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Cultural geographies of the contact zone: Gaels, Galls and overlapping territories in late medieval Ireland

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In writing about the social and cultural geographies of the past, we frequently reinforce notions of difference by using neatly delineated ethnic terms of reference that often superscribe the complexities of reality on the ground. Referring to ‘Gaels’ and ‘Galls’, demarcating ‘native’ and ‘foreign’ worlds in late medieval Ireland, is but one example. We often exaggerate, too, the boundedness of geographical space by speaking more of frontiers and less of overlapping territories. Using the context of late medieval Ireland, I propose in this paper the application and broadening of the concept of the contact zone – prevalent in postcolonial studies for a number of years – to address this specific issue of overstating social and cultural geographical cohesion and separation in the past. The use of the concept of the contact zone in geography has been largely confined to the modern period, which in the extant literature has received priority for various reasons, not least of which is the wider availability of source material. However, in this paper, I suggest that its relevance to the study of the medieval period is equally as strong, and perhaps its application can serve to deflect our imaginings of earlier geographical worlds as somehow more static and less complicated, and instead open the possibility of reading the fluidity and interconnections of the more distant past.

Key words: contact zone, overlapping territories, hybridity, late medieval Ireland.

Introduction

In the related fields of political economy, geography, anthropology, and historiography, the theory that each ‘world’ is self-enclosed, has its own boundaries and special territory, is applied to the world map, to the structure of civilizations, to the notion that each race has a special destiny, psychology, ethos, and so on. All these ideas, almost without exception, are based not on the harmony but on the conflict, or clash, between worlds (Said 2000: 575).

Said, in one of his last works, signals the enduring significance of the geographical imagining of ‘self-enclosed worlds’, bounding and defining culture and difference. Said’s writings are, of course, marked by an unwavering endeavour to disrupt such essentialist geographical discourses and reveal and critique the politics of their construction and representation; his seminal *Orientalism* in 1978 triggering the rise of postcolonial studies. Throughout the 1990s, postcolonial critiques in historical

and cultural geography have demonstrated amongst other things the fluidity and hybridity of the multiple 'geographies of encounter' in a colonial past not simply defined by 'conflict, or clash, between worlds' (Blunt and McEwan 2002: 2; Said 2000: 575). Much of this research has tended, however, to concentrate on moments of 'high colonialism' in the eighteenth and especially the nineteenth century, critically examining a range of themes such as the imperial production of geographical knowledges, the racialised and gendered spaces of colonialism and the histories of geographical thought (Blunt and Rose 1994; Lester 1998; Wylie 2000; Driver 2001). For this period, the idea of the 'contact zone' has proven particularly constructive to social and cultural geographical analysis for a number of reasons. Most importantly, it has served to destabilise dominant colonial representations by emphasising the interconnections as well as the conflicts of ostensibly bounded geographical worlds. It has also contested overly simplified indigenous representations of the colonised and partially colonised worlds. The concept, however, has been applied largely exclusively in the context of colonialism in recent centuries, and, in this paper, I suggest that its use in the study of earlier social and cultural geographical encounters can be equally as fruitful in offering critical re-imaginings of the remoter past.

The idea of the contact zone conceptualises social and cultural geographical inquiry in a number of distinct ways. The concept, as defined by Pratt (1992: 7) in the context of colonial encounters, emphasises how:

subjects are constituted in and by their relations to each other ... not in terms of separateness or apartheid, but in terms of copresence, interaction, interlocking understandings and practices.

More broadly, the idea aims to enable situated and differentiated interrogations of intersecting cultural worlds that continually encounter and negotiate difference (Willis and Yeoh 2002). In challenging notions of the rigidity and boundedness of geographical space, it accentuates instead the hybridity and networks of contiguous geographical locales (Routledge 1997; Yeoh 2000, 2003). In essence, the contact zone is any human geographical space where 'disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination' (Pratt 1992: 7). Its research involves an interrogation of the 'in-between space' of cultural contacts, which have been examined increasingly in recent years in the context of (post)colonialism, in particular (Crush 1994; Lester 1998; King 1999). The Ocean, too, can be examined as a space or passage of contact, as Klein and Mackenthun demonstrate in their recent (2003) *Das Meer als Kulturelle Kontaktzone*. The emphasis on the fluidity of cultural contact also challenges static concepts such as Self and Other as appropriate theoretical terms of reference in the

study of colonial encounters (Proudfoot 2000; Young 2001). Routledge (1997: 70), for example, argues that ‘practices of resistance cannot be separated from practices of domination, they are always entangled in some configuration’.

How then can the contact zone conceptually aid our understanding of late medieval Ireland? To begin with, historiographically, late medieval Ireland’s amalgamation of Gaelic (Gaels) and Anglo (Galls) worlds has been envisioned via a prevailing ‘frontier’ lens. Many authors have identified multiple frontiers for the period, operating at various territorial scales and at a number of social levels: political, legal, economic, cultural and psychological (Barry 1993; Graham 1993; Barry 1995; Nic Ghiollamhaith 1995; Parker 1995; Simms 1995; Clarke 2004). Essentially, these frontiers have been shown to mark out discernible boundaries, manifesting both physical and symbolic form. In the late medieval Irish context, and indeed more broadly, however, the frontier notion encapsulates a number of problematic assumptions respecting the bounding and functioning of human geography. In utilising the concept of the contact zone, I aim in this paper to draw attention to the shortcomings of seeing late medieval Ireland in terms of a society of ‘native’ Gaels and ‘foreign’ Galls, divided by a frontier, or series of frontiers. I firstly problematise the ethnic language of difference in both the sources and the prevailing historiography of the period, which over-emphasises the idea of a neatly divided island. I go on to argue that the idea of the frontier both exaggerates the idea of division and fails to take into account the prevalence of social and cultural contact and networking throughout the later medieval period, especially at the contact zones. I make particular use of one contact zone, the Gaelic-Irish lordship of Kilnamanagh in County Tipperary, in demonstrating the idea of ‘overlapping territories’ (Said 1994). I argue that Ireland’s late medieval territories – so-called ‘native’ and ‘foreign’ alike – did not demarcate self-enclosed human geographies, effectively cut off from one another, but were, in fact, mutually constitutive in each other’s make-up, and ever more so as the medieval period drew to a close. I conclude the paper by discussing the fundamental difficulties of mapping and envisioning the late medieval Irish landscape to account for its intricate interconnections and multiple contact zones.

Names and the problem of definition

Labels [...] are no more than starting-points, which if followed into actual experience for only a moment are quickly left behind (Said 1994: 407).

Writing, defining and thereby designating ethnicities is a problematic exercise even in the present. For the past, where the surviving voices are both partial and so often the most powerful, it is even

more difficult. For Britain and Ireland's late medieval worlds, various commentators have discussed the appropriateness of using specific ethnic terms (Richie 1954; Gillingham 2000; O'Keefe 2001). In the Irish context, O'Keefe (2001: 79-80) rightly points out that referring to 'natives' and 'colonists' via any chosen appellation is hugely problematic for a variety of reasons, primarily because the material evidence suggests a level of acculturation/hybridity that simply defies reduction to static ethnic distinctions. O'Keefe's sentiments, however, do not fall into the dominant historiographic tradition of narrating late medieval Ireland, which has evolved in the context of a prevailing metanarrative framed by a simple bi-ethnic model: the 'native' Gael and the 'foreign' Gall. The 'Gaels' or 'Gaelic-Irish' – referred to as the island's primitive natives in the colonial record – have been represented as one pole of the so-called frontier in late medieval Ireland. Representing the other pole are the initial twelfth-century colonisers in Ireland and their 'hybrid' descendants, variously designated as Galls, Anglo-Norman, Anglo-French, Cambro-Norman, Cambro-French and later as Anglo-Irish and Old English in the literature. The multiple appellations for the initial colonists and their descendants (both of whom would arguably have referred to themselves as simply English, as Gillingham (2000) suggests) highlight the difficulties of generating suitably connotative nomenclature for late medieval Ireland. Furthermore, it merely reinforces the notion that contemporary ethnic distinctions were not only blurred but are perhaps more the concern of those writing the past than those who experienced it.

To what extent, if at all, is the bi-ethnic model relevant? The cumulative evidence suggests that such an uncomplicated representation of ethnicity, distinguishing Gaels and Galls, is greatly exaggerated. To begin with, as Duffy (1982-3: 37) correctly reminds us, the medieval archive is dominated by 'the views of the elite groups [...] each of whom was deeply concerned with land, power and political control', and therefore 'ideologically bound to uphold their side and to maintain the differences which they perceived to exist between them'. He asks the important question:

In examining the nature of the frontier, to what extent are we following the logic of the historical records, not to mention the legacy of historical studies in the past century, which emphasises duality of economy and society and, by implication, the existence of a distinctive medieval frontier in Ireland (Duffy 1982-3: 36-37)?

O'Keefe (2003) supports Duffy's contention by making the timely argument that we privilege history and the written word more than the archaeology of material evidence on the ground, which can reveal so much more than the dominant voices in the surviving documentary record. O'Keefe (2003) points out, too, the enduring historiographic consequence of a distinctly nationalist and romantic nineteenth-century lens between us and our readings of the Middle Ages.

The evidence of complexity on the ground suggests that the simplified Gael-Gall dichotomy is exaggerated and fails to take into account the inconsistency of antagonism between cultural groups (Cosgrove 1981). As Frame (1990: 203-204) argues, the 'dichotomy was real enough; but it may be regarded as representing two poles, between which large elements of the population oscillated'. The question that needs to be addressed, then, is to what extent can 'single, overarching ethnic constructs', like Gaels and Galls, be 'used meaningfully' at all (O'Keeffe 2001: 79)? I suggest here that in reality such rudimentary labels functioned more as terms of reference (particularly amongst the powerful elites on both 'sides') than as markers of static, self-enclosed ethnicities, territories or polities. The important point, furthermore, is that for both 'groups', their respective spaces and practices were increasingly overlapped and informed by the other as the late medieval period progressed.

An additional distinction drawn in the late medieval Gaelic annals is between the *Saxanaigh* (English by birth) and the *Gaill* (English by blood). A key question, however (for which the idea of the contact zone can prove particularly useful), is at what point do the *Gaill* (or Galls) cease to be English? During the siege of Dublin at the very beginning of the colonisation in 1170, one of the colonists Maurice fitz Gerald lamented that:

just as we are English as far as the Irish are concerned, likewise to the English we are Irish, and the inhabitants of this island and the other assail us with an equal degree of hatred (Cambrensis 1188-9: 81).

Cambrensis' writings are certainly exaggerated (especially in his geographical imagining and vituperative denigration of Gaelic culture) but this does not negate the point that the colonists were aware that they were occupying in-between space from the very beginning. As O'Keeffe (2001: 80) remarks, their 'ethnic identity was evidently shifting as a result of their relocation and the new challenges created by their interaction with the host population, the Gaelic-Irish'. In other words, their identities altered in the new social and cultural contexts of the contact zone, became 'hybrid' and so marked them out as different again. As Eagleton (2000: 130) puts it, 'distinctive ways of life were thrown into dramatic relief by colonialism [...] relativizing the identity of the colonialist powers at just the point where they needed to feel most assured of it'.

In medieval Ireland, as elsewhere, from the moment of cultural contact, the ethnic identities of both the colonists and the host population are thereafter mutually constitutive of each other. If we accept this, it has acute implications for the frontier model, which typically posits essentialised 'mother groups' opposite each other. The idea of the contact zone accepts that one cannot use unproblematically the same ethnic language of difference to articulate both the moment of contact

and its aftermath. Acknowledging this problematic allows us to read both the fluidity and mutual constitution of cultural 'contacts'. It prompts us, too, to recognise the danger of seeing ostensibly homogenised mother groups as forming either end of any so-called frontier. A useful illustrative point here is the problem of ascribing 'native' or 'foreign' status to such groups. The hybrid Galla in late medieval Ireland has frequently been described in the historiography of the period as 'native' by birth but 'foreign' by blood. How far back in time, however, does one need to go in order to be decreed 'native'? In this sense, O'Keeffe's use of the term 'host' rather than 'native' to describe the Gaelic population is particularly useful in signifying this complexity.

Late medieval Ireland and the idea of the frontier

The frontier notion has not been applied uniquely to Ireland. Cultural interaction has been envisioned on every continent via the frontier model (Febvre 1973; Lamar and Thompson 1981; Green and Perlman 1985; Bartlett and Mackay 1989; Davis and Prescott 1992; Ellis 1995). Turner's (1920) elevation of the 'significance of the frontier in American history' still resonates strongly in the essentialised imaginings of numerous works, including especially Huntington's (1993) 'The clash of civilisations'. In recent years, however, a number of authors have brought the frontier notion into question and have been more concerned with sifting out the nuances and more complex in-between spaces of social and cultural encounters (Bartlett 1993; Manzano Moreno 1994; Wishart 1994; Harrell 1995; Power and Standen 1999). Said (2003: 353) cites Gilroy's (1993) look beyond ethnocentric borders in *The Black Atlantic* as an exemplar of works concerned with the 'idea of rethinking and re-formulating historical experiences which had once been based on the geographical separation of peoples and cultures'. Other examples include: White's (1991) exploration of *The Middle Ground* of White/Indian relations in the Great Lakes Region; Yeoh's (2003) examination of the conflicts between community and authority in *Colonial Singapore*; and Gregory's (2004) look beyond the dominant simplified discourses of 'us' and 'them' in *The Colonial Present* to the contextual, contrapuntal and cosmopolitan geographies that transcend and challenge them. All of the latter works inform significantly the theorisation of Ireland's late medieval contact zones being envisioned here. However, it is perhaps best at this point to build firstly a picture of the dominant historiographic view of late medieval Ireland, from which my own critique and retheorisation emerges.

Late medieval Ireland has been typically depicted as a patchwork of self-governing and semi-autonomous lordships – both Gaelic and Anglo – separated by a series of frontiers. Seen in Figure 1 is an adaptation of Nicholl's oft-cited 1534 map of the island, within which we get a strong sense of

both the contemporary regionalism and the sense of multiple borders. Generally speaking, the east and south of the island – with nodes centred on Dublin and The Pale in the east and Kilkenny and Ormond in the south – have been delineated as the most English or Anglicised regions, with the greatest preservation of the Common Law and English economic, material and administrative practices. Conversely, the north and west have been represented as predominantly residual Gaelic or native Irish areas, often located in poorer, hilly or boggy lands, with material customs marked by a strong sense of antiquity. In between these zones, a number of frontiers have been envisioned, operating at various regional, local and internal levels (Barry 1993; Barry 1995; Parker 1995; Simms 1995). On a rudimentary level, these depictions largely follow on from the archival record:

The constant references in colonial legislation to territorial differentiation such as ‘the pale’, ‘the marches’, ‘lands of peace and war’ and references to loyal and disloyal groups or regions, all imply a strong sense of an island divided by a frontier or a number of frontiers. The literature in general has left us with a relatively clear picture of two Irelands, or more properly two territories or ‘polities’ (Duffy 1982-3: 21).

The prevailing notion of the frontier is evident throughout the surviving Gaelic Annals also, which commonly refer to a ‘duality of Gaels and Galls on the island’ (Duffy 1982-3: 31). However, as alluded to earlier, both sets of records generally impart a ‘them-versus-us’ mentality precisely because they tend to reflect elite, powerful views. On the contrary, the available evidence for the mass population, though fragmentary, supports the ‘expected view that they were oblivious to the importance of frontiers in their lives’ (Duffy 1982-3: 38). Furthermore, the frontier model does not adequately take into account several key elements of everyday life that testify to the prevalence of social and cultural networking and acculturation, particularly at the contact zones. Below, I use one late medieval contact zone in west County Tipperary to demonstrate a ‘much more practical *ad hoc*’ on the ground that belied any evidence of a lasting frontier or significant frontier’ (Duffy 1982-3: 37).

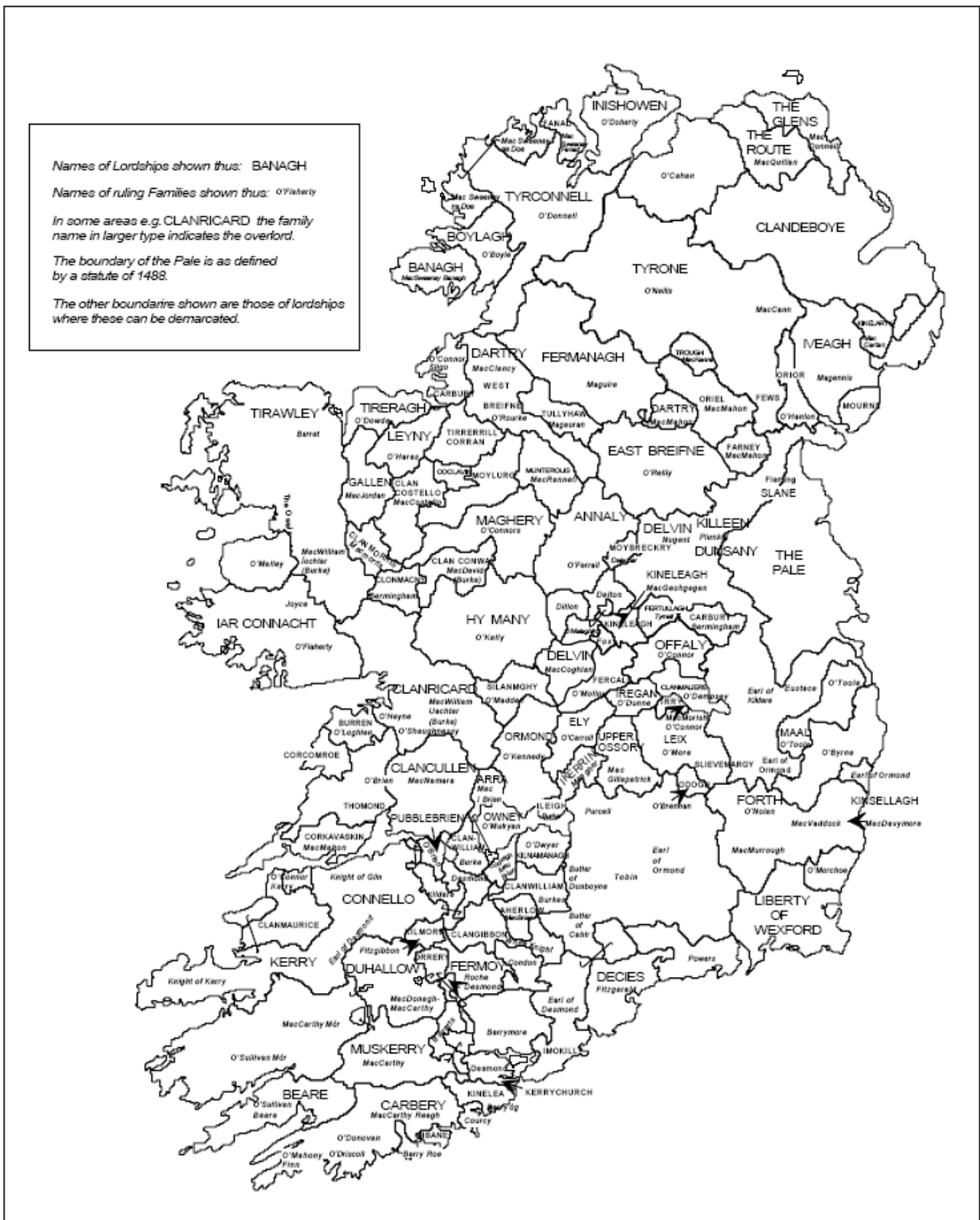


Figure 1 The Lordships of Ireland, c.1534. Adapted from Quinn and Nicholls (1976) Ireland in 1534, pp. 2-3.

Kilnamanagh and overlapping territories

The Gaelic-Irish barony and lordship of Kilnamanagh (Figure 2) was the traditional home of the extended O'Dwyer family, and can be seen as a microcosm of the so-called frontier in late medieval Ireland, finding itself fronting the Gaelic lordships of north and west Tipperary and facing the English lordships of the south and east of the county. Such a 'frontier' region as Kilnamanagh has typically been described as one of the many 'marches' or 'lands of war' supposedly in a state of agitation and conflict throughout the later medieval period (Smith 1988). The number of tower houses or castles for the region, seen in the Down Survey map of the barony in Figure 3, would apparently support such a thesis. However, I want to suggest here a different reading of their prevalence in the area.

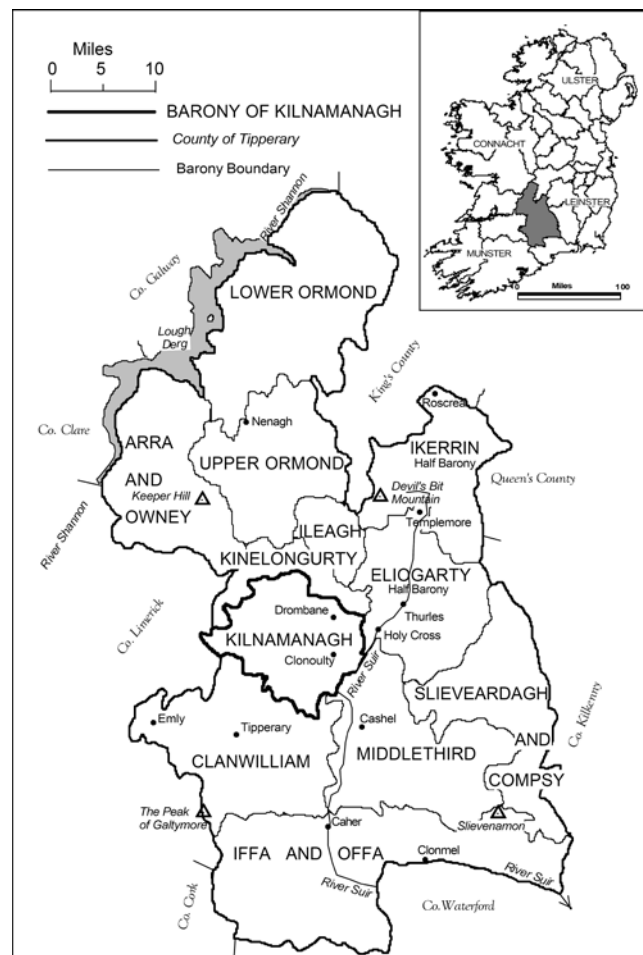


Figure 2 The Medieval Barony of Kilnamanagh, County Tipperary. Adapted from *The Civil Survey, Co. Tipperary*, Vol. 2, p. i..

O'Keeffe (2001) has recently signalled an important re-conceptualization of castles/tower houses that transcends the dominant empiricist tradition of castle studies and allows for a critical reading of associated societal issues, including gender and ethnicity. Recognising both the spectacle

and spectatorship of castles, O’Keeffe has explored their contemporary social and symbolic significance in late medieval society. He points out, for example, that defence was not the only reason for castle construction, arguing that status and symbolism were also key social concerns of the elite (O’Keeffe 2001, 2003). Making iconic social statements in the landscape was not just confined to the modern era, of course, and acknowledging medieval motivations of such allows one to see the contact zone of medieval Ireland as not perhaps simply marked by instability and war, as so often depicted.

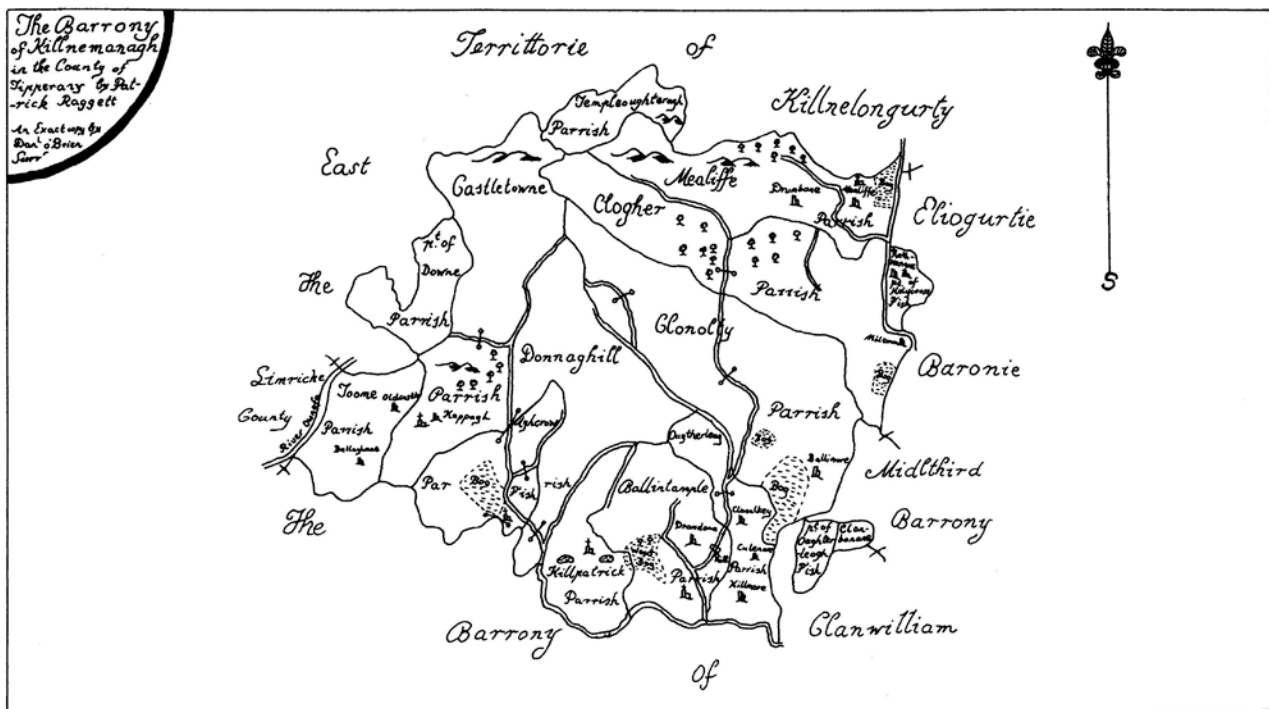


Figure 3 The Down Survey Barony Map of Kilnamanagh, c.1654. Copied from source: National Library of Ireland (hereafter NLI): MFIC Pos. 7384 b.

O’Keeffe (2001) makes one further important argument in relation to castle-building. He points out that the adaptation of castle-building in post-Norman Ireland by the Gaelic-Irish is strong evidence of the fluidity of cultural transfer that marked the late medieval period. In regions like Kilnamanagh, then, the prevalence of tower houses may reflect the ‘propensity’ of late medieval Gaelic society to ‘adopt traits of landscape and material culture from beyond its boundaries’ (O’Keeffe 2001: 82). O’Conor (2004) has shown the same pattern of adaptation for Gaelic north County Roscommon from the early 1400s. The proliferation of castle construction by the Gaelic-Irish in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries suggests a clear cultural blending of material practices with neighbouring Anglo-Norman/English areas. The castle itself represented a symbol of that cultural blending.

The evidence from castle-building in the late medieval period indicates that Gaelic and English contact zones were effectively overlapping territories and certainly not frontiers with self-enclosed networks of ideas and material practices. If the Gaelic-Irish were adapting the castle so extensively, it is logical that they were also adapting 'some of the ways in which it was used' (O'Keefe 2001: 84). This is borne out for Kilnamanagh in various ways. A mill near Milltown Castle to the south of the barony, adjacent to the River Suir, for example, was fully functioning as early as 1321, demonstrating the introduction of arable-based farming practices in an area typically characterised by the pastoralism common to the Gaelic-Irish (NLI: D. 658). Another way in which the castle was being used in Kilnamanagh was to signify the localised power status of lesser kinsmen of the O'Dwyers. It was not just the chief of the O'Dwyers who began building tower houses but also his foremost subordinates throughout the lordship, who, like their Anglo-Norman feudal neighbours, were concerned with hierarchy and status.

Castles, of course, were not the only axis of cultural blending. The Roman Catholic Church was also a key fulcrum of overlapping social and cultural practices in the later medieval period, even in those areas like Kilnamanagh that remained under Gaelic control. By the early fourteenth century, two Norman monastic houses had been established in the O'Dwyer lordship along the southern and eastern edges, and, as elsewhere, they played a notable role in the dissemination of socio-economic material practices such as arable farming (Morrissey 2003: 28). Such religious houses were also instrumental in establishing the basic administrative unit of the civil parish, especially in Gaelic areas like Kilnamanagh. As Simms (1995) points out, too, as the late medieval period progressed, the Church was a significant point of contact for all sections of society.

A further useful means of illustrating the idea of overlapping territories and networks in late medieval Kilnamanagh is to note the impact of the extended Anglo-Norman Butler family in the region from the thirteenth century. Based in south Tipperary and neighbouring County Kilkenny, the Butlers were the chief magnates of Crown authority in the south of Ireland throughout the late medieval period. The first Butler Earl of Ormond was accorded palatinate powers in the newly-created liberty of Tipperary in 1328, and successive earls, together with the extended Butler elites of Ormond and Dunboyne, were subsequently key players in upholding English legal and administrative practices in the region. The Butlers inevitably interconnected neighbouring Gaelic-Irish areas such as Kilnamanagh into wider political, social and economic networks as the late medieval period progressed. I have shown elsewhere the impact they had had on the political and socio-economic make-up of the O'Dwyer lordship by the sixteenth century, at which time the O'Dwyers possessed a sophisticated knowledge of English legal and administrative practices (Morrissey 2004).

The O'Dwyers experienced direct Butler involvement in their territory, too. The Butlers had set up a manor and borough in Moyliff in the north-east of Kilnamanagh in 1307, and despite it not being successful (by 1338, the O'Dwyers had taken it over), Butler influence remained in the region throughout the period of the so-called Gaelic revival (*Red Book of Ormond*: 64-67; The National Archives of the UK: Public Record Office C 135/55, m 5; NLI: D. 794; *Calendar of Carew Manuscripts*, Vol. 5: 444). I have critiqued the idea of Gaelic revival on various grounds elsewhere (Morrissey 2003: 30-34). Fundamentally, the notion fails to take into account that across the island Gaelic recovery was far from uniform, intensely localised and often symptomatic rather than causative of wider processes. It neglects to recognise, too, the multiple linkages of overlapping Gaelic-Irish and Anglo-Norman worlds, such as the O'Dwyers and the Butlers, whose agreements respecting land rights and mutual protection, for example, continued throughout the later medieval period. The O'Dwyers' fourteenth-century territorial recoveries had not fractured their connections with the Butlers, and, in later years, networks of allegiance between them grew even stronger in turbulent times (Morrissey 2004).

If geographical contiguity ensured that Gaelic-Irish and Anglo-Norman territories and polities overlapped, the perennial necessity of networking reinforced this. Networking, in the medieval sense, frequently equated to intermarriage and fosterage, and it served to accentuate political, social and cultural links. Control remained with the O'Dwyers in late medieval Kilnamanagh for not just their fourteenth-century territorial advances. They successfully sustained their position in the later medieval period by situating themselves in the dynamic, factional politics of Tipperary and beyond – they networked, in essence. By the mid-sixteenth century, they were connected to Anglo-Norman/English families in neighbouring Clanwilliam barony to the south, in Clanrickard in south County Galway, and in County Kilkenny and elsewhere in County Tipperary through the Butlers (NLI: MFIC Pos. 8302). Intermarriage and fosterage mirrored broader networks of political alliance and service, and in order to survive, Gaelic areas like Kilnamanagh needed to effectively become acquainted with, and interconnected to, such networks. Indeed, as O'Keefe (2001: 80) argues, the Gaelic revival could be seen as a 'triumph of a Gaelic-Irish society transformed and enhanced by its knowledge of colonial culture and by its experience of partial colonisation'.

The idea of the gaelicisation of the Anglo-Norman colony has been well acknowledged (Nicholls 1972; Watt 1987; Graham 1993). Nicholls (1972: 8), for example, has drawn attention to the Anglo-Norman adaptation of the concept of the 'clan' (seen in the extended Butler family, for example) as 'the most outstanding feature' in their gaelicisation. However, the indication from Kilnamanagh and elsewhere suggests that the anglicisation of Gaelic lordships was equally as strong (O'Keefe 2001; O'Connor 2004). Gaelic areas that were not directly colonised by the Anglo-

Normans did not, of course, mean that their cultural make-up remained static. As highlighted earlier, the picture from Kilnamanagh reveals a strong adaptation of Norman-style castle-building, for example. O'Connor (2004) has presented evidence from County Roscommon that demonstrates that the Gaelic-Irish had adapted the use of Norman-style moated sites even earlier than castles, possibly as early as 1300. Empey and Simms (1975) have also pointed out the fusion of English and Gaelic legal and material practices evident in the ordinances of the Butler lordships of early fifteenth-century Kilkenny and Tipperary. Throughout later medieval Ireland, too, a series of compositions and indentures indicate the everyday hybridity of 'Irish social and political life' (Watt 1987: 317). Ultimately, then, in late medieval Ireland's multiple contact zones, both 'gaelicisation' and 'anglicisation' were mutually dependent processes.

Contact zones and the limitations of mapping

One final point in relation to the contact zones of late medieval Ireland is worth making. It relates to the difficulties of mapping the inherent regionalism and localism of the period. Various authors have commented on late medieval Ireland's intricate, localised geographies, which render it futile to speak of contemporary Gaelic or Anglo Ireland as culturally one world, or indeed two worlds (O'Connor 1998; O'Keefe 2000; Duffy 2004). As Quinn (1987: 619) argues, "it is not possible to write a history of Ireland in this period, only a series of local histories". It is similarly not possible to assign any singular narrative that captures the situatedness, fluidity and interconnections of the spaces and practices of contemporary Gaelic and English worlds. Graham describes those worlds as 'hybrid' (Graham 1980: 7); Duffy sees them as 'transitional' (Duffy 1982-3: 21). They are conceptualised here as contact zones, but the point remains that their complex connections and overlaps make them impossible to map.

When I began to write this paper, I initially intended to rework Nicholl's 1534 map of the lordships of Ireland by introducing the notion of the contact zone to signal a different envisioning of the period. I soon realised, however, that essentially all the lordships were interconnected to somewhere and that the level of overlapping would have rendered the subsequent representation simply too complex. Rather than doing the impossible, then, I suggest here that it is perhaps more important to note that impossibility, as Clarke (2004) has recently observed. If the idea of the contact zone problematises the essentialisation of the frontier narrative, it also points out the cartographic limitations of representing the complexity of the social and cultural geographies on the ground.

Conclusion

This paper has been concerned with using the idea of the contact zone in a medieval context to demonstrate the intricate social and cultural geographies of the more distant past. In so doing, it begins to address what Jones (2004: 287) recently observes as contemporary human geography's 'considerable narrowing of the time periods that inform its empirical and conceptual studies'. Rather than seeing just the modern era as typified by the complexities of cultural geographical contacts, the paper has used the context of late medieval Ireland to highlight the multiple connections of earlier historical encounters. Envisioning the remoter past via a frontier lens reinforces notions of geographical boundedness and typically posits opposing and self-enclosed ethnicities. This serves not only to exaggerate the notion of conflict but also to dissuade a reading of the diverse interconnections of cultural contact. As Wishart (2004: 305) argues, reflection on the nature of regions reveals their 'tendency to emphasise differences rather than commonalities, and their limited scope as generalizations'. He (2004: 305) goes on to point out the 'great number of feasible ways of dividing space into regions', which 'opens the door for alternative narratives'.

Using the idea of the contact zone forms part of what Said (2003: xvii) terms the necessary dismantling and complication of the 'reductive formulae' of cultural geographical knowledges. Kilnamanagh in County Tipperary was one of the many contact zones of late medieval Ireland's amalgamated Gaelic and Anglo worlds. The material evidence reflects a social and cultural setting characterised by intermarriage, networks of political allegiance, elements of cultural hybridity and localised connections as well as conflicts. The so-called revival of the 'Gaels' neither severed existing political, social and cultural ties with the 'Galls' nor cemented any ostensibly bounded medieval frontier. The contact zone was always present. Kilnamanagh lordship as a medieval contact zone was not a rigid, bounded locale but conversely a fluid and interconnected space, unavoidably interlocking with, and transmuted by, developments elsewhere. The contemporary social and cultural geographies of neighbouring Gaelic and English lordships in Tipperary and 'beyond' were inextricably linked to those 'within' the barony. The intention throughout this paper has been to explore the intersecting contact points between such worlds and to demonstrate the ways in which linkages of ideas and material practices were a common feature of everyday life. The idea of the contact zone reminds us ultimately of the dangers of essentialising discourses of cultural contact, and prompts us to read the nuances, networks and hybridity of overlapping territories.

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