charisma than it had been in the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries. The retreat of the ‘administrative model’ of rule in favour of alliances and

\textsuperscript{70} Reg. Swayne, 58.
\textsuperscript{74} Ellis, \textit{Ireland in the Age of the Tudors}, chs. 4, 5.
diplomacy is illustrated by the marriage around 1480 of Eleanor FitzGerald, sister of the Great Earl of Kildare, to Conn son of Henry O’Neill, and the fostering, twenty years later, of one of Kildare’s sons with Aed Ruad O’Donnell, who collected young Henry fitz Gerald during a visit to the Galltacht (north Leinster).  

Should we, then, dismiss the formal distinctions between Irish and English as an irrelevant legal fiction? A contrast between Ireland and Wales may suggest why it would be unwise to do so. There were, of course, many straightforward reasons why the Tudors found Wales easier than Ireland to ‘reduce to obedience’ and absorb: it was smaller and closer to hand; large areas were in the hands of noble families based in England; there was not the complication of a frontier with Scotland. But the history of two late medieval contemporaries, both at times seen as prime enemies of the English crown, suggests an additional consideration. The careers of Art MacMurrough Kavanagh [Mac Murchadh Caomhánach] (d. 1416) and Owain Glyn Dŵr (d. c.1415–16) were pursued relatively few nautical miles apart, and both had more than one dimension. Art presented himself to the Irish as ‘king of Leinster’. A praise-poem addressed to him celebrates Leinster as a realm of gold, and presents it at maximum extent, with references to Tara, the Hill of Allen, Dublin, and the Boyne as well as the Barrow, a geography that harks back to the time of his ancestor Diarmait mac Máel na mBó (d. 1072).  

Owain also attracted the attention of the bards, who clothed him in myth and prophecy, celebrating his blood-right as a scion of the royal dynasties of Powys and Deheubarth. But the difference between the worlds in which these men moved is striking. Art demanded his annual fee as ‘chieftain of his lineage’ from the Dublin government; he sought recognition of his marriage to Elizabeth la Veel, heiress of the Kildare barony of Norragh; he blackmailed the towns of south Leinster, but also, as a great cattle-baron, traded through them; in 1415 he sent the abbot of Duiske, a doctor of laws, as his emissary to Henry V. Glyn Dŵr’s other persona reveals the additional opportunities that were available in Wales. His father, the product of a ‘mixed marriage’, had been steward of the rich lordship of Oswestry, which belonged to the Fitzalan earls of Arundel; Owain himself served in the earl’s retinue in Scotland in 1385. He married the daughter of Sir David Hanmer, a regular on judicial commissions in Wales; he may even, like his Hanmer brother-in-law, have studied law at the Inns of

75 AU, iii, 438–9.  
Court at Westminster. He belonged, that is, to a culturally versatile Welsh squirearchy, whose members were used to building careers amid the more flexible legal and administrative systems that had developed not just in the marcher lordships but also in the royal lands. The principality was set up after 1282, when Edward I was sufficiently interested, and the English state sufficiently sophisticated, to distinguish between ‘acceptable’ and ‘unacceptable’ aspects of Welsh custom, and to sanction the continuation of the former.78

Nothing of the sort was ever attempted in Ireland, which had been occupied just as English common law was taking shape.79 From the time of John, the legal distinctions between newcomers and natives grew increasingly sharp. Legal distinctions remained sufficiently real to inhibit the co-option of junior members of Irish aristocratic families into the office-holding elite of the Lordship of Ireland: there were no Irish sheriffs or keepers of the peace, let alone Irishmen in central government. Ireland thus lacked the partially assimilated gentry class that helped to facilitate the fuller incorporation of Wales into the English polity. Nor, despite the parchment schemes of Richard II, were English kings ever sufficiently authoritative and present to provide a courtly environment into which the topmost levels of Gaelic society might have been drawn, as the Scottish court and household had provided a venue where lords from diverse cultural backgrounds were woven into a single polity with a single law of property. The need for such a development, at a period when major Irish lords were doing deals on equal terms with Anglo-Irish earls and developing diplomatic ties with Scotland and the Continent, was manifest. It is implicit, for instance, in Edward IV’s direct dealings with Henry O’Neill, and in Henry VIII’s knighting in 1511 of Aed Dub O’Donnell. Aed, who was returning from a pilgrimage to Rome, ‘got large donatives from the king of the Saxons; for not often did anyone that left Ireland receive an equal amount of honour as he got from the king’.80 A decade later, Henry was to send the insignia of knighthood to Conn Bacach Ó Néill. But on a long view, the policy of ‘surrender and regrant’ was planted out on inadequately fertilised ground.

What changed in the sixteenth century was not so much the capacity of the English state: Edward I put larger armies in the field than any Tudor monarch; and he and his successors down to the 1440s projected their power on

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79 Frame, ‘Ireland after 1169’.
the Continent far beyond anything Henry VIII could contemplate. Nor was there, yet, an increased capacity to move people about and organise settlements. But the contexts had shifted. Royal advisors in the time of Henry VIII were even less tolerant than those of Edward’s day of administrative, legal and cultural diversity. Ireland epitomised that diversity, with its plethora of units of power, its mixed customs, and the bewildering palimpsest, in which lords with English surnames might be transmitters of Irish learning, while those with Gaelic surnames presided over lordship structures that had absorbed features of the Anglo-Norman world. This mattered the more because Ireland now typified the vulnerability of the Tudor regime. There had been worries about security in the past, as when King John’s baronial enemies, who possessed Irish estates, had dealings with Philip II of France. But the only serious threat from outside had been the Bruce invasion. The instability of the English crown during the Wars of the Roses changed all that. During Henry VII’s reign the Yorkist pretender, Perkin Warbeck, found backing both in Scotland and from Continental powers.

Such insecurities were increased by the Reformation. Both the twelfth-century and the sixteenth-century phase of English conquest in Ireland had a religious dimension. But their political implications could not have been more different. In 1172 Henry II, trying to recover his reputation after the murder of Thomas Becket, presented himself as a champion of Church reform, and successfully advertised his work to Pope Alexander III. From the 1530s the English crown was not an ally of reform, but its driver. The breach with Rome made Ireland a more obvious target for continental powers, and a more vulnerable one, since it complicated questions of loyalty for the Anglo-Irish elites. It can be argued that ancestry and the sense of a shared past was by 1500 a more significant element of the identity of the English of Ireland than the English language and other cultural features, which were more liable to erosion.  

Thus the second English conquest both built upon, and challenged, the foundations of the first.