

Introduction: nature is a language

For an instance of their malice to the Englishe, an English man did strongly inclose a peece of ground for meadowe, and hee pitched out from thence an exceeding number of stones, and when he came to mowe his grounds he found more stones then he tooke out (for the Irish never went that way, day or night) but threwe in stones from under their mantles.¹

The preceding passage, an apparently innocuous part of a letter from an English settler in Ulster, provides a telling account of the way in which landscape and land use served as a focus for cultural difference in Tudor Ireland. For the English, cultivated fields and enclosed grounds were the *sine qua non* of civilized society. In fact, much of the work that follows aims to demonstrate the various ways in which English officials sought to transform the disordered land of Ireland and the *wildehirschen* that inhabited it through the introduction of agriculture, trade, and the civil life associated with counties and walled towns.

Not surprisingly, the natives soon recognized the importance of the cultural differences that distinguished arable from pastoral society and regularly made them a primary site of contestation and “an instance of their malice to the Englishe.” From the 1540s, if not before, Tudor ministers were informed that “the countrey where they inhabited [i.e. the Kavanaghs and O’Tooles of south Leinster], in which is, for the moost parte, nothing but woddes, rockes, greete bogges, and barren groundes, being unmanured or tilled . . . was a greete occasion to theym to lyve like wild and salvaige persones, onlie lyving by stelthe.”² Here we see the inverse of cultivation and civility, a disordered, unmanured, and untilled landscape, one that generated nothing besides “wild and salvaige persones,” who perforce sustained themselves by preying on and pillaging the goods produced by the hard work and industry of their civil neighbors.

¹ Huntington Library, Ellesmere MS 1746, fol. 12.

² *SP Henry VIII*, I:266–70, Lord Deputy to Henry, November 14, 1540.

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John Patrick Montaña

Excerpt

[More information](#)

2 The Roots of English Colonialism in Ireland

Worse still, English observers came to believe that the wild and barbarous natives of Ireland stubbornly refused to follow the example or adopt the civil, agricultural ways of the model communities planted amongst them. Indeed, Irish devotion to Irish ways was a source of endless frustration for English officials. Even beyond the rejection of civility and cultivation, the Irish chose to rely on the settlers' industry to facilitate the preservation of the indigenous pastoral economy, and in so doing flaunted the native defiance of the officially sanctioned, arable culture while at the same time benefiting from the plentiful fodder it made available for their animals. One settler lamented that he lost "his corne and grasse at night (for like the devell they alwaies wake when wee slept) & when they feede their Cattell on our groundes, a light-footed churle watcheth at our doores, who when he spieth any body comminge forth he runneth away crying with a barbarous noyse, wch his Cattell understanding also runn away, so that the poore Englishe findes his grasse or his corne eaten, but findes no eaters."³ Rather than adopt a settled, sedentary life of cultivating fields, erecting fences, and building houses and barns, the Irish chose instead to graze their animals on the carefully tended crops of the settlers and to expend their energy training their cows to *debouch* at a prearranged signal.

The centrality of cultivation as a marker of civility and, consequently, as the necessary alternative to pastoralism and mobility is further evident in the agricultural imagery that came to characterize so many of the official accounts of Ireland. Indeed, by the end of the Tudor period the Solicitor General was recommending policies rooted in the language of contemporary husbandry manuals:

For the good husbandman must first break the land before it be made capable of good seed; and when it is thoroughly broken and manured, if he doth not forthwith cast good seed into it, it will grow wild again, and bear nothing but weeds. So a barbarous country must first be broken by a war before it will be acceptable of good government; and when it is subdued and conquered, if it be not well planted and governed after the conquest, it will eftsoons return to the former barbarism.⁴

Remarkably, amidst all the talk of the husbandman, seeds, planting, and land, there is no longer any discussion of the people who inhabited the territory before the land was "thoroughly broken" and "well planted" with good government. However, if Sir John Davies imagined a settled land without savage natives hostile to the cultural differences on offer, he proved to be gravely mistaken.

³ Ibid., fos. 12v–13.⁴ Davies, *Historical Tracts*, pp. 95–96.

The extensive, scientific, and carefully planned Plantation of Ulster during the early Stuart period excluded most Irish from the settled, agricultural areas of the planters. The *Articles of Plantation* looked to limit cultural conflicts by separating the natives from the newcomers, but the centrality of different attitudes to landscape and land use remained, with cultivated fields as the primary marker of civility as well as the principal target for those rejecting the imposition of social arrangements that relied on cultivation. Certainly, Gerard Boate's understanding of the causes of the plantation's destruction makes it clear that the differences associated with cultivation and civility in Ireland remained very much at the forefront of settler–native consciousness:

the whole land, where the English did dwell, or had any thing to doe, was filled with as goodly beasts, both cows and Sheep . . . the greatest part whereof hath been destroyed by those barbarians, the naturall inhabitants of Ireland, who not content to have murdered or expelled their English neighbours . . . endeavoured quite to extinguish the memory of them, and of all the civility and good things by them introduced amongst that wild Nation; and consequently in most places they did not only demolish the houses built by the English, the Gardens and Enclosures made by them, the Orchards and Hedges by them planted, but destroyed whole droves and flocks at once of English Cowes and Sheep.⁵

I hope, in the pages that follow, to trace the importance of cultivation and its relationship to the new ideas about civility in Tudor England and to show how they informed many of the strategies for settling, civilizing, and colonizing Ireland. In addition to the accounts of officials in Ireland and England, the book will examine how new views about cartography, surveying, material culture, and the threat posed by the barbarous customs of the Irish were all linked to concepts related to cultivation.

In the face of colonialist and post-colonialist thought, scholars working on Ireland began to debate the question of Ireland's status as a kingdom or colony in the early modern period.⁶ Eventually, many opted to position themselves as trimmers, sensibly pointing out that for much of its history Ireland was both. It was the very ambiguity of the island's constitutional position, however, that inspired English officials under the Tudors to try and develop a strategy or strategies that could resolve this damnable question. The contention here is that the revival

⁵ Boate, *Ireland's Naturall History*, p. 89.

⁶ Two prominent examples are Ohlmeyer, ed., *Political Thought; Canny, Kingdom and Colony*.

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John Patrick Montaña

Excerpt

[More information](#)

4 The Roots of English Colonialism in Ireland

of classical ideas about cultivation and land during the Renaissance not only resurrected the ancient ideology about the barbarism of nomadic or pastoral peoples, but also permitted English reformers to find – in the distinction between their own agricultural civility and the pastoral savagery of the Irish – an avenue leading to the cultural reformation of Ireland.⁷

Throughout this work, ideas about the inherent civility of cultivation and an agricultural society will inform the various chapters, each intended to examine the earliest strategies for the transformation, ordering, and improvement designed to be incorporated into the English state.⁸ While many of the policies studied here will be refined over the course of English imperial history, they nonetheless offer an introduction to the ideologies and strategies to be carried with colonialists for centuries, most obviously to the New World by some of the same adventurers we find in Tudor Ireland.⁹ In that sense, the present work differs from those which argue that there was no rhetoric of imperialism or any political, cultural, or economic empire until very late in English imperial history. I hope to show that along with classical and literary antecedents, the early colonial strategies are already apparent in the cartography and surveying of the Tudor regime as well as in the material culture and the hardening attitudes towards barbarous customs under Elizabeth.¹⁰

Several passages in the following pages refer to the writings of Gerald de Barri – the royal chaplain and relative of the earlier invaders variously known as Gerald of Wales and Giraldus Cambrensis – and the host of later commentators on Ireland.¹¹ The early Irish historian Geoffrey Keating condemned them all for writing “in imitation of Cambrensis ... because it is Cambrensis who is as the bull of the herd for them for writing the false history of Ireland, wherefore they had no choice of guide.”¹² All of these thinkers share an assumption about the

⁷ Shaw, “Meat Eaters”; Hadfield, “Briton and Scythian.”

⁸ Two recent works that incorporate the importance of cultivation in Tudor Ireland are Smyth, *Map-making, Landscapes and Memory*; and Maginn, “Civilizing” *Gaelic Leinster*.

⁹ Canny, “Ideology of English Colonization”; Canny, “Dominant Minorities”; Canny, “Origins of Empire.”

¹⁰ The leading proponents of the commercial and benign nature of early colonialism are Armitage, *Ideological Origins of the British Empire*; Andrews, *Trade, Plunder and Settlement*; Fitzmaurice, *Humanism and America*. Armitage touches on Ireland while the other works say little or nothing about it.

¹¹ Gerald de Barri was a grandson of Nesta and Gerald of Windsor, and the son of Guillaume de Barri; his uncles were among the most important lords who led the invasion of Ireland after 1169.

¹² Keating, *History of Ireland*, I:53.



1. The first Seal of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. The natives' desire for civility is indicated in the figure's asking the colonists to "Come over and help us."

importance of agriculture in shaping the landscape as well as the centrality of land use as the foundation for their strategies about reforming Ireland. This developing ideology is drawn from many of the greatest authorities from classical antiquity, most notably Virgil, Herodotus,

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John Patrick Montaña

Excerpt

[More information](#)

6 The Roots of English Colonialism in Ireland

Homer, and other Greek philosophers who predate the best-known Athenians and even Herodotus himself. At its core, the theory has two inseparable beliefs: first of all, that walls, cities, and cultivated fields are the essential marker of civilization; likewise, by way of antithesis, mobile, nomadic, or pastoral life is, therefore, a sign of savage barbarity. Put another way, the failure to live in settled communities, to build permanent dwellings, and to work the land is to reject civility and to refuse to progress beyond the indolent state of primitive man.¹³

Thanks largely to the influence of Gerald of Wales' *History and Topography of Ireland* and *The English Conquest of Ireland*, future commentators on Ireland comfortably adopted the premise that it was a land of nomads who neither farmed nor tilled their lands; instead they

live on beasts only, and live like beasts. They have not progressed at all from the primitive habits of pastoral living. While man usually progresses from the woods to the fields, and from the fields to settlements and communities of citizens, this people despises work on the land . . . Little is cultivated, and even less sown. The fields cultivated are so few because of the neglect of those who should cultivate them.¹⁴

Indeed, the idea of the Irish as a wild and savage people was so widely accepted that it informs ambassadorial reports to several European courts throughout the sixteenth century. The Venetian Ambassador wrote to the Signory of Venice about Scots allying with "10,000 Irishmen from that part of Ireland which the English call Savage-land (*selvagian*), whose inhabitants yield obedience to the Pope."¹⁵ The same assumptions traveled abroad with English Ambassadors in the middle of Elizabeth's reign, with Sir Henry Norris writing to the queen from Paris about the Earl of Thomond's arrival there: "As he is a barbarous man he wants neither vainglory [n]or deceitfulness, and yet in his talk is very simple." A later declaration, emanating from Rome, lamented the dishonorable "robbers and rovers" sent to govern Ireland, yet still repeated the belief that "the nobility of Ireland can bear no rule, but live as captives under them."¹⁶

The accounts and descriptions of Irish barbarity informed the discourse about Ireland throughout Europe in these years, with an Italian

¹³ Waswo, *Founding Legend*; Shaw, "Meat Eaters"; Herodotus, *Histories*, Virgil, *Aeneid*, Hesiod, *Works and Days*, and chapter 1 below.

¹⁴ Gerald of Wales, *History and Topography*, 3:93.

¹⁵ *CSP Venetian*, 1527–33, no. 811, Capello to the Signory, October 2, 1532. Capello sent an erroneous report about the killing of the Viceroy by "the so-called wild Irish who do not tender obedience to this king," *ibid.*, no. 846, Capello to the Signory, January 24, 1533.

¹⁶ *CSP Foreign*, 1569–71, no. 1155, Sir Henry Norris to the Queen, August 9, 1579; *ibid.*, 1579–80, Declaration of the Army of the Pope and Spain, March 1580.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-19828-8 - The Roots of English Colonialism in Ireland

John Patrick Montaña

Excerpt

[More information](#)

report on Ireland in 1554 sounding suspiciously like the *Expugnatio* of Gerald: “the Queen has Ireland, where Henry II went with a fleet and the greater part of those who held it surrendered themselves to him, they being all savages ... The men for the most part are still in great part wild [savages], but those subject to the English are generally more civilized.”¹⁷ But while English claims about the disordered state of Ireland may have been useful for defining themselves as the civilized, ordered, cultural alternative to their wild neighbors to the west, it also made the wild and papalist Irish a potential remedy for the spiritual cancer that was afflicting the Church of Rome.

The Catholic hierarchy’s and His Most Catholic Majesty’s obsession with heresy in the form of an unwed woman served as an excellent entrée for the wild Irish into the corridors of power in Rome and at the Spanish court. Gregory XIII told Philip II that he “has been again and again assured by certain Irishmen ... that there is now an excellent opportunity of delivering Ireland from impious tyranny, and subjecting it to the sway of his Majesty.” He went on to exhort the king to do “a grand thing, to wit, effecting the deliverance of a Catholic realm from the most grievous yoke of an impious Jezebel.” The Habsburgs, beset by William the Silent in the Netherlands, were anxious to support the Irish “on the flanks of that wicked woman, to harass her and wear her out as Orange has worn us out.”¹⁸ Ironically, written accounts of the rude, wild, violent, unreliable Irish were serving very effectively as recruiting tools for the queen’s enemies, thereby attracting far more adversaries, rather than the civilized inhabitants most plans imagined would settle the waste lands neglected by the natives.

The fact that these reports are a product of men who had never visited Ireland but were basing their accounts on information derived from English sources is extremely relevant to the present work. The vast majority of the sources cited here also come from English observers, many of them officials or adventurers with every reason to portray Ireland in a way that served to justify their particular strategy for its reformation. In particular, the emphasis on cultural difference, and eventually on the inevitability of the conflict between civility and cultivation on the one side, and savagery and barbarism on the other, made the characterization of Ireland and the Irish as uniformly pastoral, mobile, disordered, and unsettled an absolute necessity. As a result, the *Surveys, Accounts, Views, and Plans for the Reformation* of Ireland

¹⁷ *CSP Venetian*, 1534–54, no. 934, Report on England, 1554.

¹⁸ *CSP Rome*, II:287, Pope Gregory XIII to Philip II, November 10, 1576, *ibid.*, II:299, Cardinal Como to Don Juan, April 2, 1577. The cardinal was unable to refer to Elizabeth as anything but “that wicked woman,” see *ibid.*, II:327, 334, 361.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-19828-8 - The Roots of English Colonialism in Ireland

John Patrick Montaña

Excerpt

[More information](#)

8 The Roots of English Colonialism in Ireland

written by Tudor officials shared a uniformly reductive vision of an island without the basic elements of civilized life. Furthermore, in their desire to reveal a place desperately in need of reformation and civility, most eyewitnesses studiously ignored and omitted any evidence that might undermine their case. Indeed, the treatises on Irish society were to demonstrate how Ireland and the Irish were a fractured mirror that allowed the English to see the barbarous alternative to their own civility.¹⁹

In the seventeenth century, John Lynch wrote a three-volume response to Gerald of Wales, rightly noting in his *Cambrensis Eversus* that, “[Cambrensis] culled the most discreditable facts from the Irish annals, and suppressed those that eminently deserved to be recorded – like the leech which sucks out corruption, but leaves the sound humours untouched,” while Geoffrey Keating denied that most of the earlier *histories* even merited the name.²⁰ But what these later defenders of Irish culture failed to recognize is that so long as cultural differences or cultural superiority form the basis for a colonial or reforming strategy, then anything that draws attention to similarities or proximity undermines the Manichean discourse of inferiority versus superiority, barbarism versus civility. In Sartre’s view, there can be no hope for reconciliation, “one of them must triumph and the other be annihilated.”²¹ For these reasons, the repeated failures of Tudor reforms in Ireland functioned to reinforce the idea that the eventual efforts to eliminate the barbarous customs of the Irish were both laudatory and necessary for the sake of decency, peace, order, and stability. Therefore, in spite of regular reports of cultivated fields, the discovery of large stores of grain, and the existence (and confiscation) of impressive stone buildings, the tropes about nomadic society, waste lands, and no permanent dwellings continued to be reused and recycled as key elements in the strategies aiming to reduce Ireland to obedience.²² Likewise, the lengthy defenses of the need to destroy crops in order more effectively to subdue the native population never caused any doubts about the oft-repeated claims that the Irish refused to cultivate their lands.

Once we recognize that the representations are an essential aspect of the discourse, a discourse that relies on cultural difference to justify the strategies for the reformation and eventual settlement of Ireland, then

¹⁹ For Ireland as a “series of negative images of Englishness,” see Murphy, “Reviewing the Paradigm,” 35; Bradshaw, Hadfield, and Maley, *Representing Ireland*, introduction.

²⁰ Lynch, *Cambrensis Eversus*, III:501; Keating, *History of Ireland*, pp. 55–57.

²¹ JanMohamed, *Manichean Aesthetics*, pp. 4–5; Sartre, *Anti-Semite and Jew*, pp. 40–41; Murphy, *But the Irish Sea Betwixt Us*, pp. 4–6, 15–29, 47–67.

²² Hulme, *Colonial Encounters*, pp. 2–21.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-19828-8 - The Roots of English Colonialism in Ireland

John Patrick Montaña

Excerpt

[More information](#)

the misleading assertions about the Irish knowing nothing about arable farming, rarely engaging in trade, and not building permanent structures can be understood more clearly in their ideological context. The assumptions about Ireland's wasted and savage state are made plain on the map accompanying Gerald's *Topography*, a map that shows only the handful of ports that Henry took under his own protection, along with several rivers. Significantly, there is no evidence of inland centers, such as Armagh, Downpatrick, Kells, Kildare, Cashel, or Tuam, all of which were well known to Irish people as major medieval monastic centers with proto-urban functions.²³ But ignoring reality in Ireland was to prove a regular part of colonial discourse: the abundant fields of corn they encountered never interfered with the reformers' demands for the introduction of agriculture and husbandry; the fortifications they assaulted and drew on their maps rarely hindered the demands for urban settlements; and the constant denigration of the Irish for their inability to build in stone was possible only for those oblivious to "the excellent masonry displayed in the round-towers and the early Christian churches, which no one pretends to claim as Norman (or English) erections ... [W]here great durability and strength were the main objects, from time immemorial they [i.e. the Irish] use[d] stone."²⁴

But all these misconceptions become part of an important construct that underpins much early colonial theory; furthermore, the integrity and coherence of that construct must be maintained even when "haunted by the recurrent sameness of Irish difference," or in the face of considerable evidence to the contrary.²⁵ Scholars and officials from the sixteenth century to the present realized that the univocal descriptions of Ireland were disingenuous. In 1528 one Irish officer recommended "that raids be made to destroy the corn of the wild Irish, which is the chief punishment of the rebels," undeniable evidence that officials knew that the Irish produced and depended on their corn harvests. Robert Cowley, advocate of reinhabiting Irish lands, told Cromwell in 1536 that "the living of the Irishry consists in their corn and cattle," and if either were destroyed they would be past recovering or annoying another subject. In the course of Lord Deputy Grey's depredations he took "Castle Geshyll [with] corn enough to sustain 1000 men for a year." In the same abbey he also found "a peyer of orgons, and other ... thinges for the Kynges collage of Maynoth, and as muche glas as glasisd part of the windous of the chyrche of the seid collage, and much dell

²³ Simms, "Core and Periphery," 24; Delaney, "Archaeology of the Irish Town," 48–50.

²⁴ Webb, "The Clan of the MacQuillins of Antrim," 266.

²⁵ Murphy, "Reviewing the Paradigm," 34. For another view of the use of barbarism to justify English rule in Ireland, see Carroll, "Barbarous Slaves and Civil Cannibals."

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-19828-8 - The Roots of English Colonialism in Ireland

John Patrick Montaña

Excerpt

[More information](#)

10 The Roots of English Colonialism in Ireland

of the windous of His Graces castell of Maynoth.”²⁶ This was quite a haul of corn and precious material from a land that was believed to be devoid of both.

The reliance on a rhetoric of barbarism and difference demanded that the assumptions about the lack of arable farming and permanent buildings be sustained in most reformist tracts. The cavalcade of soldiers and officials heading to Ireland in search of forfeited monastic properties did little to curtail the flow of reports about the natives’ habit of living without structures. Similarly, the carefully designed plans to transform the sturdy monastic buildings into a strong and defensible ring of forts to help secure the Pale in 1537 never seemed to challenge the official accounts about the Irish architectural void, nor did Conn O’Neill’s refusal to obey a summons to Dundalk in September “when the corn of his country is likely to be ripe and in rick or stack.”²⁷ Most importantly, ironically for a country convinced of Irish barbarity owing to their refusal to cultivate and work their lands, England consistently resorted to military tactics that targeted cultivated fields of Irish corn, knowing full well that the Irish depended on their produce to survive. The 1st Earl of Essex was careful to detail how he drove out the locals who left “their corne behynde them, wch I have all wasted & spoyled, together wth such habitacions as they had in that place ... [Thus they] are dryven into grat extremytie. Ffor theyr corne beinge dystroyed in my journey to the Leefor ... they ... doe lyve altogether upon feeshe.”²⁸

In sum, there is evidence throughout the archives, and therefore available to officials in Tudor government, that makes it clear that the imagined society of Irish nomads awaiting civility and reformation never existed. What remains, however, is the mass of documentation that represents Ireland and the Irish according to the conventional terms of nomadic barbarism: mobile, disordered, pastoral, and savage. A fine example of this disjunction is the account of Fynes Moryson, a leading promoter of notions of Irish barbarity who accompanied Baron Mountjoy as he mopped up the rebels after the battle of Kinsale in 1601. Moryson’s abhorrence of Irish customs is well known, but the State Papers are filled with the lord deputy’s letters discussing both

²⁶ *L & P Henry VIII*, IV:2, 1526–28/4510, Tuke to Vannes, July 14, 1528; *ibid.*, X, 1536/1049, Cowley to Cromwell, 1536; *ibid.*, XII:2, 1537/1300, Grey to the King, December 31, 1537 and also *SP Henry VIII*, II:529.

²⁷ Lyons, “Revolt and Reaction”; *L & P Henry VIII*, XVI, 1540–41/1127, July 1541.

²⁸ PRO SP 63/50/4, Essex to Privy Council, March 10, 1575. For evidence of economic organization and trade in an Irish lordship, see Breen, *Lordship of the O’Sullivan Beare*. English adventurers were anxious to get their hands on the well-established fishing rights in several areas, see the account in O’Mahoney, “Baltimore, the O’Driscolls.”