

Noble Gaelic identity in medieval and modern Ireland

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Ireland's Gaelic nobility were obscure to European observers in the middle ages, who recounted stories of their primitive living habits and exotic headdresses, much the same as would be reported of Indians in the new world of the late sixteenth century. Medieval Gaelic Ireland has been described as existing 'outside the typical European social milieu'¹, which was true as regards many of its cultural and social practices, but it was also the subject of much imaginative speculation on the part of colonial writers anxious to confirm long-held prejudices about this land on the margins of the known world. Although Anglo-Norman influence was exerted in the late twelfth and thirteenth centuries, much of what was distinctive about Gaelic-Irish culture and custom survived until the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Colonial and nationalist writers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries often viewed this culture as being by definition, ancient, static and unchanging.² Because Irish identity was conceived in opposition to Englishness, the Protestant gentry of Gaelic descent have been accused of abandoning their roots in favour of 'Anglicisation'. Their economic and political background ran counter to nationalist stereotypes of the native Irish – i.e. poor, Catholic, Irish-speaking. However, the role of genealogy as an indicator of class during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries saw continued interest in the Gaelic past amongst the Protestant ascendancy, revealing a more complex view of ethnicity across social divides.

The view of the Irish as a homogenous class is found in the anti-Irish diatribes of Tudor writers who depicted them as savages, living out-of-doors, and fleeing to the woods at the advance of English soldiers. Much of this thinking permeates nationalist views of the past which are deeply informed by notions of dispossession. As a

¹ K.W. Nicholls, *Gaelic and Gaelicized Ireland in the Middle Ages* (Dublin, 2003) 3.

² See J. Leerssen, *Mere Irish and Fíor Gael* (Indiana, 1997) 151.

result modern Irish people tend to associate social disparities based on distinctions of birth with the English class system – perceived to be represented historically by the Protestant or Anglo-Irish ascendancy. Within this narrative framework Ireland's ubiquitous ruined castles – many of them Gaelic – are equated with colonial oppression and conquest rather than celebrated as the former homes of a native aristocracy. In reality these buildings reflect the relative independence of the Gaelic ruling class for several centuries after the Anglo-Normans had supposedly conquered the country. Now mostly ruins these castles play little part in Ireland's national narrative as they subvert dearly held nationalist orthodoxies about land, class and ethnicity.

Social status within native lordships

Misconceptions about class and landownership in pre-conquest Ireland underlie idealised notions of Ireland's pre-colonial clan system and the supposed lifestyle which accompanied it. Notions of communal living and shared access to land emerge from the real practice of periodic property redistribution according to the principle of gavelkind. Where English primogeniture saw land handed down to eldest sons, in Ireland land was re-divided amongst the ever expanding lineage of the most powerful – i.e. the *taoiseach* – or lord of the lineage.³ In some cases this meant the concentration of property in the hands of a single ruling family; in other cases competition between various lineages for the chieftainship saw the permanent division of lands between minor branches and the creation of new lordly titles. In the early seventeenth century the territory of Mac-I-Brien Arra (in modern Co. Tipperary) had eight castles all of which were divided amongst sons of the ruling lord, indicating that in the space of two hundred and fifty years the territory had not been divided up into increasingly small units by competing lineages but rather successfully maintained and passed down to a single familial unit.⁴ The larger neighbouring territory of Ormond was ruled by four separate lineages, O'Kennedy Fionn, O'Kennedy Roe, O'Kennedy Donn and Mac Tadhg, all branches of the same clan but competing for supremacy.⁵ One result of these differences was an increase in the number of nobles within the O'Kennedy clan, who are recorded in possession of at least 37 castles in an English survey of Irish land ownership conducted in 1654.⁶ Invisible in this landscape are the underclass of landless peasants who supported them, the voice and identities of whom are often assumed to have been at one with their masters.

The Tudor policy of 'surrender and re-grant' saw Irish lords such as the Mac-I-Brien give up their lands and receive them back under English land patents. Those drafted for the Mac-I-Brien Arra provide a glimpse of the way in which native lords were served by their social inferiors. In 1605 Mac-I Brien received rents from 90 carucates of land, which was approximately equivalent to 11,000 acres. The under tenants or peasantry on these lands paid him in cash, goods and services, amounting

³ Nicholls, *Gaelic and Gaelicized Ireland*, 11-12.

⁴ S.H. O'Grady, ed., *Caithreim Thoirdhealbháigh* (London, 1929) 190-191.

⁵ A. Tierney, *Pedigrees in Stone? Castles, Colonialism and Gaelic-Irish Identity from the Middle Ages to the Celtic Revival* (PhD Thesis; Dublin, 2005) 154-195.

⁶ R.C. Simington, *The Civil Survey A.D. 1654-56. County Tipperary Vol. II* (Dublin, 1934) 207-351.

to £21 7s 8d 'old English money', ten oxen, 76 sheep and five hogs (pigs). He also commanded these tenants to contribute labour to the lordly demesne in the vicinity of his castles (approximately 3,500 acres in all), each of the ninety carucates of tenanted land supplying two mowers (for hay cutting), two days of labour for ploughing, and, presumably for longer terms, one labourer in the spring time, and two reapers in the autumn. On the same lands there were a number of freeholders who paid rent in cash only and were not subject to providing labour. Their contributions added a further £78 12s and 4d to the Mac-I-Brien's annual income.⁷ But prior to the time that Irish lords such as the Mac-I-Brien of Arra agreed to take title to their lands under English law the exactions on their tenants were much heavier. As Kenneth Nicholls has pointed out, Irish lords exacted payment from their tenants for a wide range of expenses from castle building and maintenance to the feasting and entertainment of both themselves and their guests, which could amount to far more than the stipulated rents.⁸ In fact, English law provided Gaelic tenants and freeholders protection from such exploitation. Mac-I-Brien Arra was only granted his lands on the condition that neither he nor his heirs should 'demand or levy any irish customs [...] or other unlawful impositions upon the free-tenants or ter-tenants of [the] country', upon forfeiture of the double value of the thing exacted, or £20'.⁹ The rights to impose onerous expenses such as castle-building have been recorded in a range of early sources and attest to the wide gap between the Gaelic aristocracy and the lower social classes.¹⁰ The obscurity of this class system in both the documentary and archaeological record has fed a Marxist reading of Gaelic society as communal and equal.¹¹

The class distinction between freeholders and peasants was important in Gaelic Ireland. Most freeholders had some claim to nobility – i.e. they appeared in the genealogical scheme of the Gael –, and included minor branches of the ruling family whose status was defined in visible terms through their right to bear arms. In cultural terms this warrior identity was a defining characteristic of their class and it was a subject of considerable comment when the chieftain Shane O'Neill, in defence of his territory against the English, chose to arm his peasantry for the first time.¹² So while poets, historians and professional mercenary soldiers in Gaelic Ireland might be regarded as servants, they were drawn from the class of freeholders rather than peasantry and were distinguished by noble descent and the possession of lands, though these might be relatively small. Some of these families, though very minor in terms of their power, managed to assert their aristocratic status in the landscape. English governance and law offered these smaller freeholders a level of protection and independence that was lacking under the old Irish landholding system. Many expressed their increased prosperity under English law through the construction of new tower hous-

⁷ J. Caillard Erck, *A Repertory of the Inrolments on the Patent Rolls of Chancery in Ireland commencing with the Reign of King James I* (Dublin, 1846) 265-266.

⁸ Nicholls, *Gaelic and Gaelicised Ireland*, 34-40.

⁹ Caillard Erck, *A Repertory of the Inrolments on the Patent Rolls*, 267.

¹⁰ R. Loeber, 'An Architectural History of Gaelic Castles and Settlements, 1370-1600', in: P.J. Duffy, D. Edwards and E. FitzPatrick, ed., *Gaelic Ireland c. 1250-c. 1650, Land, Lordship and Settlement* (Dublin, 2001) 309.

¹¹ R.F. Foster, *Modern Ireland, 1600-1972* (Dublin, 1989) 439.

¹² G. Hayes McCoy, 'Gaelic Soc in Ireland in the late Sixteenth Century', *Historical Studies*, IV (1963) 50.

es, which were sometimes substantial, such as that built by the hereditary MacEgan lawyers at Kilnalagh in Co. Tipperary.¹³

But there are other indicators of social distinction. Inclusion within the genealogies depended on the patronage of poets and chroniclers, which in turn depended on the control of lands. It is extraordinary, for example, the degree to which the late sixteenth-century genealogies of the O'Kennedys accord with the names of castle owners, though earlier genealogies attest to many other branches of the clan who appear to have either died out or fallen out of the aristocratic class. The genealogy shows that while the sons of one O'Kennedy chieftain each possessed a castle to themselves, their first and second cousins shared castles amongst several branches of the family, suggesting they would eventually be squeezed out entirely.¹⁴ A well-known native law-case of 1584, relating to the O'Kennedys, illustrates the point: two related families disputed the ownership of the land they inherited from their common ancestry. The judge decreed that it should be split between them but the senior had the right to occupy the family castle.¹⁵ While the lineage of the junior branch can be reconstructed from the details of the case only the lineage of the senior descendant was actually recorded in the genealogical record. This suggests that as families increasingly divided and expanded the junior lineages were pushed to the periphery and ultimately omitted from the nobility. Thus the patronage of the learned classes was not merely a means of expressing a lord's cultural largesse; it was an absolute necessity if a lineage wished to maintain their aristocratic status in genealogical terms.

There were also considerable differences in status between members of a single kin group, something apparent from records made by the English in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. For example in a list of royal pardons for the period 1601-1603 within north Tipperary we get reference to 'Kyen O Carroll yeoman (farmer) of Ballencasselane' and 'Owyne O Carroll, Modryne [sic], gentleman'.¹⁶ Both were members of the same clan and shared a common ancestor at some point, but the first named was evidently a working man of middling status, while the second was regarded as a member of the ascendancy. Notably his address is the same place where an O'Carroll castle can be found, and he was likely to have been a member of the family who resided there. In this list of pardons most of those listed as 'gent' within the O'Kennedy clan are given an address in the vicinity of a castle. However, an interesting exception is 'Teige O Kennedy fitz Kaddagh, yeoman, Porttolichan' whose father had been listed as a castle-owner there some twenty years before. The family lands and castle had been confiscated in the intervening period which may explain why his son had lost his status amongst the gentry. Of course one of the difficulties of investigating Gaelic ideas of class through English documents is the assumption that terms such as 'gent' and 'yeoman' accurately reflect status rather than actively impose it.

¹³ Tierney, *Pedigrees in Stone?*, 246-255.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, 154-195.

¹⁵ K.W. Nicholls, 'Gaelic landownership in Tipperary in the light of the surviving Irish deeds' in W. Nolan, ed., *Tipperary: History and Society* (Dublin, 1985) 92-103.

¹⁶ D.F. Gleeson, *The Last Lords of Ormond: Cromwellian Plantation, Prelude and Aftermath in the 'Countrie of the Three O'Kennedies'* (Nenagh, 2001) 253.

Though ‘shared kinship’ is often understood to reflect a culturally and ethnically homogenous society in Gaelic Ireland documentary sources suggest that the nobility did not recognise a shared genealogical origin with the peasantry. The eleventh-century *Leabhar Gabhála* or *Book of Invasions*, which recounted a history of the various peoples who settled in Ireland (the last and greatest of whom were attested to be the Gaels), provided an array of alternative origins for the lower orders.¹⁷ A late fourteenth-century tract concerning the O’Kellys, lords of Uí Maine in modern-day Co. Galway, describes some of the unfree peasantry as ‘the remnants of the Fir Bolgs’, who, according to the pseudo-historical *Book of Invasions*, had been anciently defeated and vanquished prior to the arrival of the Gaels in Ireland. The book also asserts that the chief of the O’Kellys had the power to raise their rents at will, indicating that these people had no meaningful rights within the Gaelic economy.¹⁸ This hints that the Irish pseudo-historical tradition – as it survives in poetry and prose – may have provided the framework for more complex distinctions of class and ethnicity within Gaelic Ireland prior to its re-colonisation by the English. Although nationalist historians saw the Catholic peasantry as keepers of this poetic tradition following the decline of Gaelic power in the seventeenth century, more recent research has demonstrated that it remained the preserve of a distinct class of reduced aristocracy and their retainers. As a result racial identity and antiquity of birth remained defining features of Gaelic ethnic identity throughout this period despite their later appropriation by a populist republican and agrarian movement.¹⁹

Material identity

Although colonial descriptions of the Irish deliberately eschewed images of permanent settlement, the Gaelic Irish, like most aristocratic groups, expressed their class identity in material form; principally through the agency of residential and ecclesiastical architecture. After Gaelic families regained their lands from Anglo-Norman (or Old English) incursions in the fourteenth century they began to build stone castles, principally in the form of tower houses – an architectural form they shared with Gaelicised families of Anglo-Norman descent who had settled and intermarried with them. Although material difference came to be seen as integral to national character this was very much an invention of colonial and nationalist writers who overlooked the level of acculturation between different ethnic groups during this period. Incensed at the colonial charge that there were no stone buildings in Ireland before the coming of the Norsemen the seventeenth-century historians Ruadhri Ó Flaitheartaigh and Dubhaltach MacFírhisigh both stressed two points: firstly, the colonial origins of the Gaelic aristocracy themselves who ‘after subdueing the island, began to erect fortresses, and places of defence, called in Irish Rathe and Duna; and to cultivate and improve the country, by cutting and clearing the woodland parts’²⁰, and secondly,

¹⁷ R.A.S Macalister, ed., *Lebor gabála Éirenn: the book of the taking of Ireland* (Dublin, 1938).

¹⁸ J. O’Donovan, ed., *The tribes and customs of Hy-Many, commonly called O’Kelly’s country: Now first published from the Book of Lecan, a manuscript in the library of the Royal Irish Academy / with a translation and notes, and a map of Hy-Many* (Dublin, 1843) 83–85.

¹⁹ L.M. Cullen, *The Hidden Ireland: Reassessment of a concept* (Dublin, 1988) 23.

²⁰ C. O’Conor, ed., *The Ogygia vindicated, against the objections of Sir George Mac Kenzie by Roderic O’Flaherty* (Dublin, 1775) xliv.

that they were ‘made like works in other kingdoms about the time in which they were made, and wherefore should they not, for no invasion came to Ireland but from the eastern part of the world, that is to say Spain’.²¹

The earliest literary descriptions of Gaelic noble dwellings emphasised both their assimilation of Anglo-Norman building styles and – in ideological terms – their parallels with both early Gaelic royal forts and the building tradition of ancestors pre-dating the Gael’s arrival in Ireland.²² For example, a celebration of the O’Kelly castle of Gaille in 1350²³ praises its similarity to a supposed tower built by the Irish in Spain prior to their traditional invasion of Ireland and refers to the patron as ‘not a mere Irishman’ but rather ‘Grecian and Spanish’.²⁴ Although these origin theories are now regarded as pseudo-historical they highlight the way in which buildings were invested with meanings that singled out the distinctive, non-native origins of the aristocracy.

Within the household aristocratic memory and identity were transmitted via heirlooms that could be passed down through generations. One thirteenth-century poem provides detail regarding the various drinking horns and battle-standards on display in such a residence, revealing them as important material indicators of the family’s ascendant status. Written for Aodh Ó Conchobhair (d.1274), King of Connacht, by Giolla Brighde Mac Con Midhe, it evokes the atmosphere of a noble Gaelic court at an early date:

It was on Midsummer’s day that I saw in the west reaping and ploughing together,
a slope of rush-blossom full of milk hard by the rath of Cruachain of Connacht.

I saw Aodh’s drinking-house full of curved, wrought drinking-horns – no cause of
great fame but rather lasting love – the drinking feast of Ó Conchobhair.

The steward used to allow me into the ordering of the drinking feast of Cruachain;
a fist above the company one could see O’Neill’s horn, the horn of Ó Catháin.²⁵

The buildings themselves were also understood as heirlooms to be protected and handed down from one generation to another and though petty warfare was an important expression of the martial culture of the nobility, the destruction of fortified homesteads was an occasion for mourning and lament. Ruin imagery had a long tradition in Gaelic writing, often obtaining an almost proto-Romantic sense of loss.

²¹ T. Ó. Raithbheartaigh, *Genealogical tracts 1 : Comprising A. The introduction to the Book of Genealogies / by Dubhaltach Mac Fírbhíáigh [sic]. B. The ancient tract on the distribution of the Aithech-thuatha. C. The Lecan Miscellany, being a collection of genealogical excerpts in the Book of Lecan* (Dublin, 1932) 18-19; see also A. Tierney, ‘Genealogies of the Irish Tower House’ in: A. Piccini, L. McAtackney and M. Palus, ed., *Towards diversity: papers from CHAT 2003* (Oxford, 2007).

²² See for example the two poems written about the fourteenth-century O’Conor castle of Cloonfree in Connacht in K. O’Conor and T. Finan, ‘The Moated Site at Cloonfree’, *Journal of the Galway Archaeological and Historical Society*, LIV (2002) 72-87.

²³ E. Knott, ‘Fílidh Éireann go haoiteach’, *Eriú* 5 (1911) 50-69.

²⁴ *Ibidem*, 65.

²⁵ N. Williams, ed., *The Poems of Giolla Brighde Mac Con Midhe LI* (Dublin, 1980) 167.



Donegal Castle, County Donegal, fifteenth century seat of the O'Donnell clan remodelled with attached house by the English soldier Basil Brooke (*photo courtesy of Johnida Dockens*)

Irish poets exploited its emotive power from at least the fourteenth century when Gofraidh Fionn Ó Dálaigh wrote of the deserted rooms of his dead patron, Conor O'Brien (d.1328). He contrasted his memories of the social throng within the house during O'Brien's life with the strange emptiness that followed his death, the resounding sense of absence evoked by the overturned couches of the nobles.²⁶ More evocative is the long poem composed by Eoghan Ruadh Mac an Bháird following the destruction of his patron's castle of Donegal in 1595, which begins:

O Northern fortress that art solitary, alas
 that I have seen thee as thou now
 art; thy form has been destroyed,
 O mansion of the beautiful streams.²⁷

Irish poets of the later medieval period often personified buildings to express the deep personal bond that existed between them and their occupants. In this guise,

²⁶ L. McKenna, 'Historical Poems of Gofraidh Fionn Ó Dálaigh, *The Irish Monthly* (1919) Jan., 1-3.

²⁷ T.Ó. Raghallaigh, ed., *Duanta Eoghain Ruaidh Mhic an Bháird* (Gaillimh, 1930) 394-398.

their destruction became the subject of elegy in the same way as the passing of a nobleman.

With the loss of their political power in the seventeenth century the Irish nobility would themselves become understood as vestiges of the past, living ruins, subjects of elegy by antiquarians and romantic novelists. It is hard to draw a line between colonial observation of Gaelic customs and antiquarian imaginings of the Gaelic past. While most Irish noblemen from the late sixteenth-century wore contemporary western European-style clothing, some resolutely Catholic families in the face of destruction sought to promote knowledge of the Irish nobility and their origins. The incarcerated Catholic chieftain, Florence MacCarthy, in 1609 wrote a long letter from the Tower of London to the Protestant Donough O'Brien in the hope that an historical account of their shared culture and history would inspire him to assist him – which it did. The letter was written in response to O'Brien's query regarding Ireland's antiquities and to please 'so ancient a nobleman of the nation'²⁸, the term 'nation' at this period having a genealogical meaning rather than a political one. This was consistent with the traditional manner of expressing aristocratic identity within Gaelic Ireland, which was completely dependent on history. MacCarthy's account was a distillation and commentary on the *Book of Invasions* and other Irish mytho-poetical material, which traced Irish ancestry back to Greece via Spain. Written in English, the tract was a firm sign that this shared culture was aristocratic and historic rather than linguistic. Indeed, as another Gaelic noble noted, the obscurity of the Irish language was an impediment to promoting knowledge of Ireland's culture and history outside of the country:

there have been many and various affairs of the kingdom of Ireland well worth knowing and commemorating, yet its records, either wholly unpublished, lurk in darkness shrouded in the thickest mist, or are so much written in the Irish language that they are confined to the home circle and have not been sufficiently published by anyone in Latin.²⁹

The Catholicism of many Irish nobles in the sixteenth and seventeenth century saw them promote their supposed genealogical links to Catholic Spain, something they frequently alluded to in their own histories and in letters to the Spanish king.³⁰ These histories were not of the 'Irish people' as a whole – for such a concept did not yet exist in its modern sense – but rather of the nobility and the church. This group was irritated by English writers who complained about the uncivilised state of Ireland and made no distinction between the classes of its people. Most famously Geoffrey Keating, the well-known seventeenth-century Irish historian, attacked Camden, Spenser and other English writers, arguing that they 'take notice of the ways of

²⁸ J. O'Donovan, 'Letter from Florence MacCarthy to the Earl of Thomond', *Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland*, IV (1856-7) 203-229.

²⁹ M.J. Byrne, ed., *Ireland under Elizabeth: Chapters towards a history of Ireland in the reign of Elizabeth, being a portion of the history of Catholic Ireland by Don Philip O'Sullivan Bear* (Dublin, 1903; repr. New York, 1970) xxv.

³⁰ See, for example, the letter of O'Sullivan to the king of Spain in T. Stafford, *Pacata Hibernia. Ireland appeased and reduced* (London, 1896) 47.

inferiors and wretched little hags, ignoring the worthy actions of the gentry'.³¹ He complained that such writers

have displayed no inclination to treat of the virtues or good qualities of the nobles among the old foreigners and the native Irish who then dwelt in Ireland; such as to write on their valour and on their piety, on the number of abbeys they had founded, and what land and endowments for worship they had bestowed on them; on the privileges they had granted to the learned professors of Ireland, and all the reverence they manifested towards churchmen and prelates.³²

Pride in pedigree amongst the Catholic nobility was, of course, often coupled with contempt for the English Protestant families who by the second half of the seventeenth century had largely replaced them as landowners through various phases of plantation. One seventeenth-century Gaelic poet sourly remarked: 'all our castles will be held by clownish upstarts, crowded full with veterans of cheese and pottage',³³ a snide reference to the diet of the lower orders. Following the plantations and confiscations the lingering sense of entitlement amongst the dispossessed Gaelic nobility was expressed through a continued interest in genealogy. Sir Henry Piers, an English settler writing in 1682, described the situation:

One great evil of this vanity in our Irish gentry is, that you shall hardly meet with any of them, that scorns not to take up any manual craft, whereby they may earn an honest livelihood, as if like cameleons [sic], they could live on these airy vanities, that thus puff up their minds. They will walk from house to house with their greyhound, their constant attendant, and spend their whole age in idle wandering [sic] and coshering, as they term it, and live, as if they were born only *fruges consumere*.³⁴

The deliberate continuance of archaic custom among such families could take various forms, from types of behaviour to the continued possession of heirlooms or animals associated with pursuits of the nobility. Particularly noticeable was the maintenance of Irish hunting dogs, which had long been indicators of aristocratic status in Ireland and were famed across Europe for their immense size. John Dunton, an Englishman travelling through the west of Ireland in 1699, described his Irish guide as 'a gentleman descended of one who had been master of some estate, but the sins of the father in rebellion fell upon him'. His greyhound was now 'the only mark of his gentility'.³⁵ A similarly large hunting dog also appears in a portrait of Sir Neill O'Neill of 1680,

³¹ G. Keating, *Foras feasa ar Éireann* (London, 1987), 1, 7.

³² *Ibidem*, 5.

³³ J.C. MacErlean, ed., *Duanaire Dháibhidh Uí Bhrúadhair Poems of David Ó Bruadair: Pt.1 : Poems down to the year 1666* (London, 1908).

³⁴ H. Piers, 'A Chorographical Description of the County of Westmeath – 1682', in: C. Vallency, ed., *Collectanea de Rebus Hibernicis* (Dubin, 1786) 110.

³⁵ A. Carpenter, ed., *Teague Land or a Merry Ramble to the Wild Irish (1698) by John Dunton* (Dublin, 2003) 49-50.

a descendant of the ancient O'Neills of Ulster, which depicts him in deliberately anti-quarian style, exhibiting what were evidently understood as cultural markers of Gaelic nobility: a richly ornamented mantle, exotic feathered hat, spear, wolfhound and piper.³⁶ The elaborate headdress also appears in a slightly earlier rendering of an Irish chieftain from the seventeenth century in Thomas Carve's *Lyra Sive Anacephalaeosis Hibernica*, suggesting it was understood as a defining part of the Gaelic dress code.³⁷

Gaelic nobility in the Romantic age

If there is a romance to this impoverished Irish nobility then it is one that was forged in the age of Romanticism, which of course coincided with the period of antiquarian enquiry into the past. In the early nineteenth century an Ordnance Survey of Antiquities was conducted by some of Ireland's greatest scholars of the Irish manuscript tradition, who not only retrieved the boundaries of ancient Gaelic lordships, but found the occasional living remnant of the families that once ruled them. Here we see the nobility as living artefact, the rugged genealogical ruin that matches the poetry of the wild landscape. Joep Leerssen has discussed this in the context of the Celtic Revival novels of Sydney Owenson and other early nineteenth century Irish writers who glamorised the dispossessed Irish nobility in the eyes of the English reading public, presenting their Catholicism as a palatable ritual of the picturesque.³⁸ In this period the Gaelic nobility were presented as part of a 'national tale', a position they would not continue to hold in twentieth century Irish nationalist ideology.³⁹ Outside of the novel, chance meetings with such figures became 'encounters' with the past to be turned into anecdote. Even the normally sober pen of John O'Donovan, the famous early nineteenth-century Irish antiquary, could not resist romanticising his meeting with the impoverished northern Irish chieftain MacSweeney Doe, a wandering itinerant:

I was at length diverted by a group of people walking on the smooth sand of the shore of Sheep haven. It consisted of a man tall and stately, three women & some children accompanied by a hampered ass, some grey hounds and other dogs, and I think a goat. What group, said I, addressing the fisherman, is this on the strand? That, said he, is Mac Swyne Na Doe and his family, the heir of Doe Castle [...] the only badge of his nobility are now his greyhounds and dogs, of which no petty game hunters have dared to deprive him, for Captain Hart treats him with great respect, and delights to hear him romancing about the daring achievements (exploits) of Sir Malmurry MacSwinnedo, from whom in a direct line he is the 5th in descent.⁴⁰

³⁶ See www.tate.org.uk (5 Oct. 2009).

³⁷ T. Carve, *Lyra Sive Anacephalaeosis Hibernica* (Vienna, 1651).

³⁸ J. Leerssen, *Remembrance and Imagination: Patterns in the Historical and Literary Representation of Ireland in the Nineteenth Century* (Cork, 1996) 33-67.

³⁹ See Tierney, 'Genealogies of the Irish Tower House', 45-53.

⁴⁰ M. Herity, ed., *Ordnance Survey letters Donegal* (Dublin, 2000) 26.



Doe Castle, County Donegal, the early sixteenth-century seat of MacSweeney Doe
(photo courtesy of the National Library of Ireland)

Such romantic reports often included some visual identification with the past, in this case the maintenance of hunting dogs, which was clearly the indulgence of local landowners who would not normally tolerate a peasant engaging in hunting.

Attraction to such individuals during the Romantic period was not stimulated merely by an interest in the dramatic artefacts of history but also a search for the 'authentic'. As a result, one of the attributes attached to them was moral virtue. John O'Donovan described the lineal descendant of the O'Mullan chieftain of Garvagh who though 'now in very poor condition [...] was much respected by [...] the neighbouring gentlemen for his honesty and noble principles'.⁴¹ Though his participation in the 1798 rebellion had ruined him financially, O'Mullan was saved by a descendant of an English settler in Ireland, Lord Garvagh, who 'knowing his honesty procured him a pardon and protection [...] and a small cabin in the townland of Brockaghboy, where [he] bestowed upon him a mountain farm'.⁴² There is an interesting interplay of eco-

⁴¹ G. Mawhinney, *John O'Donovan's letters from county Londonderry (1834): letters containing information relative to the antiquities of the county Londonderry collected during the progress of the Ordnance Survey* (Draperstown, 1992) 36.

⁴² *Ibidem*.

nomics and aesthetics here as a member of the new English ascendancy in Ireland sought to maintain a representative of the old nobility as a sort of souvenir of times past. There is perhaps an analogy to be made with the 'hermits' kept by the English nobility in their landscape gardens. MacSweeney Doe, described above, was similarly indulged by the local landowner Captain Hart (restorer of Doe Castle), who enjoyed the tales of his noble ancestry. Another impoverished family of Gaelic nobility were the O'Dohertys, also of Donegal in the north of Ireland, who received an annual pension from Lord Donegal (of English settler stock) on the basis of two documents in their possession proving their descent from the 'Great O'Doherty'. When these documents were lost the income ceased, though the Captain Hart who expressed such interest in MacSweeney Doe, did his best to get it re-instated. He failed and they were ultimately reduced to the status of fishermen on Malin Head.⁴³

By the nineteenth century the 'noble peasant' was perceived as an integral part of Irish identity and was celebrated in the novels of the Celtic Revival and beyond.⁴⁴ Proprietorial behaviour by the peasant nobility might be indulged as a picturesque affectation where sufficiently divorced from any real legal claim on a property. For example, the Knox family had settled on the MacSweeney estates in the seventeenth century but the peasant MacSweeney claimed a jurisdiction over the ancestral seat that they appear to have tolerated. John O'Donovan described how this character, though a wandering itinerant, 'sometimes [came] to visit his Castle at Ramullan, and to give orders to Knoxe's man to take particular care of it'.⁴⁵

Noble identity within the Catholic tenantry

While antiquarian sources show a romantic interest in the aristocratic peasant, more elusive are the Catholic middlemen of Gaelic descent who survived as a sort of half gentry, often taking leases of their old lands from new English owners. On some absentee estates large Gaelic leaseholders could retain so much power as to appear to the peasantry as the virtual owners of the soil.⁴⁶ The residences of such Catholic families constitute an interesting and little explored arena within the archaeology of the post-medieval Irish landscape. Kevin Whelan has described them as low key and unostentatious⁴⁷ and in some cases appearing to reflect both vernacular and polite architectural styles.⁴⁸ It might also be noted that this class occasionally made attempts to maintain or forge material connections with their ancestral castles, many of which still formed substantial landmarks in the landscape. In north Tipperary, an area heavily settled by Cromwellians, the old aristocratic family of O'Kennedy maintained a presence as middlemen during the eighteenth century. A tombstone in Lorrha grave-

43 H.T. Hart, *The Family History of Hart of Donegal* (London, 1907) 139.

44 See in particular Samuel Lover's novel *Rory O'More* (1837) the central character of which was much more the peasant than any of Sydney Owenson's impoverished Gaels.

45 Herity, *Ordnance Survey letters Donegal*, 18.

46 K. Whelan, 'An underground gentry?' Catholic middlemen in eighteenth-century Ireland', in Donnelly, J. S. and K. A. Miller, ed., *Irish Popular Culture, 1650-1850*, (Dublin and Portland, Oregon) 127; The example of the O'Flahertys of Renvyle is particularly illustrative.

47 *Ibidem*, 140.

48 *Ibidem*, 133.



Lackeen Castle, County Tipperary, a tower house of a branch of the O’Kennedy family. The later house is in the fore-ground (*photo by author*)

yard dated 1766 proclaimed a John Kennedy as ‘founder of Lackeen Castle’, suggesting he had undertaken a restoration of the family’s principal ancestral seat – a sixteenth-century tower house.⁴⁹ The castle was a ruin following the wars of the mid-seventeenth century but immediately beside it are residential remains of seventeenth and eighteenth century date suggesting continued occupation of the site in the post-medieval period. Most notable here is the mid-eighteenth century house of small but polite character built into the surrounding wall of the castle. In 1735 a member of the Kennedy family discovered in the castle walls at Lackeen the famous missal enshrined by Philip O’Kennedy, King of Ormond (d.1381),⁵⁰ an event which occasioned a Gaelic poem predicting the downfall of the Hanoverian regime in 1745.⁵¹ It was perhaps this discovery that prompted a revived interest in the castle amongst the Kennedys. Their presence there was evidently acceptable to their Cromwellian landlords, the Hemsworth family, who occupied a ‘big house’ within view of the castle.

Other O’Kennedy families of this class retained a connection with the architecture of their lordly predecessors in this part of Tipperary during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Although they existed below the class of the Protestant landed gentry Samuel Lewis’s well-known *Topographical Dictionary of Ireland* of 1837 often (unwittingly?) included them amongst the resident gentry. Glenahilty Castle was listed as one of the principal gentlemen’s seats in the parish of Ballygibbon, described

⁴⁹ T.F. O’Rahilly, ‘The History of the Stowe Missal’, *Eriu*, X (1926) 102–104.

⁵⁰ *Ibidem*, 97.

⁵¹ *Ibidem*, 102.

as a residence of ‘W. Kennedy, Esq’, who was a tenant of the landlord J.C. Fitzgerald of Co. Clare.⁵² The castle is a very modest building – now entering dereliction – formed out of a much reduced tower house of late medieval date. That this gentrified farmhouse continued to bear the title ‘castle’ and its occupant the status of ‘esquire’, despite its much reduced material condition, bears witness to the special status of such families. Early Ordnance Survey maps of both Lackeen and Glenahilty show aspirations to gentility in small sections of parkland, flower gardens and enclosed orchards – though neither constituted a proper demesne. Besides such conscious landscaping of status, the castles themselves were probably the most effective instruments in projecting a claim to gentility and patriarchy amongst the common Irish – particular on estates with absentee landlords. It was noted by a mid nineteenth-century parish priest that in the absence of a resident landlord, William Kennedy of Glenahilty Castle was a ready source of benevolence to the local poor during the famine.⁵³

That a noble Gaelic identity was dependent on this continued relationship between classes is clear from the situation of the O’Conor family in the eighteenth century. Descended from the high kings of Ireland, and latterly of Connacht, they had survived as impoverished Catholic landowners and professionals who made history – or to be more precise – the history of Irish royalty and nobility, their particular study. Their strategy was to continue to behave as aristocrats, which they seem to have done with the acquiescence of the neighbouring peasantry. A French visitor in Ireland in 1796 reported:

Here it is possible after such a long lapse of time to see the peasants in certain districts, pay ceremonious respect to the representatives of their ancient prince. He who is perhaps the most extraordinary is Roderick O’Connor, descendant of the kings of Connaught and of the last great monarch of Ireland at the time of the English invasion in 1171. I have been told that his domestics serve him kneeling, and that no one may sit down in his presence without his permission. When he is addressed or written to one must say O’Connor, without any style or title whatever.⁵⁴

Similarly, Rory O’Flaherty, a descendant of the lords of a territory in west Co. Galway, was active as an historian in the seventeenth century when he still hoped for the restitution of his estates, which never happened.⁵⁵

I live a banished man within the bounds of my native soil; a spectator of others enriched by my birthright; an object of condoling to my relatives and friends, and a condoler of their miseries.⁵⁶

⁵² S. Lewis, *Topographical Dictionary of Ireland* (London, 1837; repr. 1984) 135.

⁵³ D. Grace, *The Great Famine in the Nenagh Poor Law Union* (Nenagh, 2000) 98.

⁵⁴ J. Stephenson, ed., *A French Man’s Walk Through Ireland* (Dublin, 1897) 285.

⁵⁵ W.J. Hogan, ‘Introduction’ in: J. Hardiman, ed., *A Chorographical Description of West or H-Iar Connaught written in 1684 A.D. by Roderic O’Flaherty* (Dublin, 1846; repr. 1977) i-xiii.

⁵⁶ *Ibidem*, iii.

Remarkably, two hundred years later many of his kinsmen were still maintaining the airs and graces of the nobility. Mr. Blake, the new owner of the O'Flaherty estate in Connemara, reported in 1825: 'Many of [the old nobility], without seeking employment for themselves, or education for their children, still cling to customs which have now passed away; and, when reduced almost to a state of mendacity, continue their former boast of being 'gentlemen'.⁵⁷

The 'castellated gentry of Ireland'

While one recent historian has termed this class a 'hidden gentry', another has questioned whether the term has any real validity given the economic status of such middlemen.⁵⁸ While the question perhaps reflects historiographical divisions in Irish academia, objective definitions for gentility do not exist now and did not exist during the eighteenth or nineteenth centuries. However, the social status of Old Irish families was certainly much contested in writings of the period. First published in 1826, Burke's *Landed Gentry* was the principal public record of landowning families of gentry status and included many families of Gaelic descent (both Catholic and Protestant). Although much outnumbered by families of English origin, the London-based publication hugely increased the visibility of the Irish, emphatically asserting their position within the social hierarchy. In fact, the book actively claimed the superiority of Old Irish (or Gaelic) and Old English (Anglo-Norman) families to those of new English and Cromwellian stock (mostly seventeenth century planters). In the preface to the 1862 edition, Sir Bernard Burke, its editor, stated his perspective in no uncertain terms:

In England, and still more in Scotland, the peerage may be regarded as, upon the whole, giving a favourable specimen of the nobility of the two countries. But this cannot be said of the Irish peers, very few of whom belong to the original illustrious races of the island. With the exception of some splendid houses of Anglo-Norman descent [*his own included*], and a few respectable families of the Elizabethan times, the great body Irish peers must confess their inferiority to those of the same class in Great Britain. And it is quite astonishing how few among them are, like O'Neil and O'Brien, connected with the history of their native country during its days of independence.⁵⁹

The real nobility of Ireland, he argued, were to be found 'in very subordinate stations in their own island, or in the service of foreign princes, where they have occasionally risen to honours as high, or even higher, than those which graced their fathers in the old country'.⁶⁰ As a result of Burke's enthusiasm for families of Old Irish and Old English stock, some recently returned from exile on the continent or recently converted

⁵⁷ Blake Family, *Letters from the Irish Highlands* (London, 1825) 2.

⁵⁸ Whelan, 'An underground gentry?', 118-172; T.C. Barnard, 'The gentrification of eighteenth-century Ireland', *Eighteenth-century Ireland: Iris an dá chultúr*, XII (1997) 137-155.

⁵⁹ Sir B. Burke, *A Genealogical and Heraldic Dictionary of the Landed Gentry of Great Britain and Ireland, Part I* (London, 1862) xvii.

⁶⁰ *Ibidem*.

to Protestantism were readily accepted into its pages. One example is the Fogartys of Castle Fogarty in Co. Tipperary, recent converts who had retained a portion of their lands but whose marriage alliances suggest a distance from the wider settler gentry. Their entry in the *Landed Gentry* finished with the statement that they had possessed their lands since ‘before the time of Strongbow’ – a commonly used phrase that indicated their independence from the settler class.⁶¹ But if the inclusion of such families in the official *Landed Gentry* was designed to highlight the arriviste status of Cromwellians it did not go unchallenged. In 1844 *Tait’s Edinburgh Magazine* published an article entitled ‘What is a gentleman?’ which poured scorn on what it termed the ‘castellated gentry of Ireland’, native families who used their proximity to their old castles to claim gentility. The issue arose following a court case over a horse race at Galway where an English soldier, Mr. Younge, had refused to admit defeat to a man named O’Kelly because, he argued, he was not a gentleman and should not have competed. Ultimately the case was decided in O’Kelly’s favour because his family appeared in the *Landed Gentry* while Younge’s family did not. Clearly taking the view that Burke’s *Landed Gentry* had lost sight of its purpose, the magazine article attacked the pretensions of families such as O’Kelly, claiming their castles were little more than ramshackle ruins. It also poked fun at the ease with which dubious characters might assume archaic Irish titles, and mocked London and Dublin society for too readily respecting them.⁶²

Gaelic-Irish identity in the Protestant Ascendancy

The point has been made elsewhere about Ireland that ‘any map which demarcates sharply the cultural territories of native and newcomer misdirects’.⁶³ The same point could be made about ethnicity. Though discussions about native nobility tend to take opposition to the new colonial elite as a defining characteristic of the class, not all Gaelic Irish joined the ranks of the politically and economically disenfranchised.

Those who converted to Protestantism retained much of their former estates and intermarried with the new English, becoming highly visible members of the new ascendancy. In reality this ascendancy was an amalgamation of ethnic identities rather than simply ‘new English’ though the currency of Gaelic identity within this mix is often overlooked.

It is notable that while the use of Os and Macs in Irish surnames had been derided by early colonial writers, some wealthy Protestant families of Gaelic descent maintained them as a badge of distinction. At the same time many of the reduced Catholic Irish abandoned them as an impediment to advancement in an increasingly anglicised world. Similarly, we can find the continued use of ‘barbarous’ Gaelic forenames in Protestant families of the highest rank. Like many Catholic and Protestant Gaelic families the O’Briens of Thomond in the west of Ireland were largely anglicised from

⁶¹ John Burke, *A Genealogical and Heraldic Dictionary of the commoners of Great Britain and Ireland* (London, 1838), III, 700.

⁶² *Tait’s Edinburgh Magazine* XI, July (1844) 417-422; the article also appeared in *The Mirror of Literature, Amusement, and Instruction*, Oct 11 (1845) 230.

⁶³ Barnard, ‘The Gentrification of Eighteenth-Century Ireland’, 146.

the sixteenth-century onwards. Donough O'Brien, fourth earl of Thomond (d.1624) sought to disassociate himself from the rebel Irish while retaining a genealogical interest in his own family's past. Though the eldest sons of the family were given English names during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, younger sons were often named in an Irish fashion. So while the fifth Earl was named 'Henry', his younger brother was the Irish 'Brian'. Brian actually succeeded to the earldom and when it came to naming his own eldest son gave him the English name of Henry, reserving the Irish name 'Donogh' for his second son.⁶⁴ The second major line of O'Briens, the earls of Inchiquin and later marquesses of Thomond also took the Protestant side in the wars of the seventeenth century, and again, while English names predominate there remained a continued use of distinctive Gaelic-Irish names amongst younger sons. Occasionally when there were many early deaths a relation with a Gaelic name was cast into the spotlight, such as Murrough, the fifth earl and first Marquess of Thomond (d.1808).⁶⁵ The same minor use of Gaelic names occurred in the surviving branch of the O'Briens, the barons of Inchiquin. The practice attests to a consciously maintained duality of identity that makes it difficult to pigeon-hole such families within simple cultural or ethnic jurisdictions.

This pattern of naming can be observed within other notable families of noble descent. The O'Haras of Annaghmore in Sligo maintained their ancestral lands in the ancient territory of *Luigne* throughout the seventeenth century and continued to use the name 'Kean', derived from the Irish 'Cian' up until the mid eighteenth century at which time it falls out of use until revived as a middle name in 1860.⁶⁶ The name had once been very important to them in that it related to their identity as part of the Ciannacht tribe of Munster, much expounded upon in the medieval book of bardic verse they maintained as an heirloom in their house.⁶⁷

The large houses built by such families reflected their status in the upper echelons of ascendancy society while some of their contents drew attention to their Gaelic descent. One publication of gentlemen's seats from 1880 described Dromoland Castle, Co. Clare, seat of the O'Briens of Inchiquin:

The castle contains some interesting relics of ancient times...among the pictures may be mentioned a life-sized portrait in the hall of Donough Carbraic O'Brien, descendant of Brien Borohme, King of Ireland, and ancestor of the O'Brien family: there is an inscription in the corner of the picture – "Donatus O'Brien, quondam Hibernorum Rex, A.D. 1250".⁶⁸

This portrait was evidently an attempt by much later descendants of the family to visualise and display the status of ancestors who long pre-dated the rise of formal

⁶⁴ B. Burke, *A Genealogical History of the Dormant, Abeyant, Forfeited and Extinct Peerages of the British Empire* (London, 1866) 406.

⁶⁵ J. O'Hart, *Irish Pedigrees* (Dublin, 1892) I, 166.

⁶⁶ B. Burke, *A Genealogical and Heraldic History of the Landed Gentry of Ireland* (London, 1912) 533.

⁶⁷ L. McKenna, ed., *The Book of O'Hara Leabhar Í Eadbra* (Dublin, 1980).

⁶⁸ F.O. Morris, ed., *A series of picturesque views of seats of the noblemen and gentlemen of Great Britain and Ireland with descriptive and historical letterpress* (London, 1880), IV, 27.



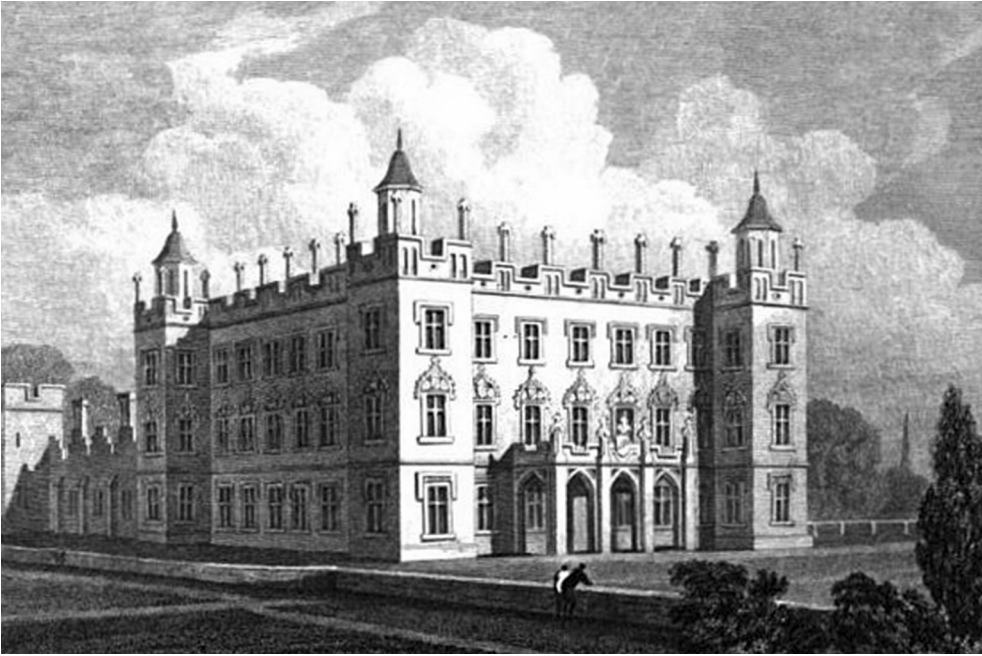
Dromoland Castle, County Clare, the early nineteenth century baronial pile erected by the O'Briens of Inchiquin, descendants of the kings of Munster. A view from 1880

portraiture. Next to it were displayed portraits of the English royal family of various periods that showed the O'Briens' close relationship with the British establishment. Despite such professed loyalty, one member of the family, William Smith O'Brien had agitated for the rights of the Catholic poor and led an insurrection against the English government in Ireland in 1848.

Gothic styles of architecture became popular in Ireland during the nineteenth-century as means of advertising the antiquity of families of all ethnic backgrounds. One such house was Borris House in Co. Carlow, the seat of the Kavanagh family, descendants of the Gaelic kings of Leinster. According to Neale's *Views of the seats of Noblemen and Gentlemen* (1823) the style of architecture was unique and chosen 'as being appropriate to the antiquity of the Family of the possessor'. Of course the style was not actually unique to this family in Ireland but Gaelic lineages often attracted writers to read these meanings into their material surroundings.⁶⁹ Like many other ascendancy families of Gaelic origin the Kavanaghs exhibited relics of their royal past – in this case, the crown and charter horn of the kings of Leinster.⁷⁰ Less well-off Catholic families who retained their status amongst the gentry invested their iden-

⁶⁹ J.P. Neale. *Views of the Seats of Noblemen and Gentlemen in England, Wales, Scotland, and Ireland*, II (London, 1823) unpaginated.

⁷⁰ S. Steele, *The Right Honourable Arthur Macmurrough Kavanagh: a biography* (London-New York, 1891) 7.



Borris House, County Carlow, the seat of the MacMurrough-Kavanagh family, descendants of the kings of Leinster. A view from 1880

tities even more heavily in such relics, most notably the O'Conors, descendants of the kings of Connacht, who collected Gaelic manuscripts and other artefacts from a wide variety of sources. These were important tools in affirming the gentility of Old Irish families in opposition to the extensive antiquarian literature that contested their claims to civility in the distant past.⁷¹

Elizabethan and Cromwellian Gaels

It would be wrong to assume that families of new English or Cromwellian stock opposed Gaelic identity and culture at every turn. This rather black and white view obscures the more complex familial inter-change between old and new families within the Protestant hierarchy. Various new English families assumed or even appropriated Gaelic lineages as a result of intermarriage. For example, when the Cromwellian family of Cooper intermarried with the last of the O'Haras of Annaghmore, Co. Sligo in 1810 they took the name O'Hara in order to inherit the estate, assuming in the process a Gaelic lineage stretching back into early medieval lore.⁷² Similarly, in 1855 the Rev. William Chichester, a descendent of the Elizabethan Lord Deputy who had

⁷¹ For an in-depth account of antiquarian debates see C. O'Halloran, *Golden ages and barbarous nations: antiquarian debate and cultural politics in Ireland, c. 1750-1800* (Cork, 2004).

⁷² Burke, *A Genealogical History A Genealogical and Heraldic History* (1863), II, IIII.

done so much to destroy the power of the O'Neills of Ulster, changed his name by royal licence to become the representative of the O'Neill dynasty. By virtue of his great grandmother, a daughter of Henry O'Neill of Shane's Castle, this Protestant clergyman found himself the heir to an ancient royal line of Gaelic descent that began in Burke with the absurdly distant ancestor 'Niul, [...] son of Pharsa, King of Scythia' in the year A.M. 1800.⁷³

Many other settler families inherited the land of Old Irish Protestants and an altered sense of identity. John Rowan, a man of Scotch settler origin in Co. Antrim, in 1809 married the heiress of the Gaelic MacManus family of Mount Davys after which several editions of Burke's *Landed Gentry* had an addendum to the Rowan genealogy proclaiming their descent from 'Magnus O'Connor, third son of Tirleigh Mor O'Connor, 48th King of Connacht and 181 elected Monarch of Ireland'.⁷⁴ Other genealogical links were more tenuous. The wealthy Trench family of French Huguenot origin, having settled in east County Galway in the first half of the seventeenth century, managed to reinvent themselves as the heirs to the native MacCarthy dynasty of Munster. In 1732 a Trench married Frances le Poer who could claim descent on her mother's side from Elena, daughter of Cormac MacCarthy, Earl of Clancarthy and on the basis of this distant connection they succeeded in persuading the crown to grant them a second creation of the earldom of Clancarty in 1803.⁷⁵ It was a rather brash assumption given that the descendents of the original earls still survived in the male line, having recently returned from the continent, and were at the time living 'in comparative obscurity in the city of cork'.⁷⁶

Many Protestant settlers in Ireland seemed quite happy to acquire and celebrate a descent from glamorous Catholic rebels of noble stock. The 1804 *Baronetage of England* shows that the wealthy English family of Lovett (seated in Tipperary and Buckinghamshire) claimed a descent in the female line from the famously rebellious O'Mores, Gaelic-Irish lords of the ancient midland territory of Laois, a tribe violently decimated in the time of Elizabeth I. Having settled in Ireland in the seventeenth century Christopher Lovett had married Frances O'More, a figure described in 1804 as 'a descendant of that great, but unfortunate man Roger O'More, one of the first families in Ireland'.⁷⁷ An 1844 edition of Burke described this female ancestor in more romantic language as 'daughter and heiress of Roger O'More, the descendant and representative of the great family of the O'Mores, Princes of Leix, whose great estates had been forfeited in the reign of Elizabeth'.⁷⁸ They were so attracted by the idea of this 'princely' descent that by 1804 Sir Jonathan Lovett was being proclaimed as 'the representative of Roger O'More', and 'quarter[ed] the arms of O'More accordingly'.⁷⁹

73 Ibidem, 1122.

74 Burke, *A Genealogical and Heraldic History* (1912) 609.

75 W. Courthope, ed., *Debrett's complete peerage of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland* (London, 1837) 590.

76 J. O'Hart, *Irish Pedigrees: the origin and stem of the Irish nation* (Dublin, 1881) 125.

77 W. Betham, *The Baronetage of England, or the History of the English Baronets etc* (London, 1804), IV, 94.

78 Burke, *A Genealogical and Heraldic History* (1844) 324.

79 Betham, *The Baronetage of England*, 94.

Other more apocryphal connections to native Irish nobility can be seen elsewhere amongst families of settler origin, particularly where there was a strong material presence of the original owners in the form of antiquities.⁸⁰ In the 1835 edition of Burke's *Genealogical and Heraldic History* the Freeman family of Castle Cor in Co. Cork claimed descent from a 'Miss Callaghan of Bantyre, of the ancient house of O'Callaghan of Clonmeen'.⁸¹ They seemed uncertain of both her full name, and – as the 1847 edition of Burke's reveals – the name of the member of the Freeman family she was meant to have married.⁸² They may have been inspired by their surroundings. Castle Cor was built on the site of a medieval Irish abbey and the Freemans were alive to its Gothic associations, describing a cave beneath the ruins where 'no superstitious peasant would venture at midnight [...] as at that hour the [Irish] prince is allowed to assume his natural form, and move through the dark trees which have grown amid the ruins; these trees alone evince the antiquity of the place, and the remote period of its decay'.⁸³ The insecurity of English settlers amidst a landscape imbued with the antiquities of the dispossessed Irish may have spurred attempts to fabricate such indigenous links.

The combination of agrarian agitation and the Celtic Revival in the nineteenth century made such connections valuable and attractive to the new English. As a result the identities of ascendancy families became increasingly complex and contradictory. While the Gaelic O'Hara family of Sligo were in reality the Cromwellian Coopers (see above), another branch of the Coopers, the wealthiest of Sligo's settler families, came to believe that they were in reality not Cromwellian at all, but descended from the native sept of O'Brien. W.B. Yeats, a friend of the family, reported:

All my childhood the Coopers of Markree, County Sligo, represented such rank and fashion as the County knew, and I had it from my friend the late Bryan Cooper that his supposed Cromwellian ancestor being childless adopted an O'Brien; while local tradition thinks that an O'Brien, promised the return of her confiscated estate if she married a Cromwellian soldier, married a Cooper and murdered him three days after. Not, however, before he had founded a family.⁸⁴

The descent was not proclaimed in Burke as it was far too tenuous and there is no reference to it in the large scale family tree on the great staircase at Markree Castle. But from the second half of the nineteenth-century the claim was asserted as the true origin of the family. One local historian having debated the issue was ultimately happy that the family should have full authority on the matter:

⁸⁰ One of the most revealing examples of such insecurity is that of the Darbys of Leap Castle in Co. Offaly see A. Tierney, 'The Gothic and the Gaelic: Exploring the Place of Castles in Ireland's Celtic Revival', *International Journal of Historical Archaeology*, VIII (2004) 185-198 no.3; A. Tierney 'From Gothic to Gothic Revival: An Archaeology of Leap Castle, Co. Offaly' in: K. O'Neill, ed., *Studies in the Gothic Revival* (Dublin, 2008) 27-50.

⁸¹ Burke, *A Genealogical and Heraldic History* (1835), II, 693.

⁸² Burke, *A Genealogical and Heraldic History* (London, 1847), I, 447.

⁸³ Burke, *A Genealogical and Heraldic History* (1835) 693.

⁸⁴ W.B. Yeats, *Wheels and Butterflies* (London, 2006) 10.

Another circumstance that tells strongly for the O'Brien origin of the Markrea [sic] Coopers is this : that the late Mr. Cooper, who was so well qualified to weigh arguments, was fully convinced of this origin after he had studied diligently all the facts of the case.⁸⁵

The claim dates then to at least the time of 'the late Mr. Cooper', Edward Josuah Cooper who died in 1863 and possibly even a generation earlier. But more significant than the truth of their genealogical origins is the desire, so keenly expressed, to find such a noble indigenous root.

The twentieth century

The downfall of the Protestant Ascendancy in the twentieth century was precipitated by the agrarian movement of the nineteenth which sought to break apart the great estates in favour of tenant landownership. The notion that the Irish peasant had a natural affection for families 'of the old stock' was soon converted into the idea that 'the genuine Irish peasant was an aristocrat at heart',⁸⁶ a perspective which facilitated the idea that the land had always belonged to the people and was being retrieved from a foreign aristocracy. In 1912 the editor of Burke's *Landed Gentry*, with tongue-in-cheek, described the situation:

Of course, one knows that every Irishman is the descendent of countless kings, princes and other minor celebrities. One admits it – the thing is unquestionable. One knows, of course, also, that every family is the oldest in Co. Galway, or Co. Sligo, or somewhere else, and that, for some reason or other, every Irishman is the "head" of his family, and I am growing weary of reading letters which assure me that the mushroom families included in the Landed Gentry pale into significance beside the glories of those which are omitted [...].⁸⁷

In 1938 a local history of the O'Kennedy country of Tipperary entitled *The Last Lords of Ormond*, sought to confirm the repatriation of the landownership to the common Irishman. Remarking on the similarity in names of those Gaelic dispossessed by Cromwell and those Irish repossessed by the Land Commission the author wrote:

it is even startling to find in the pages of a dry official record of 1933, the evidence that the Providence of God, after the lapse of nearly three hundred years, has not allowed to go unrighted the grievous wrong perpetrated on the men of Ormond by Cromwellian decree, Stuart statute, and breaking of the Limerick's Treaty.⁸⁸

⁸⁵ T. O'Rorke, *History, Antiquities, and Present State of the parishes of Ballysadare and Kilvarnet in the county of Sligo* (Dublin, 1878) 195.

⁸⁶ J. O'Daly, 'The Poets and Poetry of Munster', *The Irish Quarterly Review* (1857), VII, 336.

⁸⁷ Burke, *A Genealogical and Heraldic History* (1912) 609.

⁸⁸ Gleeson, *The Last Lords of Ormond*, 150.

While Gleeson reproduced images of castles of the old Gaelic aristocracy and discussed their demise, he never investigated their genealogical links with the common farmers of his own time. Nor did he make any claims as regards the entitlement of any dispossessed aristocracy to those lands or castles as ‘the old nobility’ were assumed to be the common people.

The profile of aristocratic families of both Gaelic and Cromwellian stock became increasingly low within the newly independent Irish Free State (from 1922) – and later Republic (from 1949). It became a policy not to confer titles of nobility on any individual as means of confirming the democratic nature of governance. However, in 1944 Edward MacLysaght, the chief herald under the new government, arranged for official ‘courtesy recognition’ to be continued to ten ‘chieftains of the name’ of Old Irish stock, as a means of acknowledging their heritage value within a country that, culturally at least, sought to revive the Gaelic past. Other families were subsequently added to the list until in 1999 the recognition was entirely revoked following controversy surrounding the authenticity of the MacCarthy Mór pedigree.⁸⁹ Although those claiming Gaelic-Irish nobility retain some presence today in the ‘Council of Irish Chiefs’, they are largely invisible within the politics or media.⁹⁰

Conclusion

If Irish identities remain enduringly complex then part of that complexity is the unresolved issue surrounding social class in the context of colonialism. In the absence of documentary source material the surviving buildings of major tenants and strong farmers demand further investigation. Ireland is rich in the ruined remains of tower houses, cottages and ‘big houses’, all of which constitute a remarkably under-utilised record of class relations. Tenant families such as the O’Kennedys of Lackeen and Glenahilty perhaps conform in some degree to the notion of a ‘castellated gentry of Ireland’, though the label was applied to more established families than these. A romantic image of the ruined nobility was certainly propagated in early and mid-nineteenth century novels such as the *The Wild Irish Girl* and *The O’Donoghue of the Glens* though little research has been carried out on the actual occupation of medieval castles by Catholic middlemen in the eighteenth century. How this relates to wider changes in country house building remains obscure. Certainly the construction of new castles amongst the landed gentry in the eighteenth-century appears first amongst the Catholic families of the Pale.⁹¹

Intermarriages between settler and native families in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries reveal more complex forms of ethnicity within the emerging Protestant Ascendancy. They also subsequently favoured the castellated style of architecture and in many cases were happy to acknowledge some native descent or even

⁸⁹ C. Lysaght, ‘Foreword’, in: W.J. Curly, ed., *Vanishing Kingdoms: The Irish Chiefs and their Families* (Dublin, 2004) 13–14; See also S. Murphy, *Twilight of the chiefs: the Mac Carthy Mór hoax* (Dublin, 2004).

⁹⁰ For a more detailed account of their current status see A. Chambers, *At Arms Length: Aristocrats in the Republic of Ireland* (Dublin, 2004).

⁹¹ M. Craig, *The Architecture of Ireland from the earliest times to 1880* (Dublin, 1982) 247–8. See also Tierney, ‘An archaeology of Leap Castle, Co. Offaly’, 49.

cast themselves in the role of 'chieftain' or head of the sept. Exaggerated genealogical claims and the maintenance of obscure heirlooms retained a currency within the wider field of antiquarian interest and promoted Gaelic identity to a wider audience in Britain. The role of Burke's *Landed Gentry* in asserting the legitimacy of the 'castellated gentry' placed the discourse around Gaelic identity at the heart of the British establishment. Here the insecurities surrounding notions of class and gentility were manifest in the competing claims of old and new families to be the representative nobility for the country.