

## Introduction



‘Songs of our land, ye are with us forever’, sang Donegal’s ‘blind poetess’ Frances Brown in the 1840s, but she was wrong. Although feted and garlanded in her time, and awarded a pension by Prime Minister Robert Peel (not a noted lover of Ireland, as we shall see), she and her stirring anthems are virtually forgotten now. Histories, like songs and poems, belong to the time in which they are written, and inevitably reflect their writers’ interests, preoccupations and experiences. This concise history is written by an Irish female born in 1960 and reared in an urban, lower-middle-class Catholic extended family in which there was as strong a devotion to history in all its forms (political, social, archaeological, local, national, international and, of course, familial) as there was to religion. Nearly forty-five years of ‘doing history’ – learning, researching, writing, teaching, reading, lecturing and talking to people – has reinforced the early childhood conviction that study of the past is both a worthwhile pursuit and a pleasant use of one’s time. The late Raphael Samuel was right when he declared that history was a pastime as well as a passion, ‘a social form of knowledge; the work, in any given instance, of a thousand different hands’. The bibliography at the end of this book gives a list of the many secondary works consulted in the writing of this history, but the sense of the past which drives this narrative comes from numberless influences, sights, memories, sounds and stories absorbed

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over a lifetime, which would take another lifetime to list and to catalogue, assuming they could all be remembered.

This history follows the conventional timeline of nationalist Irish history, because events like the coming of Christianity, the Scandinavian and Norman invasions and the wars of the bloody sixteenth and seventeenth centuries really did change the lives of people in Ireland, and added new cultural and ethnic elements into the population. Headlining invasions, wars and changes in political leadership, however, can give the impression of a people lurching from crisis to crisis, always losing, always lamenting. ‘It would never be spring, always autumn | After a harvest always lost’, Patrick Kavanagh wrote in 1944, in ‘Memory of Brother Michael’, about the one of the seventeenth-century Four Masters who wrote a history of Ireland which (unsurprisingly for the time) emphasized defeats and losses. Kavanagh’s two lines have stayed in the back of my mind for almost half a century, as a warning against exaggeration of the victim narrative in writing about any oppressed or ‘marginal’ people. Ireland’s history, while it had its traumatic moments, was a lot less ‘distressful’ than that of many other small islands in the world, and there were, in Ireland as elsewhere, long periods of peace and normality throughout these sixteen centuries. The hidden history of Ireland, like that of any country, is the story of the vast majority of people of all classes and conditions who got on (when they were able to do so) with living, working and caring for each other as best they could, who, in George Eliot’s resonant words, ‘lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs’.

This concise history is aimed at anybody newly interested in Ireland, or in history, or anyone who wants

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a convenient ‘starter’ reference book. It is the history of Ireland from the coming of Christianity in or around AD 432 (and the beginning of written records), to the centenary of the 1916 Rising in Ireland and Brexit (the United Kingdom’s vote to leave the European Union) in Northern Ireland, in 2016. The emphasis is on telling a story, and every attempt has been made to present a fair and balanced picture of Ireland over 1,600 or so years. Discerning readers are invited to make up their own minds on controversial topics by reading further into the subject, in the books and articles listed at the end. More space is given in this history to Irish history after 1541 than to early and late medieval history. This would be true of any survey history of any country, firstly because there are far more sources for the later centuries, but secondly because comparatively recent events which shaped the modern political and social sphere seem to require more explanation. This might give the impression that the millennium from the fifth to the sixteenth century was somehow static or unchanging. It was not. Apart from the invasions from the eighth to the twelfth centuries, agriculture and trade developed, religion went through several cycles of corruption and reform (even before the Reformation), fortunes were made and lost, urban settlements grew and others declined, dwellings were built and eventually toppled or absorbed back into the landscape, and new methods of communications, commerce and defence developed to cope with changing circumstances. It is hoped that the two chapters which cover these 1,100 years will spur the interested reader to a closer examination of an Ireland whose traces – in the form of grassed-over ring forts, ruined monasteries, round towers and old castles – are everywhere.

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Irish people have been described by outsiders for so much of their history (since at least the eleventh century) that it is impossible to disentangle their sense of who they were or are from their reactions to outsiders' descriptions of them. Questions of 'identity' have been discussed at great length by historians, literary scholars, political scientists, sociologists, anthropologists, and many others. This history considers all people, regardless of origin, who made their permanent homes anywhere on the island from the fifth to the twenty-first centuries as 'Irish', whether they would have accepted or rejected such a designation. Of course, their origins (Anglo-Norman, New English, Scottish/English) often have to be specified, so as to explain their allegiances and loyalties. But it is not only confusing but downright inaccurate to refer to politically privileged landowning Protestants from the eighteenth century onwards as the 'Anglo-Irish'. Ireland from the late seventeenth century had some powerful Protestant O'Briens, O'Haras, Conollys, O'Neills, and others whose origins went back before the Norman invasion. Also, many who were of settler stock came to describe themselves as Irish too, developing a distinctive identity within the greater British polity. Even the descendants of the northern Protestant settlers of the seventeenth century spoke with Irish accents, used Irish idioms and place names, understood some Irish and became attached to their native soil. 'My country is Kiltartan Cross | My countrymen Kiltartan's poor', wrote W. B. Yeats during the Great War in the voice of Major Robert Gregory of Co. Galway, in 'An Irish Airman Foresees His Death'. Gregory, whose mother was the famous Augusta (Lady)

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Gregory, belonged to the landlord class; should his love of place (even at one remove through the mouth of Yeats) be reckoned less sincere than that of a thousand poems and songs written in Irish eulogizing the country in part or in whole?

A very popular ‘recitation’, written by John Locke, which many Irish people born between the 1890s and the 1920s knew off by heart, begins with the words: ‘Glory be to God but there it is | The dawn on the hills of Ireland!’ (Figure 0.1) It goes on:

O Ireland isn’t it grand you look,  
Like a bride in her rich adorning.  
With all the pent-up love of my heart  
I bid you the top of the morning.

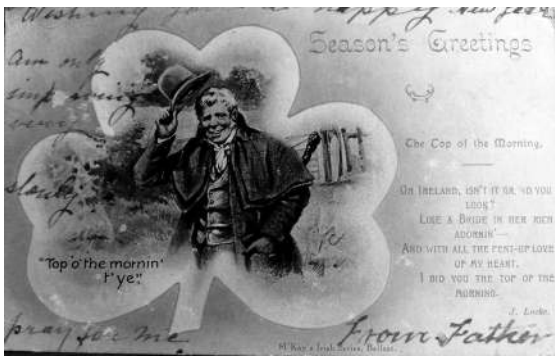


FIGURE 0.1 Postcard: ‘Top of the Morning’. From author’s personal collection. This postcard, incorporating Locke’s famous verse, was sent by a man from east Clare to his son in Boston, USA, around 1910 or 1912. (The stamp and postmark are missing.) A later generation of Irish people would reject such images as ‘stage-Irish’, but they were very popular in the early twentieth century.

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Geological time being what it is, the dawn on the hills of Ireland is not that different today from what the young Patrick, chained in his slave ship, saw in the fifth century, although in his case, the love would come later. Our story begins with him and with the coming of Christianity, which brought modern writing and the beginning of written records, and forged new bonds with Britain and much of the European continent.

## I

## Transformation



Early Medieval Ireland c. 430–1169

## 1.1 Introduction

People have been living in Ireland since about 7500 BC. The early settlers lived near rivers and lakes and ate deer and wild boar, fish, and nuts and berries of various kinds. Cattle and sheep were domesticated around 3000 BC and the sowing of wheat, oats, barley and rye gradually developed from about 2500 BC. Pottery was made in Ireland from about 2000 BC, as were axes and other tools. Elaborately worked tools and ornaments were made in Ireland from about 1000 BC – there were copper mines in Cork and Kerry – but also imported from as far away as the Baltics and the Mediterranean. Ireland was on a busy sea-road at a time when the most efficient and capacious transport was by water, so it was never remote. The Celts began to arrive from around 500 BC, bringing their language with them, which became the language of the entire country. They arrived gradually, rather than in one big invasion force, and probably assimilated the original inhabitants rather than wiping them out. Writing was developed in the second or third centuries AD in the form of Ogham, a hieroglyphic form of writing that survives mainly on stones in Ireland and Wales, although

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written Ogham found its way into the Books of Ballymote and Lecan, produced in the later medieval period.

Up to about AD 700 the Romans called this island Hibernia and everyone else, including the Irish, called it Scotia; Scotland was so-called because of the Irish settlers there. The name Éire started to emerge around the eighth century and the Scandinavians used a version of it. The full title of the famous ninth-century Irish scholar Johannes Scotus Eriugena combines both names – *eriugena* means born in Éire. By the tenth century this island was Éire, anglicized as Ierland, or Ireland.

History is based on written records, and in Ireland, writing began with the coming of Christianity in the fifth century, so this is the starting point for this history.

### 1.2 Circa 430–795

#### 1.2.1 *The Land and the People*

By the fifth century, Ireland was divided politically into ‘*cúigí*’ (fifths): *Ulaidh*, which grew to correspond more or less to modern Ulster and contained *Emain Macha*, later Armagh and Airgialla, anglicized as Oriel; *Míde* or Meath, which took in a good chunk of what is now north Leinster and south Ulster, stretching from the Irish Sea to the Shannon – modern-day Louth, Meath, Longford, Westmeath, part of Offaly; *Mumu* or *Mumba* (modern-day Munster), comprising Clare, Limerick, Tipperary, Cork, Kerry and most of Waterford; *Laigin* was most of modern Leinster – Wicklow, Wexford, Carlow, Kildare, modern Laois and some of Offaly; and Connacht, which was all territory west of the Shannon (see Map 1.1). The population of Ireland was between half and three-quarters of a million.

Transformation: Early Medieval Ireland, c. 430–1169



MAP 1.1 Ireland in the eighth century. By Pádraig Lenihan. On or around the time of the Scandinavian invasion and before the growth of the major cities, this is how Ireland divided up politically, into *cúigi* (fifths) – *Ulaid*; *Midhe*, the eastern midlands, *Connacht*, more or less west of the Shannon, *Mumha*, the entire south-west extending into the eastern midlands, and *Laigin*, the eastern part of the country. Settlements mentioned in the text are marked.

The west and south of Ireland always had trade links with France and Spain, while northern and eastern Ireland traded more with Britain and northern Europe. Within Ireland, waterways were vital connectors. In the south-east are the

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‘three sisters’, the rivers Barrow, Nore and Suir, which connected the south coast with the eastern midlands, while the Slaney connected Wexford to Wicklow. In the west, the Shannon stretches from the Atlantic Ocean to Cavan, in the east the broad sweep of the Liffey from Kildare to the Irish Sea made the coast an irresistible site for a settlement, and the Boyne opened up Meath and Louth. The Blackwater in Cork was also important. In the north were the Bann, the Foyle and the Lagan. The most important political and ecclesiastical sites in early medieval Ireland, *Teambrach/Tara*, *Emain Macha*/Armagh, *Caisil Mumhan*/Cashel and *Cill Dara*/Kildare, were situated on or near key waterways. Not all of these rivers were navigable all the way, but boats could be pulled across land for short distances (as at Limerick and Clare on the Shannon). River fords were focal points for settlement and marked territorial boundaries going back to Neolithic times, indicated by the prefix or suffix *áth* or, less commonly, *fearsad*, in place names – Athlone (*Áth Luain*), the ford of Luan; Athboy (*Áth Buí*), the yellow ford; Belfast (*Béal Feirste*), the mouth of the ford.

Five important roads or *slighe* radiated from *Teambrach/Tara*: one to *Emain Macha*, the most important settlement in the north of the country; one to *Cualu*, now south Co. Dublin/north Wicklow; one to the north-west as far as it could go; one to *Osraighe* (Ossory) or modern Kilkenny; and one to the River Shannon. Throughout the country local kings and leaders maintained tracks and trails to enable them to travel through the areas they ruled over, on horseback, with their goods and chattels in carts drawn by horses or oxen.

Visitors to Ireland, mainly bishops, priests and scholars from about the sixth century, marvelled at the mild climate