

INTRODUCTION TO SPECIAL ISSUE

Historical Geographies of Ireland: Colonial Contexts and Postcolonial Legacies

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Anniversaries and colonial traumas

An independent Irish state will soon attain its centenary and its birth pangs of rebellion, war, and civil strife are being commemorated as a decade of anniversaries.¹ Themes of memory and commemoration have been a particular interest of cultural and historical geographers working on Ireland.² Brian Graham and his colleagues, for example, have produced a rich set of studies on the multiple and contested politics of memory, particularly in Northern Ireland.³ Given such geographical scholarship on the contestability of memory and history in Ireland, we can anticipate that geographers will engage as public intellectuals during this current period of taking our bearings from our past. At such times of reflection upon identity and legacy, there will always be a tension between exceptionalism and generalization. Each vibrates with political resonance, each risks false explanation, and yet each is necessary for critical and effective historical geographies.⁴ In introducing this set of historical-geographical essays on Ireland, let me begin at the comparative pole.⁵

The Irish Free State of 1921 was haunted by plantation and famine, the two defining moments of its colonial history. The separation of six counties, as the Province of Northern Ireland, from the remaining twenty-six, the Irish Free State, was a legacy of the last and most systematic of the plantations, that of Ulster. With eighteen thousand men, the English army sent to re-conquer Ulster from the Irish was the largest deployed anywhere in the world at that time (larger even than the Spanish army sent to take colonies in South America).⁶ As commander of the English forces (1600-1603), Charles Blount, Lord Mountjoy, determined upon a scorched-earth policy reducing much of the province to starvation, which together with disease and battle, may have killed eighty thousand Irish, halving the population of Ulster. Into this vacated space was poured a new people, one that from the 1603 union of the English and Scots crowns under James I/VI of England/Scotland, was increasingly described as British, such that “the colonization of Ulster” became “the first cooperative British enterprise of James’s newly proclaimed Kingdom of Great Britain.”⁷ With people from Wales, England, and, in particular, Presbyterian Scotland, a distinctive society was made within the half-emptied nest of Gaelic Ireland. From plantation came a religious division integral to the control of Ireland, a divide-and-rule policy that became typical of British colonial rule elsewhere and that encouraged partition as its postcolonial legacy.⁸

The Great Famine of 1845-52 was the last in a traumatic series but it was managed by the British in a novel fashion, both modern and cruel. The blight upon the potatoes in Ireland deprived the majority of the population of their daily food. Only exceptional measures could have kept them alive, and at times these were tried. In July of 1847 perhaps three million people were being fed at public or charitable expense, about one-third of the population of the island.⁹ Thereafter, policies became more savage. The Irish were not to be encouraged in idleness with [begin page 23] free food but should be willing to give up their plots, enter the workhouse, dissolve their family ties, or emigrate if they wished to survive. The mounting mortality was to be endured by British consciences as the price for bringing Irish population into line with Irish resources. The Irish survivors would not only have learned a lesson about improvident fertility but after their period in the workhouse they might have been imbued with that thriftiness upon which the British so prided themselves.¹⁰ The use of mass starvation for social engineering was, like plantation and partition, to become part of the arsenal of British colonial technologies.¹¹ The consequences for Ireland were profound. Perhaps a million people died in the five years of the famine, perhaps another one-and-a-half million emigrated and the population level of 1845, probably about nine million, has never been regained. Indeed, emigration exceeded immigration in every decade from the 1840s until the 1990s. The Irish Free State inherited and did not reverse an expectation among many Irish people that prosperity was only to be found in Britain, the United States, or Australia.¹²

Continuity and discontinuity

These issues have directly and indirectly affected the tone and substance of work on the historical geography of Ireland. For example, the question of continuity and discontinuity becomes one way that the significance of these traumas is indirectly debated. If, with Estyn Evans, one finds profound continuities in rural *genres de vie*, then, the distinctiveness of Ulster may be understood as long prepared and given only its latest and perhaps incomplete expression as Northern Ireland, with even the plantation merely repeating shapes of distinction long evident upon and from the land.¹³ In contrast, Tom Jones Hughes emphasized the discontinuity imposed by the replacement of tribal with landlord-based rural society and classed the disruption a species of colonialism.¹⁴ Through analysis of a systematic land survey of Ireland, Griffith’s Valuation of the mid-nineteenth century, Jones Hughes documented the tremendous diversity of property arrangements between landlords, large farmers and tenants. The colonial character of the property settlement in Ireland was challenged by other historical geographers, notably by Brian Graham and Lindsay Proudfoot.¹⁵

The arguments of Graham and Proudfoot come from the revisionist pole of the Irish historical imagination and they are shaped profoundly by the partition of Ireland and the violent Republicanism and Unionism that made sectarian conflict in Northern Ireland during the 1970s and 1980s. In itself this style of historical argument was a marked postcolonial legacy. A central aspect of the revisionist arguments was that Ireland was characterized by a plurality of identities and that it was a nationalist myth to insist only upon a Gaelic origin and a Catholic basis for Irish society and culture.¹⁶ Their arguments, however, were in turn shaped by the very politics from which they wished to distance themselves. All too often, appealing to “revisionist” perspectives in Irish history was to enter a hall of mirrors where to prevent historical research being used to bolster nationalist politics, and the violence of nationalist insurrection, the conclusions of historical research were framed so as to inoculate them against nationalist use.¹⁷ Yet, it is one thing to argue that the history of colonialism does not justify an armed struggle in the present, but it is quite another to claim that this is because colonialism either never occurred or has left no discernable legacy; the very terms of the revisionist argument are one such legacy.

In this manner, revisionism is an acute form of postcolonial anxiety, the spectre of nationalism haunts historical methodology and arguments are constructed against a foil that is rarely fully documented. For example, a common feature of revisionist arguments has been an emphasis on complexity and the implicit

foil is that there is a simplistic account that would otherwise be dominant. There are good reasons to insist upon complexity in preparing a context for advocating pluralism as a political virtue.¹⁸ However, complexity can also serve to obscure colonial contexts for fear that more plain speaking might give comfort to nationalists, that **[begin page 24]** spectral dominant narrative. Consider, for example, Proudfoot, noting “the welter of hyphenated identities in Irish history,” before going on to suggest that this meant that place-making could only be “ambiguous in . . . intent and outcome,” and that thus a place’s “[i]nitial meaning might be transient and multi-layered, and lost altogether in subsequent renditions.”¹⁹ One might imagine that the original stain of colonialism is somehow washed out in the multiplicity of pluralism. Or, again, consider Proudfoot insisting that “the plantations also involved processes which were socially and spatially adaptive rather than obliterative,” and that “new patterns of administration and landownership . . . were not . . . necessarily completely divergent from what had gone before.”²⁰ Note the foil implicated by “also involved” and “completely divergent,” and how even the extremity of plantation can be diminished by insisting upon the necessity of a nuanced reference to continuity. This foil is not directly referenced but haunts the text in the making of the revisionist point; a point that is almost taken back in the following pages where we are told that “it is nevertheless still true that this process of dispossession created significant social divisions which had a lasting effect on Irish society,” and that, despite having been told that Ireland was not unlike some other parts of Europe in having large landed estates, “what was remarkable about the pattern of landownership in Ireland was . . . that [large estates] were owned in the main by families of relatively recent origin in the country, whose rights of possession were acquired at the expense of an earlier, largely displaced landed elite.”²¹ The case for the importance of colonial contexts and postcolonial legacies has rarely been put more clearly than that.

This interaction of colonial contexts and postcolonial legacies has been an important aspect of Irish historical geography more broadly. Paddy Duffy’s work on the territorial legacy of Gaelic Ireland not only highlights the ways that the spatial framework of rural life retained pre-colonial moorings even under the pressure of dispossession but suggests that where indigenous folk remained as tenants on lands they had once owned, they were yet able to ensure a continuity of some aspects of place-making, particularly in the “hybrid zone” at the medieval frontier.²² John Morrissey has documented ways that Gaelic lords might have chosen to engage with English law in order to prosecute or secure claims of their own against rivals.²³ In *Map-Making, Landscapes and Memory*, Willie Smyth has taken up the historical geographical themes of Don Meinig’s work on European imperialism in North America and combining original scholarship with a synthesis of works by other historians and geographers, Smyth’s monograph establishes very clearly the colonial contexts and is more than suggestive of the postcolonial legacies of the project of plantation.²⁴ Map-making has been a fruitful object and method for exploring postcolonial legacies.

Making maps

In a *festschrift* for Evans, John Andrews wrote about mapping in the service of the Elizabethan occupation and plantation of parts of Ireland.²⁵ Andrews’ own work on the history of the Ordnance Survey in Ireland, *A Paper Landscape*, was celebrated by Jones Hughes in a review that, in noting Andrews’ account of the English transliterations of Irish place-names, remarked that: “In this way it is doubtful whether any other nation or language has suffered so great a humiliation at the hands of its official surveyors.”²⁶ Not only this re-naming, but also reflecting upon the continuing cultural significance of such re-naming is a postcolonial legacy, and in this case the work of the scholar was taken up with enthusiasm by a playwright, Brian Friel, and informed the very successful *Translations*.²⁷ Born in 1929, Friel grew up a nationalist within Northern Ireland and, feeling abandoned by the Irish Free State and marginalized within the Protestant province, has described a sense of being “at home but in exile.”²⁸ In a play set during the Irish Civil War of 1922-3, *Juno and the Paycock*, Sean O’Casey had presented the ineffectual patriarch, Jack Boyle, as exclaiming that “the whole worl’s in a state o’chassis!” suggesting a **[begin page 25]** combination of chaos, crisis and stasis that is similar to the way Friel felt about contemporary violence in Northern Ireland.²⁹ In *Translations*, set in Donegal in 1833, the double exile of the Irish from language and place is produced by the multiple erasures of place-lore, language and cultural continuity effected by compulsory education in English and by the remaking of the landscape as an English text. It is significant that in commenting upon the ways Friel drew upon *A Paper Landscape*, Andrews noted that Friel had presented the Ordnance Survey in Ireland as staffed by the British military, whereas it had, at the time, been a largely Irish bureaucracy led by people with profound scholarship in Irish.³⁰ In folding the consequences of the Survey back into a characterization of its personnel, Friel gets a poetic truth he can produce on stage but at the risk of conflating the Survey with the British Army more generally and thus misapprehending Irish involvement with both, past and present. After the intolerable violence of the Famine, very many Irish people prepared their children for exile, pushing them away from hearth and kin towards a world of English.³¹ There is a postcolonial legacy of shame, difficult even to name.³²

The act of map-making has been at the heart of several collaborations between historical geographers, archaeologists, and historians in Ireland and each of these in their different ways can speak to the relations between colonial contexts and postcolonial legacies. Over the past three decades, under the direction of Anngret Simms, Howard Clarke, Jacinta Prunty and Raymond Gillespie, the multi-volume *Irish Historic Towns Atlas* has published mapped histories for two-dozen towns.³³ The magnificent documentation of urban historical geography in these volumes manifests the extensive swathes of towns that were given over to defense and to military occupation. The descriptions of how buildings have been used, re-used and abandoned show not only the regular commandeering of space by the English and later British army in response to periodic rebellion, but also the current legacy of vacated military barracks that overlook so many Irish towns. The second collaboration focuses on counties rather than towns. Since 1985 with a work on Tipperary, Willie Nolan’s Geography Publications has been producing collections of essays on the history and geography of individual Irish counties.³⁴ The diversity of material and approach within and between volumes is evident but the issues of plantation and famine are treated in many. There is work of summary and comparison needed before the regional geography of these matters will emerge from these volumes but as they stand they are suggestive of the local impact of these broader forces. Among many examples: Paul Kerrigan gave an overview of defensive structures in Offaly; for Kildare, Nolan looked at what he calls the documents of Conquest; Catherine Ketch examined land confiscations in Waterford; James Lyttleton considered one element of what he called the archaeology of plantation in Longford; Sheila Molloy traced dispossession in Galway; and Monica Brennan looked at changes in the structure of landownership in Kilkenny.³⁵

The third of the collaborations that highlights the importance of map-making is the new *Atlas of the Great Irish Famine*.³⁶ Walter Freeman’s early work on the geography of pre-Famine Ireland was to some extent complemented by the work of Stuart Cousens on the regional dimensions of famine mortality but for decades thereafter there was very little advance upon these early works of historical and population geography, that is until the last few years.³⁷ This work of regional demography has been taken up in recent work by Stewart Fotheringham, Mary Kelly, and Martin Charlton.³⁸ The colonial context and resonances of the British administration of famine relief have been explicated by David Nally.³⁹ I have described some of the geopolitical forms of British colonial rule in this period drawing in part upon Giorgio Agamben’s theory of the exception and I have also described some geographical aspects of the anti-colonial politics that developed in reaction to this trauma.⁴⁰ But with *The Atlas of the Great Irish Famine, 1845-52*, we not only now have a tremendous accession to the geographical scholarship on the Famine but we also have one that in its public impact becomes part of a new debate about postcolonial legacies.⁴¹ The core of

the *Atlas* is a series of essays by Willie Smyth on the historical geography of the famine, for [begin page 26] Ireland and then for each its four historic provinces—Connacht, Leinster, Munster, and Ulster. These essays are illustrated by a wealth of maps on the depth, administration, and consequences of the Famine. There are also essays by other historians and historical geographers providing case-studies by topic and locality. Colonial contexts are well examined by Smyth and Nally, and postcolonial legacies are treated by Crowley in a piece on the fate of Victoria's statue, Murphy writing about the manor walls built with the stones of demolished peasant cottages, Miller and colleagues on the elision of Presbyterian poverty from the Protestant memory of Famine, Neville on Irish gratitude to French republicans as expressed during the days of the Paris Commune, Reid on the famine Irish and the creation of Glasgow Celtic football club, Lee on the Famine memorial in New York City, Nolan on the shaping of later land reform by experience of the Famine, Póirtéir on the Irish-language folk memory, Dooley on museum culture, Marshall on Irish art, Morash on literature, and Dodds on the aestheticisation of famine imagery.⁴²

The *Atlas* was published in August 2012 and one of its editors soon introduced its core mapping project to the readers of the *Irish Times*.⁴³ The fairest of winds was set for the public reception of the *Atlas* when Kevin Whelan wrote a long review for the *Irish Times* in which he asserted that, in nearly two decades, it was first work of Irish Studies that “everyone should read.”⁴⁴ He praised the *Atlas* as “a powerful, unflinching account of the Famine as the defining event in Irish history” and remarked upon its “unparalleled assemblage of new maps, old images and extensive documentation.” The Irish Roots blog of the *Irish Times* of October 28 2012 reported that the *Atlas* was currently number seven on the list of bestselling books in one prominent Dublin bookstore and the blogger found this a welcome indicator of the public appetite for scholarship: “There’s hope for us all yet.”⁴⁵ On November 29 2012, at his official residence, the president of Ireland, Michael D. Higgins, accepted a copy of the *Atlas* and in his remarks he praised it as a “great vindication of the Irish university system,” describing it as a “book we have been waiting for,” a “great publishing event,” a “bringing home of the scholarship of the Famine to Ireland,” and a “final breaking of the all the silences that were there about the Famine.”⁴⁶ In his three books of the year for the *Irish Times*, Diarmaid Ferriter included the *Atlas*, lauding it as a “stunning achievement, full of cutting-edge research and inter-disciplinary perspectives, lavishly illustrated and a worthy monument to the defining event in modern Irish history.”⁴⁷ At the Cúirt International Festival of Literature in Galway in April 2013, the *Atlas* had its own session.⁴⁸ The *Atlas* was shortlisted for non-Fiction Book of the Year and for the International Education Services Best Irish-Published Book of the Year under the *Bord Gáis* Energy Irish Book Awards for 2012, winning the latter.⁴⁹ Given the academic and popular reluctance to accept the Famine as the defining feature of modern Irish history, the sales and public recognition of the *Atlas* mean that of itself it is prompting a renegotiation of postcolonial legacies.⁵⁰

From colonial contexts to postcolonial legacies

The preceding sketch provides some of the context for current work on the historical geography of Ireland that will be published in this and the next issue of *Historical Geography*. The first paper in this issue, by Keith Lilley and Catherine Porter, takes up the topic of the plantation of Ulster and the work of mapping that was part of it. Building upon the work of Andrews and Smyth on the cartography of plantation, Lilley and Porter return to the case of Ulster. They use the remarkably full record of correspondence concerning the surveying of Ulster 1609-10 to describe the organization of the collective effort needed to produce the maps that the British would use for re-allocating land and attracting investors. The novelty of their paper is that they also subject the maps themselves to something more than the textual analysis they have normally received and develop further the pioneering attempt of Andrews to subject them to spatial analysis. Using [begin page 27] GIS techniques, they use the pattern of inconsistencies between the maps of the seventeenth century and those of today to identify a pattern of deviations that throw light upon the process of surveying itself and this permits them to venture further towards a description of the interaction between imperial map-makers and local informants than has hitherto been possible.

The colonial enterprise in Ireland included a radical dissolution of Irish legal systems, including around the holding and inheriting of land. In the first place, a proclamation of 1605, sought to make illegal the Irish practice of *gavelkind*, or the idea that all sons had a right to a share in the estate of their father upon his decease. *Gavelkind* had effectively established the family group as the collective owner of land and this communalism was at the heart of Irish rural society. These kin-based systems were the basis of the *septs* that were integral to Irish tribal society and rundale, a strongly egalitarian practice of the periodic reallocation to individual farming families, reinforced this communalism. The communal system of land reallocation was still found in existence in various parts of the west of Ireland in the mid-nineteenth century, and in some places even later. In his paper for this issue, Eoin Flaherty notes that Friedrich Engels saw this as evidence of Celtic resilience in the face of the colonial attempt to destroy the bases of their communal culture. Evans also saw rundale evidence of long continuity in Irish rural society whereas Whelan argued that the system had returned as a response to population pressure and food insecurity during the nineteenth century.⁵¹ Flaherty takes up the question of resilience through an examination of the ecological instability produced by colonialism. The issues raised by Flaherty are those focused by ecological readings of Marxism, which see political economy as a way of re-ordering the internal relations of society and nature. This approach promises a new understanding of the colonial ecology of the Famine.

Kevin Keegan's paper returns us to the issues raised by interactions between Andrews and Friel. The contact zone between the colonized and the colonizer has often had the character of a liminal world where, despite inequalities of power, there are shared as well as divided spaces. Keegan takes up the question of the fate of the Irish language in such spaces. Examining works by Jonathan Swift (1667-1745), John Keegan (1816-49), and William Carleton (1794-1869), Keegan examines the cross-cutting relations between orality, literacy, Irish, and English. He shows the ways that contemporaries understood what was at peril with the loss of the Irish language, what might be attained through acquiring the English, and how the forms of literature took up the characteristic features of a story-telling tradition. The writings of folk such as Keegan and Carleton who had a familiarity with both language traditions can reveal much about the cultural dynamics of the contact zone and in their quotidian character can give nuance to the picture thrown into sharpest relief at times of crisis.

Land, law, and language were important battlegrounds for the colonial enterprise in Ireland and securing English and later British monopoly in each was integral to attempts to establish colonial rule as legitimate and Ireland as truly conquered.⁵² However, the field in which the British attempt to remake Ireland failed most spectacularly was that of religion, and this failure set the scene for the sectarianism and division that has followed. The confiscation of lands that was the preliminary to the plantations dispossessed Catholics and brought in new Protestant landowners. In 1600 Protestants held one-fifth of the land of Ireland, by 1700 they held six-sevenths.⁵³ Alongside the dispossession of Catholics that was part of the seizure of lands from people judged to be in rebellion against the Crown, Catholics were subject to further economic and social disabilities as part of the successive Penal Laws passed at various times from 1607 through until late-eighteenth century.⁵⁴ This limited the rights of Catholics to practice in the professions, to bear arms, to buy land, to be educated, to practice their religion, and in various other ways, some petty, some not, to feel the shame of second-class status. The social and geographical dimensions of the recovery of the Catholic Church after the intense oppression of [begin page 28] the seventeenth century has been analyzed by Kevin Whelan and these issues

are re-examined in the paper by Martin Millerick. Millerick looks at the recovery of institutional Catholicism in the diocese of Cloyne, county Cork. Whereas Whelan had emphasized the significance of a Catholic culture as repository of opposition to dispossession, Millerick notes that in Cork at least the institutional recovery of the Catholic Church was perhaps assisted by its work as an agent of social control, defending rather than challenging property rights.

Kevin Whelan's work on the radical culture that animated the rebellion of 1798 also provides some of the context for David Featherstone's paper. Featherstone follows scholars such as Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker in placing Ireland within an Atlantic society agitated by colonialism, racism, slavery, and labor struggles.⁵⁶ This Atlantic perspective has informed some recent work on Irish identities, for example in Adrian Mulligan's studies of Irish nationalism in North America.⁵⁷ The focus of Featherstone's paper is the use of racial politics by Irish seamen and it raises important questions about postcolonial legacies where divisions of race cut across lines of colonial subjection.⁵⁸ In documenting the radical politics of these black and Irish seamen, Featherstone's research also highlights anti-racist and anti-colonial solidarities as occasional dimensions of Irish transnational politics. These progressive possibilities might also be part of Ireland's postcolonial legacy.

Postcolonial legacies are the focus of Mary Kelly's paper. Postcolonial perspectives have perhaps been most thoroughly developed in the field of literary studies and within Geography among historical and cultural, and to a lesser extent, development geographers.⁵⁹ With respect to Ireland, Catherine Nash has written about the geographical techniques and metaphors of mapping and place-naming from postcolonial and feminist perspectives.⁶⁰ Geographical studies of Irish literature have also shown a sensitivity to the postcolonial legacies of writers such as James Joyce.⁶¹ Kelly takes up the works of Elizabeth Bowen (1899-1973) and finds there not only an evident obsession with the postcolonial legacy of inheriting a big house that was a legacy of her ancestors' occupation of confiscated Irish lands, but also an obsession which is explored through the evocation of geographies, both material and imaginary. Kelly finds Bowen reflecting upon the colonial contexts and postcolonial legacies of Irish life through the history of the engagement and dis-engagement of her own family with their neighbors. The Big House was a common synecdoche for the Anglo-Irish class that at certain periods styled itself the Ascendancy.⁶² William Butler Yeats reflected on the Big House as "the inherited glory of the rich," and noting the threat posed during the Irish Civil War (1922-3) to both house and the class that occupied them, he offered a defense of both house and class, although he implied that the ultimate honor of such a house would come from it being the place where a modern Homer might as a guest produce great literature.⁶³ Bowen ultimately lost her house since, as a writer, she did not command the income required to maintain it. Her family had preserved the house through rebellion and civil war, but the house was demolished in 1961, two years after Bowen has sold it. Haunted by a history that her characters find it difficult to enunciate, the Big House serves as a rich metaphor for what Bowen herself called her "fiction with the texture of history."⁶⁴ Ultimately, perhaps, Bowen made an apology similar to Yeats's for in *Bowen's Court*, her family history, she contrasted the militant planter class from which she was drawn with the later generations that supplemented martial values with a humanism evident in the library described at Bowen's Court, and finally of course in the literary achievement of her own re-telling of the story of this ennoblement of being.⁶⁵ In excavating the imaginary geographies in Bowen's work, Kelly follows Nash's injunction to attend to the tension "between the critical engagement with a grand narrative of colonialism, and the political implications of complex, untidy, differentiated and ambiguous local stories."⁶⁶ Attending to this tension can help explicate the relations between colonial contexts and postcolonial legacies.

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NOTES

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13 E. Estyn Evans, "Folklife Studies in Northern Ireland," *Journal of the Folklore Institute* 2 (1965): 355–363; E. Estyn Evans, "[The Personality of Ulster](#)," *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 51 (1970): 1–20. This body of work is effectively criticized in: Graham, "[The Search for Common Ground: Estyn Evans's Ireland](#)," *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* new series 19, no. 2 (1994): 183–210. Although see also a defense of Evans as a scholar of politics in a minor key: Virginia Crossman and Dympna McLoughlin, "[A Peculiar Eclipse: E. Estyn Evans and Irish Studies](#)," *Irish Review* 15 (1994): 79–86.

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