

Protestants and Gaelic culture in 17th-century Ireland

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THE COMPLEX political and religious developments in the seventeenth century continue to be a subject of considerable debate among historians of Ireland. Central to these discussions is the problem of how a Protestant administration with an English monarch as head of state governed a kingdom that was predominantly Catholic and apparently loyal only to the pope. In this scenario Ireland is seen as a country riven by sectarian hatred, where the Protestant “New English” community was continually at loggerheads with its ethnic and religious adversaries: the Old English and native Gaelic Irish. There is little indication that this trend is losing momentum. These acute confessional divisions, manifested in the violence of the 1641 rebellion, still hold centre stage in the study of the seventeenth century. Therefore, the indications are that the current orthodoxy seems set to prevail.

In this context the conclusion that Ireland in the early modern period was a highly polarised society seems inescapable. But was it? Is this a fair assessment? One way to challenge this orthodoxy is to examine Ireland’s culturally vibrant society. Not only does it provide a very different picture of the country’s social make up; it also exposes the risk of labelling, or at least misrepresenting, ethnic groups along political and religious lines. Yet the reality is that Protestants made a significant contribution to Gaelic culture; this cultural engagement, moreover, had as much to do with antiquarian interests as with promoting the Church of Ireland.

Irish and the established church

The Church of Ireland underwent something of a mini-revival at the end of the sixteenth century. The foundation of the long awaited university in Dublin, Trinity College, prompted a belated effort by the Crown to rival the influx of Counter Reformation trained priests from the continent. Furthermore, with the flight of the earls, Hugh O’Neill and Rory O’Donnell, in 1607 the established church was now finally in position to evangelise the native Irish. This was initially undertaken through the medium of print: first the translation of the New Testament (*Tiomna Nuadh*) in 1602 and, second, the Book of Common Prayer (*Leabhar na nurnaightheadh gcomhchoidchiond*) in 1608 by William Daniel, later archbishop of Tuam. The publication of the Prayer Book in particular was a significant development in the transmission of Protestantism to the Gaelic world.¹ Moreover, it marked an important turning point in the Church of Ireland’s attitude towards the vernacular. The translation project was not only an unambiguous signal of intent. It also signalled the beginning of a process that was expected to generate further

momentum. While the immediate effect is difficult to ascertain, the response from the Franciscans on the continent suggests some degree of concern. Between 1611 and 1618 five devotional texts in Irish were published from their printing press at Louvain (modern day Leuven).

However, the momentum engendered by Daniel's translation failed to materialise. As John McCafferty has noted, both the parliamentary statute books and the proclamations of the lords deputy demonstrate a lack of direction regarding the use of the Irish language for the clergy.² Indeed, it was not until the appointment of William Bedell in 1628 as Provost of Trinity College that Irish was back on to the Protestant agenda by way of renewing the evangelising mission.

Bedell possessed a remarkable talent for languages, having translated several religious texts into Italian during his time in Venice as chaplain to King James's ambassador, Sir Henry Wotton. Thus it was no surprise that the new provost quickly turned his attention to the Irish language after assuming his new post. For this purpose he employed the talented Gaelic convert Muircheartach Ó Cionga as his tutor. The relationship blossomed. Bedell was so impressed that he gave Ó Cionga a leading role in the translation of the psalms – a major task since they had been omitted from the Book of Common Prayer when Daniel published the Irish version in 1608.³ Language continued to be at the forefront of Bedell's efforts at Trinity. He insisted that Irish was necessary for students in the Church of Ireland ministry. Consequently he revived lectures in the vernacular in the face of hostility from the more conservative faction of the college led by Joshua Hoyle.

Bedell's conviction that clergy must be competent Irish speakers manifested itself when he was appointed bishop of Kilmore and Ardagh in 1629. This was convincingly put into action by building up a cadre of clergy who were proficient in the native tongue. Alan Ford estimates that there were nine Irish clergy serving in Bedell's diocese compared to only six under his predecessor Thomas Moigne.⁴ Three are of particular note because they show elements of a careful strategy by which Bedell sought to win the trust of the native Catholics. Daniel O'Creane, for example, was formerly "a learned fryar" with strong local associations and reputedly "did much good, and did turn away many from iniquity".⁵ Donnchadh Ó Sioradáin was another with local connections. He was ordained deacon by the bishop in 1634 and proved to be an ardent supporter of the evangelising project to the extent of remaining loyal to Bedell through the turmoil of the 1641 rebellion. In fact, the bishop died in Ó Sioradáin's residence. But the most important figure was unquestionably Ó Cionga. Ordained deacon by Bedell in September 1632 and provided with the living of Templeport in Kilmore the following year, Ó Cionga was the leading member of the bishop's team of scholars that undertook the translation of the Old Testament. In Bedell's own words his former tutor was a "competent man...[who] has few matches as an Irish scholar in the kingdom".⁶

Although the 1641 rebellion interrupted Bedell's plans for an Irish Bible (the project was in fact delayed for over forty years), his efforts are nevertheless important for two reasons. First, as a senior member of the Church of Ireland Bedell demonstrated that the vernacular was not the exclusive concern of the native Irish in the early seventeenth century. The bishop famously acknowledged that Irish was "a learned and exact language and full of difficulty", yet within a short time after his appointment to Kilmore he became noted for being "a critick in the Irish tongue".⁷ Indeed, the catechetical work known as *The ABC; or, Institution of a Christian* printed in 1631 was closely associated with him, if not actually penned by him. The second point is arguably more noteworthy. The clergy in his diocese plainly show a genuine commitment by members of the established church to engage with Gaelic culture and language. Although O'Creane, Ó Sioradáin and Ó Cionga were all of native Irish extraction, Bedell also managed to attract talented ministers who had no local connections. Reverend John Johnson, who was chief engineer for the lord deputy, was commissioned by Bedell to work on a universal language project which included Gaelic.⁸ Johnson later became a minister in the diocese of Ardagh. Nor were clergy who could read or speak Irish confined to Bedell's dioceses of Kilmore and Ardagh. It was not unusual for the northern dioceses to have Gaelic speaking clergy due to the influx of Scottish immigrants in Ulster. Most significant of all, perhaps, was the English-born and Oxford-educated bishop of Killaloe, John Rider. He placed considerable emphasis on his clergy preaching in the vernacular and even set an example by learning to speak Irish himself. According to W. A. Phillips, Rider was adamant that his curates could read "divine service in the Irish tongue unto their parishioners, that others by their example may be encouraged to the practice [of] the reading of the Irish language".⁹ Among those serving in his see was Daniel McBrodin, a native Church of Ireland cleric and relation of one of the leading literary Gaelic families, the MacBrauideadha's of Thomond.

Protestant antiquarians and historians

Members of the clergy were not the only Protestants to recognise the merits of interacting with the Gaelic world. There was also a number of highly influential scholars who sought to salvage antiquarian studies from descending into a battleground between rival religions. Three men in particular stand out. The first was **Sir George Carew**, lord president of Munster between 1600 and 1603. A veteran army officer who commanded English forces in the Baltinglass (1580) and Desmond (1569-73 and 1579-83) rebellions and later during the Nine Years War (1594-1603), Carew developed a keen interest in Irish history. While his original motivation was a desire to reclaim lost family lands in Munster, his focus quickly shifted to investigating pedigrees of other leading families in the province. As a consequence Carew amassed a sizeable collection of valuable historical sources. His importance lies not only in the fact that he spent considerable time and effort utilising Irish manuscripts for his research: he also saved an enormous amount of

material which otherwise could have been lost, given the generally poor record-keeping by the Irish. The Carew manuscripts are preserved in the library of Lambeth Palace in London.

Chief among those who rescued and preserved Irish manuscripts was the archbishop of Armagh, **James Ussher**. According to his friend and colleague, Sir James Ware, Ussher's library at Drogheda was "the most extensive" in the country. The Jesuit, Stephen White, remarked that it was of "really great value".¹⁰ The salient elements of the archbishop's career are well known: an outstanding scholar, a committed Protestant, religious controversialist, and famous collector of manuscripts - above all his extensive range of manuscripts of Gaelic origin, many of which he purchased from Carew. Among the major holdings in his library were the Book of Ballymote and the Book of Lecan (which he acquired from Trinity College, Dublin), the Annals of Ulster, the Psalter of Cashel, in addition to an array of saints' lives in Latin. He clearly took great pride in his Irish collections, notably describing the native language as "both elegant and rich" in a letter to Ludovicus de Dieu.¹¹

Yet these manuscript collections were not just about satisfying his antiquarian curiosity. They also served an academic purpose by providing an original interpretation of Irish history and culture which was noticeably different to that previously offered by scholars. Indeed, Joep Leerssen maintained that "Ussher was among the very first scholars outside the living tradition of native Gaelic culture to whom some of its riches were beginning to spread: and, as such, his position was one of crucial importance."¹² The archbishop made extensive use of these in his research, especially in his pioneering work *Britannicarum ecclesiarum antiquitates* (1639) which was the first critical account on the origins of Christianity in Britain and Ireland. Included in this study was a history of St Patrick's conversion of the Irish, which required a monumental effort in integrating manuscript and printed sources of St Patrick's life for the first time.

The third key figure in this triumvirate is **Sir James Ware**, arguably the leading antiquarian of his day yet surprisingly overlooked by historians.¹³ At first glance, he fits the mould of the New English, or Protestant settler, typecast. He pursued his studies at Trinity College, Dublin where he received a BA in 1611 and an MA seventeen years later. This provided the necessary platform for following a career in Dublin Castle. He was knighted in 1630 and became auditor general for the government after his father's death in 1632. By 1640 he was appointed to the Irish Privy Council in which he played an active role throughout that decade until he was forced into exile in 1649, when Cromwellian forces tightened their grip on Dublin. He returned to Ireland when Charles II was restored to the monarchy, by which time he focused most of his energy on antiquarian studies.

Despite such a distinguished political career, Ware's lasting contribution was as a scholar. Over the space of forty years he published no less than eleven substantial historical works. Like his mentor, Ussher, these drew on an impressive range of manuscript sources with the primary goal of highlighting Ireland's illustrious past. His first two publications concentrated on ecclesiastical history, specifically catalogues of archbishops' lives from the eleventh to seventeenth centuries. In 1626 he published obits of the archbishops of Cashel and Tuam with a short commentary on each. This was followed by a catalogue of the Leinster bishops in 1628. Both editions were ultimately incorporated and expanded to include all the dioceses in Ireland in *De Praesulibus Hiberniae* in 1665.

The manner in which Ware went about these studies is particularly striking. The Irish episcopate was presented in a completely neutral tone. Controversial passages were revised in such a way that the lives of the archbishops and bishops were read without prejudice. This is most plainly demonstrated in Ware's *The Historie of Ireland* (1633) in which he edited three chronicles of Ireland, none of which had appeared in print before: Edmund Campion's *A Historie of Ireland* (1571); Meredith Hanmer's *The Chronicle of Ireland* (1571); and, famously, Edmund Spenser's *A View of the Present State of Ireland* (1596). This was no easy task because he was faced with the challenge of having to limit hostile comments made by the authors about Ireland and the Irish. The most problematic of all was editing Spenser's *View*. For example, words like "barbarism", "savage" and "brutish" were repeatedly omitted so "that salvage nacion" was read as "that nation"; while "theire owne brutishe behaviour" was altered to "their owne behaviour".¹⁴ This served an important task. By reducing the polemical impact of sixteenth-century works, Ware sought to stress their merits as sources for recovering the ancient history of Ireland. In fact, the motivation is discernible in all his publications. His *De Scriptoribus Hiberniae* in 1639 was a remarkable piece of research for its double purpose of defending Ireland's cultural integrity while simultaneously celebrating the nation's achievements. Moreover, his masterpiece *De Hibernia et antiquitatibus eius disquisitiones* (1654, 2nd edition, 1658), traced the country's origins up to and including the Norman conquest. This was the most exhaustive historical survey of Ireland ever undertaken and provided Irish and European scholars with a much clearer understanding of the kingdom's distinctive past.

Protestant laity

There is a danger of giving the distorted impression that only a small coterie of Protestant scholars showed an awareness of the value of Irish language and Gaelic inheritance. However, less prominent members of the Protestant laity can be shown to have developed a taste for Irish history and culture, even if their ethnic or religious backgrounds might be considered an obstacle to such an engagement. Daniel Molyneux, for example, was Ulster king of arms and principal herald of

the kingdom of Ireland. His business was to certify family pedigrees, dispensing heraldic emblems and on occasion investigating family histories. But he also shared an interest in ecclesiastical history, notably asking Ware for works by the twelfth-century commentator, Giraldus Cambrensis, as well as the canons of the synod of Ferns from 1223-43.

Above all, Ware's notebook records the names of those with whom he exchanged manuscripts, thereby providing us with a fascinating cross section of people actively involved in such transactions, many of whom are rather obscure. Sir James Craig *alias* Cradog, a major landholder in Ulster, received fragments of the history of Ireland; Thomas Hooke, who attended the parish churches of St Catherine's and St James's, acquired a copy of Campion's "Chronicle of Ireland"; Thomas Reynolds, probably a kinsman of Ware, who borrowed the Annals of Ulster; and Roger Moore of the parish of St John the Evangelist, who was given a loan of the Irish translation of the New Testament. Moore was not the only one who possessed devotional prints in the vernacular either. The lord mayor of Limerick, Edmund Sexton, had an inscription of the ten commandments in Irish in his notebook. Although he was disinclined to identify with his family's Gaelic past (their ancestors were the Ó Seasnáin's of Thomond), Colm Lennon notes that the ten commandments "may suggest an interest in the Irish language and perhaps an awareness of its place in catechesis within the Anglican mode."¹⁵

Other motivations

Of course, not all Protestant settlers engaged in Gaelic culture and language were driven by a sense of curiosity. Motivations varied significantly. Matthew de Renzy is one of the best documented examples. Originally a native of Germany, he fled to Ireland in 1606 after his business went bankrupt. Not long after his arrival he obtained lands in Westmeath, more specifically in the Gaelic lordship of Delvin MacCoghlan. Within a year de Renzy approached the Mac Bruaideadha family in an effort to learn how to read and write in the native tongue. He sought to advance his studies further by making contact with other learned Gaelic families between 1608 and 1611 with a view to mastering classical Irish. His extant writings are particularly striking. They include genealogical and topographical notes relating to his properties in Mac Coghlan's lordship. More significantly, he used his facility with the language to establish his title to his lands by tapping into local knowledge. Thus in the case of de Renzy Irish was a simply a means for furthering his career. There was actually no evangelical intention, rather the driving force behind familiarising himself with the native language was to further his own economic interests.¹⁶

Gaelic culture was also used as a political tool. Although his family was of native extraction, the fourth earl of Thomond, Donough O'Brien, was raised in the court of Queen Elizabeth and became a staunch supporter of the Irish administration

upon his return. This effectively made O'Brien an outsider in his own earldom. As a direct consequence the earl patronised the Mac Bruaideadha poets among others. This was designed to cultivate a popular image and consolidate his position in a territory where the vast majority of inhabitants were native Irish. Among the five surviving poems which are addressed to O'Brien, Bernadette Cunningham maintains that the attitudes of the poets are "ambivalent".

For example, two different interpretations can be made of a poem penned by Maoilín Óg Mac Bruaideadha in 1599: either the poet implies that the Irish hoped that the Ulster earls would travel south during the Nine Years War or, punctuated more subtly, the message avoids any offence that might suggest a longing for some kind of liberation from O'Brien's control. However in another poem, apparently composed by the poet Aonghus Fionn Ó Dálaigh, the earl's support of traditional Gaelic culture and his obligations as a patron are praised, and he is urged to continue assisting the poets in his earldom.¹⁷

So what are we to make of the relationship between Protestants and Gaelic culture? Two conclusions can be made. First, it is clear that many of the new breed of settlers from the end of the sixteenth and early seventeenth century embraced native culture and language. Their reasons for doing so differed significantly. In some cases Irish was used to promote the established church in areas where Protestantism had failed to make inroads; in other cases it was employed for economic reasons.

Similarly, interest in Gaelic culture was not just a scholarly endeavour; it could also help Protestants consolidate their positions in regions where they were politically vulnerable.

Second, we need to reassess the way in which we view Irish society in this period. Categorising people and placing them into groups along political, religious and/or ethnic lines only serves to reinforce the notion that sectarianism was rife. This is not to deny that religious divisions contributed to conflict such as the 1641 rebellion. But that is only half the story. Between 1603 and 1641 Ireland was mostly peaceful. In those forty years both native and newcomer regularly interacted with one another in politics, religion, law, trade and culture. The time is overdue for a radical re-evaluation of early seventeenth-century Irish society in terms of a more integrated community.

NOTES

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1 See Marc Caball, 'Gaelic and Protestant: a case study in early modern self-fashioning, 1567-1608' in *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy*, vol. 110, section C, (2010), pp 191-215.

- 2 John McCafferty, 'Venice in Cavan: the career of William Bedell, 1572-1642' in Brendan Scott (eds), *Culture and Society in Early Modern Breifne/Cavan* (Dublin, 2009), p. 185
- 3 Terence McCaughey, *Dr Bedell and Mr King: the making of the Irish bible* (Dublin, 2001), pp 42-6.
- 4 Alan Ford, 'The Reformation in Kilmore before 1641' in Raymond Gillespie (ed.), *Cavan: essays on the history of an Irish county* (Dublin, 1995), pp 73-98.
- 5 McCaughey, *Dr Bedell and Mr King*, p. 24, f. 2.
- 6 *Calendar of State Papers, Ireland, 1633-47*, p. 205.
- 7 E. S. Shuckburgh (ed.), *Two biographies of William Bedell* (Cambridge, 19102), pp 295, 133.
- 8 *Ibid.*, pp 109-10.
- 9 W. A. Phillips (ed.), *History of the Church of Ireland* (2 vols, Oxford, 1934), ii, p. 575.
- 10 Quoted from Richard Sharpe, *Medieval Irish Saints' Lives* (Oxford, 1991), p. 59.
- 11 C. R. Elrington and J. H. Todd (eds), *The Whole Works of the Most Rev. James Ussher* (17 vols, London, 1829-64), xvi, p. 25.
- 12 Joep Leerssen, 'Archbishop Ussher and Gaelic Culture' in *Studia Hibernica*, 22-23 (1982-83), p. 53.
- 13 See Mark Empey, "'Value-Free' History? The scholarly network of Sir James Ware' in *History Ireland*, vol. 20, issue 2 (March/April 2012), pp 20-3.
- 14 For many more examples see Edmund Spenser, *A view of the state of Ireland: from the first printed edition (1633)*, eds Andrew Hadfield and Wily Maley (Oxford, 1997), pp 170-6.
- 15 Colm Lennon, 'Religious and social change in early modern Limerick: the testimony of the Sexton family papers' in Liam Irwin and Gearóid Ó Tuathaigh (eds), *Limerick History and Society* (Dublin, 2009), p. 121.
- 16 Brian Mac Cuarta, "'Sword' and 'word' in the 1610s: Matthew de Renzy and Irish reform' in Brian MacCuarta (ed.), *Reshaping Ireland 1550-1700: colonization and its consequences: essays presented to Nicholas Canny* (Dublin, 2011), pp101-30.
- 17 Bernadette Cunningham, 'Continuity and change: Donnchadh O'Brien, forth earl of Thomond (d. 1624), and the Anglicisation of the Thomond lordship' in Matthew Lynch and Patrick Nugent (eds), *Clare History and Society* (Dublin, 2008), pp 69-70.