

# Irish literature and the historiography of 18th-century Ireland

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There is an Irish proverb that runs '*a scéal féin scéal gach aon duine*'; literally, 'everyone's story is their own story', or more loosely, 'everyone likes to be talking about themselves'. In keeping with this piece of folk wisdom, I'd like to begin tonight's lecture by taking a few minutes to talk about my own initiation into the use of the vernacular literature as a historical source.

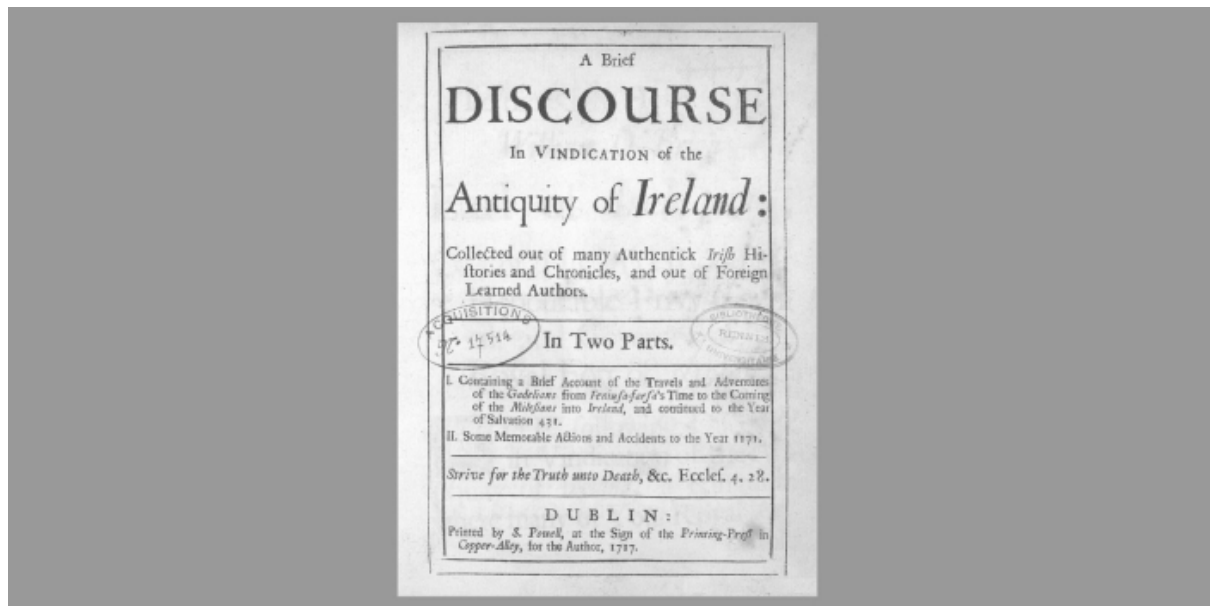


Figure 1: Hugh MacCurtin, *A Brief Discourse in Vindication of the Antiquity of Ireland* (Dublin, 1717)

Some twenty-eight years ago, in 1991, I was researching a thesis for the degree of M.Phil. in Irish studies in UCD. My thesis was originally conceived as a study of Hugh MacCurtin's *Brief Discourse in Vindication of the Antiquity of Ireland*, a history based on native sources that was published at Dublin in 1717. I wanted to include an introductory chapter on the author, who was also a prolific poet and is perhaps better known under the Irish form of his name, Aodh Buí Mac Cruitín. In trying to piece together a summary biography, I encountered a number of problems, one of which is of relevance to the subject of tonight's lecture. In one of his poem's, MacCurtin anticipated forthcoming Christmas festivities among the soldiers of the Régiment de Clare – an Irish regiment in the French service. The poem strongly suggests, but does not explicitly state, that the poet was himself a soldier in the regiment. The final verse reads as follows:

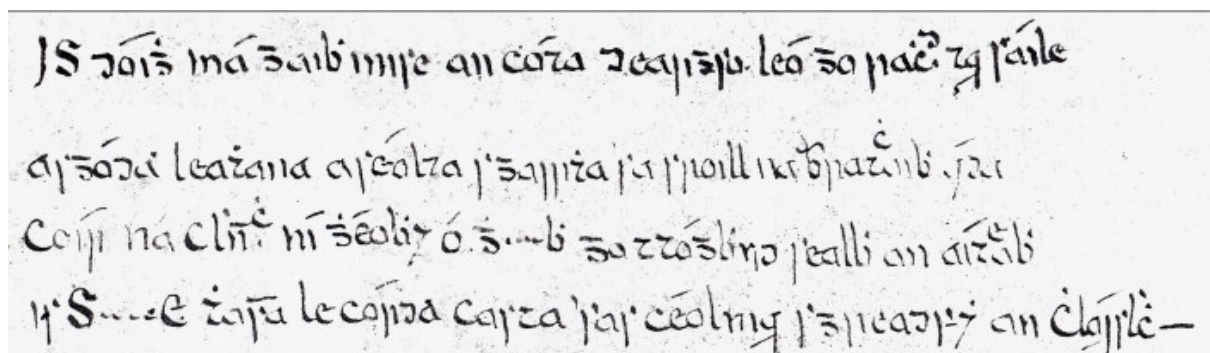


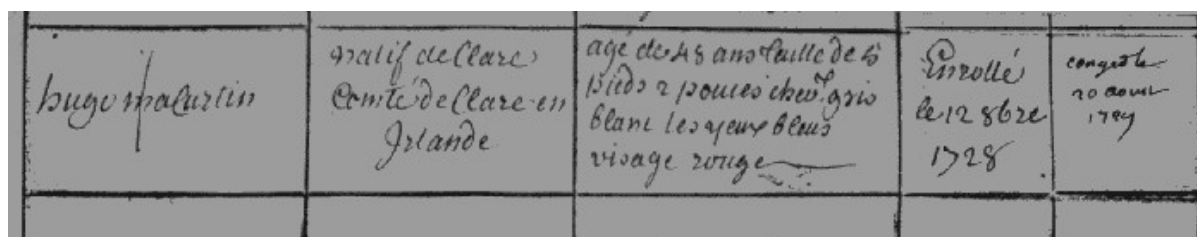
Figure 2: NUIM MS. Murphy 11, pages 268 (line 1) and 269 (lines 2-4)

That is:

Is dóigh má ghabhaimse an cóta dearg so leo go rachad tar sáile,  
a scóda leathan, a seolta scartha is an sról 'na mbratachaibh arda;  
cóir ná ceannach ní gheobhaid ó Ghallaibh go dtógaid sealbh a n-áitreabh,  
Is Seirse a thachtadh le corda casta is is ceolmhar screadfas an chláirseach.

(I suppose if I put on this red coat, I'll go with them over the sea, with sheets spread, sails deployed and silk in their banners on high; no justice or recompense will they obtain from the English til they take possession of their dwellings and strangle George [II] with a twisted rope, and musically the harp will sound.)

As with any work of literature, it is possible that the author may have given free rein to his imagination: if a poet chooses to speak in the voice of a soldier, it cannot be assumed that he really was a soldier. In any event, it may be noted that the crucial phrase in the poem is qualified: '*má ghabhaimse an cóta dearg so*' ('if I put on this red coat'). This leaves open the possibility that the poet never put on a red coat. Yet precisely such a claim occurs in one of the manuscript copies (RIA 23 C 8) where the scribe's introduction reads as follows: '*Aodha baoi mc Cruitín cct 7 é a bhflóndras, a ccaith thighearna an chláir 7 súil aco re teacht go héirinn do bhain a bhfearann dúthchais do ghallaibh isan mbliain 1693*' ['Aodh Buí Mac Cruitín composed when he was in Flanders, in Lord Clare's regiment, and they hoping to come to Ireland to take their native land from the English in the year 1693']. My confidence in this scribal note was somewhat impaired by the date quoted: the king of England was not called 'George' in 1693. Furthermore, from other evidence, I knew that the poet was born *circa* 1680 and could hardly have enlisted at twelve or thirteen years of age. None the less, my feeling was that the poem had an authentic ring to it and that the poet really had put on the red coat of a soldier. With the energy and enthusiasm of youth, I concluded that there was only one course of action open to me: rather than leave such an important biographical question unresolved, I decided to visit the French military archives—then, as now, located in the Chateau de Vincennes on the outskirts of Paris. On the second day of my research there, I found what I was looking for: the muster roll of the Régiment de Clare.



Buge MacCurtin	originaire de Clare Comte de Clare en Irlande	age de 23 ans taille de 6 pieds 2 pouces cheu. gris blanc les yeux bleus visage rouge	Enrolle le 12 oct 1728	congé 20 août 1729
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Figure 3: Service historique de la Défense MS. 1Yc 257, folio 114 verso

This established that MacCurtin enlisted on 12 October 1728 and was discharged on 20 August 1729 - information that was consistent with other biographical details that were known to me. For example, MacCurtin had already published a book entitled *The Elements of the Irish Language Grammatically Explained in English* at Louvain in 1728, and he would subsequently be named as a collaborator on the title page of Conchobhar Ó Beaglaioich's *The English Irish Dictionary* which appeared at Paris in 1732.

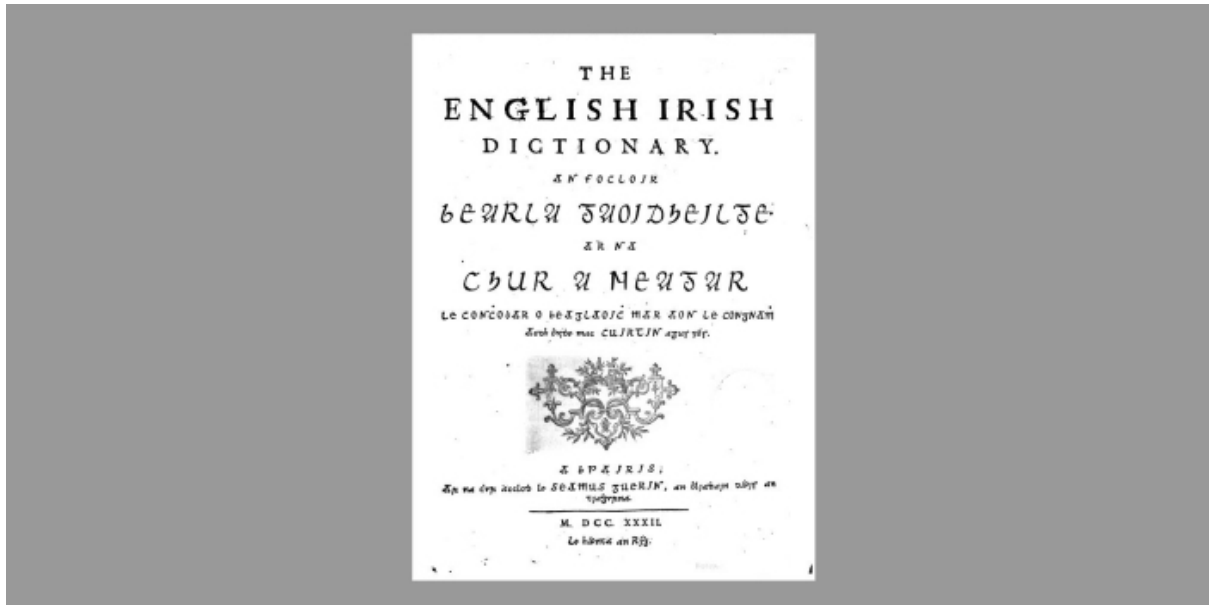


Figure 4: Conchobhar Ó Beaglaóich, *The English Irish Dictionary* (Paris, 1732)

Furthermore, the soldier in the muster role was aged 48 years – exceptionally old for an enlisted man, but exactly what I expected for the poet. As final confirmation of the soldier’s identity, I was able to establish that in 1728 the Régiment de Clare was stationed at the town of Béthune in the province of Artois, about midway between Louvain and Paris. To summarise: an entry made by anonymous officers in a muster roll in 1728-9, had transformed a literary composition of questionable evidential value into a unique historical text composed by a rank-and-file Irish soldier in the French service. This was a formative experience for me, and it left me with an enduring belief that the vernacular literature provides a window into the views and lives of important social strata that are not otherwise represented in the historical record

This belief places me in a small minority among historians of eighteenth-century Ireland. Almost invariably, historians of the period restrict their research to sources in English and avoid any engagement with the vernacular literature. Yet Irish-language texts from the century are both extensive and varied. While only 500 manuscripts in the language have survived from before 1700, about 1,000 manuscripts are extant from the eighteenth century, many of them running to hundreds of pages. There are a further 3,000 manuscripts from the first half of the nineteenth century, many of which contain texts composed during the previous century. These manuscripts provide a unique insight into the culture of the society in which they were produced—a more sensitive insight than could ever have been provided by printed sources, because the barriers to manuscript production were so much lower. Essentially, manuscript production required only literacy, some paper, a bottle of ink and a goose quill. There was no need to engage a printer, to solicit subscriptions, or to arrange for distribution. Furthermore, while publications in English were monitored by the state, and their authors, printers, distributors and retailers were all liable to prosecution for seditious libel, it was comparatively easy for Irish-language authors and the scribes who recorded their work to evade detection. The vernacular sources are therefore much more unguarded than sources in English on such sensitive issues as the legitimacy of the reigning dynasty, the orthodoxy of the established church, or Ireland’s constitutional status. Although there *were* some instances of Irish-language authors being prosecuted, a small amount of discretion ensured that the risk was low and, for practical purposes, vernacular compositions

of the period can be regarded as uncensored expressions of their authors' opinions. It may be noted, however, that the scribe who penned the copy of MacCurtin's poem in NUIM MS. Murphy 11 took the precaution of abbreviating the potentially incriminating words 'Gallaibh' and 'Seoirse'.

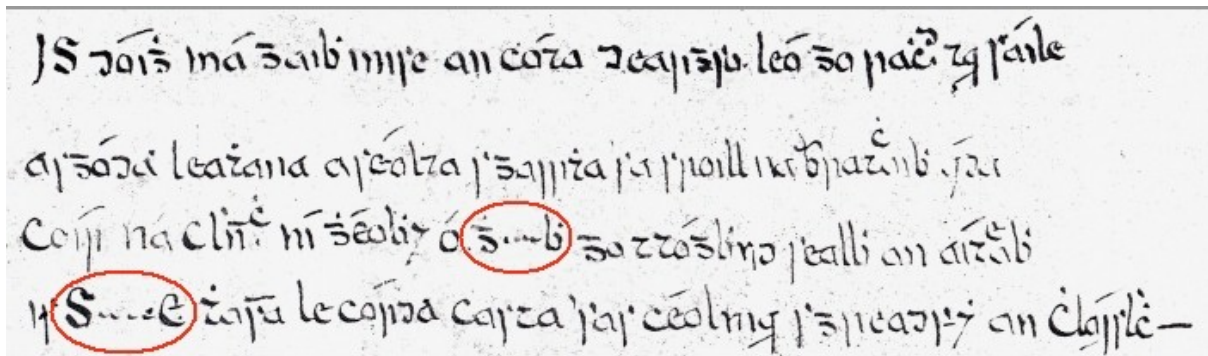


Figure 5: Two examples of scribal discretion in NUIM MS. Murphy 11

More than a century ago, Eoin MacNeill, the distinguished historian of early Ireland, surveyed the contents of the O'Laverty manuscript collection held in Saint Malachy's College, Belfast. This collection contained 333 discrete compositions, and MacNeill classified them as follows: eighty-five items (26 %) were religious and a further seven were 'purely controversial', a description which probably signified sectarian polemics; 38 items (13 %) were heroic in nature and mainly concerned tales of Fionn mac Cumhaill and his *fianna*; seventeen items (5 %) related to 'contemporary politics', and a further sixteen dealt with 'past history'; twenty-six compositions were described as 'amorous', some of which MacNeill judged to be 'indecent'; 'humorous literature' was represented by eighteen compositions and a further eleven were described as 'satirical'; twenty items praised persons who were recently deceased, and seven were composed in honour of living subjects.

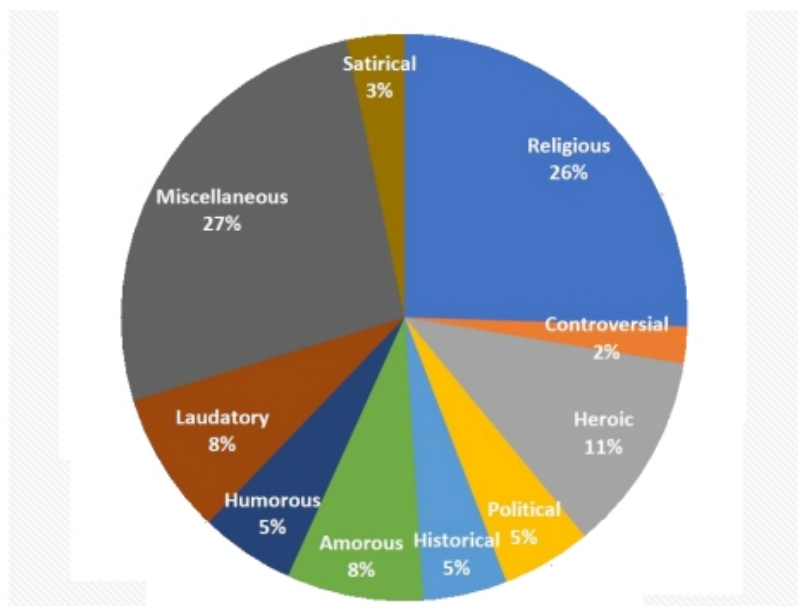


Figure 6: Eoin MacNeill's analysis of literary texts in the O'Laverty manuscripts

MacNeill's sample was small and a northern bias is likely, given the provenance of the manuscripts, but I cannot cite a more recent or representative analysis of the manuscript literature as, remarkably, the subject has not attracted the attention of later historians.

One must pose the question: why is this so? *If* the divide between the Irish-speaking and English-speaking communities in the eighteenth century were merely geographic—similar to that between the French-speaking and German-speaking cantons of Switzerland—historians’ neglect of the Irish sources would still be difficult to understand given the large volume and broad range of the material available. But the divide between the linguistic communities in Ireland was *not* merely regional: in 18th-century Ireland, the linguistic division correlated strongly with important ethnic, political, religious and social divisions. Historians who restrict their research to sources in English, systematically privilege voices that are overwhelmingly English or Anglo-Irish, Protestant, loyal to the established political order, and drawn from the upper layers of society. To follow such an unbalanced research methodology is to engage in the retrospective anglicisation of eighteenth-century Ireland. It is to fabricate an image of an English-speaking Georgian Ireland that never existed in reality: the age of Swift and Goldsmith was also the age of Ó Rathaille and Merriman. On the other hand, to adopt a bilingual research methodology, is to engage with the views of the rural populace, of Catholics, of the politically disaffected, of social layers that had no access to print media. Given this background, then, why *do* historians of the period consistently fail to utilise the Irish sources? In the next part of this lecture I would like to interrogate various explanations that have been offered by academic historians.

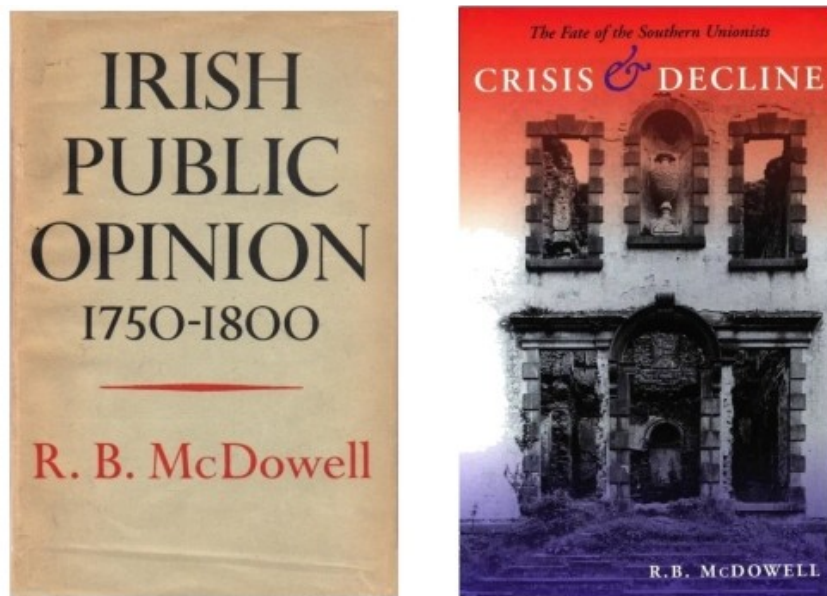


Figure 7: Two books by R. B. McDowell from 1944 and 1997

Comments by R. B. McDowell in the preface to his *Irish Public Opinion 1750-1800*, a much praised monograph published in 1944, give some insight into the views of historians at that time. Dated though they are, McDowell’s arguments provide a benchmark against which the views of more recent historians can be assessed. The author anticipated some criticism of his failure to use sources in Irish, and defended his exclusively anglophone methodology in the following terms:

It may be said that too much attention has been paid to the opinions of ‘the thinking few’ (to borrow an expression from theological controversy) and that the outlook of the masses has been neglected. But perhaps it scarcely requires to be emphasized that the great bulk of the people were restricted by poverty and persecution to political speculations of the simplest kind ... the great output of Gaelic

poetry through which they expressed their feelings does not contain any formulated political ideas.

*Irish Public Opinion 1750-1800* (1944), pp. 5-6.

This is an extraordinary claim. In effect, McDowell dismissed the political and historical significance of the views held by the majority of the Irish population on such subjects as the American revolution, the Volunteer movement, the Rightboy agitation against tithes, Penal legislation, and the French revolution. Furthermore, he did so without ever examining the sources in which those views were expressed. In a second book, *Crisis and Decline: The Fate of Southern Unionists*, published as recently as 1997, McDowell was equally dismissive of the Irish-language sources:

Within Trinity the courses and teaching closely resembled those in a British university —I nearly wrote, ‘in other British universities’. However, there was a school of Celtic studies and courses in Irish, and the comparatively few undergraduates who studied Irish were prone to assert vigorously the immense value, especially to Irishmen, of their own subject. Their assertions left me cold or, on controversial occasions, heated. I felt no impulse to learn Irish. My ancestral connections with the language, if they existed, were very distant; I was not a good linguist and my slight acquaintance with Gaelic literature, gained from translation, did not stimulate me to attempt to master the language.

*Crisis and Decline: The Fate of Southern Unionists* (1997), pp. 205-6.

Once again, this is an extraordinary argument. As professional scholars, historians *should* be able to transcend their family backgrounds, their political sympathies and their personal aptitudes. For any historian, the need to familiarise oneself with the full range of sources relevant to the subject being investigated should be paramount. Instead, McDowell dismissed, unread, all of the sources produced by one of the two linguistic communities in eighteenth-century Ireland. His monograph was mistitled: in reality, the subject of his study was not Irish opinion, but rather Anglo-Irish opinion.

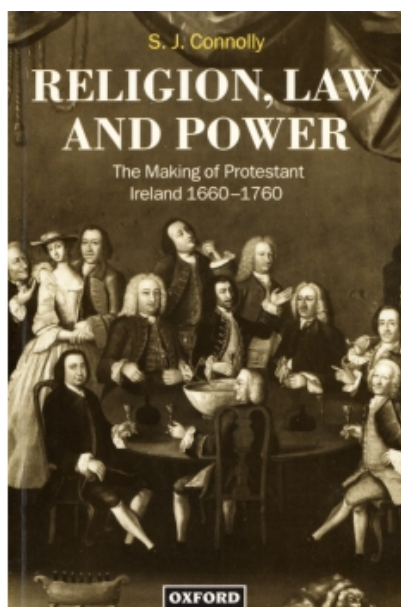


Figure 8: S. J. Connolly, *Religion, Law and Power: The Making of Protestant Ireland 1660-1760* (1992)

Although his academic career spanned more than fifty years, it must be acknowledged that R. B. McDowell's views were formed in the 1940s and it might be thought that attitudes would have evolved in the intervening period. This is true to some extent, but arguments that minimise the importance of sources in Irish continue to be advanced. Professor S. J. Connolly, who recently retired from the chair of Irish history at Queens University Belfast, is prominent among those who dispute the historical value of vernacular sources. In his *Religion, Law and Power: The Making of Protestant Ireland 1660-1760*, a work that was well received on its appearance in 1992, he argued that the vernacular literature of the later eighteenth century expressed 'fossilized' ideas that 'should perhaps be considered part of a society's folklore rather than its politics'. However, the only evidence advanced in support of this contention was a song entitled '*Tá an cruatan ar Sheoirse*' ('George is in distress') composed by the County Kerry poet Eoghan Rua Ó Súilleabháin during the American revolutionary war. Professor Connolly dismissed Ó Súilleabháin's song in the following terms:

When the County Kerry labourer Eoghan Rua Ó Súilleabháin (1748-84) composed a poem on the American War of Independence, for example, his delight in the difficulties engulfing the Hanoverian dynasty was conveyed in a web of confused and inconsistent images, in which the American colonists were not mentioned at all, while 'the Emperor' was somehow imagined to be among Britain's enemies.

*Religion, Law and Power: The Making of Protestant Ireland 1660-1760* (1992), p. 248.

The truth is very different. In reality, it was the historian, not the poet, who showed a lack of familiarity with the contemporary diplomatic and military contexts. The entry of France into the American war coincided with growing tensions between Austria, a French ally since the 'diplomatic revolution' of 1756, and Prussia. These tensions culminated in the War of Bavarian Succession in 1778-9. In Ireland, as elsewhere in Europe, it was widely expected that the two wars – that between France and Britain in the Atlantic, and that between Austria and Prussia in Germany – would merge into a wider conflict, much as the colonial War of Jenkins' Ear had previously merged with the War of Austrian Succession. In April 1778, shortly after the formal breach between Britain and France, *Finn's Leinster Journal* reported that French forces had entered Brussels, capital of the Austrian Netherlands, and continued:

we foresaw this might take place in consequence of a convention between the courts of Vienna and Versaille, according to which the French were to occupy the Austrian Netherlands as soon as the Emperor's troops had retired from them.

*Finn's Leinster Journal*, 8 April 1778.

In its next issue, the newspaper advised its readers that George III's continental possessions were about to be overrun: 'The Emperor is putting himself at the head of his army ... and Brunswick and Hanover are certainly to be the seat of war'. That Britain did not become involved in a German war can be attributed to two factors: first, the French were determined not to fight on two fronts; second, Russian opposition to Austrian claims in Bavaria persuaded the emperor to bring the war to an early conclusion. The War of Bavarian Succession is now a minor historical footnote, but at the time it was widely assumed that it would develop into a general European war involving all the major powers. Austria's accession to the anti-British alliance was not only anticipated, but was reported as an accomplished fact in the Irish press. Eoghan Rua Ó Súilleabháin's song accurately reflects this

expectation. Further references in the song to Comte d’Estaing, the French naval commander, and to Russian rejection of British overtures, show the poet to have been a well informed observer of contemporary European developments. His song captures the sense of anticipation which spread among the Irish-speaking population of Munster in the early summer of 1778 as the French fleet put to sea, as Germany teetered on the brink of war, and as British hopes of a Russian alliance foundered. Far from being ‘confused and inconsistent’, the song is an essential text for any historian who would trace the evolution of Irish opinion during the American revolution.

Writing in the *American Historical Review* in 1999, Jane Ohlmeyer, currently professor of modern history in TCD, put forward a different argument. Unlike McDowell and Connolly, she did not dismiss the historical value of sources in Irish. Instead, she argued that the availability of English translations made a knowledge of the language unnecessary:

For many, the linguistic barrier remains a very real one; however, given the wealth of material that has been translated into English by bodies like the Irish Texts Society, it should not be an insurmountable one.

*American Historical Review*, April 1999, p. 450.

This argument is simply untenable. The greater part, by far, of the vernacular literature of the eighteenth century has never been published *in Irish*—much less translated into English. It is preserved in manuscript only; those who would read it require a knowledge not just of the Irish language but also of Irish palaeography. The minuscule proportion of material available in English can be gauged by considering the number of eighteenth-century poets, anthologies of whose work have been published without translations. In contrast, I can think of just one prolific poet from the eighteenth century whose corpus is available in translation: namely, Aogán Ó Rathaille.



Figure 9: Single-author anthologies of 18th-century verse in Irish only (on left) and with English translations (on right)

There are, of course, many individual poems and songs that have been translated, but these are invariably chosen for their literary merit, not for their historical value, and there may be an inverse correlation between the two: good literature usually concerns itself with



universal, timeless themes, whereas important primary sources are invariably situated in a particular historical conjuncture. In fairness to Professor Ohlmeyer, her period is the seventeenth century rather than the eighteenth, and translations from the earlier period are somewhat more plentiful. None the less, when two members of the Irish department in TCD (Damian McManus and Eoghan Ó Raghallaigh) edited an anthology of five hundred previously unpublished bardic poems in 2010, their collection included approximately one hundred and fifty poems from the 17th century and none of these were translated.

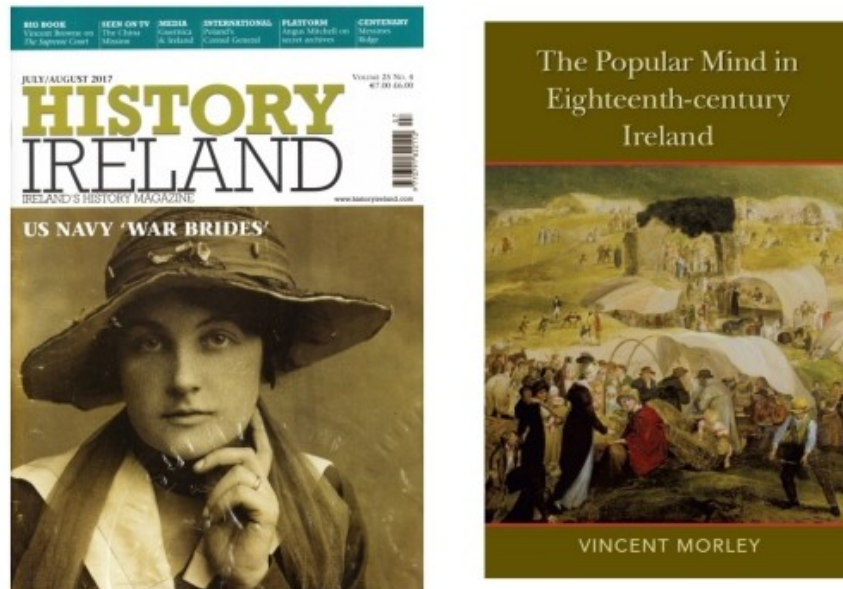


Figure 10: *The Popular Mind in Eighteenth-century Ireland* was reviewed in *History Ireland*, July-August 2017

In his review of my *Popular Mind in Eighteenth-century Ireland*, a review which appeared in the July 2017 issue of *History Ireland*, Jim Smyth, emeritus professor of Irish history at the University of Notre Dame, concluded as follows:

The high value of Irish-language sources is demonstrated conclusively. The tractability of such evidence remains problematic, however. To what extent did poets write for each other? How representative were their views? Imagine, by analogy, extrapolating later twentieth-century popular political beliefs from those encoded in a stylised literary genre of that era—academic history?

*History Ireland*, July-August 2017, p. 63.

While apparently conceding the importance of the vernacular sources, Smyth questions whether the views they express were really representative of the wider Irish-speaking community. He sees a parallel between the Irish-language authors of the eighteenth century and academic historians of the present day. The latter are, of course, a very unrepresentative group. Recruited largely from the upper middle class, they are subjected to intensive instruction for three to four years as undergraduates, followed by practical training for four to six years as they research master's and doctoral theses. This allows ample opportunity for the historical profession to reproduce itself in its own image: to guide young historians into approved areas of research, to familiarise them with the conventional wisdom of their elders, and to advise them which sources are essential and which sources are merely optional – or, indeed, deprecated. Given such a long process of formation, it may well be possible to inculcate a professional viewpoint which differs from that of the wider society. Whether this is true or not, it has no bearing on the literature of eighteenth-century

Ireland. The authors of that period were all amateurs and they received no professional training. Furthermore, they were socially differentiated and widely dispersed geographically. For example, it seems likely that songs from Munster had little or no currency in North Leinster or Ulster, and the reverse also seems to be true. While some poets of the period undoubtedly received payments for individual compositions, none of them were employed by patrons. The comparison drawn between their circumstances and that of modern academic historians is therefore devoid of merit and can be dismissed out of hand. The vernacular authors of the eighteenth-century were recruited from, and composed for, the Irish-speaking population at large.

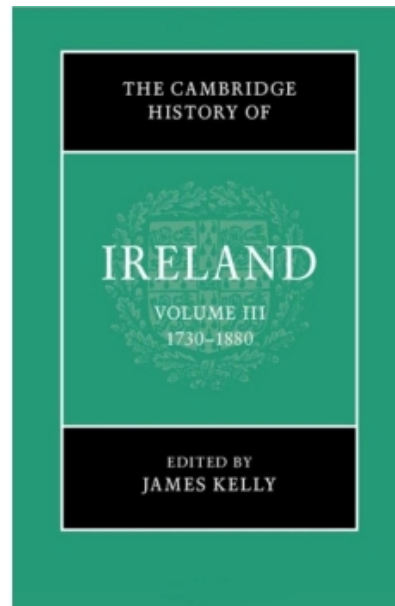


Figure 11: Volume 3 of The Cambridge History of Ireland (Cambridge, 2018)

In his preface to the third volume of the *Cambridge History of Ireland* which appeared last year (2018), Professor James Kelly of DCU commented as follows:

It is fashionable, in certain circles, to argue that the limits of this [state] archive can be made good by appealing to the corpus of Irish-language material, and recent work utilising its primary component – Gaelic poetry – has demonstrated its potential in divining the popular mind, but it has less to offer on economic, social, gender, intellectual, recreational and other aspects of Irish society with which historians also seek to engage and, inter alia, address here.

*The Cambridge History of Ireland, III* (2018), p. 14.

I suspect that Professor Kelly may be correct in relation to economic history, provided this is narrowly defined as trade statistics, availability of specie, fluctuations of wages and prices, etc. But I am baffled as to why he imagines that sources in Irish are unimportant for those who would investigate social, gender, intellectual or recreational aspects of the Irish past. In relation to social history, the vernacular sources shed essential light on such key topics as penal legislation, landlordism and agrarian unrest. In relation to gender history, let us recall that Eoin MacNeill described twenty-six of the 333 compositions in the O’Lavery manuscripts—some 8 per cent of the total—as ‘amorous’ or ‘indecent’. Can it seriously be maintained that such works have nothing to tell us about gender relations at the time of their composition? Again, the long series of poems by multiple authors on the cross-dressing Seon Anna Prior are surely of relevance to any historian of gender fluidity in the eighteenth-

century. Kelly's inclusion of intellectual history among the areas where the Irish sources have little to offer is more perplexing still because, in the very first chapter of volume 3 of the *Cambridge History*, literary compositions in Irish are the principal source used to characterise the ideology of Irish Jacobitism. I am the author of that chapter and Professor Kelly commissioned me to write it. Strangest of all is the inclusion of recreation among the areas in which the vernacular sources are found wanting. It should surely be evident that eighteenth-century texts in Irish are vital sources for the literary culture of the period; they also shed incidental light on such topics as music and song, storytelling, dancing, card games, alcohol consumption, etc. I would have thought that even those who dispute the importance of the Irish sources for the political historian, would at least accept their importance for the historian of popular culture.

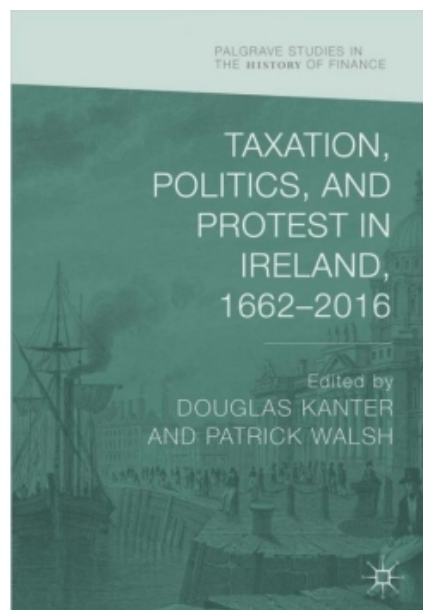


Figure 12: *Taxation, Politics, and Protest in Ireland, 1662-2016* (2019)

A collection of essays entitled *Taxation, Politics, and Protest in Ireland, 1662-2016*, was published earlier this year. One of the editors, Patrick Walsh, is a lecturer in history at TCD and he quoted a taxation-related passage from a poem by the County Sligo author Seán Ó Gadhra that was translated in my *Popular Mind in Eighteenth-century Ireland*. He then added the following comment:

Such commentaries on taxation in the Irish language sources are rare, making this an especially valuable source, revealing as it does some insight into popular attitudes to taxation, attitudes that were rarely verbalised in the surviving documentation.

Instead historians have been largely obliged to infer popular attitudes to taxation from instances of illicit distillation, protest, riot, or smuggling.

*Taxation, Politics, and Protest in Ireland, 1662-2016* (2019), p. 90.

I have now almost thirty years experience of working on the literature of the eighteenth-century, and it does not appear to me that the vernacular authors of the period were particularly reticent on the subject of taxation. On the contrary, it seems to me that references to the subject are quite plentiful. In addition to the term that is now standard, 'cáin', the terms for taxation used in the literature include 'cíos', which can also mean 'rent'; 'ráta', which is often a land tax; 'sraith', which corresponds to 'cess' in English; 'deachú', the tithes payable to the established church; and the generic 'íoc' or 'payment'. Furthermore,

the word 'tax' is itself used as a borrowing from English; indeed, it must be one of the most common English words in the Irish-language literature of the period. But if references to taxation are common, it probably *is* the case that they have rarely been translated. This is easily explained: the dry-as-dust subject of taxation is unlikely to arouse the interest of literary scholars, while historians typically avoid any engagement with the Irish manuscripts.

As the views of the six historians quoted above show, there has been some shift in attitudes. While there is a clear line of continuity between R. B. McDowell's claim that the Irish sources do 'not contain any formulated political ideas', and S. J. Connolly's argument that the ideas they contain should be considered 'part of a society's folklore rather than its politics', more recent comments by other historians have been less dismissive. None the less, they continue to minimise the significance of the Irish sources by arguing that much of the material has been translated, that the views they express are unrepresentative, or that they have little to contribute in specific areas. Varied though these arguments are, they all point to the same conclusion: that a purely anglophone research methodology is perfectly adequate for historians of eighteenth-century Ireland. In this, they diverge from the standard practice of historians in other countries.

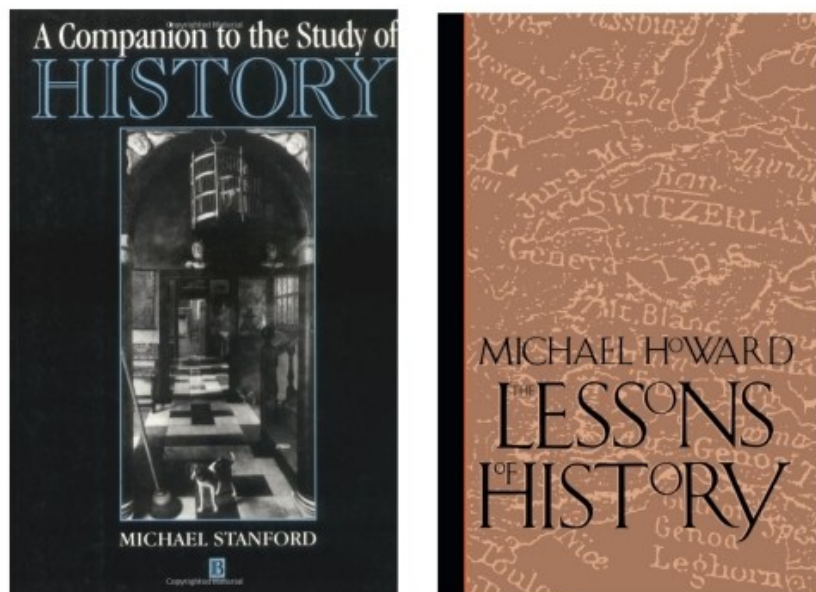


Figure 13: Books by Michael Stanford (1994) and Michael Howard (1991)

Let me quote from a popular textbook on historical methods, Michael Stanford's *A Companion to the Study of History* (1994):

Languages ... act as a filter for the evidence. Any historian of Europe needs to be able to read several languages. Indeed, it is often necessary even for one's own country. The history of the port of Bristol (a modest piece of local history, one might suppose) calls for, at least, English, French, Latin and Spanish.

*A Companion to the Study of History* (1994), p. 150.

Another English author, the distinguished military historian Michael Howard, has written as follows in *The Lessons of History* (1991):

we cannot know too many languages. We need them not so much in order to make ourselves understood but in order to understand. Without knowing the languages that shape and express their thought, our comprehension of other cultural

communities will be dim and unreliable, however great in the abstract may be our knowledge of their past.

*The Lessons of History* (1991), pp. 12-13.

Howard and Stanford are surely correct. The historian of eighteenth-century Ireland needs to be bilingual because Irish society of the period was bilingual and the primary sources it has left to posterity are written in two languages.

A monolingual historian who approaches the history of eighteenth-century Ireland, can be likened to a profoundly deaf film critic. Such a critic could give detailed descriptions of the sets, costumes, lighting and make-up, and provide a reasonably accurate account of who did what to whom, when, where and how. But a deaf movie critic would be reduced to speculation when trying to answer the most important question of all: 'why'? If we cannot understand the dialogue, if we cannot hear the characters speaking, their motivations must remain obscure to us. As if to confirm this view, academic historians of eighteenth-century Ireland have seriously maintained: that we cannot know how plebeian Catholics felt about the Penal laws; that Jacobite sentiment dissipated quickly after Culloden; that the Whiteboys of the 1760s were loyal to George III; that the Catholic population supported the British war effort during the American revolution. None of these propositions will survive engagement with the Irish sources.

A profoundly deaf movie critic would have a second handicap that should also be mentioned: such a critic would be unable to hear the soundtrack which is so important for creating a mood or an atmosphere: whether it be one of tension or calm, of grief or joy, of fear or expectation. Societies also have soundtracks, soundtracks that manipulate the emotions of their populations. The soundtrack we hear today is provided, in large part, by the mass media – whether it be the legacy 'mainstream media' or newer digital media. But in eighteenth-century Ireland, the soundtrack heard by the majority of the people consisted of song and verse in Irish. While much of this material has been lost, a considerable proportion of it is preserved in the literary manuscripts. Familiarity with this soundtrack is not an optional extra for historians of the eighteenth-century; it is an essential requirement without which their understanding of Irish society during the period must remain, in Michael Howard's words, 'dim and unreliable'.

***The above lecture was read to the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland on 26 September 2019. Figure 6 has been added since.***