JANE OHLMEYER
MAKING EMPIRE
IRELAND, IMPERIALISM, & THE EARLY MODERN WORLD
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JANE OHLMeyer

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Dedicated to the memories of
Aidan Clarke
Lindy Guinness, Lady Dufferin
Margaret MacCurtain
Hamish Scott
Empire and imperial frameworks, policies, practices, and cultures have shaped the history of the world for the last two millennia. It is nation states that are the ‘blip on the historical horizon’ even if states, societies, and monarchies had long existed within empires. This book re-examines empire as process—and Ireland’s role in it—through the lens of early modernity. It covers the two hundred years between the mid-sixteenth century and the mid-eighteenth century that equate roughly to the timespan of the ‘First English Empire’ in the early modern period (c.1550–c.1770s).

And, it is an English, rather than British, empire. After 1707 and the political union between England and Scotland, the Scots participated as equals (at least on paper) in colonial activity. However, as John MacKenzie has argued, this did not make the empire ‘British’. That said, colonial initiatives in Ireland, the Atlantic, and Asia did involve peoples from all four nations that comprised the Stuart multiple monarchy. The First English Empire was, as Ken MacMillan notes, ‘ideologically principled’ with a ‘broadly consistent (if generally un-intrusive) system of imperial governance’. It was also a global empire intent on economic exploitation. By the 1660s it included Tangier in the Mediterranean, Bombay and other holdings in India, the island of St. Helena in the south Atlantic, islands in the Caribbean, territories along the east coast of America stretching from Newfoundland in the north to South Carolina, and, of course, Ireland. By the late eighteenth century, according to Sir George McCartney, the County Antrim-born statesman, diplomat, and governor of Grenada, Madras, and the Cape Colony, the First English Empire was ‘this vast empire on which the sun never sets and whose bounds nature has not yet ascertained’.

Empire had a long history in Ireland. England had first invaded Ireland in 1169, leading Friedrich Engels to observe in a letter (1856) to Karl Marx that ‘Ireland may be regarded as the first English colony’. Engels continued: ‘which because of its proximity is still governed exactly in the old way, and here one can already observe the so-called liberty of English citizens is
based on the oppression of the colonies’. How then did the English empire actually function in early modern Ireland and how did this change over time? What did access to European empires mean for people living in Ireland? This book answers these questions by interrogating four interconnected themes: first, that Ireland formed an integral part of the English imperial system with its land and labour fuelling English expansionism; second, that people from Ireland operated as agents of empire(s); third, that Ireland served as laboratory in and for the English empire; and, finally, it examines the impact of empire(s) on people living in early modern Ireland.

Issues of identity permeate the book. What did it mean to be ‘Irish’, ‘English’, and even ‘British’ in an era of intense colonisation and mobility? ‘Irishness’ meant a variety of things to different people. Strictly speaking, only the Gaelic-speaking Catholic natives regarded themselves as being ‘Irish’. Those of Anglo-Norman ancestry consistently stressed their ‘Englishness’ often at the expense of their ‘Irishness’. Aidan Clarke’s seminal work on the political connections and cultural makeup of this ‘Old English’ community clearly demonstrates that throughout the first half of the seventeenth century they perceived themselves as the Crown’s loyal and devoted servants and argued that their Catholicism in no way jeopardised their fealty to a Protestant prince nor their ability to serve him as their ancestors had done. Studies largely by Gaelic literary scholars, especially Breandan Ó Buachalla, suggest that, after the defeat in the Nine Years’ War (1594–1603) and the ‘Flight of the Earls’ in 1607, the native Irish, while acknowledging the centrality of Catholicism to their identity, increasingly adopted the same conciliatory, *politique* attitude towards the Crown which had traditionally characterised the Old English. Despite prohibitions against it, extensive intermarriage and cultural cross-assimilation had occurred between the native Irish and the Old English, with the result that many members of the former had become anglicised and the latter gaelicised. Predictably this blurred boundaries between ‘Irishness’ and ‘Englishness’ and allowed Catholics, especially members of the elite, to juggle identities. The conversion to Protestantism of leading native Irish and Old English lords complicated matters further.

The ‘New English’ settlers, Catholic and Protestant alike, who colonised Ireland from the 1530s, flaunted their ‘Englishness’. However, as Toby Barnard’s insightful study of the collective mentality of the Protestant community demonstrates, the onset of the First English Civil War after 1642 forced Protestants living in Ireland to choose between king and parliament
and caused something of an identity crisis for many. Those who opted for
Charles I continued to tout their ‘Englishness’; while those who sided with
parliament and later Oliver Cromwell viewed themselves primarily as
Protestants of Ireland. Increasingly, religion became ‘the surest touchstone of
reliability’, preparing the ground for the Protestant Ascendancy of the
eighteenth century.\textsuperscript{11} To complicate matters further, these nuances around
identity were lost on external observers, who increasingly labelled anyone
from Ireland as ‘Irish’ and often used ‘Irish’ to denigrate and imply disloyalty.
In other contexts ‘Irishness’ was equated with Catholicism and Protestantism
with ‘Englishness’.\textsuperscript{12} Equally misleading are later assertions that the English
empire was exclusively Protestant, even if confession did drive, to some
degree, the imperial mission.\textsuperscript{13}

Like identity, nomenclature is slippery and can bedevil, especially as
meanings changed over time and early modern people used terms less
familiar today. It is critical to be clear by what is meant in this book by
‘empire’ and ‘imperialism’ and related—but not interchangeable—terms,
from the Latin word ‘imperium’, which signified the power and authority
to command and came to denote those subject to Rome through military
conquest.\textsuperscript{14} According to Niccolò Machiavelli, the sixteenth-century phil-
osopher, historian, and diplomat, imperialism was when a prince held terri-
tory by annihilation, by colonisation, or by rule through ‘locally entrenched
groups’.\textsuperscript{15} Machiavelli’s definition works well for early modern Ireland, as
do more recent ones. In \textit{Culture and Imperialism}, Edward Said defined
imperialism simply as ‘the process or policy of establishing or maintaining
an empire’ when an ‘empire’ comprises extensive territories or sets of terri-
tories under the control of a single ruler.\textsuperscript{16} John Darwin concurs, adding
that imperialism may ‘be defined as the attempt to impose one state’s pre-
dominance over other societies by assimilating them to its political, cultural,
and economic system’.\textsuperscript{17} This aligns with Jürgen Osterhammel’s under-
standing of imperialism as a process of territorial acquisition initiated by
military conquest, which is followed by the implementation of formal and
informal structures of rule that resulted in a relationship of domination.\textsuperscript{18}

Closely linked to ‘imperialism’ is ‘colony’, which derives its name from
‘colonia’, the Latin word for farmer, which, according to the \textit{Oxford English
Dictionary}, signified by the early modern period an area settled by ‘a body of
people… forming a community subject to or connected with their parent
state’.\textsuperscript{19} Osterhammel suggests that a ‘colony’ is a new political organisation
created by invasion, conquest, or settlement; ‘colonisation’ designates a process of territorial acquisition; and ‘colonialism’ is a system of domination, in this case between England and Ireland. Early modern people frequently used the words ‘colony’ and the verb ‘to colonise’ often interchangeably with ‘to plant’ or, from the 1610s, ‘plantation’, meaning the settlement of people. ‘Colonialism’ is a more recent construct with usage dating from the later eighteenth century. So too is the word ‘anglicisation’. Instead, contemporaries used words like ‘civility’, ‘to civilise’, ‘improvement’, and ‘to improve’ to describe the English mission in Ireland.

Just as language and meanings changed over time, so too did the context, the nature of imperialism, and the intensity with which it was executed. Moreover, colonisation was not a single occurrence but an iterative and durable process that impacted different parts of Ireland at different times and in different ways. In fact, during these years Ireland was repeatedly colonised, making for messy models and moving targets that defy easy definition and simplistic analysis. One thing is clear, imperialism was about the exercise of political and economic power, about violence, and about coercion. Strategies about how best to turn conquest into profit, to marshal, mobilise, and control Ireland’s natural resources, especially land and labour, varied but the reality of everyday life did not change and provoked a wide variety of responses ranging from acceptance, accommodation, assimilation, and innovation to resistance and rebellion.

Even though the focus of this book will be on Ireland and the English empire, people from Ireland were trans-imperial and engaged with all of the early modern imperial powers. It is therefore critical, where possible and appropriate, to look to other European and global empires for meaningful comparisons, contrasts, connections, and entanglements in this era of expansionism and economic exploitation. Given the expansive nature of the topic, this book makes no claim to be comprehensive but aims instead to stimulate further research, discussion, and respectful debate.
Acknowledgements

This book derives from the 2021 Ford Lectures on ‘Ireland, Empire, and the Early Modern World’. It was a great honour to be invited to deliver the annual James Ford Lectures in Irish and British History at Oxford University. I am grateful to the electors for the invitation and especially to Professor Steven Gunn. The list of previous Ford Lecturers reads like a ‘Who’s Who’ of British and Irish history and includes three distinguished Irish historians, Marianne Elliott, Roy Foster, and the late F. S. L. Lyons.

Instead of delivering the Fords in person in Oxford, I recorded them without an audience in Dublin in January and February 2021, at the height of the Covid-19 pandemic. I would like to thank my colleagues at the Trinity Long Room Hub Research Institute in the Arts and Humanities for allowing me to film in the Neil Hoey lecture theatre and especially Caitriona Curtis, Aoife King, Giovanna Lima, Francesca O’Rafferty, Eve Patten, and Elspeth Payne for their support. The final two lectures were recorded in Iveagh House on St. Stephens Green in Dublin, once the town house of the Guinness family, and today home of Ireland’s Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. I am deeply grateful to Minister Simon Coveney, the then Secretary General Niall Burgess, Ambassador Adrian O’Neill, and colleagues for facilitating the filming in line with the restrictions imposed by the pandemic. Thanks to Neil Leyden and Dermot Horan, the recordings of the six lectures now sit on the RTE website (https://www.rte.ie/history/2021/0304/1201023–ireland-empire-and-the-early-modern-world-watch-the-lectures/) where roughly 20,000 people from around the world have downloaded them. I am grateful to those of you who have viewed these lectures and for your questions and comments.

I am also indebted to the Warden and Fellows of All Souls College for their kind offer of a visiting fellowship in spring 2021, which the pandemic prevented me from taking up. Instead, I spent a very productive time in the autumn of 2021 as a visiting fellow at Merton College and am grateful to the Warden and Fellows, especially Steven Gunn and Richard McCabe, for the very warm welcome. Ian McBride and Dmitri Levin organised a lively
‘Fords vs Carlyles’ seminar at All Souls College where Mark Goldie, who had delivered the 2021 Carlyle Lectures (also online), and I had an opportunity to reflect with a live audience on our respective lectures. In November 2021 Ambassador Adrian O’Neill hosted in the Irish Embassy in London a delightful evening, where I presented a distilled version of the Fords, my first ‘real’, in person, lecture since March 2020. After nearly two years of virtual interactions, the conversation, conviviality, and companionship over the autumn of 2021 was particularly welcome. I’d like to thank for their hospitality Judith Buchannan, Susan Brigden, Marianne Elliott, Roy Foster, Charles Hansard, Sadie Jarrett, John Kennedy, Paulina Kewes, Brian Kingham, Michael Lonergan, Adrian O’Neill, Sinead Pentony, Glyn Redworth, Louise Richardson, the late Hamish Scott, and Julia Smith. A special word of thanks to Debby Guthrie and James Wise, who welcomed me into their hearts and London home.

Ireland and Empire is a topic that has long fascinated me. I have been working on aspects of it for nearly 30 years—from my early work on the MacDonnells of Antrim and my contribution in 1998 to The Oxford History of the British Empire, to my ongoing collaborative work with Richard Ross and Phil Stern on anglicisation in and through the law, and another project on women and sexual violence with Rosemary Byrne and Stephanie McCurry. My 2021 Ford Lectures, as they looked at Ireland and Empire through the lens of early modernity, attempted to bring together some of these threads.

On a more personal note, I was born in Kitwe in Zambia (then a British protectorate named Northern Rhodesia). My father, a South African originally from Lithuania, worked in the copper mines in Kitwe where he met my mother, a McGucken from County Tyrone, who was a teacher. We moved to Belfast in 1969, the year after the Troubles broke out. The war dominated my childhood and teenage years and like so many of my generation I left at the first opportunity to travel, to study, and to pursue a career that in 2003 brought me back to Ireland, to Trinity College Dublin.

Over the course my life I have travelled extensively and taken with me my fascination with empires, ancient and modern. I have been fortunate to visit the remains of historic empires: the Aztecs, Egyptians, Greeks, Mughals, Ottomans, Romans, and Vijayanagaras. I have spent most time in countries that once formed part of the British empire: Australia, Canada, Egypt, Hong Kong, Israel, Kenya, Malaysia, Myanmar/Burma, Singapore, South Africa, Sri Lanka, Zimbabwe, and, above all, India.
Initially, it was in my role as the founding Vice President for Global Relations at Trinity College Dublin (2011–14) that regularly took me to India. During these trips I seized any opportunity to visit historic sites, to spend an afternoon in a municipal library or archive, and to meet local scholars. We had much to discuss and, thanks in part to the British empire, shared much in common. Though the cultures and histories of our countries were so different, I found very familiar the educational and legal systems, the civil services and bureaucracies, the built environment and architecture, the roads and railways, and, of course, the language—English—through which we conversed. Wherever I went in India there were constant reminders of a shared imperial past. Undoubtedly those experiences of seeing and engaging have helped me to better understand the nuances and complexities associated with the study of empires. I learned much from my conversations during extended research trips to India in 2015, 2017, and 2018 with Jyoti Atwal, the late Rajat Datta, Cyrus Guzder, Irfan Habib, Najaf Haider, Sucheta Mahajan, Aditya and Mridula Mukherjee, Bodh Prakash, Shireen Moosvi, and Malabika Sarkar. It was a privilege to engage with colleagues and students at the Centre for Historical Studies at Jawaharlal Nehru University and Ashoka University, where I co-taught a course to Young India Fellows on ‘Ireland, India, and Empire’.

A research fellowship in February and March 2022 at the Centre for Humanities Research at the University of the Western Cape allowed me to explore Irish experiences of empire in the context of South Africa. For this I am indebted to Heidi Grunebaum, Premesh Lalu, and Maurits van Bever Donker and the amazing team at the Centre for Humanities Research. I would also like to thank Patricia Hayes, Ajay Lalu, Valmont Layne, Adam Asmal, the staff at the Zeitz Museum of Contemporary African Art, and the Spences. From Cape Town I travelled to California, where a research fellowship at the Huntington Library in San Marino in March and April 2022 allowed me to conduct further research on the impressive, but often overlooked, early modern Irish holdings and to participate in an international conference on ‘Ireland and the Wider World’. I am grateful to Steve Hindle for this opportunity and to Michael Ballagh, Jim and Elizabeth Chandler, Tim Harris, Mary Robertson, and Jennifer Wells for their insights and fellowship.

Over the summer of 2022 I delivered a revised version of the Ford Lectures as a course for graduate students at the University of São Paulo in Brazil. I am grateful to Laura Patricia Zuntini de Izarra for making possible this rewarding and fascinating experience and to Munira Mutran and
colleagues associated with the Yeats Chair for their warm welcome. Maria Rita Drumond Viana and Larissa Lagos kindly invited me to speak at the Federal University of Ouro Preto at Mariana, a colonial settlement dating from the late seventeenth century, in the state of Minas Gerais, where more people were enslaved to work in the gold mines than anywhere else in Brazil. I also took the opportunity to visit Recife, settled by both the Portuguese and Dutch, and nearby Olinda, one of the first towns in the country, dating from 1535. Brazil is a country—like Ireland—where imperial after lives loom large and I learned a tremendous amount, especially from my students. The actor Stephen Rea happened to be in Brazil for the launch of ‘Secrets from Putumayo’, a documentary about Roger Casement’s time in the Amazon, and joined the final class, where he read from Brian Friel’s *Making History*.

Since delivering the Ford Lectures in spring 2021 I have given papers on themes related to them at various seminars: the Early Modern Seminars at Oxford and Trinity College Dublin, the British History Seminar at the Institute of Historical Research in London, the Irish Studies Seminars at the Princess Grace Library in Monaco and Magdalene College, Cambridge, a seminar on the Irish in the early modern Atlantic held in Seville, and a workshop (also in Seville) on the role played by elites in shaping early modern European empires. Two conferences, where I was honoured to deliver keynotes, deserve special mention for the new ground they are breaking: ‘“Where Do We Go from Here?” Revisiting Black Irish Relations and Responding to a Transnational Moment’, organised in November 2021 by Kim DaCosta, Miriam Nyhan Grey, and Kevin Kenny at Glucksman Ireland House, New York University, and ‘Ireland, Museums, Empire, Colonialism: Collections, Archives, Buildings and Landscapes’, organised in April 2022 by Dominic Bryan, Emma Reisz, and Briony Widdis at Queen’s University Belfast. I am indebted to the organisers of all these events, seminars, and conferences for the opportunity to discuss my research and to the participants and students for their constructive criticism and comments.

Librarians and archivists are often the unsung heroes of books like these. My debts are many: to the librarians at Trinity College Dublin, especially Mary Higgins, Sean Hughes, Jane Maxwell, Laura Shanahan, and Helen Shenton; at the British Library; at the New York Public Library; at the Huntington Library, especially Vanessa Wilkie; at the Bodleian Library in Oxford, especially Michael Webb; and at the National Archives in London, especially Neil Johnston, in Belfast, and in Dublin. Faber and Faber kindly granted permission to quote from Brian Friel, *Making History*. A generous
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I would like to thank colleagues at Oxford University Press, who have been a pleasure to work with, Stephanie Ireland, Cathryn Steele, Saraswathi Ethiraju, and Tom Stotter, as well as the copy-editor, Michael Janes, and indexer, Gillian Northcott. I would particularly like to thank the anonymous OUP reviewers and Micheál Ó Siochrú, who read a final draft of this book, for their constructive comments and invaluable suggestions for improvement.

Over the years I have had the good fortune to collaborate with some gifted early career researchers who have worked as research assistants: the late Marie Sophie Hingst, Grace Hoffman, James Leduc, Daryl Hendley Rooney, and Caoimhe Whelan. In different ways each has contributed to this book and I am indebted to them and the students at Trinity College Dublin who, over the years, have challenged and inspired me. I am deeply grateful to many colleagues and friends who have offered advice and support, shared references and insights, and contributed in so many different ways to this book: Robert Armstrong, Tom Bartlett, Guy Beiner, Homi Bhabha, Matteo Binasco, David Brown, Rosemary Byrne, Nicholas Canny, Dan Carey, Clare Carroll, Sandro Carvalho, Marion Casey, Peter Crooks, Sarah Covington, Gaye Cunningham, Linda Cullen, Coleman Dennehy, Mary Doyle, Susan Flavin, Roy Foster, Patrick Geoghegan, Eileen Gillooly, David Harris Sacks, Cathy Hayes, Leslie Herman, Brendan Kane, Jimmy Kelly, Louise and Caroline Kennedy, Kevin Kenny, Phil Kilroy, Mona and Rasid Khalidi, Connie Kelleher, James Kelly, Paulina Kewes, the late Shay Lawless, Ian McBride, Stephanie McCurry, Bríd McGrath, Andrew MacKillop, James Maguire, Annaleigh Margey, John Morrill, Elaine Murphy, Terry Neill, Bríona Nic Dhiarmada, Thomas O’Connor, Finola O’Kane, Hussein Omar, Ciaran O’Neill, Terry Neill, Igor Perez Tostado, Glyn Redworth, Brian Rooney, Richard Ross, Sinead Ryan, the late Hamish Scott, Brendan Smith, Phil Stern, Stuart Switzer, Micheál Ó Siochrú, Ciaran O’Neill, Patrick Walsh, John Walter, and Olivia Waters. My family—Shirley, Richard, Jamie, and Hannah—remain a constant source of support and I am eternally grateful for their love.

Today I divide my time between Dublin, where I’m privileged to work with fabulous colleagues and students in the History Department at Trinity, and our family home on Cruit Island in County Donegal, part of O’Donnell’s Tyrconnell and not far from Friel’s imagined townland of Baile Beag/
Ballybeg. My neighbours on Cruit are the wonderful nieces of Brian Friel, Finn McMahon and Christa Darrall, and Stephen Rea. Indeed, I wrote the Ford Lectures and much of this book on Cruit during the 2020–1 pandemic and found invaluable conversations, particularly with Stephen about Field Day and Making History, which I had seen performed at the National Theatre in London in 1989.


Jane Ohlmeyer,
Cruit Island, County Donegal
and Trinity College, Dublin
# Table of Contents

*Maps and Figures* \(\text{xxix}\)

*Abbreviations* \(\text{xxi}\)

1. **Making history** \(\text{1}\)
   - I. Contexts \(\text{12}\)
   - II. Challenges \(\text{23}\)
   - III. Chapters \(\text{28}\)

2. **Anglicisation** \(\text{30}\)
   - I. Culture and religion \(\text{36}\)
   - II. Political and legal imperialism \(\text{48}\)
   - III. Irish land and English economic imperialism \(\text{53}\)

3. **Assimilation** \(\text{68}\)
   - I. The first Irish play \(\text{70}\)
   - II. Intermarriage \(\text{77}\)
   - III. Lived experiences in colonial Ireland \(\text{83}\)
   - IV. The first Irish novel \(\text{96}\)

4. **Agents of empire** \(\text{99}\)
   - I. Agents of empire \(\text{100}\)
   - II. Trans-imperialism and global empires \(\text{109}\)
   - III. The ‘Irish’ empire \(\text{119}\)
   - IV. Identities and empires \(\text{135}\)

5. **Laboratory** \(\text{141}\)
   - I. Concepts of empire \(\text{144}\)
   - II. Imprint of Ireland \(\text{152}\)
   - III. Tools of empire \(\text{157}\)
   - IV. Ireland and India \(\text{161}\)
   - V. Resisting empire \(\text{164}\)
# Table of Contents

6. **Empires in Ireland**  
   I. Shaping lives 172  
   II. Shaping landscapes 179  
   III. Shaping minds 186  
   IV. Memory and early modern empires 193

*Endnotes*  
*Bibliography*  
*Index*
Maps and Figures

Map 1.1. Map of Ireland showing ‘frontier’ zones. 3

Figure 1.1. John Derricke’s woodcut image (The Image of Irelande, with a Discoverie of Woodkarne (1581)). Reproduced courtesy of the University of Edinburgh. 6

Figure 2.1. Captain Thomas Lee (1594) by Marcus Gheerhaerts. Reproduced courtesy of the Tate Gallery in London. 32

Figure 2.2. George FitzGerald, sixteenth earl of Kildare (c.1612–60). Reproduced courtesy of the trustees of the Castletown Foundation. 38

Figure 2.3. One of Thomas Raven’s coloured maps of the Clandeboye estate. Reproduced courtesy of North Down Museum. 59

Figure 2.4. Sir Neil O’Neill by John Michael Wright. Reproduced courtesy of Tate Britain in London. 65

Figure 2.5. John Derricke’s woodcut image of the Irish chieftain (The Image of Irelande, with a Discoverie of Woodkarne (1581)). Reproduced courtesy of the University of Edinburgh. 66

Figure 3.1. Broadsheet from 1647 entitled A prospect of bleeding Irelands miseries. Reproduced courtesy of the British Library in London. 73

Figure 3.2. Wenceslaus Hollar from Sir James Ware’s Equitis Aurati de Hibernia (1658) depicting Hibernia. Reproduced courtesy of Marsh’s Library in Dublin. 84

Map 4.1. Map of ‘Irish’ Caribbean. 118
Abbreviations

BL  British Library, London
BL, IOR  India Office Records
Bodl.  Bodleian Library, Oxford
CSPD  *Calendars of State Papers, Domestic Series, Second Series* (23 vols., London, 1858–97)
Gilbert (ed.), *Irish confederation*  J. T. Gilbert (ed.), *History of the Irish Confederation and the war in Ireland, 1641 [–1649] containing a narrative of affairs of Ireland, by Richard Bellings. With correspondence and documents of the confederation and of the administrators of the English government in Ireland, contemporary personal statements, memoirs, etc. Now for the first time published from original manuscripts* (7 vols., Dublin, 1882–91)
Gilbert (ed.),  *Contemporary history* J. T. Gilbert (ed.), *A Contemporary history of affairs in Ireland from AD 1641 to 1653* ...(3 vols., Irish Archaeological Society, Dublin, 1879)
HL  Huntington Library, San Marino, USA
HMC  Historical Manuscripts Commission
HMC, Ormonde  *Calendar of the Manuscripts of the marquess of Ormonde, preserved at Kilkenny Castle* (Old and New Series, 11 vols., London, 1895–1920)
IMC  Irish Manuscripts Commission
NA  The National Archives, Dublin
NLI  National Library of Ireland, Dublin
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<th>Abbreviation</th>
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<td>PRONI</td>
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<tr>
<td>TNA</td>
<td>The National Archives, London</td>
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<tr>
<td>TNA, CO</td>
<td>Colonial Office</td>
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<td>TNA, PROB</td>
<td>Probate</td>
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</table>
Making History, a play by Brian Friel which was performed in 1988, was set at the end of the sixteenth century on the eve of the Nine Years’ War, which began in 1594 and ended in 1603. For the most part it takes place in Dungannon in County Tyrone in Ulster, which was the most geographically remote—from London—of the four Irish provinces. In the play Brian Friel, who was born in County Tyrone but who spent much of his life in neighbouring County Donegal, where he now lies, tells the story of Hugh O’Neill, earl of Tyrone, and hereditary overlord of Ulster, who led the Irish war effort against Elizabeth I and went on to become the symbolic hero of Irish nationalism.1 The play opened in 1591 with the elopement and marriage of O’Neill, now aged 41, to his third wife, Mabel Bagenal, who was barely 20. This focus on intermarriage—between native and newcomer, Catholic and Protestant—immediately complicated understandings of what it meant (and means) to be ‘Irish’ and ‘English’. Friel conjured up O’Neill’s intense relationship with Mabel and her sister, Mary, daughters of the local Protestant planter, Sir Nicholas Bagenal, and their brother, Sir Henry, who was the ‘Queen’s Marshall’ from nearby Newry, and leader of the ‘New English’ community in Ulster.2

Issues of gender, family, and identity are to the fore. Some of the strongest dialogue in the play is between the two women as they discussed what constituted ‘improvement’ and ‘civility’. Mary explained how her father had drained bogland, ploughed it, fenced it, and planted it with trees—apple, plum, damson, and pear—brought over from Kent; she talked of their beehives, vegetable patches, and the herb garden.3 Mary then chided her sister Mabel: ‘You talk about “pastoral farming”—what you really mean is no farming—what you really mean is neglect of the land. And a savage people who refuse to cultivate the land God gave us have no right to that land’.4 In another intense exchange Mabel defended her decision first to marry...
Hugh O’Neill, and then to convert to Catholicism. She converted, she says: ‘Out of loyalty to Hugh and to his people. As for civility I believe that there is a mode of life here that is at least as honourable and as cultivated as the life I’ve left behind. And I imagine the Cistercian monks in Newry didn’t think our grandfather an agent of civilization when he routed them out of their monastery and took it over as our home’.  

Making History vividly imagined the world of Gaelic Ulster, just as the English state set out to conquer, colonise, cultivate, and ‘civilise’. Ulster was one of three geographic zones, where multiple colonisations occurred (see Map 1.1). The first was an area that comprised Dublin, the Pale, most of Leinster, and East Munster, which had been an English colony since the twelfth century. Englishness prevailed but intermarriage and acculturation had occurred between Gael and Anglo-Irish, much to the consternation of officials in London, who dubbed this ‘degeneracy’. The second zone, the western part of Ireland, had never been as intensively settled and retained its Gaelic character even if leading powerbrokers, like the earls of Clanricard and Thomond, had committed to ‘anglicising’ (or ‘civilising’) policies and lived under the authority of a Crown-appointed lord president. The third zone, Ulster and inaccessible areas like the Wicklow mountains, had resisted English rule for centuries. As a result Ulster was, according to one English official writing in 1609, ‘heretofore as unknown to the English here as the most inland part of Virginia is yet unknown to our English colony there’.  

Like all frontier societies throughout pre-modern Europe, much of Ulster remained sparsely populated, with widely dispersed settlements, few towns, and difficult internal communications. Frontier zones did not constitute homogeneous units as religious, linguistic, cultural, and economic factors criss-crossed with political ones to create complex, overlapping patchworks of frontier zones within and across frontier zones. This is well illustrated by Gaelic Ireland and Scotland which were united by the sea and, to all intents and purposes, formed part of the same political ethos and cultural entity, with bards composing works aimed at audiences on both sides of the North Channel. Migration across the North Channel, a mere 12 miles at the closest part, spawned extensive informal settlement in Ireland, especially in East Ulster where the rise of the MacDonnells of Antrim, nominally loyal to the Scottish Crown, complicated the political make-up of Elizabethan Ireland, as did the eagerness of Clan Campbell to interfere in Irish affairs. Indeed, Red Hugh O’Donnell’s mother, Ineen Dubh or Finola, was the daughter of James McDonnell of the Isles and proved a very effective broker of power
Map 1.1 Map of Ireland showing ‘frontier’ zones.
thanks in part to the Scottish mercenaries (known as ‘redshanks’ or ‘gallowglass’) she retained. According to her son’s biographer, Lughaidh Ó Cléirigh, ‘she had the heart of a hero and the mind of a soldier’.10

In *Making History* Friel invited us to eavesdrop on O’Neill’s discussions with Red Hugh O’Donnell, his closest ally and son-in-law, who had recently escaped from Dublin castle where he had been incarcerated for nearly five years.11 Friel rightly emphasised the importance of lineage, kinship, fosterage, and marriage alliances. In the case of O’Neill extensive fosterage and marriage links ensured that this was a complex and extensive matrix that connected him to the McDonnells, O’Donnells, O’Cahans, O’Hagans, and O’Quinns.12 Writing in the 1580s Sir Nicholas Bagenal described O’Neill ‘as so allied by kindred in blood and affinity as also by marriages and fosters and other friendships as if he should be ill-disposed might hap put the crown of England to more charges than the purchase of Ulster should be worth’.13

The Gaelic economic order, based on pastoralism, exchange, and redistribution, was foregrounded in the play.14 Mabel was in awe of the size of her husband’s herds of cattle, the source of his wealth: ‘All I could see was millions of them stretching away to the hills. I mean, I never saw so many cows in one place in all my life’.15 O’Neill used cows as currency and so cattle raiding, especially in the long winter evenings, formed an integral part of the local redistributive economy. A successful cattle raid often resulted in the submission of a territory which enhanced the military and political standing of a given lord and brought him increased riches in the form of tribute. O’Neill and O’Donnell were amongst a small number of powerful overlords who not only controlled their own territories but also collected tribute—in the form of military service, food, lodgings, and agricultural labour—and demanded submission from neighbouring lordships. Little is known of the lower orders over whom O’Neill and O’Donnell lorded it but osteoarchaeological analysis of nearly 1,300 skeletons, a third of which were of juveniles, excavated in 2003/4 from Ballyhanna in south County Donegal, has provided some extraordinary insights into the everyday life of a Gaelic lordship. Economic hardship, gruelling work, a limited diet, physical impairments, and poor health characterised the lives of these modest arable farmers, labourers, and crafts people. Few lived beyond the age of 50, with the majority dying before reaching 35. Disease, chronic infections, vitamin deficiencies, food shortages, and famine appear to have caused most deaths with relatively few from interpersonal violence.16
That said, it was a highly militarised society. Scottish mercenaries—the ‘gallowglass’ or ‘redshanks’—supplemented the Irish swordsmen who fought for O’Neill and O’Donnell. Between the 1560s and 1590s some 25,000 mercenaries found employment in Ulster. External observers struggled to comprehend what they perceived to be the apparent lawlessness. They were, in the words of another character in the play—Peter Lombard, Archbishop of Armagh—‘Constantly at war—occasionally with the English—but always, always among themselves’. Mabel went further when she told O’Neill that ‘You are not united. You have no single leader. You have no common determination. At best you are an impromptu alliance of squabbling tribesmen’.

If ‘fighting’ served as one central pillar on which Gaelic society rested, ‘feasting’ was the other, something captured in John Derricke’s woodcut image of the feast, with the chief of the MacSweeneys, close allies of the O’Donnells, seated at dinner, entertained by a bard and a harper (see Figure 1.1). Feasting was a public display of a lord’s power over his followers and mattered hugely to O’Neill, as did those traditions associated with musicians, harpists, bards, and storytellers that enhanced his standing and status within his lordship. These customs and traditions were clearly very strange, even alien, to Mabel who spoke no Irish. But they were non-negotiable for O’Neill. Just as Gaelic culture was core to his identity, the fact that he had fathered many sons and continued to keep mistresses played to his masculinity and status as a Gaelic chieftain. Despite Mabel’s complaints, O’Neill refused to dismiss his ‘harlots’, as Mabel dubbed his lovers; she then justified their presence to her sister on the grounds that this was ‘part of his culture’.

Equally insightful were O’Neill’s deliberations about ‘Englishness’ both with Mabel and his trusted friend, foster brother, and private secretary, Harry Hovenden, who unlike O’Neill and O’Donnell, was of ‘New English’ descent but also Catholic. Even though Friel suggested that O’Neill was educated in England, he was in fact raised ‘amongst the English’ of the Pale, first in the Dublin household of Sir Henry Sidney (1556–9), to whom John Derricke dedicated his *Image of Ireland*, and later with the Hovenden family, hence the close bond with Harry. As a result of this upbringing in Sidney’s household, O’Neill had acquired the necessary trappings of ‘civility’. According to Friel, O’Neill spoke with an ‘upper-class English accent’ and ‘like those Old English nobs in Dublin’. In the play, O’Donnell teased him about his ‘excessive jacket’, later adding ‘I bet you that’s a London job’. In reality, O’Neill and his children did wear English apparel. In 1599
Figure 1.1 John Derricke’s woodcut image (The Image of Irelande, with a Discoverie of Woodkarne (1581)). Reproduced courtesy of the University of Edinburgh.
Sir John Harington visited O’Neill’s camp and noted that his sons, Hugh and Henry, were both ‘dressed in English clothes, with velvet jerkins and gold lace’. Harington added that the boys were already ‘acquainted with the English tongue’. In a letter to the administration in London O’Neill claimed that he had married Mabel to ‘bring civility into my house’. O’Neill enjoyed friendships with many of the families who settled in the Pale, especially Garrett Moore of Mellifont Abbey, who had fostered one of his sons. O’Neill, by his own admission, made himself indispensable to Crown soldiers and settlers as they attempted to colonise East Ulster. He also did what he could to bring ‘in’ O’Donnell, Maguire, and other local lords. For as Mabel reminded O’Neill in the play: ‘Queen Elizabeth made you an earl. And you accepted that title. And you know that that title carries with it certain duties and responsibilities’.

For her part, Elizabeth I once described O’Neill as ‘a creature of our own’. She understood the importance of securing the support of magnates like O’Neill if she was to exercise any influence over Ulster. The maps drawn during these years vividly evoke Ulster as a terra incognita, replete with inaccessible landscapes devoid of habitations bar a few coastal strongholds populated by fierce, well-armed warriors. This meant that, even after his defeat in the Nine Years’ War, O’Neill was able to negotiate terms, something that the earl, well versed in the realpolitik of Tudor government, truly understood. For as he explained to O’Donnell in the play: ‘Because she [Elizabeth I] knows that the only way she can rule Ireland at this point is by using someone like me. She hates me—but she can rule through me provided she has control over me’. Friel underscored the point by quoting from O’Neill’s letter of submission to the queen. In it O’Neill humbly begged ‘Her Majesty to restore me to my former living and dignity where as an obedient subject I vow to continue hereafter loyal to her royal person, to her crown, to her prerogatives, and to her English laws . . . Particularly will I help in the abolishing of all barbarous Gaelic customs which are the seeds of all incivility’. However surrender in 1603 also meant that O’Neill had no alternative but to engage with the Crown’s local agents, men like Henry Bagenal. After all, as O’Neill reminded Mabel, ‘it’s the plodding Henrys of this world who are the real empire-makers’.

From the 1570s English soldiers and bureaucrats, like Bagenal, held a royal mandate to exercise brute force in Ulster, building forts and garrisoning men in strategic locations and launching fire and sword campaigns often under the guise of martial law. Towards the beginning of the play O’Donnell
Ireland, Imperialism, and the Early Modern World

outlined the aggressive English military strategy in Ulster: ‘Do you know what the hoors are at? They’re going to build a line of forts right across the country from Dundalk over to Sligo’. O’Donnell continued: ‘That’ll cut us off from the south. . . . The second stage is to build a huge fort at Derry so that you and I will be cut off from each other . . . when Donegal and Tyrone are isolated, then they plan to move in against each of us’. This is, of course, exactly what happened. Derry’s formidable walls are still intact and other remains of these early seventeenth-century castles and fortified houses litter the border landscape, from Newry to Enniskillen, and are vividly represented in the maps by Robert Bartlett and other early modern cartographers.

O’Neill detested Bagenal whose ambitions to be lord president of Ulster threatened his preeminent position in the region. He branded Bagenal a ‘Staffordshire mongrel’ and ‘a bloody upstart’. Confident in his social and cultural superiority, O’Neill focused on Bagenal’s unworthiness, inhumanity, and poor breeding. The name-calling continued as Bagenal lambasted O’Neill’s disloyalty and Catholicism. Henry laid bare (both in the play and in reality) his humiliation and shame that his blood ‘should now be mingled with so traitorous a stock’. Mary concurred and held O’Neill to be ‘evil incarnate’, the ‘Northern Lucifer—the Great Devil—Beelzebub!’

Denigration of the ‘other’ came with an imperative to replace everything Irish with everything English: the landscape was to be shired; primogeniture was to determine inheritance practices; and English law was to replace Brehon and customary law. In the play, Hovenden recounted to O’Neill the details of a cattle raid on the Devlins, who paid tribute to and expected protection from O’Neill, and reminded him that ‘if Hugh O’Neill cannot offer them safety and justice under the Brehon Law, they’ll have to look for protection under the new English Law’. Even though violence was endemic and omnipresent throughout the play, the significance of the English victory, first at the battle of Kinsale (in 1601) and then, two years later in the Nine Years’ War, is muted. It was Mabel who reminded Hugh that ‘This is a war that England must win because her very survival is at stake’.

England’s desperation to win explained—but in no way excused—the tactics deployed. In the play there were fleeting—but nonetheless intense—images of the destruction wrought on Donegal by English troops. O’Donnell, still reeling from the news that O’Neill had married outside the tribe and
wed the sister—‘that Upstart bitch’—of their arch enemy, struggled to contain his rage at an atrocity committed by New English troops:

Do you know where the Butcher Bagenal was last week? In the Finn valley. Raiding and plundering with a new troop of soldiers over from Chester—the way you’d blood young greyhounds! Slaughtered and beheaded fifteen families that were out saving hay along the river bank, men, women and children. With the result that at this moment there are over a hundred refugees in my mother’s place in Donegal Town.

Later in the play, O’Donnell recounted how ‘Everywhere you go there are people scavenging in the fields, hoking up bits of roots, eating fistfuls of watercress. They look like skeletons’. The English scorched earth policy, which included unrestricted violence against non-combatants especially women and children, and the use of famine tactics, coincided with the coldest decades of the sixteenth century and a run of bad harvests between 1591 and 1597. The consequences for Ulster were devastating with widespread starvation and depopulation. It has been estimated that two-fifths of the population died thanks to the destruction of the Nine Years’ War. Reports, albeit by English observers associated with Lord Mountjoy, of alleged cannibalism circulated with graphic descriptions of children eating the roasted flesh of death mothers.

Even if Friel’s focus is the local, he never lost sight of the wider contexts of England, Scotland, and especially Spain and the papacy, from where O’Neill and O’Donnell secured support for their Catholic ‘crusade’. Archbishop Peter Lombard embodied these connections with Catholic Europe. Lombard reminded O’Neill:

I’ve spent a lot of time in Madrid recently, Hugh, and I can tell you that Europe is looking more and more to us as the ideal springboard for the Counter-Reformation…The initial shock of the Reformation is over. Catholic Europe is now gathering itself together for a Counter-Reformation. And the feeling is that culturally, geographically and with some military assistance we could be the spearhead of that counter-attack.

Lombard was a distinguished theologian and, as O’Neill’s first biographer, began the cult of O’Neill as national saviour. In the play most of O’Neill’s exchanges with Lombard—first in Dungannon and later in Rome—focus on the meaning of history and allowed Friel to complicate the nationalist myth of O’Neill as the symbolic hero of Irish nationalism.
Time and again, O’Neill insisted that Lombard must tell the ‘truth’, especially about his relationships with Mabel and with Harry. Lombard fobbed him off with ‘I’m not even sure I know what the historian’s function is—not to talk of his method... Maybe when the time comes my first responsibility will be to tell the best possible narrative. Isn’t that what history is, a kind of story-telling?’ ‘Is it?’ asked O’Neill. Lombard replied: ‘Imposing a pattern of events that were mostly casual and haphazard and shaping them into a narrative that is logical and interesting. Oh, yes, I think so’. O’Neill continued: ‘And where does the truth come into all this?’ Lombard answered: ‘I’m not sure that ‘truth’ is a primary ingredient—is that a shocking thing to say? Maybe when the time comes, imagination will be as important as information. But one thing I will promise you: nothing will be put down on paper for years and years. History has to be made—before it’s remade’.49

Nearly 25 years do pass; history is made and remade. In the final scene of the play O’Neill, having left Ireland in 1607 as part of what is now known as the ‘Flight of the Earls’, was in Rome with Lombard. Broken and blind, O’Neill again insisted that the archbishop tell his life story exactly as it happened. ‘I need the truth, Peter. That’s all that’s left. The schemer, the leader, the liar, the statesman, the lecher, the patriot, the drunk, the soured, bitter émigré—put it all in, Peter. Record the whole life—that’s what you said yourself’.50 Again, Lombard pushed back:

What are you so miserable about? Think of this [book] as an act of pietas. Ireland is reduced as it has never been reduced before—we are talking about a colonised people on the brink of extinction. This isn’t the time for a critical assessment of your ‘ploys’ and your ‘disgraces’ and your ‘betrayal’—that’s the stuff of another history for another time. Now is the time for a hero. Now is the time for a heroic literature. So I am offering Gaelic Ireland two things. I’m offering them this narrative that has the elements of myth. And I am offering them Hugh O’Neill as a national hero.51

Of course, by putting it all in—‘the schemer, the leader, the liar, the statesman, the lecher, the patriot, the drunk, the soured, bitter émigré’—Making History challenged the myth of ‘Hugh O’Neill as a national hero’.

Instead Friel portrayed O’Neill as a complex man, redolent with ambiguity, who flitted between two very different and competing worlds. He was a powerful Gaelic lord—the O’Neill—who valued his kin, lineage, culture, and religion. He was also an English earl, comfortable with the language and trappings of England, a friend to English men, a lover of English women, and a servant of an English queen. Friel also imbued O’Neill with
qualities—ambition, ruthlessness, hybridity, pragmatism, passion, charm, and charisma—that made him accessible and human. Finally, Friel rendered O’Neill as a leader who was willing to negotiate, to accommodate, to compromise, to survive, and to reconcile.

As even this brief overview of the play makes clear, *Making History* is grounded in the historical record. The dialogue included direct quotations from key documents and, interestingly, Friel’s portrayal of O’Neill resonated with contemporary depictions of the earl even by his enemies. For example, Lord Mountjoy’s secretary, Fynes Moryson, suggested that O’Neill was ‘of a meane stature, but a strong body, able to indure labors, watching, and hard fare, being with all industrious, and active, valiant, affable, and apt to manage [sic] great affaires, and of a high dissembling subtile and profound wit. So as many deemed him borne, either for the great good or ill of his Countrey’. Friel also drew inspiration from Seán ÓFaoláin’s very popular biography, *The Great O’Neill*, first published in 1942, which according to Hiram Morgan, was characterised by ‘wild inaccuracy’ and ‘crass romanticism’. As a result, the play, at times, has a confused internal timeline, events are conflated, and composite characters created. In other words, Friel strays from the known ‘facts’. O’Neill was not reared in England but ‘amongst the English’ of the Pale. According to O’Neill, the lord deputy ‘vigorously’ urged him to have his ‘eldest son [Hugh] attend the newly established College of the Holy and Undivided Trinity in Dublin’, adding ‘I’m told he’s trying to get all the big Gaelic families to send their children there’. Yet Trinity was only founded in 1592, the year after the exchange occurred. While O’Neill met Lombard in Rome, the archbishop, originally from Waterford, never visited Ulster, spending most of his life on the Continent. Mabel’s biographers simply tell us that she died in 1594 ‘without issue’. There is no evidence to prove that she died in childbirth, as is suggested in the play, though this was certainly possible. However, to focus on factual infelicities misses the point of the play, which is about language, identity, colonialism, and the relationship between history and myth.

It is important to note that *Making History* was not the only insightful play written about Hugh O’Neill. In May 1969 *The O’Neill* by Tom Kilroy, another remarkable Irish playwright and close associate of Friel’s, premiered in Dublin with a larger cast of 26 (there were only six actors in *Making History*). Set in London and Ireland before, during, and after O’Neill’s victory at Yellow Ford (1598), *The O’Neill* addressed many of the same issues: the challenges associated with conquest, colonisation, and anglicisation; the
‘civilising’ influence of women; the corrosiveness of commercialisation; ethnic and sectarian tensions and how these shaped identity formation. The bardic poet in The O’Neill satirised O’Neill’s ‘English ways’, adding he enjoyed ‘Three marks of the foreigner: gaudy clothes, a strange language, and the desire to build houses’. Teasing aside, O’Neill was quick to vilify the low-born arrivistes. According to O’Neill the Bagenals ‘are the breed of a Newcastle tailor. They will give them titles but that is all colonials will ever be—tailors. They patch up the holes in the overcoat of the Empire’. Yet O’Neill was willing to intermarry with the daughter of an imperial tailor, confident that she would assimilate. As O’Neill reminded Mabel ‘You are Irish. I am Irish. Madam, we are only separated by time, blood, religion. These are small things. History will not be able to tell the difference between us’. Though he may not have been aware of it, Kilroy, as we shall see in Chapters 3 and 6, had found his mark. The O’Neill, however, did not engage local audiences and communities to the extent that Making History did during its first major run. Part of the explanation for this lies in the context, especially the time and the place in which Making History was performed.

I Contexts

Three contexts and related historiographies are discussed in this section: the first, that in which Making History was set—the turn of the seventeenth century; the second, that in which it was performed—the late 1980s; and, finally, the context of the moment, the early 2020s.

First, the context in which the play is set. Since the seventeenth century is examined at length in the next five chapters, the focus here is the historiographical debate that is of particular relevance, even if it is a rather tired one, on whether Ireland was a kingdom or a colony or a hybrid combination of both. The passage of the Kingship Act in 1541 transformed Ireland’s status from a patchwork of feudal lordships into an imperial kingdom. This ‘constitutional revolution’ redefined relations between the English king and his subjects, especially those of Irish provenance who were now accorded the same rights as those of English origin. Ireland now formed part of a ‘composite monarchy’ in the context of an English empire that from the late sixteenth century had expansionist ambitions. After 1603 and the accession of James VI and I to the throne of the three kingdoms, Irish Catholics, of Old English and Gaelic provenance, proclaimed their loyalty to
the house of Stuart and celebrated in poetry, plays, and polemics their status as a kingdom.65 The Ulster poet Eoghan Ruadh Mac An Bhaird, who had eulogised Red Hugh O’Donnell and later shared Continental exile with Hugh O’Neill, welcomed James VI and I as Ireland’s spouse and depicted Ireland as a distinct kingdom in the context of James’s ‘three crowns’.66 Writing in Rome Archbishop Peter Lombard dedicated his Episcopion Doron (1604) to James and in the preface congratulated him on his accession as Ireland’s legitimate ruler.67

From this moment on the majority of Catholics, especially those of Old English provenance, accepted the extent to which kingship underpinned the exercise of political power together with the centrality of Irish parliamentary sovereignty, something that the Protestant community also took on board during the later decades of the seventeenth century. The celebrated Galway lawyer and MP Patrick Darcy articulated this in his address to the Irish parliament in June 1641 when he called for Ireland’s legislative independence as a separate kingdom within the Stuart ‘composite monarchy’.68 The following month the Irish House of Commons declared: ‘The subjects of this his majesty’s kingdom are a free people, and to be governed only according to the common-law of England, and statutes made and established by the parliament in this kingdom of Ireland, and according to the lawful customs used in the same’.69 Events surrounding the ‘Wars of the Three Kingdoms’ (1639–53) and especially the rise of the Westminster parliament as an alternative source of power fundamentally challenged and then changed these assumptions.70

Ironically, however, Darcy had prepared the constitutional song sheet for the Protestant ruling elite.71 His An Argument (Waterford, 1643) stated that an Irish kingdom was ‘to be governed only by the common lawes of England, and the statutes of force in this kingdome’, as is the case in England, ‘to be their birth-right, and best inheritance’.72 First William Domville, Irish attorney general for much of the Restoration period, and then his son-in-law William Molyneux borrowed and recycled Darcy’s arguments. Matters came to a head in the 1690s. Molyneux, wrote his influential The Case of Ireland Being Bound by Acts of Parliament Stated (1698), arguing that only the Irish parliament could legislate for the kingdom of Ireland. The English parliament and prominent figures condemned and contested Molyneux’s assertion. For example, Sir Isaac Newton, the renowned scientist and warden of the royal mint, argued that ‘Ireland is one of the English plantations and though it has changed the title of lordship to that of kingdom yet it still