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Literature and Elizabethan Imperial Expansion

Patricia Palmer

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## *Introduction*

We traffic with time in the arts of language, and with history  
and its events.

Robert Welch, *Changing States*, p. 4

The Elizabethan conquest of Ireland is that point in history where the fortunes of two languages briefly intersect, then spectacularly diverge. For one, the conquest marks the inaugural episode of its imperialist expansion. For the other, it is the originary moment of a language shift that constitutes the great drama of Irish cultural history. The present book, written from the perspective of an Irish anglophone awkwardly aware that those troubled origins continue to shadow Irish speech, explores how far that moment of encounter throws light on an enduring paradox: that Irish literature in English – a literature rooted in the silencing of Irish and animated by that rupture – itself participates in that most Elizabethan of concepts, ‘the triumph of English’.

A sense of discontinuity, self-estrangement, of living beyond the faultline of a fractured tradition haunts Irish writing. Anglophone Ireland, cut off from its Irish-speaking antecedents, is ‘adrift among the accidents of translation’ (Thomas Davis, quoted in Lloyd, ‘Translator as Refractor’, p. 145). The ‘semantics of remembrance’ are impaired; cultural amnesia is inescapable: ‘there no longer exists any inherited reservoir of meaning’ (Steiner, *After Babel*, p. 494; Kearney, *Transitions*, p. 13). The past is available only in translation and not everything – not much – can jump the gap. In a context where ‘mother tongue’ and ‘native language’ do not necessarily seem synonymous, language is made strange. Declan Kiberd’s *Idir Dhá Chultúr* captures in its title – ‘Between Two Cultures’ – the displacement of modern Irish literature which, he argues, sprouts in the cracks between the two languages. When an Irish writer like Samuel

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Beckett takes up his pen, argues David Wheatley, ‘titeann scáth teanga trasna a shaothair’ (the shadow of language falls across his work<sup>1</sup>) (‘Beckett’, p. 17). A sense of being exiled from ‘another tradition, encoded in the lost language of a nation’ complicates Irish writers’ relationship with their medium (Boland, *Object Lessons*, pp. 80–1).

The most complete expression of the predicament comes in the final chapter of James Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, a chapter threaded through with fragmentary allusions to ‘the age of Dowland and Byrd and Nash’ (p. 210). When the English Dean queries his use of ‘tundish’, Stephen feels ‘with a smart of dejection that the man to whom he was speaking was a countryman of Ben Jonson’. His sense of holding imperfect title to the language he speaks, of never being fully at home in it, is the simultaneously uncomfortable and enabling perspective of Irish writing in English:

The language in which we are speaking is his before it is mine . . . His language, so familiar and so foreign, will always be for me an acquired speech. I have not made or accepted its words. My voice holds them at bay. My soul frets in the shadow of his language. (p. 172)

Dowland, Byrd, Nash, Jonson . . . Tell-tale flashes of historical consciousness return us time and again to the Elizabethan source of the quandary. Seamus Heaney, ‘a wood-kerne / Escaped from the massacre’ (‘Exposure’), seeks to ‘re-enter memory’ (‘Bone Dreams’) but hears only the ‘Soft voices of the dead’: ‘I cock my ear / at an absence’ (‘Gifts of Rain’). His laconically ambivalent formula, ‘We are to be proud / Of our Elizabethan English’, marks out the distance separating ‘us’ from the Elizabethans who ‘tell of us’ – and it explains his recoil from the ‘whinging’ MacMorris, ‘gallivanting / round the Globe’ (‘Traditions’). In ‘Ocean’s love to Ireland’, he reconfigures the sixteenth-century conquest as a linguistic rape: Raleigh ‘Speaking broad Devonshire . . . drives inland’; ‘The ruined maid complains in Irish’. After her spoliation, ‘Iambic drums / Of English beat the woods.’

John Montague’s *The Rough Field*, too, meditates on the legacy of a colonialism that was, to a striking degree, linguistic. Montague feels keenly the ‘harsh . . . humiliation’ of growing ‘a second tongue’ (p. 39); ‘A Severed Head’, interleaved with woodcuts of conquest from John Derricke’s *The Image of Irelande*, provides an oblique and halting commentary on the long legacy of the Elizabethan campaign:

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Dumb  
 bloodied, the severed  
 head now chokes to  
 speak another tongue. (p. 39)

These fleeting apparitions of the Elizabethan moment are doubly revealing. Historical intuition draws writers to this pivotal episode in the encounter between Irish and English; scholars' commensurate inattention to the linguistic face of the conquest, however, reduces their access to a fuller engagement with it. The problem is illustrated by Frank McGuinness's *Mutabilitie*, set in Kilcolman during the Nine Years War. Theatrically, the stage is shared among the English characters, 'Edmund' the poet and 'William' the playwright, and an Irish woman poet, 'File', a dispossessed chieftain, Sweney, and his queen, Maeve. Linguistically, however, no alterity is recognised; the play reproduces the colonial texts' effacement of Irish. In the world of *Mutabilitie*, the triumph of English is already accomplished. McGuinness's elision of Irish goes beyond the conventions necessary for mediating a diglossic world to an English-speaking audience.<sup>2</sup> His alterations to his source text, *A View of the Present State of Ireland*, erase Spenser's acknowledgement of the potency of Irish. Whereas Spenser writes 'the speech being Irish, the heart must needs be so, for out of the abundance of the heart, the tongue speaketh', 'Edmund' says 'Out of the abundance of the heart, the tongue speaks, and here it speaks of Rome' (*View*, p. 68; *Mutabilitie*, p. 48). By substituting 'Rome' for 'Irish', McGuinness is anachronistically privileging religious over linguistic nationalism. Hugh, the chieftain's son, refuses William's request to 'speak to me in your own language' with the retort 'You are hearing my own language' (p. 68). The effect of representing sixteenth-century Munster as uncomplicatedly anglophone is deeply problematic. Edmund speaks commanding Spenserian prose;<sup>3</sup> William descants Shakespearean sonnets (p. 23); the natives, culturally unhoused neophytes astray in a richly textured world of English, have access only to howls, hobbling rhymes (p. 43) and inarticulate violence: 'Revenge, beautiful word. Say it' (p. 28). Almost inevitably, given the natives' linguistic disadvantage, *Mutabilitie*, with its pastiche *hommage* to *King Lear* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, links their empowerment to English. This leads McGuinness into ascribing anachronistic sentiments of cultural dependency – 'I require your eloquence' (p. 23) – to a sixteenth-century *file* who is made to prophesy improbably that an English poet 'shall give us

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the gift of tongues' (p. 2).<sup>4</sup> McGuinness's engagement with the seminal moment of linguistic encounter is circumscribed precisely because its perspective is that of most literary critics on 'Elizabethan Ireland', that give-away term. Like such critics, it is positioned on the far side of the break, deep inside an anglophone universe of discourse. It is in dialogue only with the canonical English texts and so it replicates their elision of Irish and of its worldview.

Such exiguous attention as the language encounter has so far attracted has focused on the nineteenth century, the century of 'silence', and on the subsequent demographics of decline (Kinsella, 'Divided Mind', p. 209; cf. Welch, *Changing States*; Hindley, *Death of the Irish Language*); the originary moment of the encounter, the sixteenth century, is ignored almost completely. This is to write history as autopsy. To focus on the silence as it settles rather than on the intensity and engagement of its sixteenth-century prelude is intellectually confining: we lose the chance to understand how power intersects with language and to study the patterns of resistance and accommodation as they are set down. But it is also impoverishing at a simpler, human level: to concentrate only on the silent prevents us from listening in to the urgent volubility of their sixteenth-century antecedents. 'Elizabethan' Ireland is the last moment when a confident Irish-speaking world confronts its English nemesis and, as its moment slips away, records its loss and makes its adjustments. The Elizabethan tracts of conquest defused Irish-speakers' insistent contestation by suppressing their expression textually; not to attempt now to reconstruct the polyphony and incipient hybridity of the encounter is to repeat that effacement. It is to truncate our understanding of the past by tuning in to one set of voices only and to elide our perspective with those with whom we share – or have come to share – a common language. 'The Elizabethan mind', Foster tells us, 'found the native Irish . . . incomprehensible' (*Modern Ireland*, p. 9). That incomprehension was, at its simplest level, linguistic; it is all too easy to replay that lack of understanding and to collapse our horizon of interpretation with that of the Elizabethan texts – as Foster himself does by remarking that 'the English colonial presence in Ireland remained superimposed upon an ancient identity, *alien and bizarre*' (p. 3; my emphasis).

'Maireann lorg an phinn, ach ní mhaireann an béal a chan' (The trace of the pen lives on, but not the mouth that sang). The proverb captures an imbalance, pronounced in colonial contexts, which this

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work is concerned with addressing – an imbalance which critical practice has often been more successful in replicating than in challenging. New Historicism with its ‘reciprocal concern with the historicity of texts and the textuality of history’ (Montrose, ‘Professing the Renaissance’, p. 20) is useful in sanctioning my own recourse to non-literary texts of conquest – State Papers, account books, campaign journals, statutes, depositions, trial reports – in seeking to reconstruct the linguistic corollary of the conquest. But less enabling is its paradoxical mesmerism with the colonial canon: Christopher Highley, for instance, spectacularly consigns Irish-language writers of the period to a footnote: they ‘remain outside the discourse of Ireland as I define it’ (*Crisis*, p. 164, fn. 2). Nor does mainstream postcolonial practice greatly advance matters. As well as being strangely ill-adapted to the early modern period (Adorno, ‘Colonial Discourse’), its inclination to think in polarities such as European/Other tends to ‘make Ireland invisible’ (Miller, *Invested with Meaning*, p. 18). When writing about early modern Ireland, postcolonialists’ fixation on English literary texts – once more unto the breach with *Henry V* – quite unintentionally ends up representing colonial discourse as triumphantly omnipotent. Said salutes writers like Friel who ‘can truly read the great colonial masterpieces’ and write back (*Culture and Imperialism*, p. 35). But it is not enough just to read the ‘colonial masterpieces’: the ‘minorpieces’ of the colonised also must be read. The ‘trace of the pen’ left by sixteenth-century Irish is faint: fewer than a hundred manuscripts from the period survive (Ó Cuív, ‘Irish Language’, p. 513); fewer still – bardic poems and annals – have a place in our story; as the endpieces of a broken tradition, they have not travelled as well in time as the ‘colonial masterpieces’. Yet, they represent an essential counterpoint to the voluminous colonial record. Equally, one must read with an eye for what did not get written. Though the colonial texts systematically exclude ‘the mouth that sings’ in Irish, critical approaches such as feminism help us to recover the voices of the silenced or, failing that, alert us to the strategies that silenced them.

To escape the temporal and theoretical impediments that block our engagement with the sixteenth-century encounter, I have found it necessary to escape a spatial one as well. Seán Ó Tuama muses that the Tudors’ ‘subjugation of Ireland may well have been unique in the attention they paid to cultural as well as territorial conquest’ (‘Gaelic Culture’, p. 28). That conviction, which holds up poorly

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against comparisons with French and Spanish colonial practice, results in the kind of insular and, at times, rancorous victimhood that marks De Fréine's *The Great Silence* and which is never far from the surface in Kinsella's *The Dual Tradition*. But the Irish case, though often portrayed as a unique misfortune (Lee, *Ireland*, p. 663), and while unusual in a European context, is by no means singular. The Tudor (re)conquest of Ireland is part of a much larger pattern of sixteenth-century colonial expansion. It comes sandwiched between the massive Spanish *empresa* in the New World and England's first colonial ventures in the Americas. To view linguistic colonisation in Ireland from that broader spatial perspective, in a manner prepared for by historians like Nicholas Canny, but never followed up by those studying language, allows us to situate events in Ireland in their wider historical context. The great advantage of the broader spatial perspective is that it expands our theoretical framework as well. It opens up the possibility of transferring to the study of linguistic colonisation in Ireland the methodologies and discursive practices which have uncovered the philosophical underpinnings and practical procedures of Spanish linguistic colonisation.

This book seeks to understand the nature of the encounter between Irish and English under the press of the Elizabethan conquest and to reinsert Irish interlocutors into the discussion in a way that avoids replacing a colonial imbalance with a postcolonial one – one that turns the colonists into the critic's 'Other'. In doing so I am indebted, imaginatively and procedurally, to the 'New World' scholarship. I draw on writers like Francis Affergan, whose analysis of colonial and anthropological strategies of silencing also explores how the voice of the other can be brought back into dialogue; or like Le Clézio, who finds a way to let 'le silence . . . immense, terrifiant' that followed the *conquista* resonate (*Rêve mexicain*, p. 231).

This work analyses the engagement between Irish and English from, roughly, Elizabeth I's accession in 1558 to the flight of the earls in 1607. Chapter 1 draws on the 'Spanish-American' model to establish a methodological framework for exploring how language and power move into alignment in the context of conquest. Chapters 2, 3 and 4 uncover the pattern of Elizabethan linguistic colonisation in its paired guises of denigrating Irish and promoting English. Chapters 2 and 3 examine how the Elizabethans' textual elision of Irish and their negative evaluations of it prepared for their strategy of silencing. Chapter 4 explores how far the Elizabethans' adventure

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in Ireland consolidated English linguistic nationalism. Chapter 5 offers an oblique commentary on both processes by exploring how colonists who graduated from Ireland to the New World engaged with native languages there. Chapter 6 focuses on Irish reaction to linguistic colonisation and traces the origins of the vigorous conflictual dialogue that opened up *between* Irish and English and, as the language shift got under way, *within* an English made polyvalent by the experience. By bringing both sets of voices into dialogue, I hope to open up ‘a space of translation’, as Homi Bhabha enjoins the critic to do (*Location*, p. 25), which can make possible an art that ‘does not merely recall the past as social cause or aesthetic precedent; [but] renews the past, refiguring it as a contingent “in-between” space, that innovates and interrupts the performance of the present’ (7).<sup>5</sup>

To examine the language shift from the temporal, spatial and theoretical perspective which I am proposing not only helps us to ‘live back’ more fully but to live in the present more alertly. It points us towards the enduring questions raised by linguistic colonisation for contemporary cross-cultural communications: how is comprehension achieved in a way that respects the opacity and singularity of the other without reducing him to either sameness or exoticism? How are power relations disentangled from the often economically unequal weight of languages in contact? And, at the beginning of a century in which an unprecedented number of languages are threatened with extinction,<sup>6</sup> we need to understand how languages are silenced and through such understanding hear, perhaps, in the responses of a future literature, a singing out of silence.

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## CHAPTER I

*Conquest, colonial ideologies and the consequences  
for language*

Les discours sont, eux aussi, des événements.

Tzvetan Todorov, *Nous et les Autres*, p. 14

The sixteenth century in Ireland was action-packed and dynamic. The transformations that occurred were so sweeping that the century, which opened with Gerald FitzGerald, the future ninth earl of Kildare and Lord Deputy, travelling to Court to marry Elizabeth Zouche, seems to close, on the eve of Kinsale, on a different world. In that time, Ireland had moved from being an almost forgotten ‘distant border province’ (Ellis, *Tudor Ireland*, p. 86), left to its own devices and those of its Old English and Gaelic magnates, to a colony in revolt at the centre of Elizabethan attention. In the interim, the country was the stage for a bewildering variety of policy changes; the cast was swelled by an influx of bureaucrats, aristocrats, adventurers, soldiers, settlers and proselytisers; and the nature of the military engagement shifted from marcher skirmishes to full-scale war with an international dimension. Caught up in all of this was language: as medium of negotiation, as subject of interdictions, as badge of identity, as index of civility, as symbol of otherness, as bearer of ideology, as words in the mouth of a preacher, as battlecry, as lines tumbling off the newly established printing presses, as – when O’Donnell, on a hosting in Sligo, slaughtered all males unable to speak Irish (O’Sullivan, *Ireland under Elizabeth*, p. 82) – death-warrant. The history of the period is, in part, the history of a shift in the balance of power between the island’s two languages. When the Englishwoman Elizabeth Zouche married into the greatest of the Old English dynasties, in 1503, she immediately set about learning Irish: using the direct method which Baron Delvin later adapted to produce an Irish primer for Queen Elizabeth, ‘in shorte tyme she learned to reade, write, and perfectlye speake the tongue’ (Gilbert,



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*Facsimiles*, iv.1, p. xxxv). A hundred years later, when Hugh O'Neill, Earl of Tyrone and overlord of the Nine Years War (1595–1603), submitted after Kinsale, he did so in English.

My purpose is to explore how the century's vertiginous political changes mapped on to the engagement between Irish and English. Historians of early modern Ireland bring us part of the way. They chart the political and military developments that transformed the island's polity and the relations between its two communities – 'mere' Irish, Old English – and the Crown; and they reconstruct the ideologies that underpinned England's growing colonial entanglement in Ireland. But they leave the question of language hanging. Yet ideologies of conquest had implications for language – as the Spanish *empresa* in the New World demonstrated. This chapter, therefore, moves from reconstructing the political and ideological context of sixteenth-century Ireland to opening up a comparison between English linguistic colonisation in Ireland and its Spanish equivalent in the New World. Because language was so central to Spanish discourses of colonisation and because academic research into the *conquista* correspondingly highlights language issues, the Spanish-American model provides a template for exploring the connection between colonial ideologies and language policy and helps to point up the particularity of English linguistic colonisation.

## THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Sixteenth-century Irish historiography is a domain almost as contested as the territory it surveys. Yet while individual historians may disagree – hotly – about when the drift towards conquest and colonisation set in, and clash over which ideologies shaped those policies, the agreed *grandes lignes* of sixteenth-century history are not in dispute. Though officially an English colony since the Norman invasion in 1169, Ireland had gradually slipped from English attention and settled into a de facto partition between the Gaelic lordships and the Pale. English rule, as far as it ran, was delegated to the principal Old English families, the FitzGerald of Kildare and the Butlers of Ormond. In the early 1530s, however, Old English reformers persuaded the Crown to involve itself in regenerating the residual colony. The ambitions of the reformers soon extended to the whole island, ushering in a phase of 'unitary sovereignty'. This phase ran from 1540, with the arrival of Lord Deputy St Leger, until

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conciliation and reform were abandoned and the drift towards conquest and colonisation began.

Offering such a neatly delineated chronology is not without its dangers. While the schema is useful, we should not be seduced into accepting its periodisation as absolute, much less into taking it over uncritically to force a matching language scheme into the same mould. Brady and Gillespie warn against a simplified view of Ireland as moving from a kingdom, with a constitution similar to England's, to a colony ripe for exploitation. The distinctiveness of sixteenth-century Ireland, they insist, is that it was 'a constitutional anomaly, neither the "kingdom" of England nor a "colony" in North America' (*Natives and Newcomers*, p. 17). England's Irish policy was never monolithic or clear-cut but characterised by 'periodic oscillations and simultaneous inconsistencies' (Brady, 'Court', p. 23).

Our focus is the interaction between Irish and English under the press of increased English engagement in Ireland after 1541. The period immediately preceding the Crown's renewed involvement in Ireland provides a point of reference and comparison. Politically, the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries were characterised by duality: the incompleteness of the Anglo-Norman conquest meant that, from the Statutes of Kilkenny (1366) until the reign of Henry VIII, London had little option but to accept the status quo and to interfere only minimally (Quinn and Nicholls, 'Ireland in 1534', p. 39). The duality was reflected in the colonists' continuing sense of their Englishness and in their more developed political consciousness which contrasted with the 'particularist and dynastic' mentality of the Gaelic lords (Ellis, *Tudor Ireland*, p. 94). But, while in the political domain 'duality' betokened boundaries and the existence of parallel political and administrative worlds, culturally, it signalled permeability. The Old English moved comfortably between both worlds: there was a 'widespread predilection for the Irish language and Gaelic cultural forms at all levels in the Pale' (Bradshaw, *Constitutional Revolution*, p. 41).

The initial expansion of the English state into Ireland combined limited military action under Lord Leonard Grey with bureaucratic reform. Bradshaw stresses the distinctiveness of this initial reform period, characterised as it was by collaboration between Old English reformers and Tudor administrators. Reform got under way in 1534 with Thomas Cromwell's *Ordinances for Ireland*. Its ambitions, limited to 'particular reform' of the Pale, were at first modest. But, while