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JANE CONROY

## Time and the Traveller: The Case of Coquebert de Montbret

At all times, we face the problem of how and to what extent we can retrieve the past, and to what purpose. We look backwards from our present but hope we are not prisoners of our past. Cultural historians, in particular, are conscious of the dissolution of experience, while they attempt to 'make sense' out of the random elements available. In that respect, we are in a similar situation to travellers in new territory, facing similar problems of selection, decipherment, preservation and presentation. Indeed, travellers were often cultural historians before the concept was fully formed; without really intending to become themselves historical sources, they were recorders of the present for the future. Late Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment French visitors to Ireland and to other developed countries were principally concerned with recording their immediate impressions, and analysing the 'état présent' of the country, rather than with delving into the past. There were exceptions. Among these was Charles-Étienne Coquebert de Montbret, who was in Ireland as '*agent de la marine et du commerce*' from late 1789 to 1792. His travel diaries allow us to see what entry points he sought into the mental world of the Irish, how he conceived of this work of interpretation from an outsider's viewpoint, how he accessed and read 'texts', in the largest sense of the word, including, for example, not just written or oral discourse but buildings, paintings, clothing, or the design of everyday items.<sup>1</sup> In particular, he gave considerable weight to

1 Charles-Étienne Coquebert de Montbret's papers relating to Ireland are found principally in the Bibliothèque nationale de France (BNF), the Bibliothèque municipale de Rouen and the Ministère des affaires étrangères. The *carnets de voyage* discussed here are in the BNF's Département des manuscrits, Nouvelles acquisitions françaises,

the past and its inscription in landscape, language and tradition. He can be viewed as a historian of culture, who also tried to grasp the diachronic dimension of the Irish 'case'. While he made earnest attempts to read and record everything he could about Ireland's past, the interest of his account of Ireland lies more in its reliance on very diverse oral informants, his own random observations, and the spontaneity and unrevised status of his manuscript (if we ignore the later notes inserted into it).

Our period has much easier access to memory than Coquebert had. We find ourselves in a 'bulle mémorielle', possibly heading towards a 'krach mémoriel',<sup>2</sup> so much so that, to many, the past can appear a burden to be rejected. It is therefore not immediately obvious how the depositions of time were remembered, retrieved and represented in a different period. In the 1790s or thereabouts for Coquebert, like other travellers, it was also not immediately obvious how to relate past and present. History's object and methods were being redrawn, while the 'study of man' with its stress on the present, was increasingly the great objective of travel, one that would eventually dethrone even the reconnoitring of potentially valuable territories (once Africa had been carved up and the 'Terre australe' colonised). This 'study of man' had always been a feature of travel, but now it was being turned into a properly constituted science, with a developed data-collection methodology. A key moment in this development was to come some seven or eight years after Coquebert's attempts to record Irish society, with the founding of the Société des observateurs de l'homme in 1799, and De Gérando's directions for observing 'les peuples sauvages' in the same year. At the end of the eighteenth century, historiography had begun to incorporate this redirection of attention towards social organisation and the new readings of the constructs of civilisations. There was a sense that the past could not be dealt with by the old methods, and also that each of the disciplines deserved its own history. It had become clear

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20098, 20099, and to a lesser extent, 20097. They are henceforward referred to as NAF 20097, NAF 20098 and NAF 20099. Translations are mine, unless otherwise indicated, and spellings have been normalised. An edition of the  *carnets*  is in preparation.

2 Emmanuel Hoog, *Mémoire année zéro* (Paris: Seuil, 2009), p. 6.

that culture itself was an object to historicise and that there was an acute need for contemporary observation to complement retrospective narrative.

In approaching a writer like Coquebert de Montbret from a cultural history viewpoint, there are several sets of questions to be kept in mind. Firstly, how do diachronic historiography and synchronic travel-writing relate to each other in a period of ‘romantic historicism’? As defined by Ann Rigney, such a period is one in which a historical culture is influenced by ‘a radicalised awareness of the alterity of the past and the historicity of experience [which] picked up on the Enlightenment interest in culture and eighteenth-century antiquarianism and fed into emergent nationalism with its “identity politics” and interest in folk-culture.’<sup>3</sup> Secondly, what level of historic awareness might a French traveller in Ireland display in the late eighteenth century and how would this find expression? More specifically, what textual presence does the past have in Coquebert’s *carnets* and what importance does he attribute to the very keen sense of history displayed by the Irish? Thirdly, we might consider how with the passage of time observations of contemporary life become historical, and how such writing, focused on the then-present, is itself *materia storica*, with attendant questions about what and how a traveller’s observations of Ireland’s ‘present’ at a past moment, but not intended to be historical, contribute to present understanding of that Irish past. Coquebert provides useful material for examining these questions for he is genuinely an emblematic traveller of his time, dealing with unresolved problems of methodology with all the means at his disposal.

It may seem odd to use the travel account as a place to take stock of historic awareness in the late eighteenth century. Travel accounts are generally expected to prioritise direct observation. In the confrontation between bookish data and experiential learning, and theory versus empiricism, it is assumed they are about the ‘there and now’ not the ‘there and then’. Otherwise why travel? The reluctant traveller could just remain at home, as so many earlier cosmographers did, compiling whatever had been said

3 Ann Rigney, *Imperfect histories: The elusive past and the legacy of romantic historicism* (Cornell Univ. Press, 2001), Introduction, p. 8.

on the chosen topic and smoothing out the contradictions. This is what another French traveller in Ireland, Duvergier de Hauranne, dismissively calls 'faire des livres avec des livres'.<sup>4</sup> From his satirical remarks in 1826–7 it can be seen that direct observation was still not the rule. Nonetheless, in the late eighteenth century, the developing discipline of geography, very much the domain of the traveller, was seen as one of the 'eyes' of history (the other was chronology).

### History, travel and truth: *ars historica, ars apodemica*

How useful and how accurate is Coquebert? Both history and travel accounts are concerned with truth claims: the tradition was to doubt travellers' tales because it was often impossible to check on them; and the debate about 'truthful' history is now a familiar one. Similar questions are

- 4 Duvergier de Hauranne is scathing about the non-travelling travel writers of his time: *'Je sais qu'avec de la patience et quinze ou vingt livres sur mon bureau, je pourrais rédiger mon voyage tout comme un autre. On emprunte à l'un sa partie historique, en remontant au-delà de César ; à l'autre ses descriptions pittoresques ; à un troisième ses réflexions politiques ; on y joigne quelques remarques fort neuves sur la longueur des dîners anglais et la commodité des trottoirs de Londres ; et avec un bon libraire, trois vignettes de Devéria, et six articles de journaux, on prend son rang parmi les observateurs d'un pays qu'à peine l'on a regardé. C'est ce qui s'appelle, je crois, faire des livres avec des livres ; occupation fort estimable, mais qui a peu d'attrait pour moi'* (I know that with patience and fifteen or twenty books on my desk, I could write my travel account like anyone else. From one you take your historical section, going back to Caesar and beyond, from another you get its picturesque descriptions, from a third its political remarks; to this you add some highly original observations about the length of English dinners and the convenience of the footpaths in London; and with the help of a good bookseller, three small illustrations by Devéria, and six newspaper articles, you take your place among the observers of a country at which you have scarcely glanced. I believe this is what is called making books from books, a highly estimable occupation, but one which holds little attraction for me). *Lettres sur les élections anglaises et sur la situation de l'Irlande* (Paris: Sautet, 1827), pp. 1–2.

asked about 'truthful' anthropology, 'truthful' statistics and other social sciences, all of which are part of the domain of the travel writer. Because of the short duration of their access to the other culture, can travel writers ever chronicle matters other than in their surface manifestations? Is travel 'immoral' in creating the illusion of truth and hiding its own aporias? Luigi Marfè, for one, has recorded doubt about this.<sup>5</sup>

How likely is it that an early-modern traveller, not specially trained in historiography and ethnography, could provide good observations? Most travellers in that period were inadvertent or accidental historians, indeed some were even inadvertent travellers, but that is not to say that they were naïve. There were two great discourses that shaped their approach: the *ars apodemica* and the *ars historica*. The first of these, the *ars apodemica*, offered advice about travel (in the period from the sixteenth to the early nineteenth century, after which the genre disappears). Apart from practical information such as choosing itineraries and inns, avoiding bandits, and learning languages, the *ars apodemica* laid out prescriptions for observation: what to observe, how to observe, how to handle the data. The *ars historica*, or theory of historiography, was found in manuals, reviews or prefaces in the same period of the sixteenth century and through to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The *ars apodemica* concerned itself mainly with how to capture synchronous phenomena. The *ars historica* was principally directed towards providing guidance in retrieving, interpreting and representing the past. But what was the level of crossover or reciprocal influence between these genres? For example, what place does any specific *ars historica* assign to the perception of synchronous phenomena, those which travellers most frequently recorded, and which make of travellers unwitting historians of culture? What weight does the *ars* attribute to symbolic rhetoric and what to 'facts'? On the other hand, in any one *ars apodemica*, how important at any time, in any place, is the sense of history, both the traveller-observer's own historic awareness and that of the people observed?

5 Luigi Marfè, *Oltre la 'fine dei viaggi': I resoconti dell'altrove nella letteratura contemporanea* (Florence: Leo S. Olschki, 2009).

One way of gauging this latter influence is to see how many questions related to the past appeared in questionnaires provided for the use of travellers. By the time Coquebert was travelling in Ireland, the questionnaires were probably the most influential type of apodemic text. They were also, of course, used in other fields. Particularly for diplomats like Coquebert, official instructions about their mission frequently took the form of lists of questions. French bureaucracy in the 1790s became very attached to them; later on, Coquebert, as head of the Bureau de la statistique, would use questionnaires, and almost certainly develop his own. Elements of question lists are already built into his *carnets de voyage* and are found among his other papers preserved in the Bibliothèque municipale de Rouen. In the decade of Coquebert's stay in Ireland, there were three key question-based apodemic texts that influenced how travellers elicited information: Leopold Berchtold's *Essay to Direct and Extend the Inquiries of Patriotic Travellers* (1789), which Coquebert had in his library; Volney's *Questions de statistique à l'usage des voyageurs* (1795), intended primarily for diplomats; and De Gérando's directions for observing 'les peuples sauvages', produced in 1799 for Baudin's expedition in *Le Géographe* (to Timor, Mauritius, Australia) and published in 1800. Berchtold and Volney provide lists of questions, while De Gérando's methodological recommendations are peppered with multiple questions on each broad area. These three works display varying levels of historical awareness. Berchtold offers this general advice regarding the importance of the past: 'Before the traveller inquires into the present state of important objects he should endeavour to get information respecting their beginning, their most memorable periods, and epochs, the causes of their increase or decrease, till the present moment, and to review the most authentic documents, and afterwards to form queries in such a manner as, that one may lead to the other, in order to curtail the inquiry.'<sup>6</sup> Yet although many of his thirty-seven sets of exhaustive questions begin with a brief inquiry about past practice, this latter ques-

6 Leopold Berchtold, *Essay to Direct and Extend the Inquiries of Patriotic Travellers* (London: Printed for the author, 1789), vol. 1, Section III, 'On Information and the Means of Obtaining it', I, p. 35.

tion is generally routine and perfunctory. As for Volney, whose work was intended to be a reduction of Berchtold's to manageable proportions, not one of his 135 questions relates to the past, and there is almost no impression that the people observed might conceivably have a sense of their own past. De Gérando's programme for anthropological enquiry was designed for unlettered, 'primitive' peoples (obviously not Ireland) and its interest lies in a systematic approach to 'fieldwork'. However, its strong emphasis on language, and its recognition of the importance of symbolic practices, imagination, ceremonies and oral tradition, all obviously hint at a conviction that the past can be partially retrieved even where written records do not exist. In this way, De Gérando gives new prominence to artefacts and orality, stressing tradition as a key to understanding:

The final and no doubt the most difficult object of the traveller's curiosity will be to penetrate the traditions of savage peoples. They will be questioned on their origin, on the migrations which they have undergone, on the invasions to which they have been subjected, on the important events that have taken place among them on the progress which they have been able to make in respect of industry or political force, on the institution of the customs current among them. It may be that only vague stories can be extracted from them; but a small number of facts can throw precious light on the mysterious history of these nations.<sup>7</sup>

## Reading Ireland's past

Charles-Étienne Coquebert (1755–1831) was a career diplomat who was thrown somewhat off course by the Revolution. Prior to his Dublin posting (1789–1792), he had spent nine years in Hamburg as consul to the Hanseatic League towns, and three years in Paris. After returning from Ireland in 1793, he managed to survive the 1790s by teaching rural economy, geology and

7 Joseph-Marie de Gérando, *The Observation of Savage Peoples*, translated and edited by F.C.T. Moore (Berkeley & Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1969), p. 100.



geography in the *École des Mines* and other institutions, becoming first editor of the *Journal des Mines* (1794–1800). Later roles included those of special envoy to London after the peace of Amiens, commissioner for Customs in the Rhineland, member of the small committee overseeing implementation of the metric system, the new ‘poids et mesures’; and he was for a time head of the Bureau de la Statistique. Although he mixed in scientific circles and wrote learned memoirs, he is principally known in France as a ‘grand commis d’état’, and that indeed is how he is described in the title of the fine biography of him by Isabelle Laboulais-Lesage.<sup>8</sup>

Coquebert was certainly altered by his travel experience. In his political attitude, he moved from a cautious stance concerning Ireland to espousing its cause against England. In November 1792, he travelled back to Paris to confer with the *Ministre de la Marine* on this matter. In December, he wrote:

*Si je me borne strictement à mes fonctions de consul, si j'évite de montrer une opinion sur les affaires intérieures et de me lier avec les chefs d'aucun parti, le gouvernement anglais sera maintenu dans une plus grande sécurité que si je me livre à ce que me dicte mon amour de la liberté en général et l'intérêt profond que m'inspire le brave et malheureux peuple d'Irlande.*

(If I limit myself strictly to my consular functions, if I avoid expressing any view in regard to internal affairs and do not associate with the leaders of any party, the English government will be maintained in greater security than if I follow the dictates of my love of liberty in general and the deep interest which the brave and unfortunate people of Ireland inspire in me.)<sup>9</sup>

He planned, but never published, a vast work on Europe. By the early 1800s, and particularly after returning from his mission to London in 1802–3, he was working on a *Géographie industrielle, commerciale et physique de l'Irlande* which was close to completion. Silvestre, one of his eulogists, refers to it as the *Géographie physique, industrielle et commerciale de l'Irlande* and

8 Isabelle Laboulais-Lesage, *Lectures et pratiques de l'espace: l'itinéraire de Coquebert de Montbret, savant et grand commis d'État, 1755–1831* (Paris: H. Champion, 1999).

9 Letter of 18 December 1792, quoted by I. Laboulais-Lesage, *op. cit.*, p. 146.

says it was 'l'un de ses travaux le plus complet, celui qu'il était le plus disposé à publier'.<sup>10</sup> However, he decided to extend this already voluminous draft and to compile a vast European *Dictionnaire*, taking in all the countries he had travelled in and observed. This was a disastrous decision, which paralysed him. Constant Leber attributes to modesty Coquebert's failure to ever consider his work ready for the public. One might equally well think that he was attempting to apply an encyclopedic system in a world where the epistemologies of the Encyclopedia era had given way to new and more specific approaches. The impression is of information overload without the means to cut through to the essential.<sup>11</sup>

Coquebert had an impressive library and he bequeathed many manuscripts to his son Eugène, some of them in Irish, together with 10,000 printed works to which Eugène added another 50,000. History was intended to figure in Coquebert's account of the Europe he knew. From his own catalogue, it is clear that history occupied the largest section with 2,894 titles, 501 on Europe and 1,963 on France.<sup>12</sup> In this section, it is clear that his main interest is in peoples rather than in rulers, and that what he is seeking is not mere description but more so explanation and analysis.<sup>13</sup> Historic awareness is unusually evident in Coquebert's approach to Ireland.

10 Augustin de Silvestre, *Notice biographique sur M.C.-E. Coquebert de Montbret* (Paris: chez Mme Huzard, 1832), p. 7.

11 Constant Leber confirms this impression: '*M. de Montbret a recherché, observé et recueilli les faits jusqu'à ses derniers moments. On eût dit qu'il n'était né que pour apprendre et conserver, comme un dépôt sacré, le trésor des connaissances qu'il avait acquises : c'était là l'erreur de sa modestie*' (M. de Montbret continued his research, making observations and gathering data to the end of his days. It seemed as though he had been born with the sole purpose of learning and preserving, like a sacred trust, the accumulated treasure of his learning: this was the error into which his modesty led him). *Notice biographique sur M. le baron Coquebert de Montbret* (Paris: G.-A. Dentu, 1839), p. 11.

12 I. Laboulais-Lesage, *op. cit.*, pp. 644–647. She notes that Coquebert included within 'Histoire' 1,140 titles not really belonging to history as understood in the eighteenth century, but rather to '*une histoire entendue comme enquête, une histoire pratiquée sur un mode expérimental*' (History understood as an enquiry, history practised in an experimental manner).

13 *Ibid.*, p. 664.

Most travellers took a much more superficial look at Irish history and oral tradition. A case in point is Coquebert's contemporary Pierre-Nicolas Chantreau, who visited the country in 1788. While not wholly unaware of the importance of usage and custom, Chantreau is still a proponent of the Cartesian tradition of historiography:

*Le philosophe, qui sait quel degré de crédit il faut donner à ces dires contradictoires [des historiens anglais et irlandais], s'en rapporte à l'observation, et laisse à l'Irlandais, comme aux autres hommes, le plaisir puéril de lire ses légendes, ses fables et ses poétiques fictions.*

(A philosopher, knowing what degree of credence one should give to these contradictory assertions [of English and Irish historians], relies on his own observations, and lets the Irish, like other people, enjoy the childish pleasure of reading their legends, fables, and poetical fictions).<sup>14</sup>

Chantreau is content to rely on the so-called 'Protestant' versions of Irish history provided by Leland and Hume as his principal historical sources; moreover, for information on the 'gouvernement de l'Irlande, sa constitution et les mœurs de ses habitants, les amis de M. La Touche ont, à cet égard, rempli parfaitement nos vues'.<sup>15</sup> This is a dubious historical method when compared to the painstaking accumulation of histories and the many informants used by Coquebert de Montbret. This cavalier attitude is all the more surprising as Chantreau was the author of *De l'Importance de l'Étude de l'Histoire* (1802), an *ars historica* in which he stresses the need to evaluate the prejudices and competence of witnesses.<sup>16</sup> In contrast to Chantreau's dismissal of Irish accounts of the past, Coquebert definitely belongs to the category of traveller identified by Luigi Marfè as 'erudite collector traveller'. This is a prevalent type in Coquebert's era, but it is

14 Pierre-Nicolas Chantreau, *Voyage dans les trois royaumes d'Angleterre, d'Ecosse et d'Irlande* (Paris: Briand, 1792), III. See pp. 128–221 for Ireland.

15 P.-N. Chantreau, *op. cit.* The La Touches' influence on 'tourisme' in the east of the country, and the weight of their opinion at this time is similarly evident in John Ferrar, *A View of [...] Dublin [and] A Tour to Bellevue* (Dublin: s.n., 1796).

16 Pierre-Nicolas Chantreau, *De l'importance de l'étude de l'histoire* (Paris: Deterville, An X (1802)).

also present in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries: Marfè includes Mario Praz, Claudio Magris, and the Catalan writer Terenci Moix in the category. For the erudite collector traveller, the past is never over, ‘permane sottotraccia in compresenza con l’oggi’ (The substratum of the past forever coexists with the present).<sup>17</sup>

The first thing to note is that the diachronic and synchronic are visible ‘à l’état brut’ in a *carnet* or *brouillon* like Coquebert’s. The unfinished condition of the manuscript means that two or more time perspectives often appear to come cutting through each other, and are interleaved. There are abrupt changes of topic but also of time-frame, reflecting how the perceptions of the traveller *in situ* are jumbled together. Why do these time-shifts occur? Within the traveller’s immediate experience, particular elements send him back to inquire into the past, or to speculate about it. There are particular routes back in time, like the wormholes of science fiction travel. The following passage is typical of the alternating time layers that result from this mix of immediate impression and retrospective information. Here it is the sight of building which prompts Coquebert to make a connection that leaps back five centuries:

*Entre Athenry et Galway, sur un bras de mer est une tour ancienne du genre de celle de Dunsandle, mais très bien conservée et habitée, ainsi qu’une maison moderne qu’on y a jointe. C’est Oran-more, à M. Denis Blake. Il y a plus loin Oran-beg. Ce nom d’Oran que portent plusieurs endroits d’Irlande se retrouve en Afrique. Au-delà, on a de la hauteur une superbe vue de la Baie de Galway et des montagnes de Conamara qui la bordent à gauche. Cette route est fort belle depuis Athlone, et sans barrières. Les habitants ont de très belles dents quoiqu’ils mangent leurs patates brûlantes. Je remarquai à la porte d’un cabaret un large gâteau surmonté d’un bouquet. C’était un prix pour le meilleur danseur. Le couvent de Dominicains d’Athenry fondé en 1241 par Milon [Meyler] de Bermingham, en irlandais, Mac-horais [...].*

(Between Athenry and Galway, on an inlet of the sea, there is an ancient tower like the one at Dunsandle, but very well preserved and inhabited, as is the modern house which has been added to it. It is Oran-more, belonging to Mr Denis Blake. Further on lies Oran-beg. This name ‘Oran’ which is used of several places in Ireland, is also found in Africa. Beyond it, from the high ground one has a superb view of

17 L. Marfè, *op. cit.*

Galway Bay and the Conamara mountains which frame it to the left. From Athenry onwards the road is very fine and there are no tollgates. The inhabitants have very fine teeth, although they eat their potatoes red-hot. I noticed at the door of a cabaret a large cake with a bouquet of flowers on top. It was a prize for the best dancer. The Dominican friary in Athenry, founded in 1241 by Milon [Meyler] de Bermingham, in Irish Mac-horais [...]. (NAF 20098, 28v–29r)

In general, there are a number of conventional moments or site-types in travel literature which give rise to musings about time, or at least hint at the ever-present nature of the past. In Coquebert's *carnets*, the typical links to the past are philology and place-names (as just seen), geological observations, the fall of great families and loss of land, the decay of man-made structures, a poeticised vision of landscape, the fables and traditions of the Irish.

Linguistic speculation, particularly philology, provided Coquebert with a key means of connecting to the past. Thanks to his early education and personal experience, he was a skilled linguist, and in his travel journal he continually interrogates the Gaelic language, seeking in it clues to the originary language, a burning topic of the times and of great philosophical significance. He always concludes that it was the source of Latin, a not uncommon view at the time. For example, he is categorical in saying: 'Bro-chille d'où le latin brugilus, broilus. *En français*, breuil, broglio' (*Bro-chille* whence the Latin *brugilus, broilus*. In French, *breuil, broglio*) (NAF 20098, 9v). He attempted to learn the language and collected copies of early manuscripts. He is consequently very open to Irish claims to be an ancient and highly evolved civilisation.<sup>18</sup>

Geology, another interest of Coquebert's which was later to provide him with a living, had through the eighteenth century offered a dangerous glimpse of earliest time, of creation itself. Remarks on geological formations are everywhere in the *carnets*. Generally, Coquebert is more concerned with their effect on the agriculture and industry of a region, and their mining potential, than in speculating about geological time. Such

18 See also, below, Coquebert's engagement with Charles Vallancey's theories of Irish origins.

ideas are not absent, however, and on balance he was a Neptunian, rather than a Vulcanist.<sup>19</sup>

Patterns of past ownership, possession and loss of territory, are recurrent themes in Coquebert's *carnets*, echoing his written and oral sources, and the familiar land memory of the dispossessed Irish. Wherever he goes, he records local owners of the land, mostly Anglo-Irish, and then gives information about the earlier occupants. Regions are almost always identified by him as 'ancien territoire' of such and such a family. To this end, he scrutinises Irish place-names and local informants, as well as written sources such as Charles O'Connor or O'Flaherty's *Ogygia*. Coquebert notes another expression of the Irish concern with dispossession: the Irish are convinced that the Danes still hold deeds to the lands they once held in Ireland, much as today displaced Greek and Turkish Cypriots recite their claims concerning who holds their title deeds.<sup>20</sup> He relates stories about the fate of various families, many deriving from local historians such as Smith, but several were clearly recounted in social gatherings. Such a one, whose family once held sway over vast tracts, is a cab driver in Kerry; such another is the last of a family which has died out. His acceptance of Irish records of the past ownership is unusual in travel accounts of the period. It displays a growing sympathy for the Irish 'hantise des origines'. It may well reflect a French post-revolutionary sense of the impermanence of great estates. Despite their use of oral testimony, these passages, with their use of Irish written sources, are rarely very original. Much of their interest

19 For example, he disputes the volcanic origin of the Fair Head basalts (NAF 20099, 21r) though he argues against his own stance. Similarly he disagrees with the view held by people in County Wicklow that the mountains there are extinct volcanoes (NAF 20099, 58v, 76v), finds Knockmealdown not at all volcanic despite what people say (NAF 20099, 100r).

20 '*Il passe pour comptant parmi les Irlandais que les Danois conservent la mémoire des terres que leurs familles ont possédée dans ce pays et les transmettent par contrat de mariage*' (The Irish take it as gospel truth that the Danes retain a record of the lands their families once held in this country and pass it on in their marriage contracts) (NAF 20100, 66v–67r).

lies in this French traveller's deep engagement with naming and defining possession and displacement.

Ruins, the decay of man-made structures, are, in Coquebert's diaries as in so many travelogues of the time, a fourth trigger, endowed with both cultural and political meaning. French travellers were less inhibited in their response to these visible remnants of Ireland's history than were their English counterparts. William Williams has noted that 'Ireland's historic landscape had either too little or too much meaning for the British travel writers.' Irish ruins were for some 'at best picturesque objects [...]. For others, especially some of the Anglo-Irish writers, Ireland's antiquities raised problems of history and identity.' Ecclesiastic remains, the tangible remains of the dissolution of religious life, were also problematic. 'Neither the historical nor the religious landscape fitted neatly into the British sense of progress.'<sup>21</sup> Coquebert is not hampered by this unease, nor by any obscure sense of guilt. He is also reinforced in his readings by a distinctively French 'héritage ruiniste'. Diderot's sensibility,<sup>22</sup> as well as Volney's and later Chateaubriand's,<sup>23</sup> are likely influences here. For a French traveller in the 1790s, the Irish ruin is not just the habitual reminder of the fall of civilisations and the fragility of man; it has more immediate political resonances

21 William Williams, *Tourism, landscape and the Irish character: British travel writers in pre-Famine Ireland* (Madison, WI: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 2008), pp. 50, 295.

22 Diderot was the first to use the expression 'poétique des ruines' in the *Salon de 1767*. On ruins in travel accounts, see, inter alia, Roland Le Huenen, 'Les ruines entre histoire et imaginaire', in Roland Le Huenen and Alain Guyot (eds), *L'Itinéraire de Paris à Jérusalem de Chateaubriand: L'invention du voyage romantique* (Paris: PUPS, 2006), p. 264.

23 In 1802, in a much quoted passage from *Le génie du christianisme* (III, 5), Chateaubriand expressed the prevalent Romantic sense of human affinity for these testimonials of the past: 'Tous les hommes ont un secret attrait pour les ruines. Ce sentiment tient à la fragilité de notre nature, à une conformité secrète entre ces monuments détruits et la fragilité de notre existence' (All men take a secret delight in beholding ruins. This sentiment arises from the frailty of our nature, and a secret conformity between these destroyed monuments and the caducity of our own existence). English version taken from *The genius of Christianity*, translated by Charles I. White (Baltimore: J. Murphy & Co, 1856), p. 466.

that are intimately connected with the themes of loss and memory after the French Revolution. In 1834, Michelet took this grim vision of a country which had been submerged by the flow of history just a bit further: Ireland in his vision cannot survive. As a trace of time, ruins are quite equivocal: they resurrect a moment in past time as the onlooker imagines their former glory and occupants; they also signify what will never be again, a vision of future ruination of what now appears to prosper and flourish. As Roland Le Huenen has pointed out, it is when ruins are reappropriated or recolonised, that there is a strong reminder of the fact that historic time is the time of men. There are examples of this in Coquebert.

Coquebert shares with other contemporaries a Gothic sensibility, which is triggered by ruins. In Athenry, for example, having contemplated the ruins of the Dominican friary, he provides his own translation of a long passage from a 'poème ersé', and notes admiringly the refinement of early Irish poetry: 'On trouve dans les pièces de vers de l'héroïsme, de l'honneur et des mœurs très raffinées en comparaison de ce que l'Europe était alors' (NAF 20098, 29v–30r). Following a reference to Charlotte Brookes' *Reliques of Irish Poetry* (1789), and a quotation from Pope, with an evocation of a ruined castle, he is struck by a further ruin, an 'antique abbaye', complete with inscribed tombstone. This brings on yet another poetic reminiscence, this time from John Cunningham's 'An elegy on a pile of ruins'.<sup>24</sup>

Coquebert was a firm admirer of *Ossian*, and more generally of 'Erse' poetry. He was aware of the unhistorical character of Macpherson's poem but not of the degree of Macpherson's *supercherie*. As he crosses the landscape, he ties particular places into the heroic past as imagined by Macpherson, and links them into the literary memories he has built up through extensive reading of Irish scholars. For example, near Ballycastle he relates the part of Scotland which is visible from that viewpoint to its presence in 'les Poèmes ersés', and identifies landmarks on the Irish side with the lives of Ossianic heroes: 'Tura et la caverne où habitait Cuchullin, Selamath palais de Toscar, la bruyère de Lena, la montagne de Cromla,

24 John Cunningham, *Poems, chiefly Pastoral* (Newcastle: T. Slack, 1771).



toute la scène d'Ossian est sur la côte orientale d'Ulster.' (NAF 2009, 20r). Many of these references are stitched into the narrative in notes that were added at a later period, showing how after the traveller's return, the vision persists of an ancient poeticised landscape.

## Coquebert as cultural historian

In *La Carte postale*, Derrida asks:

*Que se passe-t-il quand des actes ou des performances (discours ou écriture, analyse ou description, etc.) font partie des objets qu'ils désignent ? Quand ils peuvent se donner en exemple de cela même dont ils parlent ou écrivent ? On n'y gagne certainement pas une transparence auto-réflexive, au contraire. Le compte n'est plus possible, ni le compte-rendu, et les bords de l'ensemble ne sont alors ni fermés ni ouverts. Leur trait se divise et des entrelacs ne se défont plus.*

(What happens when acts or performances (discourse or writing, analysis or description, etc.) are part of the objects they designate? When they can be given as examples of precisely that of which they speak or write? Certainly one does not gain an auto-reflexive transparency, on the contrary. A reckoning is no longer possible, nor is an account, and the borders of the set are then neither closed nor open. Their trait is divided, and the interlacings can no longer be undone.)<sup>25</sup>

The cultural historian, in the Greek sense of 'recorder of the present for posterity', is in an interestingly bifocal position. Derrida's notion of the blurred borders of the producer of a discourse which integrates the producer seems appropriate here. Another way of saying this is to note that the writer (historian or traveller) is both *homo scriptans* (the authoritative observer) and *homo scriptus* (the person observed): he or she researches, arranges and

25 Jacques Derrida, *La carte postale: de Socrate à Freud et au-delà* (Paris: Flammarion, 1980). English version taken from Jacques Derrida, *The Postcard: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond*, translated by Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), p. 391.

presents data (according to the old plan of *inventio, dispositio, elocutio*) but is at the same time an object which (as here) may be researched, arranged, presented. The traveller of the Coquebert type looks back and uses past texts, he produces texts about the past and the present. He integrates past texts into his present text, which in turn becomes a text for exegesis and commentary, itself a historic text.

Coquebert's writing on Ireland is a tissue of texts, in both the literal and the extended cultural history sense, which are integrated randomly. In addition to the 'set texts', those full-scale printed works that prove Coquebert's erudition, the *carnets* contain transcriptions of ephemeral texts he collects along his way. One such is the 'Avertissement à l'entrée du Port de Dublin: "Take notice that nothing can lie with safety in the space between this wall end and the first perch as the ground is uneven and full of holes."' (NAF 20097, 2r). This particular record of signage illustrates well the haphazard assemblage of sources used by Coquebert. It is preceded by notes on two authoritative books: Whitehurst's theory of the earth and his mention of Irish volcanoes,<sup>26</sup> and Bullet's 1754 *Mémoires de la langue celtique*: it is immediately followed by notes on manufacturing and commercial activity in Belfast and other more frivolous or social information about the city, such as the possibility of taking dance lessons on the Parade. Elsewhere he records some graffiti found on the wall of an inn in Bray:

Sur le mur de l'auberge étaient ces vers:

'Where fools have scribbled, fools will scribble more

As dogs will piss where dogs have pissed before.' (NAF 20099, 58v)

At the other end of the spectrum is an almost sacred text, the record of the Huguenot presence in Cork. Coquebert was clearly moved to have held in his hands 'les registres de l'Église française [de Cork] de juin 1699', parts of which he transcribed. Following the disappearance of the originals in the late eighteenth century, his fragmented transcription offers the only

26 John Whitehurst, *An Inquiry into the Original State and Formation of the Earth*, 2nd edn (London: W. Bent, 1786).

access now available to their contents.<sup>27</sup> Other texts surface from time to time. There is a bill from the inn he stayed in in June 1790.<sup>28</sup> He is particularly attentive to *gazettes*, lists how many there are in each town, when they were founded or disappeared, and inserts a cutting into his *carnet*.<sup>29</sup> For cultural history, these ephemeral or vanished texts are of value, but even more so are the echoes of oral sources. Combined, they produce an impression of ventriloquism in the records kept by Coquebert.

Travellers, like historians, need credible living witnesses. One of the reasons why Arthur Young became a model (and Coquebert frequently mentions him) was his systematic practice of consulting high and low wherever he went. History had developed quite an elaborate way of weighing witnesses against each other, whenever confronted with ‘conflicting gazes’. There was what Uglow has called a sort of ‘witness calculus’<sup>30</sup> at work by this time. An example of the categorisation of witnesses according to their reliability is provided by the same Chantreau quoted above, who if weak on Irish history in his travelogue, is, in his manual on teaching historical method, eloquent on the *degrés de crédibilité* of different types of testimony.

Coquebert takes his information wherever he can get it. He reports the opinions of a wide range of clearly identified people, though he sometimes casts doubt on them. Among the informants upon whom he relies are: Richard Kirwan, the notable and eccentric chemist who he knew socially; Andrew Caldwell, his correspondent and informant on many things, from the mines at Cronebane and Ballymurtagh to poetry and political gossip; Mr Maiben, owner of a large bleach yard in Sligo; a Mr Kearney of Garretstown, Colonel Samuel Hayes, MP for Wicklow, and other improving landlords and proto-industrialists in the north of Ireland; Charles O’Connor, the antiquarian, one of the first Catholic historians of Ireland to assert, in a scientific way, the honorable past of the country prior to colonisation. A particular influence was Charles Vallancey, an

27 NAF 20099, 111r–113v.

28 ‘The Old Noted Inn at Newry-Bridge, within twenty-one miles of Dublin, and two of Wicklow, by Philip Coles.’ NAF 20099, 65r.

29 NAF 20099, 153r–153v.

30 Nathan Uglow, *op. cit.*

antiquarian much given to far-fetched etymologising to prove that the Irish were Phoenicians, and who was eventually viewed by many, even within the Royal Irish Academy, of which he was President, as being seriously misguided in his views. Nonetheless, in Coquebert's eyes he was a reliable, respectable informant, and all the more so because he was of French descent, his family being Huguenots. His dubious theories of the Phoenician origins of the Irish are not questioned by Coquebert who like many another French Enlightenment linguist, of the type very effectively mocked by Voltaire in his *Essai sur les mœurs, Avant-propos, Gaule barbare*, had a passion for discovering origins, especially for tracing relationships with the East through dubious etymologies. The fact that Vallancey was a military man who was busy organising the fortification of Spike Island during Coquebert's stay in Cork, was no deterrent to cordiality between them, although it was at a time when Coquebert was interesting himself in a possible French invasion and carefully noting gun emplacements.

In addition to these distinguished voices, here are numerous unattributed echoes of conversations in the Coquebert documents and they come through like the murmur of voices in the background. These are unattributed quotations, but from their place in a sequence of remarks or from their context in the itinerary, it can be surmised that they reflect an individual or local opinion. When during his travels in the west he writes that if Ireland were not so entirely dominated by England, its principal ports would be on the western seaboard, Limerick and Galway being infinitely better suited to be the capital of Ireland than Dublin or even Cork, one can almost hear the merchant class of Galway grumbling about the decline in their trade and the preferential treatment of the eastern sea-board. Often he acknowledges that he is drawing on collective opinion. The views of these *anonymes* are signaled by 'à ce qu'on m'a dit', or 'on dit ici que', 'les gens pensent ...' etc. In those cases, it is clear *what* they think, but it is not apparent *who* they are. In other cases it is known *whom* he meets, but not *what* they tell him. Included here are such transitory figures as the people whose names he lists in Galway, calling them warmly 'mes amis', whose origins are in the merchant class but possibly fairly low in that group. In the formation of Coquebert's political opinions, the role of such encounters, and of the actual friendships which developed, can only be guessed

at. There are some unlikely sources, such as the young boy encountered on the shore in Sligo:

*Un garçon de 12 ans, fort intelligent, m'a montré 4 espèces de plantes marines dont on fait du kelp. Le commun se nomme fannagh, qui est comme une peau d'anguilles ; une longue feuille rougeâtre se nomme wrack ; un en fil nommé lliondach, lliionduch ; et enfin un en bâton nommé slat mara. [...] L'intelligence de cet enfant étonnante. Quel plaisir d'être assez riche pour lui donner de l'éducation.*

(A highly intelligent twelve-year-old boy showed me four types of seaweed from which kelp is made. The common one is called *fannagh*, and is like the skin of an eel; one with a long reddish leaf, called wrack; one long and thread-like called *lliondach*, *lliionduch*; and finally one like a rod, called *slat mara*. [...] Astonishing intelligence of this child. What a pleasure to be rich enough to give him an education.) (NAF 20098, 59v–60r)

Because of the fragmentary composition of the *carnets*, it is frequently difficult to say what is homodiegetic and what is heterodiegetic. As the narrative voice is discontinuous, it is not possible to know if Coquebert is echoing something he has read, or giving a personal opinion, or taking a note from one of his informants. The following passage illustrates this:

*La montagne de Knock Erin près de Lough Allen mesurée par M. Kirwan, 1700 pieds au-dessus du lac, qui est lui-même environ 300 pieds au-dessus de la mer, du moins Athlone est 274 pieds au-dessus de la baie de Dublin. L'histoire d'Irlande a toujours été écrite dans des vues et avec esprit de parti. Leland avait été flatté d'avoir un évêché et ayant été abusé il se préparait lorsqu'il mourut il y a 8 ou 9 ans, à se réfuter lui-même. Un M. Corry, médecin de Dublin, a donné un examen critique des histoires d'Irlande depuis 1641. Hume a été d'une fausseté horrible, surtout ce qu'il a écrit de l'Irlande ; il avait promis de le changer. Il ne l'a pas fait.*

(The mountain called Knock Erin near Lough Allen, measured by Mr Kirwan, 1700 feet above the level of the lake, which is itself 300 feet above sea-level, or at least Athlone is 274 feet above Dublin Bay. The history of Ireland has always been written with ulterior motives and in a partisan way. Leland had been led to believe he would be given a bishopric but, having been let down, he was about to refute his own work when he died eight or nine years ago. A Mr Corry, a medical doctor from Dublin, has produced a critical examination of the histories of Ireland since 1641. Hume was horribly false, especially in what he wrote about Ireland. He promised to change it. He did not do so.) (NAF 20097, 18v)

Here Richard Kirwan is clearly the source of the information on heights above sea level, but is he also the person who expresses a low opinion of Leland as a historiographer? Or does that come from Coquebert or from Corry's work on historians? Or from one of the people he met that day?

Throughout, the *carnets* are a composite of recorded conversations, local opinions and talking points (attributed or not) and of Coquebert's own views, and his random personal observations on what interested him (everything from folk practices, agricultural implements and proto-industrial machines through to botany, geology, antiquarian remains and sociolinguistics). His voice and the voices of his informants are audible in remarks about how taxation is driving linen manufacturing into the ground, how the government should clamp down on smugglers, how the last war was very profitable for traders. He integrates snippets of readings, collected texts, and practical information (the rates charged for removing kidney stones in Dublin, where to get a cab in Cork, inns to avoid, how to make perfume from violets), all augmented by later notes, mostly erudite in character, some reflective.

Given this variety of written and oral information, and the way Coquebert treats it, his travel diaries are a rich source for non-eventual or micro-history, and for cultural history. The political significance of his account of Ireland and his views regarding Irish autonomy have been noted.<sup>31</sup> Understandably, historians of the Irish economy have interested themselves in him for, as a quasi consul, this was his business: he was indefatigable in recording features of economic life, such as the price of linen in every area of production, its width and quality, the earnings of the weavers, and technical innovations, or levels of exports and imports, or potential trade opportunities. He has been less often noticed as an observer of cultural phenomena, which he attempted to understand in themselves and in the light of Ireland's past. The 'historicization of everyday life', although it

31 Most recently by Sylvie Kleinman, 'What did the French ever do for us? Or, some thoughts on French archives as realms of Irish memory', in Jane Conroy (ed.), *Franco-Irish Connections* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2009), pp. 171–184 (179–182).

largely developed in the nineteenth century,<sup>32</sup> had already begun in the late eighteenth century. Coquebert's folk-life observations are valuable records, and clearly he is one of the early exponents of a growing movement. As Peter Burke has written: 'By the year 1800 there was so much interest in folksongs and folktales that it seems reasonable to speak of the "discovery" of popular culture on the part of European intellectuals.'<sup>33</sup> Of course this enthusiasm did not grip quite everyone: where Coquebert was almost reverential in his attention to the traditions and legends of the Irish, his contemporary Chantreau, as has been seen, felt entitled to discount them entirely, failing to see any value in symbolic narrative.

Among the impressions that emerge from reading Coquebert, there are three that I would like to emphasise. One is the value of spontaneity and the peculiar charm of the *carnet*. The unfinished and unpolished manuscript, the observation without the judgment, can be more interesting today than the carefully arranged analyses and moral portraits of published works. For all its value as a testimony of observations, and indirectly of how a scholarly traveller would interpret another country c. 1840, Beaumont's *Irlande sociale, politique et religieuse*<sup>34</sup> lacks the immediacy and surprising detail of the non-systematised record provided by Coquebert, or indeed of the travel notes made by Beaumont's companion, Alexis de Tocqueville. This is precisely because Beaumont suppresses many humble specifics in order to attain that higher level of abstraction then prized by historians and others. Although cultural history existed as an idea and a practice, it was the element of travel observations which was most likely to be dispensed with in the published version of a journey. Coquebert's projected *Géographie industrielle, commerciale et physique de l'Irlande* might have been a dull affair, if he had published it.

A second and related remark concerns the displacement of the valuation now placed on the information found in travel accounts. The rise of

32 Mark Phillips, *Society and Sentiment* (Princeton Univ. Press, 2000), p. 320.

33 Peter Burke, *Varieties of cultural history* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1997), p. 16.

34 Gustave de Beaumont d'Ascq, *L'Irlande sociale, politique et religieuse* (Paris: Ch. Gosselin, 1839).

the cultural historian has led to a new appreciation of what in academic circles was once seen as the weakness of travel narratives. The attraction of humble detail, and the echoes of many voices, are now recognised and appreciated, as they were by contemporary readers. One of the principle values of Coquebert's  *carnets*  lies here. Their observation of daily life and conversation is of lasting interest, and they permit access an eighteenth-century mind reading eighteenth-century Irish society at different class levels. This is where they genuinely act as a memorial of the forgotten. As Mario Paz, in writing of his own approach in his travel accounts, remarked: 'il passato rivive più nelle umili documentazioni che nelle grandiose' (The past is more effectively brought to life in humble documents than in grandiose ones).<sup>35</sup> Interest is evoked now by the description of what the game of 'horley' is like (and how lethally dangerous Coquebert considers it to be), how a rabbit warren is organised, how hens are kept in a burrow under the kitchen, how in over-crowded churches people call out in Irish 'Caith amach' so that those in front will throw holy water to those at the back, the kinds of sacks that people use to bring grain to the mill, local anxiety about the shifting dunes in Garretstown, the topic of the sermon in Youghal on the third Sunday in June 1790, the patent coffee-pot (coffee biggins) which a Sligo landowner is so proud to show off, the fact that on 25 July people visit cemeteries to strew flowers on the graves of their friends, that ossuaries in Irish ecclesiastical sites are not disordered and disrespectful as is often alleged but organised, that in Celbridge hats are made from wood shavings from lime trees, that Lord Altamont's Irish wolfhounds cost him £1200–1300 a year to feed. For example, interest is aroused in the wolfhounds not so much because of the dogs' impressive consumption, but because it was clearly a matter of local comment, and because of the reported effect they had on the local dogs. These were the items of information that Coquebert's informants thought interesting, or appropriate to discuss with a French traveller. This ventriloquism found in travellers' accounts is one of their most pleurably disorientating features. The simple almost 'infra-ordinaire' experiences of Irish people come

35 Mario Paz, *Il mondo che ho visto* (Milan: Biblioteca Adelphi, 1982), p. 15.



through in Coquebert's  *carnets*, in the random sequence in which they are encountered. Their voices are almost audible in reported speech and talking-points, opinion and counter-opinion which compose the text.

A third remark concerns the variable porosity of travellers. Some, like Chantreau, remain firmly closed to their new environment, retaining virtually intact their ideas and sense of self. Others are transformed by their access to another time-space. Travel experiences, especially those of the migrant, are like birth, dying and death, described by Otmar Ette as 'semantic compressions of life knowledge'.<sup>36</sup> Migration, such as Coquebert's extended postings in Hamburg and Ireland, can be traumatising experiences, entailing separation, alienation and problems of acculturation and marginalisation. However, they also contain immense creative potential, providing multiple perspectives on linguistic, social and historical realms of experience, most notably dispossession and displacement. Migration, of the kind experienced by diplomatic travellers, can facilitate cognitive and cultural processes generated within what Homi Bhabha has called 'the space in between', a created 'third space'. This position, poised between cultural spaces, appears in Coquebert's case, at least, to be accompanied by a strengthened awareness of time's many layers.

In sum, the study of man, the historicisation of culture, and personal displacement, all combined to shape Coquebert's reading of Ireland. His own erudition, his enthusiasm for the language and interest in the past, finally seduced him from a position of cautious distrust to one of full engagement with Irish mentalities.

36 Otmar Ette, *Literature on the move*, translated by Katharina Vester (Amsterdam/New York: Rodopi, 2003).