My comments today apply to my own area of expertise: namely, Ireland in the 'long' eighteenth-century.

Historians of this period almost invariably restrict their research to sources in English and avoid any engagement with the language of the native population. But primary sources in Irish are both extensive and varied. While only five hundred manuscripts in the language have survived from before 1700, about a thousand manuscripts are extant from the eighteenth century, many of them running to hundreds of pages, and a further three thousand manuscripts were written in the early decades of the nineteenth century.

If the divide between the Irish- and English-speaking communities were merely regional, the neglect of the vernacular sources would still be difficult to justify. But the linguistic division correlated strongly with ethnic, political, religious, and social divisions. Historians who restrict their research to sources in English privilege voices that are overwhelmingly English or Anglo-Irish, Protestant, loyal to the political establishment, drawn from the state apparatus and/or the upper layers of society, and based in the major urban centres. To follow such a skewed methodology is to fabricate an image of an English-speaking Georgian Ireland that never existed in reality.

So why do historians focus on the evidence left to us by an English-speaking élite while studiously ignoring the voices of the Irish-speaking populace? I would identify five significant factors and will consider them in turn.

1. Anglocentric orientation

From the 1930s onwards, the practice of the historical profession in England became a standard to be emulated by their Irish counterparts. English methods, research agendas and theoretical models were routinely adopted in Ireland, notwithstanding the radically different historical experiences of the two countries. Indeed, the current enthusiasm for 'decolonisation' among some Irish historians is itself a striking example of this uncritical imitation and shows that the practice continues.

2. Focus on high politics

The profession's narrowly anglophone approach was underpinned for many decades by an assumption that the primary concern of historians should be with the history of government. This view is now unfashionable and the orientation towards high politics is less pronounced than it once was. But old habits linger, and social groups that were excluded from the political nation in the eighteenth century still tend to be neglected in the historiography.

3. Privileging of print

Irish was rarely printed and studies that focus on print effectively silence the voices of the Irish-speaking community. Political tracts in English that required capital to produce, that were regulated by the state, that could only be afforded by the affluent and were intelligible only to a literate minority, are somehow accepted as part of a 'public sphere'. In contrast, political songs in Irish that could be sung at a street corner on a fair day and be immediately understood by the common people are either ignored or dismissed as the products of a small literary caste.

4. Post-colonial cringe

A tacit acceptance that the language of the coloniser is superior to that of the colonised has been identified as a feature of post-colonial societies elsewhere. While the former is associated with modernity, the latter is seen as an embarrassing relic of a bygone age. The existence of such an attitude among Irish historians is indicated by the prominence of scholars who received much, or all, of their training outside Ireland among the few who have concerned themselves with the language in recent years. Names that come to mind include Tony Crowley, Wes Hamrick, Brendan Kane and Nicholas Wolf.

5. Historical bias

The reluctance of historians to use primary sources in Irish may also reflect an apprehension that the evidence they contain will be difficult to reconcile with favoured historical interpretations. If, for example, one wished to portray New Zealand as a normal European society, it would be essential to marginalise the Maori. Likewise, primary sources in Irish pose a serious problem for historians who are anxious to downplay the colonial nature of Irish society in the eighteenth century.

Conclusion

The writing of Irish history, like the history of the country itself, has been deeply marked by the colonial experience. The prevailing assumption that a purely anglophone research methodology is appropriate for historians of the eighteenth century must be counted among its harmful legacies. This anomalous practice is accepted as normal because it has been followed by so many for so long. But the historian of eighteenth-century Ireland needs to have a reading knowledge of Irish because the society of the period was bilingual and the primary sources it has left to us are written in two languages.