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Christopher Morash
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Introduction: Ireland and the world

There is a map, originally prepared for Lucien Febvre and Henri-Jean Martin's *L'Apparition du livre* in 1958, but reprinted frequently since, which shows the spread of printing in Europe before 1500. Little clusters of dots, densely packed around centres such as Venice and Strasbourg, more sparsely scattered elsewhere, indicate the first appearance of printed books in the half century after Gutenberg's introduction to Europe of moveable type in the 1450s. It is one of those clear, useful maps that unfolds for its reader an entire history at a glance, tracing the footprints of the new technology along trade routes and over the Alps, as it defines a new geography of knowledge.

For the Irish reader, however, this map tells a different story – although perhaps not the one its authors intended. The map's legend, explaining the meaning of the variously shaped dots, is placed squarely in the upper left-hand corner, completely blotting out the entire island of Ireland. In the early history of the printed word, Ireland simply does not exist.

If we move forward to the year 2004, the journal *Foreign Policy* published a bar graph, like a silhouetted cityscape, showing what it considered to be the sixty-two most globalised countries in the world, based on four criteria: economic integration, personal contact, technological connectivity and political engagement. For the third year in a row, towering over the rest of the world, as 'the most globalized country in the world', was Ireland, ahead of Singapore and Switzerland in second and third place, well clear both of the United States in seventh place and of the United Kingdom in twelfth. Ireland's new status as the world's most globalised nation was buoyed not only by massive amounts of foreign inward investment, but also by being among the most connected countries on the planet, ranking seventh, for instance, in the number of secure internet servers per capita.

In a sense, this book is about the territory between these two points; it is the story of how a particular culture, with a particular history, interacted

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with a succession of new media – of which print is the earliest – all of which have a distinctive history in Ireland, but none of which originated in Ireland. When a German goldsmith, Johann Gutenberg, cut the first moveable type in Europe, he was changing Irish history. So too was Tim Berners-Lee when he wrote the code that would form the basis of the World Wide Web; but neither technological development would have an immediate impact on Ireland, and neither would have exactly the same impact on Ireland that they would have in other parts of the world.

Turning back to Febvre and Martin's map, the spine of early print-works from Mainz, where Gutenberg printed his Bible in the months just before August, 1456, to Lausanne and Grenoble, is, of course, the cradle of the Reformation; and, indeed, it has long been argued that the development of print made possible the Reformation, just as the string of early printers along the Italian coast, from Urbino, through Florence to Venice, map on to the centres we associate with the Renaissance. This equation of print with the Reformation and the Renaissance is so familiar that it is worth conjuring up, as Elizabeth L. Eisenstein does in *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change*, a 'counter-factual' past, in which the invention of the printing press might have been 'welcomed and put to entirely different uses – monopolized by priests and rulers, for example, and withheld from free-wheeling urban entrepreneurs.'[1] In a sense, Ireland in the sixteenth century was that 'counter-factual' land. A late adopter of print culture – the first book was not published in Ireland until 1551 – in Ireland print was not so much the cause of a Reformation, as the product of the Reformation in England.

That this kind of reversal of cause and effect is possible in an Irish context should warn us against any simple kind of technological determinism, one that would retrospectively see the effects of any given new media as inevitable. Certainly, innovations in media technology can have social and cultural effects. There is little doubt, for instance, that had moveable type (or something like it) not been developed in the middle of the fifteenth century, European history would have taken a different course. At the same time, there is no guarantee that any given society will adopt a new technology simply because it is new or better; nor is there any guarantee that, if it is introduced, it will have a predictable effect; or, indeed, if we can be reasonably sure of anything in this regard, it is that the effect of a given media technology has as much to do with the culture in which it arrives as it does with the nature of the technology itself. So, if

[1] Elizabeth L. Eisenstein, *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change*, Vol. II (Cambridge, 1979), 703.

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we consider the history of the mediated world from the perspective of a country such as Ireland, which is both part of Europe and yet has had a particular experience of colonisation, we get a very different perspective on the effects of the printing press, for instance, than we would if we looked at the same history from the perspective of Florence, Paris or London; and the same is true of the telegraph, or cinema, radio, television or the internet.

If an Irish perspective on the media allows us to see the history of the media differently, the opposite is also true: a media-history perspective on Irish history helps us to trace, over time, some of the ways life in Ireland has been shaped by, and has shaped, media technologies. If, for instance, we take it that geography has been a determining factor in Irish life, then it is worth thinking about the Irish sense of peripherality, of being on the balcony of Europe, and the ways in which this sense can ebb or flow with forms of media that are more or less constrained by geography. 'Oh, she is as mad', the character of Murrogh O'Dogherty complains of his wife in Charles Macklin's play *The True-Born Irishman* in 1762. 'The devil a thing in this poor country but what gives her the spleen, and the vapours – then such a phrenzy of admiration for every thing in England.'[2] To a large extent in the Dublin of the eighteenth century, that 'phrenzy' was the product of a thriving print culture, both in London and in Dublin, that carried accounts of London social, cultural and political life to avid Irish readers, for whom the very fact that such accounts could only be experienced in mediated form was a mark of their coloniality, their peripherality. In some ways, a similar moment occurred again, although in a different form, when cinema came to Ireland in the early decades of the twentieth century, and again when television arrived in the late 1950s and early 1960s, and the experience of watching American Westerns, for instance, helped contribute to a distinctive sense of being part of a cultural formation whose centre was elsewhere. By contrast, other media created something quite different, in the form of a simultaneous field with no centre and no periphery; there was a hint of this possibility in 1858, when the first trans-Atlantic telegraph cable ran from Valentia, in County Kerry, and suddenly made Mallow a suburb of New York, and Ireland a hub of a new telecommunications geography. That geography was reshaped again in the 1920s, during the early days of radio, when voices suddenly began flooding into Ireland from all over the world. And it would be transformed most fully and most radically in the final decade of

[2] Charles Macklin, *The True-Born Irishman* (Dublin, 1783), 8.

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the twentieth century, with digital media that not only create a new spaceless geography, but are increasingly subsuming all earlier media within them.

This book attempts to trace this fluctuating world of mediated experience from an Irish perspective; of feeling both connected to, and at times distant from, a world that is outside of Ireland – and thereby demarcating the imagined space that is Ireland in the process. It is in this sense a history of the way in which Irish people have presented themselves to one another. From this point of view, it is a materialist history, a history of things: of books, railroads, canals, telegraph lines, cinema screens, phonograph cylinders, radio transmitters, fibre-optic cables and the ways in which they are produced, regulated and traded. What it is not is a history of oral culture. Words spoken from one person to another, unmediated by print or a radio microphone or a camera, are a kind of wild zone, falling outside of such a history. So, this book comes with a *caveat*: any claims that it makes must be qualified by the recognition that in parallel to the mediated Irish world, there is another world, a world of talk, of face-to-face conversation. Its importance in Irish culture is proverbial – but that in itself may well be, at least in part, a product of the history traced here.

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CHAPTER 1

'Stumpeworne letters': 1551–1660

BEGINNINGS

By the year 1500, more than fifty printing presses had been established in Germany; in Italy, seventy-two; in France, forty-one.

In Ireland, there were none.

It would not be until almost a century after Johann Gutenberg published his Bible in 1456 that the first book was printed in Ireland. In 1541, Henry VIII declared himself King of Ireland, signalling a new seriousness in the English project of governing Ireland that had been pursued in fits and starts since the twelfth century. As part of this initiative, under the Lord Deputyship of Sir Anthony St Leger in 1550, a London bookseller, Humphrey Powell, was granted £20 by an Act of the Privy Council in London to set up a printworks in Dublin. A year later, in 1551, he printed the earliest known Irish book, *The Boke of Common Praier* of the Anglican communion.

While this might seem superficially similar to the first moments of European print culture elsewhere (at least in that the first book printed was a religious book), the differences between Mainz and Dublin were profound. Gutenberg was a goldsmith by profession, who developed moveable type with the help of an investment from a Mainz lawyer; hence, from what little documentation exists, it would seem that their choice of the Bible as the first book to print was, to a some extent, a prescient piece of market calculation. Powell's Dublin press, on the other hand, did not arise out of an indigenous culture, nor did it respond to a need in the marketplace. In any case, Powell certainly did not see his Irish monopoly as much of a business opportunity, for in the following seventeen years he appears to have printed only three other sheets of paper: *A Proclamacyon set fourth … Against Shane O'Neil* (1561); a similar proclamation against the 'rebels of the O'Conors' (1564), and *A Brefe Declaration of Certein Principall Articles of Religion* (1567) – after which he retired, presumably not unduly exhausted by his labours.

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It would be wrong, however, to blame Humphrey Powell for Ireland's less than spectacular entry into the world of print. A contrast with the situation in England is useful here. In 1557, shortly after Powell was given his Irish patent, Queen Mary established the Stationers' Company, and gave them control over nearly all the printers in England. While this had the effect of maintaining a measure of state control, it also permitted competition among licensed printers within a regulated marketplace. As a result, printing thrived. In Ireland, restricting the function of print to religious works and proclamations assigned to print a very limited, and (for the vast majority of the population) oppositional role in the culture. Printing a proclamation rather than having it copied by hand was not done out of necessity, given that most were only a single sheet, and they do not appear to have been distributed in great numbers in any case. The point in printing a proclamation or ordinance was a public display of the technological prowess of the administration. In a society in which the press was tightly controlled, a printed proclamation, whatever else it said, always made one clear statement on behalf of the colonial administration to the population as a whole: we have the technology to do this (and you do not).

The initial impact of print in Ireland, then, was to draw yet another line of division in a culture that was already riven with fissures of linguistic, religious, political, familial and ethnic allegiances. That print was to be an instrument in the Crown's efforts to reassert control in Ireland, and to push forward the parallel project of extending the English Reformation to Ireland, was further underlined in 1571, when, under the Lord Deputyship of Sir Henry Sidney, Queen Elizabeth paid for the first set of Irish type to be cut. From this set of letters, an anonymous printer (possibly John Kearney, the Treasurer of St Patrick's Cathedral), produced the first printed book in Irish in Ireland, *Aibidil Gaoidheilge agus Caiticiosma* (illustration 1). Along with the very first book printed in Irish, *Foirm na nUrrnuidheadh* (which was produced by an Edinburgh press in 1567), *Aibidil* would be the first of many attempts to use print to provide a reformed catechism for an Irish-language readership, 'for the glory of God and the queen of this realm'. However, *Aibidil* is more than simply a catechism. Near the front of the book, it presents its reader with a three-column table, beginning (on the left, where the eye would fall first) with a letter from the new Irish type; followed by its phonetic equivalent, which is followed in turn by the roman equivalent. As a book, *Aibidil* thus shows an excited, self-conscious awareness that it is performing an act of translation – or perhaps, more precisely, an act of conversion – in

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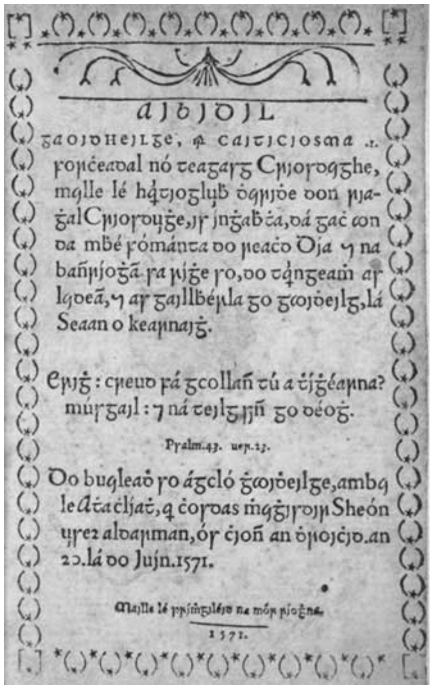
AIBIDIL
GAOIDHEILGE, & CAITICIOSMA .i.
forċeadal nó teagasg Críostaighe,
maille lé hairtioglaibh áirighe don riagalCríostaighe, is inghabhṫa, dá gach aon da mbé fománta do reacht Dia & na banríoghna sa ríghe so, do tarraingeadh as laidean, & as gaillbhéarla go gaoidheilg, lá Seaan o Kearnaigh.

Eirigh: créud fá gcollann tú a tigheárna? múscail: & ná teilg sinn go deóigh.

Psalm.43. ver.23.

Do buaileadh so ágcló gaoidheilge, a mbaile Atha cliath, a ccostas maighistir Sheón ussher aldarman, ós cionn an droichid an 20. lá do Juin.1571.

Maille lé priuiléid na mór ríoghna.
1571.

Illustration 1. *Aibidil Gaoidheilge agus Caiticiosma*, the first book printed in Irish in Ireland, was produced with specially cut type in 1571. It would be the first of many attempts to provide an Irish-language readership with a reformed catechism.

bringing the Irish language into print, mediating between manuscript, print and the sounds of language.

The existence of an Irish typeface as early as 1571 raises an obvious question: why did the first printed book in Irish not appear under the patronage of a Gaelic, or an Old English nobleman? While it is always slightly suspect from an historical point of view to ask why something did *not* happen, it is worth speculating why sixteenth-century Gaelic Ireland never developed its own print culture (just as it never developed its own theatre). While the Lords Deputy kept tight control of the Dublin printworks, their control of anything outside of Dublin was far from complete. At the very least, it could be said that there have certainly been other times and other places in which illegal hand presses operated under much more watchful eyes than those that looked out over large stretches of Connaught and Ulster in the sixteenth century.

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In the first instance, to say that Gaelic Ireland had no printing presses is not to say that it had no books. Ireland had been producing manuscript books for a very long time prior to the arrival of print in the 1550s. The earliest surviving Irish manuscripts date from the seventh century, but in some cases appear to have been based on even earlier written texts, now lost. Still, an astounding amount of material survives; and, even more remarkably, much of it is not in Latin, but in the vernacular, Irish. The arrival of print – at least initially – had little impact on the practice of copying books by hand in Ireland, which would continue for certain texts well into the nineteenth century. To understand the culture in which these manuscripts were produced and circulated, however, it is worth remembering that they were part of a complex and highly formalised oral tradition. 'The *seanchas* [law] of the men of Ireland, what has sustained it?' asks the author of an eighth-century legal document, *An Seanchas Mór*. 'The joint memory of the old men, transmission from one ear to another, the chanting of the *filid*, supplementation from the law of the letter.'[1] In the case of legal texts, as with other forms of knowledge in Gaelic culture, manuscripts would often appear to have achieved fullness of meaning only when read in conjunction with knowledge that had been transmitted orally.

It could well have been the case that sixteenth-century Gaelic Ireland was a classic instance of a culture in which one kind of information technology was so tightly entangled with other kinds of social networks that innovation offended powerful vested interests – in this case, the families of hereditary scholars, bards and *filid*, whose guardianship of both manuscripts and orature provided them with access to knowledge and to power. There is certainly at least one document from the period that suggests members of traditional bardic families felt that that their hereditary craft was incompatible with the new world of print. 'I have decided on another profession, to abandon Gaelic poetry,' wrote Giolla Brighde Ó hEoghusa to a friend, explaining his decision to become a Franciscan friar in Leuven.

> It is not hatred of my forefather's art that has unsettled my mind; nor the fact that the honour which was once bestowed on it by the Irish race has disappeared.

[1] Cited in Jane Stevenson, 'Literacy and Orality in Early Modern Ireland', in *Cultural Identity and Cultural Integration: Ireland and Europe in the Early Middle Ages*, ed. Doris Edel (Dublin, 1995), 11–22, 13.

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Though our knowledge of them is small, it is the study of learned books – the most noble profession known to me – that has enticed me away from you.[2]

For those not 'enticed away', it may have been that the fundamentally local nature of extended family ties within Gaelic society meant that there was no pressing need for new instruments of mass communication, at least within Ireland,

At the same time, any need to spread ideas further afield could be better met through Continental printing presses. The centrality of the Catholic Church to Gaelic culture meant that many Irish scholar-clerics had access to a Europe-wide network of Catholic printers, from Paris to Leuven (where the Franciscans opened their own printshop) to Rheims. Indeed, as early as the 1490s, Maurice O'Fihely – born in Baltimore, County Cork, and later Archbishop of Tuam – was principal corrector at Octavian Schott's press in Venice, which published his *Enchiridion fidei* in 1500.[3] More than a century later, Thomas Messingham published his *Florilegium sanctorum, sue vitae et acta sanctorum Hiberniae* in Paris in 1624, and other Irish writers published works with the press established in 1611 by the Franciscans in St Anthony's College, Leuven.

Indeed, it has been argued that the Franciscan press in Leuven was to have a profound effect on the development of modern Irish. The Franciscans realised that if they were to counter the effect of Protestant works such as the *Aibidil*, they would need to use a written form of Irish that was more direct, and less ornate than that which had evolved in bardic culture, particularly with work that they were translating from other European languages. 'Our aim in writing is not to teach Irish but repentance,' wrote Aodh Mac Aingil, in his devotional work, *Scáthán Shacramuinte na hAithridhe*, published in Leuven in 1618. 'The trauma of the seventeenth century had, in a one sense, a curiously liberatory effect,' observes one historian of translation. 'The emphasis on greater simplicity and communicative effectiveness that guided the translation work in Leuven and elsewhere would embolden others in their rejection of strict adherence to bardic conventions.'[4] In other words, one lineage of modern Irish leads

[2] Cited in Katharine Simms, 'Literacy and the Irish Bards', in *Literacy in Medieval Celtic Societies*, ed. Huw Pryce (Cambridge, 1998), 238–58, 253.
[3] Robert Welch, 'The Book in Ireland from the Tudor Re-conquest to the Battle of the Boyne', in *The Cambridge History of the Book in Britain*, Vol. IV, ed. John Barnard and D.F. McKenzie (Cambridge, 2002), 701–18, 704.
[4] Cited in (and translated by) Michael Cronin, *Translating Ireland: Translation, Languages, Cultures* (Cork, 1996), 63.

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back to the printing press in Leuven, and an attempt to adapt the language to the new medium of print.

Insofar as the press in Leuven was a Counter-Reformation response to the Dublin press, it could be said that the publication of the *Aibidil* did have an important, if largely unintended, indirect effect. And yet, in other ways, it now appears almost like a book existing in a vacuum, produced only because there was a powerful ideological logic that it should exist. Nonetheless, this same emerging evangelical imperative to see the word of God in every possible language was enough to carry the project of printing in Irish forward, and in 1587 the Irish type cut for the *Aibidil* was passed on to William Kearney (a nephew of John Kearney, who had died in 1581), who was given the right to print the New Testament in Irish. Kearney arrived in Ireland in 1592, the same year that Trinity College Dublin, was founded, and by 1595 he was based in the College, where he printed a partial New Testament. As Queen's Printer, he also picked up Powell's old business of printing proclamations, with the innovation that his proclamation against Hugh O'Neill, for instance, was printed bilingually, in both English and Irish. In the end, the fact that the first printed Bible in Irish, and a proclamation outlawing one of the leaders of Gaelic Ireland should both have been produced with different combinations of the same pieces of moveable type can stand as an icon of the place of Irish in the attenuated print culture of sixteenth-century Ireland.

'UTTERLY LOST, AND BURIED IN OBLIVION'

The trickle of print in any language in the Ireland of the sixteenth century – eight items in fifty years – does not mean, however, that there were no printed books in Ireland in the early seventeenth century; quite the contrary. A catalogue of the library of the ninth Earl of Kildare, Gerald Fitzgerald, from 1526, for instance, lists ninety-two items, many of which were printed, including a copy of Sir Thomas More's *Utopia*, first published in 1516.[5] As early as 1545, a Dublin stationer, James Dartas, was selling books in Dublin, and there is some evidence to suggest that there were books printed in London prior to 1550 specifically for the Dublin market.[6] Gradually, then, books were creeping into the country,

[5] Elizabeth Boran, 'Libraries and Collecting, 1550–1700', in *The Oxford History of the Irish Book*, Vol. III: *The Book in English 1550–1800*, ed. Raymond Gillespie and Andrew Hadfield (Oxford, 2006), 91–110, 97.

[6] Raymond Gillespie, 'Print Culture 1550–1700', in *The Oxford History of the Irish Book*, Vol. III: *The Book in English 1550–1800*, ed. Gillespie and Hadfield, 17–33, 18.

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