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Emerging Ireland: Antiquarian Writing and the Molding of Irish Catholic Identity in the 18th Century

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*“Emerging Ireland: Antiquarian Writing and the Molding of
Irish
Catholic Identity in the 18th Century.”*

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Patrick Gibbons

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"Emerging Ireland: Antiquarian Writing and the Molding of Irish Catholic Identity in the 18th Century."

Thesis

I argue that the works of O'Connor, MacGeoghegan, and O'Halloran reflect an attempt to construct Irish Catholic identity in the 18th century, specifically in the context of the Penal Laws, the demise of the Gaelic social order, and the changing fortunes of Jacobitism.

Introduction

In the 18th century, three Irish Catholic historians, Charles O'Connor, Sylvester O'Halloran, and James MacGeoghegan were active in the historiographic debate regarding early Irish history. Though much of their writing was clearly occupied with political concerns and any history writing by Irish Catholics would necessarily address competing Protestant narratives, I argue that this Catholic historiography represents an effort to construct a new Irish Catholic identity. I have chosen to examine the way these three historians treated the period between Ireland's conversion to Christianity and the arrival of the Normans in the second half of the 12th century to see how their accounts show differing attempts to construct Irish Catholic identity in the 18th century.

In Irish history, the 18th century is often viewed as the Protestant century due to the dominant position that Protestants enjoyed during that period. After James II's failed attempt to retake the throne and the victory of Protestant forces under William of Orange in 1691, Irish Catholics were dispossessed and disenfranchised by a series of laws known as the Penal Laws. Worsening the situation for Catholics was the loss of leadership that occurred when the most of the remaining Catholic nobility (both of Gaelic Irish and Old English extraction) went into exile

on the Continent; these “Wild Geese” took their talents to the militaries of their new countries, to the Church, and to the trades. In Ireland, the victorious Protestant minority, which felt that it had narrowly escaped destruction, passed the first of many “Penal Laws” in an effort to secure their position in the future.

Some terms used in this thesis may be confusing and need to be defined, most importantly, the word “antiquarian.” Among modern historians the word has pejorative connotations, but in the 18th century the word “antiquarian” was not loaded down with these associations and was used to refer to scholars of the distant past, though it was also sometimes used interchangeably with “historian.” Also, as Clare O’Halloran states, “Antiquaries were, for the most part, the historians of *early* Ireland,” and notes that in 18th century Ireland the boundary between historians and antiquarians was a fuzzy one, as scholars from each side of the divide freely joined in the debates of the other.¹ Charles O’Conor, James MacGeoghegan, and Sylvester O’Halloran would all have seen their work as antiquarian in its nature. While I avoid overusing the word because of the modern sense of the word, other writers that I cite (notably Clare O’Halloran) use it, and it will appear in this thesis.

Similarly, it is important to clarify the meaning of several terms used to denote different demographic groups within Ireland. The Gaelic Irish² whose ancestors lived in Ireland before the Anglo-Norman invasion in the late 12th century had (with a few exceptions) remained Catholic after the Reformation came to Ireland. Those who were descended from the Anglo-Normans who had come during the medieval period and from the English who had come to Ireland before the

¹ Clare O’Halloran, *Golden Ages and Barbarous Nations: Antiquarian Debate and Cultural Politics in Ireland, c. 1750-1800*, (Notre Dame, Ind: University of Notre Dame Press in association with Field Day, 2005), 3.

² It is hard to do justice to the complexity of Irish ethnic groupings: even the idea of “Gaelic Irish” can be deceptively simple. The Irish who were in Ireland before the Normans were hardly a homogenous group; from the very beginning many of Ireland’s Celtic inhabitants had been Picts who eventually more or less assimilated with their Gaelic neighbors. Likewise, many of the Vikings in Ireland were absorbed into Gaelic culture. In both cases these origins were occasionally remembered in genealogies into the early modern period.

Reformation became known as the “Old English.” The Old English had also remained Catholic, but retained their loyalty to the Crown and fought on the Royalist side in the wars of the 1640s. Though they shared a religion with the Gaelic Irish, the Old English maintained a separate identity into the 17th century. The events of the 1640s and onwards brought them into common cause with the “Irish” against Protestants; this merger was largely complete by the 1680s, and the Penal Laws, which targeted all Catholics regardless of ethnicity cemented it.³ English settlers who came at the time of the Reformation and afterwards were known as the “New English” and were Protestant. Within the New English grouping there were the Cromwellians, which were adventurers who had moved onto land confiscated from Catholics after Cromwell’s campaigns in Ireland; the term was also applied to the descendants of these immigrants. Finally, it is worth noting the Scots-Irish in Ulster, who came to Ireland at various points in the 17th century and were overwhelmingly Presbyterian. Though the Scots-Irish will not figure into my thesis, their presence is a reminder that the Protestant minority in Ireland was not a homogenous bloc and that there could be significant friction among Irish Protestant groups.

Historiography

Existing historiography has focused on the political nature of 18th century antiquarian writing and on the divide between Protestant and Catholic interpretations. The definitive work concerning 18th century Irish antiquarian writing is Clare O’Halloran’s 2005 monograph *Golden Ages and Barbarous Nations*. O’Halloran argues that the Protestant and Catholic antiquarian authors of this period were writing about current issues such as the Penal Laws, the Ossianic Controversy, arguments over the origins of the Irish, and the essential question of whether the Irish were civilized or inherently barbarous. Clearly the contemporary intellectual landscape of the 1700s is given a great deal of attention in O’Halloran’s work, and the time period I have

³ S.J. Connolly, *Divided kingdom: Ireland, 1630-1800* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 169-170.

chosen is only part of it; this particular part deserves more attention. Though O'Halloran's monograph is extremely thorough in its treatment of the topic, she approaches it from the angles of politics and intellectual high culture and doesn't address the antiquarian writings in the context of identity.

The tension between Catholics and Protestants is certainly a key theme in Irish history, and although the sectarian divide played an important role in 18th century Irish historiography, viewing this historiography solely through the lens of that divide ignores possibility of an internal discourse among Irish Catholics. The way Protestant scholars approached this same period is clearly related to their own concerns about identity. In the late 17th century, Protestants like Archbishop Ussher claimed that Saint Patrick and the early Church in Ireland were unconnected to Rome and were actually proto-Protestants as a means of claiming legitimacy for the Protestant Church of Ireland.⁴ Similarly, Saint Patrick was appropriated as a symbolic protector and patron by Protestants in the 1700s, which shows a growing "Irishness" in the identity of Irish Protestants.⁵ It should not be surprising that Irish Catholics were also looking back at the distant past in their attempt to recreate their identity. That identity could be influenced by Irish Protestants, but its existence would not depend on having a foil to construct itself against. For these reasons I have chosen to examine these writings in the context of Irish Catholic identity rather than looking at them side-by-side with texts from Protestant antiquarians.

Historical Context

Explaining the situation in Ireland during the 1700s illustrates the drastic changes that O'Connor, O'Halloran, and MacGeoghegan had to address in their attempts to construct (or reconstruct) Irish identity. These events and new realities meant that previous identities no longer

⁴ Bridget McCormack, *Perceptions of St. Patrick in eighteenth-century Ireland*, (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2000), 21.

⁵ McCormack, *Perceptions of St. Patrick in eighteenth-century Ireland*, 58.

met the needs of Irish Catholics and influenced the new interpretation of Irish Catholic identity, along with making such a new interpretation necessary.

Among the most important factors that these antiquarians had to contend with were the Penal Laws, which stripped Irish Catholics of their civil rights and gave Protestants a monopoly on power. After James II's arrival in Ireland, Irish Protestants had come dangerously close to being driven out of their land when James assembled a largely Catholic parliament in Dublin in 1689. This parliament repealed the Act of Settlement which had confirmed most of the land confiscations which had dispossessed Irish Catholics during the 1640s and 1650s.⁶ The Protestant population, with the rebellion of 1641 still fresh in their minds, feared that they would lose everything. After the Williamite War and what was seen as a narrow escape from another Papist revolt, they determined not to let it happen again. The first Penal Laws were passed in 1695, and over the course of the next few decades more were added. Among other things, they stated that no Catholic could go to Europe for education, own a horse worth more than £5, or inherit estates.⁷ Other laws targeted Catholic religious practice, such as the banishment of Catholic higher clergy and members of religious orders and forbidding ordained priests from coming into Ireland.⁸ This is enough to give a general sense of the difficulties facing Irish Catholics after the Williamite War and show why the Penal Laws were of such concern for the authors being examined, especially O'Connor.

In the traditional Irish narrative, the era of the Penal Laws was a period of abject suffering and persecution when Irish Catholics were exposed to wanton cruelty by the Protestant minority that held power. Since the 1960s historians have done much to correct the overly

⁶ Connolly, *Divided kingdom: Ireland, 1630-1800*, 181.

⁷ Connolly, *Divided kingdom*, 199-200.

⁸ Connolly, 198.

simplistic and dire view of the Penal Laws that had dominated Nationalist historiography. After Maureen Wall published *The Penal Laws 1691-1760* in the late 60s, the Penal Laws were carefully reexamined by revisionist historians, who showed that the historical reality was more complex than previously thought. It was discovered that the laws had been only sporadically enforced and that the Catholic clergy had suffered more than lay people. Likewise, the large number of laws spread out over multiple decades does not indicate a heartless Protestant elite who sought to pile miseries on Catholics, but are actually a sign that the previous laws were ineffective.

Nonetheless, the findings of revisionist historians do not change how these laws were *perceived* by Irish Catholics in the 18th century. Two examples show that although the laws were not uniformly enforced (or sometimes unenforceable) they could be enforced at any time if it suited those in power. The first example is the well-known story of Art O'Laoghaire's death in 1773, which prompted his wife Eibhlín Dubh Ní Chonaill to write *Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoghaire*, one of the best known pieces of Irish poetry. O'Laoghaire was a young Irishman who had left the country to serve in the army of Maria Theresa in Austria. When he returned home to west Cork on leave, a dispute arose with Abraham Morris, the local sheriff. O'Laoghaire, an army officer, had brought his horse (certainly worth more than £5) back with him and the sheriff demanded that he sell it to him. O'Laoghaire refused, and the sheriff had him declared an outlaw. Morris then assembled a posse and, quite legally, shot O'Laoghaire. As can be seen, the law could be brought to bear against any Catholic if a member of the established church wanted to settle a score.

In another example that is particularly relevant, Charles O'Conor nearly lost his house and land after his younger brother converted to the Church of Ireland and tried to take the estate

by way of a Bill of Discovery in accordance with the laws. Hugh O’Conor conformed with the established Church of Ireland in 1777 and sued Charles for the family estate in Belanagare, and filed a second Bill of Discovery suit in 1779 which wasn’t resolved until 1783.⁹ These two suits cost Charles O’Conor a large amount of money and damaged his health when he was already in his late 60s. Even one of the most respected historians in Ireland with many Protestant contacts was not safe from the threat of the law being used against him. O’Conor’s experience, like that of Art O’Laoghaire, shows the uncertain place that Irish Catholics occupied for most of the 18th century due to the Penal Laws, and also balance the revisionist understanding.¹⁰

Clare O’Halloran argues that much of Irish antiquarian debate in this period was simultaneously a debate on the relaxation or upholding of the Penal Laws as well as the civility or incivility of the Irish. The claims and counterclaims of each side would serve either to support the Penal Laws by reinforcing the inherent violence and barbarism of the Irish, or to undermine the old colonialist narrative by establishing that the Irish had a longstanding civilization of their own before the arrival of the English. Though O’Halloran does not address the question of identity directly, it is clear that the Penal Laws strongly influenced this construction of identity just as they influenced the political aspect of antiquarian writing.

This new Irish Catholic identity would need to account for the loss of what remained of Ireland’s Catholic nobility. The loss was not just a loss of *Catholic* nobility, but the remnants of the *Gaelic* nobility that were part of the larger Catholic group. The majority of the Gaelic Irish nobility had left Ireland after the Williamite War, leading to the final collapse of the Gaelic social order that had survived up to that point. Contemporary Gaelic literary sources lamented

⁹ Clare O’Halloran, *Golden Ages and Barbarous Nations*, 163.

¹⁰ Of course, while O’Conor’s experience illuminates the human element of being Catholic at the time of the Penal Laws, it also reinforces the actual findings of the Revisionists; the existence of a Catholic landowner from one of the great Gaelic families during this time shows that the laws were often unenforced or dodged by loopholes.

the lost leadership that resulted from the flight of the “Wild Geese” from Ireland; for example, the poet Dáibhí Ó Bruadair referred to the situation in October 1691 (just after the Treaty of Limerick) as *an longbhriseadh* or “the shipwreck”¹¹ of Ireland. In the poem of the same name he bemoaned “All our nobles who were by the army in battle slain, / All our men who were sent o’er the ocean in cheerless ships, / All the cold and exposure endured by our Church’s priests...”¹² that resulted from the defeat of James II and the loss of (most of) the remaining Gaelic aristocracy. While Connolly notes that many historians believe that this poem and the countless others like it that were composed over the coming decades probably represent an artistic class bemoaning the loss of the noble patrons that it relied on more than a real political statement,¹³ this body of literature is a testament to the loss of almost an entire social group in Ireland. Without any Catholic nobles in the government, and no more than a handful of Irish Catholics (especially Gaelic Irish) of noble blood left in the country, any new identity that arose in the 18th century would be bound to address this new reality.

The Penal Laws resulted in the continuing loss of young men leaving Ireland to pursue education or military careers on the continent. As already seen in the example of Art O’Laoghaire, Irish men were leaving Ireland long after the major group of *émigrés* left in 1691. The laws targeting the education of Catholics meant that Irish Catholics seeking higher education were forced to go to the Continent. Both O’Halloran and MacGeoghegan were educated in France. Similarly, with military service off-limits to Catholics in Ireland, many young men left Ireland to serve in the armies of the Catholic powers on the Continent. Charles O’Conor’s

¹¹ Dáibhí Ó Bruadair, *Duanaire Dháibhidh Uí Bhruadair (The Poems of David Ó Bruadair), Part III, Containing Poems from the Year 1682 till the Poet’s Death in 1698*; ed. and trans. John C. Mac Erlean, SJ (London: Simpkin, Marshall, Kent, & Co. for the Irish Texts Society, 1917), 164.

¹² Ó Bruadair, *The Poems of David Ó Bruadair, Part III*; 177.

¹³ Connolly, 298.

grandson Roderick went to serve with France's Irish Brigade,¹⁴ and l'Abbé MacGeoghegan served as that unit's chaplain at one time.¹⁵ The need to leave Ireland for an education or for a military career also had the effect of expanding the horizons of upper-echelon Irish Catholics in the 18th century. Most major families would likely have had at least one member on the Continent. Of course, many returned; Sylvester O'Halloran and Dr. John Curry¹⁶ (another important antiquarian) both went to France for their medical training before returning to Ireland to practice their professions. These men, and others like them, brought back their experience of life outside Ireland, and sometimes came back influenced by intellectual currents on the Continent.

Jacobitism and Irish Catholic Identity

Any study of Irish Catholic identity in the 18th century, especially one that examines the ways in which it was constructed and molded, must first account for the pre-existing identity that these changes would either perpetuate or reject. While historians of this period have done much to examine the social, political, and legal situation of Irish Catholics during this period, the topic of identity has received less attention. It would be impossible to have a full understanding of any group of people in history without information about their trades, incomes, and political behavior (among other things), but it would be equally impossible to have a complete picture without a sense of how that group conceived of themselves and what it meant to be part of the group. Éamonn Ó Ciardha makes a convincing argument that Jacobitism was “the ideology which principally sustained Irish Catholic nationalist identity between the Glorious and French

¹⁴ Charles O'Connor, *Letters of Charles O'Connor of Belanagare*, ed. Robert E Ward, John F. Wrynn, S.J., and Catherine Coogan Ward (Washington, D.C. : The Catholic University of America Press, 1988), 498.

¹⁵ James MacGeoghegan, *The History of Ireland, Ancient and Modern, Taken from the Most Authentic Records, and Dedicated to the Irish Brigade*, trans. Patrick O'Kelly. (New York: D & J Sadlier, 1845), 13.

¹⁶ John Curry was a Catholic doctor in Dublin, who aside from his medical practice was also active as a historian and political activist. He is not included in this thesis because his work did not touch on the period in question, but Curry was an important player in 18th century Irish Catholic historiography. He was also a close friend and confidant of Charles O'Connor of Belanagare.

Revolutions.”¹⁷ While the use of the word “nationalist” may be slightly inappropriate when referring the first half of the 18th century, the rest of the statement is correct.

However, asserting the importance of Jacobitism in 18th century Ireland can potentially turn the study of a relatively inoffensive topic such as the writings of antiquarians into a historiographical firefight because of the various issues that tie into the arguments of historians including Éamonn Ó Ciardha and Brendan Ó Búachalla, who argue for the Jacobite thesis. As Ó Ciardha explains in a summary of the relevant historiography, the question of Irish Jacobitism’s relevance and its influence on Catholics automatically touches on the Penal Laws, which were largely passed out of fear of another Jacobite uprising. The Penal Laws, in turn, touch on the bitter divide between the Nationalist and Revisionist schools of Irish historiography, which differ in their interpretation the laws, especially concerning the extent to which they were a realistic security measure and whether they represent the “persecution” or “oppression” of Catholics. A similar problem is that many of the most important sources written by Catholics in Ireland regarding the Jacobite cause take the form of Irish language poetry, which represents another contentious area of historical debate. To use 18th century Irish language poetry as a historical source harkens back to the so-called “Hidden Ireland” thesis that Daniel Corkery introduced in the 1920s. Corkery argued that historians had ignored the *true* Ireland in the 18th century, which was hidden from monoglot English-speaking historians because it was to be found in an underground Gaelic Irish culture that survived despite persecution. Certain parts of the argument, as well as the overall flavor of any Irish history written in the 1920s, show a clear nationalist bias, which has naturally been criticized by subsequent scholarship. Another problem with the Hidden Ireland thesis relates to the relevance and reliability of Irish poetry as historical source

¹⁷ Éamonn Ó Ciardha, *Ireland and the Jacobite cause, 1685-1766: A fatal attachment* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2002) 21.

material. For example, the “*aisling*” genre of poem has been described by Louis Cullen as lacking political content and being so bound by convention that it is unreliable as a source.¹⁸ While Cullen was correct in criticizing the simplistic and nationalistic analysis of Irish society by Corkery, the dismissal of the political nature of the poetic sources poses a problem, since it largely deprives historians of sources for Irish Catholic identity beyond official records and other English language sources.¹⁹ In some cases it is clearly contrary to the evidence to insist that this poetry did not represent a real political statement as much as stylistic convention. For example, Seán Clárach Mac Domhnaill, a poet from County Cork (and Sylvester O’Halloran’s teacher in Irish poetry), did not limit his work to cryptic poems and songs about the return of the Pretender or Bonnie Prince Charlie. He read the local newspapers, written for a Protestant audience, and translated them into Irish while adding a Catholic spin to the news, which he would then spread to the people either in the form of a poem or song.²⁰ There is probable evidence that Mac Domhnaill and another poet, Seán Ó Neachtain, were the “Jean McDonnell” and “Jean Naughton” mentioned in a deposition about recruiting men to serve in the French army.²¹ Given the amount of obviously political activity that many of these poets engaged in, it would be difficult to argue that their poetry does not incorporate their political beliefs. Similarly, the fact that so much of their work was a form of mass media makes it equally hard to dismiss these Jacobite poets as isolated malcontents writing poetry for their own amusement; there was clear intent to influence their public.

¹⁸ Louis Cullen, “The Hidden Ireland: the re-assessment of a concept,” in *Studia Hibernica* 9 (1969): 48-49, quoted in Ó Ciardha, *Ireland and the Jacobite cause*, 47.

¹⁹ Ó Ciardha, *Ireland and the Jacobite cause*, 46.

²⁰ Ó Ciardha, *Ireland and the Jacobite cause*, 277.

²¹ Ó Ciardha, *Ireland and the Jacobite cause*, 143.

The reason to discuss the field of Jacobite historiography and Irish language poets who sang about the exiled Stuarts in the context of antiquarian writing by Irish Catholics is to establish what the existing Irish Catholic identity was at the time that these books began to be written. While Jacobitism as a larger historical topic remains quite contentious for the reasons already mentioned, Ó Ciardha makes a satisfying enough argument that it was the distinguishing feature of Irish Catholic identity for most of the 18th century, and fortunately, teasing out the various aspects of Jacobitism in Ireland is a task for professional historians, not undergraduates.

O’Conor and O’Halloran both accepted the Hanoverian succession as a pragmatic approach to increasing the rights of Catholics. O’Conor wrote in his diary that the ’45 was “the last flicker of a candle that has been going out for sixty years, unless God prevents it.”²² His political activities with the Catholic Committee included repeated addresses to the king by Irish Catholics stating their loyalty; the Jacobite cause was of little interest to O’Conor and other Catholic activists seeking to improve their situation. O’Halloran, though not involved with politics, supports the legitimacy of George III in the Preliminary Discourse of *An Introduction to the Study of the History and Antiquities of Ireland*, saying that “in his present majesty, and his ancestors from James I. the royal blood of the three kingdoms is united.”²³ For O’Halloran, the current monarch’s claim was perfectly legitimate,²⁴ and George III’s descent from James I meant that he had Scottish and Irish blood, which cemented his claim to rule Ireland and Scotland. However, O’Halloran paid little more than vague lip-service to the king’s tiny amount of Irish blood; O’Conor went into detail to show that George III was of Irish descent, even going so far

²² Connolly, 297.

²³ Sylvester O’Halloran, *An Introduction to the Study of the History and Antiquities of Ireland: In Which the Assertions of Mr. Hume and Other Writers Are Occasionally Considered*, (Dublin: Thomas Ewing, 1772), xvii.

²⁴ Of course, the likelihood that his acceptance of the Hanoverians was due to the final collapse of the Jacobite cause in 1766 is just as high as the likelihood of a true ideological attachment.

as to include a table in the 1766 version of his *Dissertations* that showed the line of descent from “Kineth Mac Alpin” [Cináed Mac Ailpín] the Gaelic king of Dál Riata who conquered the Picts and became the first king of Scotland.²⁵ An odd twist in O’Conor’s celebration of the present king’s lineage was the mention that the Dál Riata had been given aid and support in establishing their Scottish colony by the Uí Néill kings of Tara;²⁶ though it was certainly written without any motive, it could be seen as saying that George III’s claim to Scotland exists because the kings of Ireland had decided to help his ancestors, which would be an interesting version of history.

On the other hand, James MacGeoghegan’s *Histoire de l’Irlande (History of Ireland)* shows no signs of abandoning the cause of the exiled Stuarts, but this should not be a surprise. MacGeoghegan was the chaplain of France’s Irish Brigade and was connected with the Jacobite court in exile, and as a result his historical writing is unabashedly Jacobite. MacGeoghegan’s situation as an émigré living among the “Wild Geese” that had settled in France allowed him to hang on to a political outlook which was slowly losing ground in Ireland. Even more importantly, his location in France meant that unlike Jacobites in Ireland, he could be vocal in his support of the Stuarts. Even if his own belief in the Jacobite cause had not been strong, his audience would probably have dictated that he write his history from a Jacobite perspective. Of course, in reality his beliefs lined up with those of his audience and his Jacobitism is sincere. Despite his sincerity, the truth was that by the time his work was published, Jacobitism was quickly nearing the end of its political viability.

²⁵ Charles O’Conor, *Dissertations on the History of Ireland, to which is subjoined, A Dissertation on the Irish Colonies Established in Britain, with some Remarks on Mr. Mac Pherson’s Translation of Fingal and Temora*, (Dublin: G. Faulkner, 1766), 209.

²⁶ Charles O’Conor, *Dissertations*, (1766), 208.

Though MacGeoghegan himself did not abandon the Jacobite cause, the difficulty he had in publishing the third installment of *Histoire de l'Irlande* and the ambivalence of even the French towards the Stuarts at the time shows that Jacobitism had finally lost its viability. The third volume of *History of Ireland* was published in 1763 as the Seven Years War was ending and Anglo-French relations were improving; the censors were not keen to publish a book full of unadulterated Jacobite, anti-English rhetoric.²⁷ Eventually the situation was resolved by having the third part published with a foreign frontispiece²⁸, but his difficulties were a true sign of the times; after James III's death in 1766 the Vatican would abandon the Stuart cause and give its support to the Hanoverian kings, a decision which finally extinguished any realistic hope for Jacobitism.

Charles O'Conor of Belanagare

Charles O'Conor (1710-1791) was one of the last Catholic landowners in the country and a descendant of the last High King of Ireland; his career as a historian serves as a link between the earlier Irish Gaelic society that he came from and the new political and cultural realities that Ireland faced by the mid-18th century, as well as opening the field of Irish Catholic historiography in this period with his first book. For obvious reasons, Charles O'Conor looms large in the field of 18th century Irish antiquarian writing, especially the Catholic side of that period's antiquarian writing.

Charles O'Conor's biography helps to explain his later activities both as a scholar and as a political activist. O'Conor's family had managed to hold on to some of its land after the Williamite War, and the unique environment in which he was raised would provide him with the

²⁷Geoghegan, Vincent. "A Jacobite History: The Abbé MacGeoghegan's "History of Ireland."" *Eighteenth-Century Ireland / Iris an dá chultúr*, 6, (1991): 37-55
URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30070907>

²⁸ Ibid.

background necessary to pursue his career as a historian. As it happened, he was born into one of the oldest and most important Gaelic Irish families, the O’Conor Dons, which traced its descent to the last High King of Ireland, Ruaidhrí Ó Conchobhair, and had been the kings of Connacht in previous centuries.²⁹ Charles was the heir of this legacy, and upon becoming the O’Conor Don³⁰ he inherited the family’s remaining lands in Roscommon. While his lineage did not make him a king, O’Conor’s origins had a significant impact on his career as an antiquarian.

The Williamite Wars, as said before, had been disastrous for Catholic nobles and gentry in Ireland. However, the O’Conors were able to hold onto seven hundred acres of land in Roscommon through the legal wrangling of Terence MacDonough, a larger-than-life counsellor who was the only Catholic in the kingdom allowed to argue before the bar.^{31,32} For various reasons the family did not take possession of this land until the 1720s, and as a result Charles’s father Donough lived in relative poverty in County Sligo and Charles grew up in circumstances very different from those that his station might have afforded. However, O’Conor, SJ claims that this situation had a strong impact on the young man; a story related by O’Conor’s grandson tells that Donough O’Conor repeatedly told his sons not to look down on the poor or be unwilling to live in poverty, and that “I am the son of a gentleman, but ye are the children of a ploughman.”³³

²⁹ Clare O’Halloran, *Golden Ages and Barbarous Nations*, 23.

³⁰ “O’Conor Don” (Ó Conchobhair Donn) is not just the name of the family but also the title of the head of the family (Chief of the Name.) This convention applied to major Gaelic noble families, in which the head of the family was referred to as “The [surname].”

³¹ Charles O’Conor, “Charles O’Conor of Belanagare: An Irish Scholar’s Education.” *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review* 23, no. 89 (1934) : 124.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/30095114>

³² To make things complicated, it turns out that two important writers about the life of Charles O’Conor of Belanagare also happen to be named Charles O’Conor. The first was his grandson Charles O’Conor, a priest and historian who served as a chaplain to the Marquess of Buckingham’s Irish Catholic wife at Stowe. The second, in the 20th century, was a Jesuit priest and also a direct descendant of the 18th-century antiquarian. To distinguish between the later O’Conors, the grandson will be referred to as Dr. O’Conor, and the 20th-century Jesuit will be referred to as O’Conor, SJ.

³³ O’Conor, SJ; “Charles O’Conor of Belanagare: An Irish Scholar’s Education.”, 128.

The landscape is also argued to have had some effect, since the neighborhood of Kilmactranny was filled with sites tied to Irish mythology and early Irish history. While it may be a stretch to make these sorts of speculations about the effect of Charles O’Conor’s upbringing,³⁴ it is entirely reasonable to say that he had first-hand knowledge of the changed situation facing Irish Catholics in the 1700s.

In contrast to most educated Irish Catholics at the time (including O’Halloran and MacGeoghegan), O’Conor did not go abroad for his education but received it in hedge schools and later in Dublin. This was a classical education, and by his teens he was fluent in Latin and familiar with the classics. His uncle Thaddeus O’Rourke, the Bishop of Killala then became a major influence in his education and added polish to O’Conor’s learning.³⁵ The net effect of all the teachers O’Conor had during his youth in Sligo was to give him a level of familiarity with Irish history and the old intellectual tradition of Gaelic Ireland that no other scholar at that time possessed; as Clare O’Halloran points out, he was “virtually the only person in English-speaking society with even a limited competence in the archaic language of bardic literature,”³⁶ which made him uniquely suited for his later scholarly endeavors.

Along with the intangible benefit of being part of an intellectual tradition, the O’Conor family had access to old Irish manuscripts that would later be very useful in Charles’s antiquarian pursuits. For example, one of his tutors gave him a manuscript of the *Annals of Connacht*, along with several other important works that O’Conor drew on as sources for early Irish history. In the 21st century it may be hard to realize how much such accidents of birth influenced scholarship, but in the 1700s it was common for there to only be one known copy of a

³⁴ Especially given O’Conor’s expressed dislike of Irish mythology as “Romances, and vulgar stories.” (C. O’Halloran, 103.)

³⁵ O’Conor, SJ, “Charles O’Conor of Belanagare: An Irish Scholar’s Education,” 136.

³⁶ C. O’Halloran, 104.

source or manuscript, which was sometimes hard to access. For example, the holdings of Trinity College library were largely off limits even to members of the Ascendancy, and even more so for Catholics. O’Conor was the first Catholic ever to be granted access, and in that case it was on the invitation of Thomas Leland, the librarian and a fellow antiquarian.³⁷ The fact that Charles O’Conor had access to his own personal copies of the *Dinseanchus*, *Annals of Connacht*, and *Leabhar Gabhála* (The Book of Invasions) among others, represents an important factor in his writing of history.

Finally, the cultural and intellectual milieu that O’Conor came out of demonstrates clear links with the remnants of Gaelic high culture and the bardic tradition. O’Conor, SJ devotes a fair amount of space to O’Conor’s relationship with Turlough O’Carolan, the famous Irish harper and composer. O’Carolan was a frequent guest in the O’Conor Don household and taught Charles to play the harp. Likewise there were several other poets and scholars in residence with the family, such as those who provided O’Conor with some of his manuscripts. Though O’Conor would later be involved with the politics of the Ascendancy and be one of the most respected scholars in Ireland, his decidedly Gaelic origins continued to influence the man and his work.

Along with being one of the most respected Irish historians of the 18th century, Charles O’Conor was a key member of the Catholic Committee which sought the repeal of the Penal Laws and authored several political pamphlets supporting civil rights for Catholics. Though these pamphlets were written with an eye towards improving the situation of Irish Catholics, O’Conor wrote them under a pseudonym and they were presented as the work of a liberal Protestant. There was already an existing tradition of Protestant critiques of the Penal Laws, of which Bishop Berkeley’s *The Querist* was the most important example. A Protestant who argued

³⁷ C. O’Halloran, 145.

against the Penal Laws might meet severe criticism, but a Catholic publishing the same work could be charged with public libel for criticizing the government or a public figure, which carried the penalty of imprisonment.³⁸ In addition, the criteria for what was considered libel would be different for a Catholic, and a mild critique might be enough to run afoul of the law. The arguments in O’Conor’s pamphlets often echo *The Querist*, and he even admitted in multiple letters to Curry that many of the ideas in his pamphlets were ultimately derived from Berkeley.³⁹ O’Conor’s pamphleteering career lasted from 1749 to 1771; his political writing began before his historical works and continued after he published the second *Dissertations* in 1766. The arguments in his pamphlets are sometimes substantially different from those in his scholarly works. For example, the 1749 *A Counter-Appeal to the People of Ireland* emphasizes that “Popery” was introduced by an “Englishman” (St. Patrick), though echoing Ussher and later Protestant historians in claiming that the coming of the English had resulted in the “utter extirpation of the old pure *religion* planted here by the ecclesiasticks [sic] of Britain”⁴⁰ and portraying the Reformation as the reestablishment of this “old pure religion” in Ireland. While it is possible that O’Conor’s views changed between 1749 and 1753 when he published the first *Dissertations*, it is much more likely that he was playing to his audience and presenting a history that would back up the claim that the pamphlet was the work of a Protestant.

O’Conor’s work as a Catholic pamphleteer is important because his political concerns spill over into his antiquarian writing, and because his construction of an Irish Catholic identity included a political outlook. Also, these pamphlets *were* read by their target audience; O’Conor

³⁸ Robert Coogan Ward and Catherine Coogan Ward. “The Catholic Pamphlets of Charles O’Conor (1710-1791).” *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review* 68, no. 272 (1979) : 259.
URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30090215>

³⁹Robert Coogan Ward and Catherine Coogan Ward. “The Catholic Pamphlets of Charles O’Conor (1710-1791),” *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review*, 263.

⁴⁰ Robert Coogan Ward and Catherine Coogan Ward. “The Catholic Pamphlets of Charles O’Conor (1710-1791),” 261.

was told by a Protestant colleague that his work was known among members of the Irish Parliament, though the pamphlets did not effect a change in the laws.

Charles O’Conor published two antiquarian works, *Dissertations on the Antient History of Ireland: wherein an Account is given of the Origine, Government, Letters, Sciences, Religion, Manners and Customs, of the antient Inhabitants* published in 1753, and *Dissertations on the History of Ireland, to which is subjoined, A Dissertation on the Irish Colonies Established in Britain, with some Remarks on Mr. Mac Pherson’s Translation of Fingal and Temora* which was published in 1766. In these books O’Conor argued against Protestant claims that the Gaelic Irish had been “barbarous” and that early Irish Christianity had been opposed to Rome while also arguing that Ireland had been a great seat of learning in the centuries after its conversion.

O’Conor’s accounts of Ireland’s kings and political organization represent an attempt to integrate a new political outlook into Irish Catholic identity, a post-Jacobite identity that accepted the Hanoverian succession and sought to integrate Catholics into the existing political system. As mentioned earlier, O’Conor was uninterested in Jacobitism and viewed it as a dying cause in 1745. His final pamphlet, *Observations on the Popery Laws* (1771) was devoted to the possibility of Catholics taking an oath of allegiance to demonstrate their loyalty to the King and in turn be accorded better legal standing.⁴¹ Since O’Conor was leaving behind the political option that required the violent overthrow of the “usurping” Hanoverians, his writings emphasize a political outlook based on a constitution and a distaste for absolutism. In many ways, the political vision reflected in both *Dissertations* is in tune with the politics in *The Querist* and moderate Irish Protestants.

⁴¹ Robert Coogan Ward and Catherine Coogan Ward. “The Catholic Pamphlets of Charles O’Conor (1710-1791),” 263.

One aspect of O’Conor’s history that immediately stands out is the frequent references to a “constitution” in Ireland during the early Christian period and even earlier.⁴² The use of this term is significant in several ways; first, O’Conor is making a distinct claim that the ancient Irish possessed an orderly political system, which would stand in stark contrast with widely held views that saw the ancient (and not so ancient) Irish as barbarous and lawless. For example, O’Conor describes the coming of the Normans under the auspices of Pope Adrian IV as having “unhing’d the Constitution.”⁴³ This “constitution” prohibited arbitrary use of power by kings, and O’Conor praises Oliol Molt [Ailill Molt] for “his frequent recourse to the sense of the nation, by its representatives in Teamor [Tara]...”⁴⁴ O’Conor is espousing a monarchy limited by a representative body for his own time by inserting this ideal into ancient Irish history. In the pages that follow, O’Conor describes a golden age of learning in Ireland, which blossoms under such a political arrangement; the implication is that Ireland will flourish again with such a system in the 1700s. Another important aspect of this strategy is that by placing a precedent for his political ideals in the distant past, O’Conor’s calls for change can be portrayed as the restoration of an older system rather than a reformation leading to something new and unknown. Similarly, he praises the Uí Néill kings for being in touch with the people and not living a life detached from their subjects. His language is worth noting: the Uí Néill are described as “utter strangers to that distance which so easily unlearns the equality of human nature.”⁴⁵ This statement about the “equality” of human nature is remarkable given the time period and context of the work. Another notable quotation from the same page claims that the Uí Néill had been convinced that “kings are

⁴² MacGeoghegan and O’Halloran also use the word in the same way, but it is unclear whether this is due to O’Conor’s influence or some other cause.

⁴³ Charles O’Conor, *Dissertations on the Antient History of Ireland: wherein an Account is given of the Origine, Government, Letters, Sciences, Religion, Manners and Customs, of the antient Inhabitants*, (Dublin: James Hoey, 1753), xxv.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ Charles O’Conor, *Dissertations* [1753], xxvii.

only the servants of the people.”⁴⁶ This statement reflects a different view of the nature of kingship than the absolutist divine-right theory of monarchy that underlay the Stuarts and was a key part of Jacobitism. O’Conor was clearly describing the qualities of an ideal government and ideal monarch by praising the qualities of historic kings that were in line with his vision and by inserting his political ideals into his accounts of antiquity.

O’Conor places a strong emphasis on the learning and scholarship of the Irish in the “Isle of Saints and Scholars;” this emphasis would serve to establish the honor and glory of (many) Irish Catholics, who claimed the Gaelic Irish of this of this period as their ancestors. The entrance of Christianity ushered in a new period of Irish history, and is still widely considered something of a golden age. The fall of Rome and overrunning of Europe by various Germanic tribes resulted in the loss of a great deal of learning, but as O’Conor says, “the sciences fell into the arms of the Hy-Niall princes, by whose bounty they throve, [sic] and under whose protection they flourished, until Charles the Great, Emperor of the West, transplanted them back, by the means of professors from Ireland.”⁴⁷ The achievements of Irish scholars reflect back onto their Uí Néill patrons, and even Charlemagne is mentioned as a supporter of the learned Irish monks in their quest to reestablish scholarship on the Continent. O’Conor makes a second reference to Charlemagne that goes even further to establish the importance of the Irish in this time period: “Thus have our monarchs established a reputation, which no other princes in Europe ever yet obtained: Europe recognized it; and so sensible was Charles the Great of their merit that he honored them, in a particular manner, with his Alliance and Friendship; a memorial of which is preserved, to this day, in the paintings of the Royal Palace of Versailles.”⁴⁸ In both cases, to

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Charles O’Conor, *Dissertations* [1753], xxviii.

⁴⁸ Charles O’Conor, *Dissertations* [1753], xxviii-xxix.

mention the Uí Néill in the same breath as Charlemagne is to link both monarchies together and to make a bold claim about the importance and prestige of the kings of Ireland. Likewise, it is interesting to note the mention of Charlemagne's "alliance and friendship" with the Uí Néill, especially the bit about being memorialized in art at Versailles; France is presented as the heir of the old Carolingian empire and continues that alliance with Ireland. Apparently, despite O'Connor's move away from Jacobitism, he was still an Irish Catholic with a Gaelic background and could not ignore the importance of that traditional alliance.

Counterbalancing his emphasis on the learning of the Irish, O'Connor also establishes the recurring internal strife and division among the Irish kings, the inability of the Uí Néill monarchy to create a unified state, and the destructive effects that these conditions had as a central theme in his history of Ireland during this period. Much of his account of the period bears the marks of coming from the annals and narrates the succession of various kings, their battles, and very often their intrigues against other possible contenders. It is extremely important to point out that O'Connor's understanding of kingship in Ireland is an anachronism, especially in his treatment of the Uí Néill. He interprets the kingship of Tara as a political reality, while modern scholarship has shown that for most of the period in question the kings of Tara rarely had power that was respected throughout Ireland, though their power *was* gradually increasing. For O'Connor, the Uí Néill are the kings of Ireland and the rightful rulers in line with the "constitution." As a result, the frequent attempts by powerful provincial kings to challenge the king of Tara are interpreted as insurrections against a rightful ruler and as an example of the fragmentation and factionalism that supposedly marred this golden age. For example, O'Connor heaps invective on one of the kings of Munster who "felt the superiority of his genius, and trusted too much to it" and sowed

dissension.^{49, 50} This disunity and disorganization in Ireland is viewed as a prime cause of Ireland's eventual conquest, which was facilitated by the Viking incursions into Ireland and the further instability that they caused.

O'Connor's narrative essentially portrays a tragic history, in which the failure to establish a strong monarchy in Ireland left Ireland open to two centuries of Viking incursions and settlement in Ireland, which in turn led to chaos and in-fighting among the natives; the weakening of Ireland by foreign and domestic problems, which resulted from the lack of a unified nation, made the Norman conquest of Ireland possible. In O'Connor's treatment of this period of Irish history, there is a clear intent to portray it as a golden age with a tragic end, which in turn reflects on the present by implicitly calling for a return to some of the policies and customs that were associated with this golden age.

Though the "Isle of Saints and Scholars" concept had existed for centuries, O'Connor's version is special because it reiterates this narrative from a Catholic perspective in a period when Protestant versions were predominant. Not only that, but O'Connor represents the emergence of Irish Catholic historiography, which had previously kept to itself within the mediums of the Irish language and Latin, into the wider historical debate in Ireland.

Another function of O'Connor's history is to establish the "honor" of the Irish and place them on a par with the great powers of the day, and even to assert that while countries such as England, France, and Prussia were mired in the "Gothic ignorance"⁵¹ that resulted from the fall of Rome, Ireland was a stronghold of learning in Europe. The word "gothic" was widely

⁴⁹ O'Connor, *Dissertations* (1766), 232.

⁵⁰ O'Connor also, rather memorably, refers to Feidlim as "the shining and useless ornament of his age; a fine genius and a bad man."

⁵¹O'Connor, *Dissertations* (1766), 226.

understood at the time in relation to the theory that the Teutonic (or “gothic”) peoples had been the origins of a movement towards liberty. For example, many English would have seen the Magna Carta, Parliament, and Protestantism as legacies of a “gothic” love of freedom inherited from the Angles, Jutes and Saxons. However, as Clare O’Halloran notes, O’Conor used the word in a different sense, “which related to the Germanic tribe’s role in the destruction of the great civilization of Rome, rather than their putative development of political liberties.”⁵² In a way, he was saying that the Irish had reintroduced civilization in Europe among the very people who had wantonly destroyed it in the beginning.

While O’Conor’s work was certainly animated by a real scholarly interest, it has been seen that he also had other motives in writing history, such as a desire to secure more political freedom for Irish Catholics or to increase awareness of the accomplishments of the Irish in antiquity. O’Conor’s claims that the Irish had a monarchy that consulted a representative body, and that the state and the church were allied but distinct during this “Golden Age” are part of this deliberate attempt to shape the present by using the past. If readers could be convinced that the “Isle of Saints and Scholars” era represented Ireland’s period of greatest glory and accomplishment, the next logical step would be to argue that Ireland would return to its former glory if it returned to the practices of those times. Even though O’Conor was the most distinguished scholar in his field and would not have made claims for which there was no evidence, to an extent he was inserting his own political and social ideals into the distant past, with the implicit message that Ireland needed to return to the alleged customs of its glory days.

O’Conor’s role in constructing Irish Catholic identity through antiquarian writing was not limited to his own writing. In fact, it would be difficult to overstate his importance in the wider

⁵² C. O’Halloran, 93.

field of 18th century antiquarian writing in Ireland, let alone the Catholic segment of that field. O’Conor’s first *Dissertations* established him as one of the most important scholars in Ireland, and also represented the début of Irish Catholic historiography written in English. Without O’Conor, whose social position and heritage were ideal for entering a debate that had been exclusively Protestant, it is unlikely that MacGeoghegan, O’Halloran, or Curry would have published their works. Likewise, all later Catholic antiquarians cited O’Conor, which further illustrates his key role.

James MacGeoghegan

James MacGeoghegan was a Catholic priest who lived his adult life in France; and was the next Irish Catholic historian to publish a work on this period of Irish history. His book *Histoire de l’Irlande*, published in three volumes between 1758 and 1763, shows a continuing commitment to the Jacobite cause, emphasizes the importance of the Church, and most interestingly, lays the foundation for an account that emphasizes the damage done to Ireland by outsiders.

He was born in County Westmeath and left Ireland to study for the priesthood in France, where he spent the rest of his life and wrote his history of Ireland.⁵³ As mentioned earlier, due to the Penal Laws, Catholics seeking an education usually had to leave Ireland, and those aspiring to the priesthood had no other choice than being educated on the Continent. By the time MacGeoghegan went to France, there was a well-established Irish community in France. In fact, one of the footnotes to the book’s dedication (added by O’Kelly, the translator) mentions that one of the exiled military leaders that MacGeoghegan extols, a certain “Mareschal Browne,”⁵⁴

⁵³ James MacGeoghegan, *The History of Ireland, Ancient and Modern, Taken from the Most Authentic Records, and Dedicated to the Irish Brigade*, trans. Patrick O’Kelly (New York: D & J Sadlier, 1845), 12-13.

⁵⁴ Possibly Maximilian von Browne, a field marshal in the army of Austria.

had been MacGeoghegan's own uncle. So despite the long-standing language and imagery of exile, many of these young people, including MacGeoghegan, actually had important connections and bright futures on the Continent.

A potential factor that may have influenced MacGeoghegan's account is that the "Wild Geese" were sometimes noted for having a conservative outlook and maintaining an attachment to the old country that looked back to the time that they left. By this time, generations of Irish *émigrés* had come to France and elsewhere; in this milieu a tragic narrative of Ireland's "sufferings" and English oppression would be very popular and anyone living in that setting would likely absorb it to some degree. Likewise, the Jacobite ideology that MacGeoghegan subscribed to was essentially one of a messianic restoration, so the changes taking place in Ireland in the meantime would likely be seen as signs of the degeneration of Ireland under a usurping monarch. To an extent, the cultural changes taking place among the Irish Catholics in Ireland were of limited importance because any move away from a truly "Irish" or "Catholic" identity would eventually be remedied by the restoration of the Stuart monarchy.

It is worth recalling that not only did the Wild Geese have their own grudge against the English, but in this case they lived in France; the fact that their adoptive home was England's nemesis would naturally influence their views. MacGeoghegan's flock in the Irish Brigade provide a good example of the way that these two residual hatreds could run together. In 1745 at the battle of Fontenoy, a charge by the Irish Brigade was largely responsible for a decisive French victory against the English and Hanoverians; before charging at the British lines their battle-cry was "*Cuimhnigi ar Luimneach agus Feall na Sasanach!*" [Remember Limerick and the treachery of the English.]⁵⁵ The Irish were serving as French soldiers in a war that had more

⁵⁵ Connolly, 294.

to do with the complex geopolitics of 18th century Europe than with Ireland or the wider Jacobite cause, but when they faced the English they carried their identity as Irish Catholics into the fight. Similarly, as MacGeoghegan went to fight the hated *sasanach* with his pen, his attachment to France played a role in determining what his account of history would look like.

Little is known about James MacGeoghegan; most of the evidence comes from fragments scattered in various places such as legal papers related to his estate after his death, O’Conor’s correspondence, and the preface to *Histoire de l’Irlande*. When l’Abbé MacGeoghegan died in 1763 he was a priest at the parish of Saint-Merri and lived close by; the documents indicate that he enjoyed a comfortable life but had come upon hard times because of the delay in publishing the third volume of his book, and he died with substantial debts to his wine merchant and the paper maker who supplied the paper for his books.⁵⁶ MacGeoghegan mentioned O’Conor’s 1753 *Dissertations* favorably in his own work, and O’Conor wrote to his friend Dr. Curry about it since Curry and MacGeoghegan had known each other while both were studying in France.⁵⁷ Finally, the introduction to *The History of Ireland* contains a substantial amount of information about the author’s life that must have been discovered by O’Kelly. He states that MacGeoghegan served as a chaplain for an English gentleman and traveled to England around 1736, that the *Abbé* somehow found a way to pay a visit to Ireland during his time as the man’s chaplain, and eventually returned to Paris and began his career as a historian. Sadly, it is difficult to know how accurate these claims are because O’Kelly left no records or footnotes of where he found his information.^{58, 59} Thus, even though we have a potentially true account of the author’s life (and

⁵⁶ Yves Le Juen, “The Abbé MacGeoghegan Dies”, *Eighteenth-Century Ireland / Iris an dá chultúr*, 13, (1998): 140.

URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30064330>

⁵⁷ Charles O’Conor, *Letters of Charles O’Conor of Belanagare*, ed. Robert E Ward, John F. Wrynn, S.J., and Catherine Coogan Ward, 65.

⁵⁸ Vincent Geoghegan, “A Jacobite History: The Abbé MacGeoghegan's "History of Ireland."”

though it is entirely possible that O’Kelly got his information from credible sources that are no longer in existence) most of James MacGeoghegan’s life is a mystery.

MacGeoghegan’s location in Paris is meant that along with Irish sources he also had access to a different body of sources than O’Conor or O’Halloran; the copious citations and footnotes show a heavy debt to ecclesiastical scholars, though he cites a wide variety of sources. He cites early medieval authors such as Bede and Einhard who were contemporaries of many of the Irish monks who loom large in MacGeoghegan’s history. Latin *vitae* of various saints are also major sources for the sections pertaining to the “saints and scholars” of early medieval Ireland. MacGeoghegan also cites Geoffrey Keating’s *Foras Feasa ar Éirinn*, written in the 1630s, which was the “first narrative history [of Ireland] based on medieval sources.”⁶⁰ MacGeoghegan’s account of history sometimes echoes much older versions, and because of his reliance on sources such as Keating his work belongs to a much longer historiographical tradition.

Interestingly, MacGeoghegan frequently cites Ussher’s history of the Irish church, despite MacGeoghegan’s commitment to a *Catholic* history. Ussher had laid the foundations of the Protestant historiographical tradition that sought to appropriate early Irish Christianity for the Church of Ireland as a means of establishing the new Church’s legitimacy and to attack the Roman Catholic Church as a foreign institution in Ireland. It seems that MacGeoghegan, though a committed Catholic and confirmed Jacobite, was not prejudiced and recognized quality

Eighteenth-Century Ireland / Iris an dá chultúr, 6, (1991): 37.

URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30070907>

⁵⁹ Simply to make things confusing, there are secondary sources about O’Conor written by other O’Conors, an article about MacGeoghegan written by Geoghegan, and Sylvester O’Halloran’s work is described in Clare O’Halloran’s monograph. This is why I choose to refer to the 18th century priest as MacGeoghegan even though he is occasionally referred to as Geoghegan by some scholars and even by himself, as well as the fact that *History of Ireland* gives his name with the “Mac.”

⁶⁰ C. O’Halloran, 14.

scholarship no matter what denomination the author belonged to. Likewise, historians such as Camden and Stanihurst, whose accounts were often unfavorable to the Irish, find their way into his bibliography.

MacGeoghegan's writings understandably emphasize the history of the Church in Ireland, the activities of Irish clerics on the continent, the destruction caused by the coming of the Vikings, as well as the thorny issues posed by St. Malachy's reforms, Pope Adrian IV's bull *Laudabiliter*, and the coming of the Anglo-Normans.

Much of MacGeoghegan's account of the period between the coming of Patrick and the coming of the Normans is given over to chronicling the history of the Irish church. Much of it is a tedious retelling of what abbeys and monasteries were founded by which saints, and how the founders died at advanced ages after living lives of great sanctity. In many ways it resembles a medieval chronicle in its form when telling of countless saints and their monasteries. Many of the questions addressed are of limited interest, such as questions of which tonsures were used by followers of which saints and which orders certain religious communities were aligned with. On the topic of the Irish Church's differences with Rome regarding Easter, MacGeoghegan emphasizes that although the "Scoto-Milesians"⁶¹ remained obstinate for a long time in celebrating Easter on a different date based on different calculations, it was not because they rejected Rome's authority. He also cites Bede's statement that "their opposition to it could not affect their sanctity. They performed miracles; they drew a great number of souls to God, whom they loved without affectation...and their hearts were so inflamed with the grace of charity, that

⁶¹ The term "Milesian" bears explanation: it is a term for the Gaelic Irish derived from Milesius, the ancient (and mythic) Spanish king from whom the Gaels claimed descent in their origin story. The "scoto" part of the term used here derives from the Latin word "scoti" which originally referred to Gaels from Ireland, though the term became used for the Gaels living in northern Britain.

they were worthy of being instructed on that point of discipline.”⁶² In other words, the Irish were so holy that making a mistake regarding church discipline, which they could be corrected on, was not as important as their grasp of the core of Christianity; the question of Ireland’s variance from the rest of the Church becomes an opportunity to further expound on the virtues of its “golden age.”

Of course, the period between Ireland’s conversion and the arrival of the Vikings at the end of the 8th century was seen as a golden age for learning just as much as holiness, and the history of Ireland’s contribution to the intellectual history of Europe was a major component of MacGeoghegan’s narrative of Irish history. By showing the role of the Irish in preserving learning and reestablishing it on the Continent, he is asserting the importance of the Irish on the international stage at an early date, and in many cases making the argument that the other nations in Europe owe their learning and civilization to Ireland. In the Preliminary Discourse, he states that Ireland became a beacon of religion and scholarship that attracted students from abroad, “while Gothic ignorance spread itself over the face of Europe.”⁶³ The reference to “Gothic ignorance” is taken directly from O’Conor’s 1753 *Dissertations*. By quoting O’Conor in *Histoire de l’Irlande*, MacGeoghegan is spreading the same idea to a new, French-speaking audience. Like O’Conor, MacGeoghegan is arguing that at a time when the most powerful nations of the 18th century were mired in barbarism, Ireland had been the most educated and devout country in Europe. Establishing Ireland’s former “glory” would be an important part of forming a contemporary identity that lacked glorious achievements in the more recent past to form itself around; the problems of the present are not as problematic for a group’s sense of self if it is

⁶² MacGeoghegan, *The History of Ireland*, trans. Patrick O’Kelly, 189.

⁶³ MacGeoghegan, *The History of Ireland*, 3.

possible to look back to a golden age. Also, as mentioned before, the Jacobite narrative was one of deliverance and restoration, which means that MacGeoghegan's vision of history automatically includes a return to Ireland's former glory at some future date.

The individual examples of Irish monks who went to the Continent provide MacGeoghegan with numerous opportunities to expound on the importance of the Irish in the wider history of Europe. Likewise, the examples of various brilliant scholars in the distant past served as a counterpoint to the widespread view that Ireland was a land of unintelligent savages that was Cambrensis's legacy; along with countering this belief among outsiders, it was intended to remind Irish Catholics of their illustrious past.

MacGeoghegan discusses the careers of Clement and Albinus, both Irishmen, who were sent by Charlemagne to start schools in Paris and Pavia, respectively. Though neither actually founded the famous universities in those cities, which happened centuries later, MacGeoghegan strongly suggests that these places became centers of scholarship because of these early schools that Irishmen founded on Charlemagne's orders. He also goes into an aside regarding the claims by Scottish authors that Clement and Albinus had been *Scottish*, and that their accomplishments belonged to Scotland, as well as some authors who thought Albinus was the same person as Alcuin. This was a part of a larger historiographical battle between Irish and Scottish historians regarding the nationality of various historical figures, and in turn, which country could claim the glory of having produced these people. The older Latin term for the Irish had been *scoti*, and eventually came to be applied to Scotland in the later middle ages because it was a colony of *scoti* that had crossed over from Ulster; Ireland was frequently referred to as "Scotia Major" and

Scotland as “Scotia Minor.”⁶⁴ This same debate is repeated throughout *Histoire de l’Irlande* concerning other figures as well.

Another example of MacGeoghegan’s focus on Irish monks on the Continent can be seen in the account of St. Virgilius, who left Ireland for the Carolingian court and eventually became the bishop of Salzburg. Aside from being a bishop, Virgilius was a scholar who became entangled in a number of intellectual controversies such as a theological feud with St. Boniface in which the papacy sided with Virgilius.⁶⁵ However, the more interesting controversy revolved around his assertion that the Earth was round and that the sky did not meet the Earth at the horizon. Even though Ptolemy had first suggested the idea long before, Virgilius was reported to the pope, who decreed that if Virgilius remained obstinate in these opinions he must be excommunicated. However, MacGeoghegan, eager to save the papacy from the embarrassment of censuring Virgilius for saying the Earth was round and to defend an important Irish monk from the charge of heresy, argues that “it would appear that the matter had been badly represented to him [the pope], whereas he did not comprehend the opinion of Virgilius respecting the antipodes” and that the sentence against Virgilius was never actually put in effect.⁶⁶ The story of St. Virgilius connects Ireland with Salzburg, which was a center of art and culture at the time, and even more importantly, shows an Irish monk making the claim that the Earth was round in the late 700s, which further backs up MacGeoghegan’s arguments for the brilliance of Irish scholars spread out across Europe at the time.

⁶⁴ MacGeoghegan, *The History of Ireland*, 223.

⁶⁵ MacGeoghegan, 203.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

MacGeoghegan goes well beyond these examples and tells the stories of figures such as St. Columbanus, St. Gall, and many others who went to Europe and spread Christianity everywhere from France and Germany to Italy and Spain. Similarly, he lists many ecclesiastics and scholars from Europe who went to Ireland for their education as evidence for his presentation of Ireland as the intellectual capital of western Europe in the early medieval period. However, the examples already given are enough to demonstrate the importance of the “Isle of Saints and Scholars” in his conception of history and his vision of Irish Catholic identity.

The golden age of Ireland’s first centuries of Christianity came to an abrupt halt with the arrival of the Vikings, and just like O’Conor, MacGeoghegan lays the blame on these invasions for Ireland’s later problems. Interestingly, MacGeoghegan also follows O’Conor in emphasizing the “gothic” origins of the Vikings (or “Normans” as MacGeoghegan tends to call them) and explicitly draws a connection between the Norse who ravaged Ireland and the Goths who had sacked Rome centuries earlier, who were also thought to have originated in Scandinavia. Throughout his account of the Viking wars MacGeoghegan paradoxically emphasizes the bravery and martial prowess of the Irish while also focusing on the disastrous effects of the Vikings’ invasions and settlements in Ireland. The foreign interlopers are presented as monstrous savages capable of any level of violence, but a careful reader notices that, despite their ferocity, the Vikings are defeated on a regular basis. Regardless of these paradoxes, MacGeoghegan refers to this era as “the period of the decline of religion in Ireland, and the termination of the brightest days of the Irish church”⁶⁷ and accuses the Vikings of doing irreparable damage to the “constitution,” which led to eventual chaos and, in turn, led to the calamity of the Anglo-Norman invasion.

⁶⁷ MacGeoghegan, 215.

A hidden aspect of *Histoire de l'Irlande* can be discovered in this section of the book. Though MacGeoghegan usually leaves a pile of footnotes at the bottom of the page, I discovered a passage that, although not cited as being taken from any other source, seemed like it belonged to a different work. The passage is as follows:

“He appointed a Norman king to each province; placed a captain in each territory, an abbot in each church or monastery, a sergeant in each village, and obliged every house to lodge a soldier. The will of those tyrants, supported by military execution, took the place of laws, so that no man was any longer master in his own house.”⁶⁸

This passage was not, in fact, written by MacGeoghegan, but is taken straight out of Geoffrey Keating’s *Foras Feasa ar Éirinn*,⁶⁹ which was written in the early 1600s. That MacGeoghegan is citing Keating is not a surprise, since he cites him elsewhere, and in many other cases MacGeoghegan’s history has the literary flavor of Keating’s work. However, this passage is not original to Keating, who like MacGeoghegan neglected to cite his source. The text is actually taken from the *Cogad Gáedel re Gallaib*, or “The war of the Gaels against the foreigners,” a work from the first years of the 12th century which recounts the history of the Viking incursions into Ireland and culminates with the defeat of the Dublin Vikings by Brian Boru at the Battle of Clontarf in 1014. Francis J. Byrne describes the *Cogad* as “a saga based on annalistic and other historical sources, but written in the reign of his [Brian’s] great-grandson Muirchertach Ua Briain”⁷⁰ and notes that it was much more concerned with the political aspirations of Brian’s

⁶⁸ MacGeoghegan, 218.

⁶⁹ The passage from MacGeoghegan and the similar passages from Keating and the *Cogad Gáedel re Gallaib* are included in an appendix, so that the main body of the text is not broken up by three large block quotes.

⁷⁰ Francis J. Byrne, *Irish Kings and High Kings*, 2nd ed. (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2001) 267.

descendants. Along with the political message of the work, it is also an extreme example of literary excess; at another point in the *Cogad*, the author uses twenty-seven different adjectives to describe one noun, all of which begin with the same letter. Historical accuracy clearly takes a backseat to bardic hyperbole and epic storytelling while the poet flaunts his mastery of words. Despite this, Keating incorporated this passage (and very likely others) from the *Cogad* into his own work, and in turn MacGeoghegan used it. The reason this is interesting is that this strand of MacGeoghegan's history dates back to the period *before* the Anglo-Normans, and though the original context of the passage was a bombastic medieval saga, the uncritical use of the *Cogad* as a source and lack of attribution allowed it to be transmitted through successive generations of historiography without leaving a hint of its origin. It is also important because it shows that a pre-Norman narrative of victimization and oppression by foreigners was passed on into later historiography and helped shape Irish identity. Likewise, while it is easy to note that there is some continuity in the tone and content between Irish sources dealing with successive waves of armed newcomers, it is also easy to argue that the idea of meaningful continuity is the product of the historian's imagination; this passage shows that, to some degree, a real link exists between earlier and later conceptions of Irish victimhood.

The passage from the *Cogad Gáedel re Gallaib* was only part of a larger passage that MacGeoghegan lifted straight from Keating (all without any attribution.) The second part, which also deals with oppression of the Irish by the Norse, illustrates the relevance of MacGeoghegan's history in terms of molding Irish Catholic identity. A long description of the disastrous effect of the Vikings on the Church and the banning of education and learning for the Irish leads to this quote:

“everyone passed his time in the strictest retirement; the secular and regular clergy, in order to shelter themselves from the fury of the Normans, lay concealed in the woods, where they celebrated the divine mysteries, and spent their days in prayer and fasting; while the faithful sought them in secret to receive consolation from them, and join in their prayers for the delivery of the people.”⁷¹

MacGeoghegan’s readers in the 18th century would have immediately seen parallels between this account of events in the 10th century and the events of the 17th and 18th century. Though the phenomenon of Catholics secretly gathering at a “Mass rock” to worship was largely a thing of the past by MacGeoghegan’s time, his readers would have been familiar with stories of the clergy going into hiding and the persecution of Catholicism which were part of the collective memory of the Irish *émigrés*. Similarly, the forests mentioned in the passage had a special significance as well, because the woods (which had only been felled within living memory) had been a safe haven not only for Catholic clergy, but for dispossessed Irish nobility and rapparees who carried on campaigns of guerilla warfare during the various wars of the 1640s and ‘50s as well as the Williamite War, which was commemorated in stories and in songs such as *Seán Ó Duibhir an Ghleanna*⁷² which were part of the cultural milieu of the Irish communities in Europe as well as Irish Catholics in Ireland. The sense of oppression that Irish Catholics had as a result of recent history was given roots extending into the 900s as a result of this parallel between

⁷¹ MacGeoghegan, 218.

⁷² A 17th century song, also known as “John O’Dwyer of the Glen,” probably dating to the 1650s, which tells the story of a Gaelic officer’s dispossession and eventual flight to the Continent. I have included a translation of the song in Appendix II to show the similarities, which are found in numerous other songs from the same period.

MacGeoghegan's "borrowed" portrayal of the Viking wars and recent history, which shows a significant effect of this antiquarian writing on Irish Catholic identity.

Another aspect of *Histoire de l'Irlande* that stands out is the complicated treatment of the papal bull *Laudabiliter* which infamously served as the legal pretense for the Norman invasion of Ireland during the 12th century, which goes against the "obvious" way a Catholic priest in France might be expected to write about it.⁷³ His treatment is noteworthy because of his criticism of the document, and because of the proto-nationalist consciousness that can be seen in his writing on the subject. As many historians including Clare O'Halloran have observed, MacGeoghegan faced a difficult dilemma regarding the papal bull. On the one hand, as an Irish Catholic, particularly one of Old Irish descent, he could only see the coming of the Anglo-Normans and everything that resulted from it as a catastrophe for Ireland. Whoever bore responsibility for it would go down in infamy among Irish Catholics, and the way that both Diarmait Mac Murchada (the King of Leinster who invited Henry II to Ireland) and Henry II were savaged by Irish historians shows that. The issue for MacGeoghegan was that *Laudabiliter* implicated the Papacy in the Anglo-Norman invasion, which posed obvious problems, especially for a historian who was a priest. To deny the *principle* of the pope's temporal authority to give away Ireland to Henry II was not an option, so an alternate approach to exonerating the Papacy was required. First, MacGeoghegan attacks the authenticity of the bull, for example writing that the account of John of Salisbury, which said "Pope Adrian had granted Ireland to king Henry, at his request, it being the patrimony of his holiness by hereditary right, inasmuch as all the islands

⁷³ It is also notable because of these three historians, he was the only one to include the actual text of the document and also because he noted the fact that Adrian IV was an Englishman and the potential bias that he may have had. Clare O'Halloran argues that the ferocity of MacGeoghegan's attack on the credibility of the papal documents was due to his need to shield the papacy from blame. (C. O'Halloran, 94.)

belonged to the Roman Church, by the concession of the Emperor Constantine the Great”⁷⁴ is suspect. He cites other (unnamed) scholars who note that the mention of *Laudabiliter* in John of Salisbury’s work doesn’t fit in with its surroundings as a passing reference to what would have been a major topic of discussion while all his other dealings with Adrian IV on that particular visit are recorded at length; the statement was “added to the chapter by a strange hand.”⁷⁵ To further attack the plausibility of Henry II being tasked with the reformation of the Irish church and the strengthening of Christianity in Ireland, MacGeoghegan attacks the character of the king himself, this time in reference to a related bull from Alexander III, issued at the time of Henry’s arrival in Ireland. “A bad Christian makes a bad apostle. What was Henry II?” begins MacGeoghegan, and after listing the king’s many offenses (such as his role in the killing of St. Thomas Becket and his marriage to Eleanor of Aquitaine) he exclaims “Behold the apostle, the reformer, whom the Holy See would have chosen to convert Ireland!”⁷⁶ Thus, with the Vatican safely exculpated, there would be no need for ambiguity in the relationship between Irish Catholics and their church, and the *Catholic* aspect of that identity was safe from the problems of a complicated history.

Despite having made such a forceful case that the papal bull was not legitimate, MacGeoghegan does consider the hypothetical possibility that it was, and his arguments regarding that possibility are even more interesting from the perspective of identity formation than his arguments against the bull’s authenticity. As other historians such as Clare O’Halloran have already noted, MacGeoghegan’s uneasiness with the issue is clear when he shies away from the topic of the “the real or supposed right of the popes to dispose of crowns and kingdoms”

⁷⁴ MacGeoghegan, 247.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ MacGeoghegan, 249-250.

which he deems to belong “more properly to theology than history.”⁷⁷ Of course, his unease with that topic has already been noted, and is less important for identity than the way in which he uses the potential that *Laudabiliter* was genuine to assert a sense of Irish independence and sovereignty. After granting that perhaps Constantine did give “the islands” to the papacy, he argues that it would still be impossible for that to give the pope the right to dispose of Ireland, because Ireland had never belonged to the Romans and was therefore not Constantine’s to give away.⁷⁸ He also dryly adds that that line of reasoning *would* be applicable to Great Britain, which had been a Roman possession both before and after Constantine, but despite this, “the kings of England have never been understood to hold their authority from the Holy See.”⁷⁹ Elsewhere in *Histoire de l’Irlande*, he makes a similar argument. Regarding a different bull from 1555 which declared that Ireland *was* a kingdom, MacGeoghegan snaps that the pronouncement was irrelevant because Ireland had been regarded as such long before the coming of the English or even the establishment of the papacy.⁸⁰ In these cases, the concept of Ireland being a “nation” unto itself from antiquity and never having been conquered by the Romans served to bolster the sense of pride and worth of the Irish, especially given the indignation and sense that Ireland had been the victim of a centuries-long smear campaign beginning with Giraldus Cambrensis that can be found in MacGeoghegan’s preliminary discourse.

Though most of the material in *Histoire de l’Irlande* that is relevant to identity is wrapped up in historical narrative, some of the most unequivocal evidence for the intentional shaping of identity is found in a number of tangents and asides that MacGeoghegan adds to the

⁷⁷ MacGeoghegan, 247.

⁷⁸ MacGeoghegan, 247-248.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

⁸⁰ MacGeoghegan, 451.

history. In one instance when discussing Cormac-Mac-Culinan, a 9th century king of Munster who was simultaneously the bishop of Cashel, MacGeoghegan clarifies that the union of spiritual and temporal power was in the manner that certain German electors were also bishops, and not a parallel to “the sacrilegious power so shamefully usurped by the kings of England.”⁸¹ Even though the topic at hand has nothing to do with the protestant Church of England, MacGeoghegan adds this bluntly anti-Protestant and anti-English statement, apparently in response to an unnamed protestant writer who had argued otherwise. In a similar way, the controversy of whether Charlemagne’s friendship with the kings of the “scots” referred to the kings of Ireland or kings of Scotland prompts some candid remarks from MacGeoghegan. He mentions that although the Scottish have a long history of alliance with France and bravery in war, of which he cites the “generous effort made by them in our time, in favor of their legitimate prince”⁸² as an example, the alliance refers to the Irish. This, of course, is a blunt reference to the Jacobite uprising of 1745 in Scotland, and leaves no doubt about the views of the author, and reasserts the importance of Jacobitism in MacGeoghegan’s construction of Irish Catholic identity. Finally, there is MacGeoghegan’s tangential commentary on the loss of Gaelic identity among some Irish Catholics. MacGeoghegan credits Brian Boru with passing a decree that all the Irish must adopt surnames and then explains the convention of Ó and Mac in Irish surnames, which is all perfectly germane to his topic. However, he diverts his attention to the fact that “it would appear that the Irish are now ashamed of these additions, which at once characterize their noble extraction and the antiquity of their names. We see some...suppress them, which can only arise from ignorance, littleness of mind, or a foolish desire of conforming to English taste.”⁸³ In

⁸¹ MacGeoghegan, 225.

⁸² MacGeoghegan, 223.

⁸³ MacGeoghegan, 231.

the same breath he goes on to berate those who abandon the Irish language (or pretend not to understand it) and “adopt a jargon introduced among them by foreigners.”⁸⁴ Along with the political identity that MacGeoghegan espouses, he is also clearly arguing for a Gaelic cultural identity for Irish Catholics. His situation in France living among exiled Irish nobility also explains the emphasis on the nobility and antiquity of the surnames and his horror at the loss of the Ó or Mac, which would be equivalent to a French aristocrat dropping the *de* from his name (and completely unthinkable at the time.) Even though a critical reader can detect the ideological underpinnings and cultural vision of MacGeoghegan by an analysis of his version of history, some of the most important statements he makes about identity are found in his unequivocal asides.

It is important to remember that MacGeoghegan’s history is not aimed at Ireland but at the Irish diaspora in France as can be seen by the language it was written in, however, it is worth noting that *Histoire de l’Irlande* (in translation) became well known in Ireland in the 19th century. It is possible that MacGeoghegan’s extensive coverage of Irish monks on the continent is related to his audience, who would see these ancient Irish abroad in Europe as precursors to themselves. The book’s dedication to the Irish Brigade and preliminary discourse in particular show that MacGeoghegan sought to portray the Irish as having a long and glorious martial tradition alongside their tradition of piety and scholarship, which would likewise reflect onto his *émigré* audience which included many military men. Another way that MacGeoghegan wrote with his audience in mind can be seen in the way that he mentions them in relation to events many centuries earlier. For example, when describing the role of Brian Boru and the rest of the Dál gCais dynasty in driving out the Vikings, the Abbé mentions that Charles O’Brien, the “Earl

⁸⁴ MacGeoghegan, 232.

of Thuomond [sic], heretofore called Lord Clare, Marshal of France, knight of the orders of the most Christian king, and colonel of the Irish regiment of Clare” is the direct descendant of Brian Boru.⁸⁵ Along the same lines, his account of the 8th century Uí Néill king Flahertach leads him to mention his descendants, the “illustrious tribe” of the O’Donnells, and point out that the current chief of that family is a general in the army of Maria Theresa of Austria “well known for his military exploits, not only in the last war with the Turks, but also in the present war with Prussia,”⁸⁶ which shows that Irish Catholics of the present day were still looking back a full millennium to bolster their own sense of honor and glory in the present.⁸⁷

Though it falls outside the scope of this thesis, it is worth adding an epilogue concerning the later career of *Histoire de l’Irlande* as a translated work in the 19th century. In the 1860s John Mitchel published his own continuation (Treaty of Limerick to the present) of MacGeoghegan’s work, which was often published along with O’Kelly’s translation of the Abbé’s original as one volume. That Mitchel would choose to connect his work with MacGeoghegan’s shows that, even if Irish nationalism did not exist per se in the mid-18th century, the arguments and narrative in *The History of Ireland* were easily adapted to fit the new ideology. The emphasis on the piety, scholarship, and valor of the Irish and (in particular) on the havoc wreaked by foreigners in Ireland meshed well with Mitchel’s vision, and the combined history became popular among Irish nationalists. Éamonn Ó Ciardha points out that Irish Jacobite literature, mainly poems and songs, got a new lease on life in the late 19th and early 20th century, in some cases edited or translated by the leaders of the 1916 Rising; among other examples, an old Jacobite song was

⁸⁵ MacGeoghegan, 241

⁸⁶ MacGeoghegan, 185.

⁸⁷ It might also be argued that flattering potential patrons who might buy his book was also a key motivation in making these references to the ancient lineage of Irish officers in Europe.

chosen, after some minor changes, as the anthem of the Irish Volunteers.⁸⁸ While poetry was later repurposed largely as a way to *express* identity, MacGeoghegan's work, as a comprehensive history actively *molded* identity by shaping the historical consciousness of Irish Catholics in Ireland in support of a new ideology.

In MacGeoghegan's own time and in the book's original context, *Histoire de l'Irlande* represented a further spreading of Irish historiography from the confines of Latin and Irish language works, and a unique appreciation of the international dimensions of Irish Catholic identity in the 18th century. Though it was not as innovative or original as the work of O'Connor or O'Halloran, it was a serious work of scholarship that showed a (sometimes unknowing) recycling of earlier narratives and an attempt to write a history that took the changes of the 17th century into account while still supporting the Jacobite cause.

Sylvester O'Halloran

Sylvester O'Halloran, an optical surgeon in Limerick, was the last of these three historians to publish his work; O'Halloran's approach to Irish history deemphasizes the importance of Christianity (particularly denominational distinctions) and actually focuses on a primordial "Milesian" civilization from which it is claimed that the Gaelic Irish descended. While O'Halloran had some familiarity with the older traditions that informed O'Connor and MacGeoghegan, his own works show the influence of contemporary intellectual currents such as the Ossianic Controversy⁸⁹ and primitivism, as well as a humanistic perspective and emphasis on

⁸⁸ Éamonn Ó Ciardha, "Irish-language sources for Irish Catholic identity since the early modern period: a brief survey," in *Irish Catholic Identities*, ed. Oliver P. Rafferty (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013) 147.

⁸⁹ The Ossianic Controversy centered on the epic poems, attributed to the ancient bard "Ossian" (Oisín), that Scotsman James MacPherson claimed to have translated from Scottish Gaelic, which he published in the early 1760s. The poems, which were supposedly passed down orally from pre-Christian antiquity, became an international sensation. However, the authenticity of the poems immediately came under fire; Charles O'Connor himself led the

tolerance that stemmed from his exposure to the Enlightenment. Most of all, his approach to Irish Catholic identity focuses on the glory of ancient Irish scholarship and military excellence, and perhaps most interestingly, on nonsectarian identity.

In many ways O'Halloran's 1772 work *Introduction to the Study of the History and Antiquities of Ireland* stands in sharp contrast to the works of O'Connor and MacGeoghegan because O'Halloran's focus is very different from either of the other historians. Much of the subject matter is concerned with prehistoric history and pre-Christian Ireland, which are beyond the scope of this thesis, and which were also areas where little reliable evidence existed. He was a very dedicated enthusiast rather than a trained scholar. In many ways he can be seen as the Catholic counterpart of Charles Vallancey, a Protestant antiquarian who also worked with O'Connor but was overly given to making far-fetched claims about ancient history based on questionable evidence and despite an inability to competently read and interpret the sources. While O'Halloran's work often represents sub-par scholarship as a historian, even for his time, any study of Irish Catholic antiquarian writing relating to the time period in question would be incomplete without a discussion of his writings. He also wrote a second book, *The General History of Ireland* in 1778; however I do not address it in this project. While it would be wrong to leave out O'Halloran's work, the first book is enough to give a sense of his wider work; regarding the second book I follow the example of Charles O'Connor, who became so exasperated with O'Halloran's tendencies that he ended his collegial relationship with him and did not

attack as the foremost authority on Gaelic manuscripts and the bardic tradition the poems were supposedly drawn from. Another major critic was Samuel Johnson. The Ossianic Controversy was also of added importance for identity because of the way that MacPherson had denigrated the Irish and their culture as part of his attempt to glorify the Scots, which particularly incensed both O'Connor and O'Halloran.

subscribe to the *General History* when it was published.⁹⁰ Despite his shortcomings, O'Halloran's work is important to any discussion of Irish Catholic antiquarian writing in this period because it shows the ways that new interpretations of history and new conceptions of identity emerged alongside more traditional narratives, and because it illustrates the diversity of opinion (and occasional zaniness) that was found in antiquarian debates of the time.

O'Halloran's education included the traditional classical education offered in "hedge schools" and he received some of his education on Irish literature from the poet Seán Clárach MacDomhnaill, as mentioned earlier. The connection with MacDomhnaill is noteworthy because it represents a link to the Gaelic literary tradition, and also indicates that he would have been exposed to MacDomhnaill's strong Jacobite sympathies. However, O'Halloran was of a different generation than O'Connor and MacGeoghegan, and his connection to the earlier tradition of learning was different. It is convenient that both O'Connor and O'Halloran had famous poets as teachers, because the comparison between O'Carolan and MacDomhnaill sheds some light on their students. O'Carolan had enjoyed the patronage of the O'Connor Don and wealthy families of both Irish and English extraction, and being born in the later 17th century (before the Williamite War) had ties to the true bardic tradition that was rapidly dying out. MacDomhnaill was born in 1691 and never made much money, though he managed to avoid the abject poverty of many similar Munster poets.⁹¹ MacDomhnaill was also much more of a populist in his style, writing invective filled poems against the local Anglo-Irish, as well as composing many Jacobite poems, even after the failure of the "Forty-Five."⁹² In the same way, although O'Halloran had some

⁹⁰ At the same time, O'Halloran should be forgiven for focusing on his medical career instead of his historical hobby, and perhaps it is best to bear in mind his request to the reader of his first book, to "perhaps pardon its faults, and commend his industry." (xviii)

⁹¹ Daniel Corkery, *The Hidden Ireland: A Study of Gaelic Munster in the Eighteenth Century*, (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan Ltd, 1924), 240.

⁹² Corkery, *The Hidden Ireland*, 241.

basic familiarity with the older tradition and was competent with Irish. O'Halloran's exposure to the tradition did not mean that he absorbed it or incorporated it into his work, but in light of the wildly divergent approach he takes it is worth establishing that he did come from the same culture that produced O'Connor and MacGeoghegan. Similarly, his connections to Irish Gaelic tradition did not mean that O'Halloran was provincial in his outlook; he received his surgical training in London and Paris.⁹³ O'Halloran's time abroad probably had a formative effect and the strong Enlightenment flavor in his work is probably due to exposure to contemporary intellectual currents while outside Ireland. This Enlightenment outlook exerted a far stronger influence on his writing than his limited connections with the Gaelic intellectual tradition.

O'Halloran had a casual interest in Irish history and literature, but it was only after reading some critiques of the Irish by writers such as David Hume that he decided to defend the "honor" of Ireland by writing a history that refuted the claims of Scottish and English authors, especially those that were dismissive of the Gaelic literary tradition.⁹⁴ He was also attracted to the project by his love of MacPherson's Ossianic poetry and his desire to claim it as Irish rather than Scottish. At the same time as Irish Catholic antiquarians were writing to establish their own sense of identity, their work was also part of a much wider antiquarian debate throughout the British Isles, and outsiders like Hume published views of the Irish that were an affront to their sense of national honor and identity, especially in their characterization of the Irish as illiterate and barbarous. As it happened, these attacks touched a sensitive nerve among Irish Catholic historians, who must have seen Hume and others as modern successors of Cambrensis who needed to be refuted in the same way that Lynch and Keating had dismantled Cambrensis's history in the previous century. In some ways O'Halloran was ahead of his time in his lack of

⁹³ C. O'Halloran, 107.

⁹⁴ C. O'Halloran, 39.

prejudice towards oral traditions as a historical source in an era when written sources were considered the only credible sources by many historians. However, he had too much confidence in the oral tradition and early annals, and took a lax approach to providing evidence for his claims.⁹⁵ For example, he argues in his Preliminary Discourse that the ancient Milesians used “reflecting and refracting glasses” to discover Ireland in prehistory.⁹⁶ Of course, the evidence for this claim was O’Halloran’s own reading of the story of the sons of Milesius, a fact that does not vouch for its credibility. Luckily, his most egregious claims are largely confined to the pre-Christian period where the absence of solid evidence gave his imagination more room to run wild.

In a dramatic break from previous Irish Catholic historiography, O’Halloran asserts that Ireland was known as the “Isle of Saints and Scholars” long before the coming of Christianity,⁹⁷ and that pagan Ireland was a hub of European civilization. Of course both of these are bold claims, and the logic that O’Halloran uses to back them leaves much to be desired. O’Halloran’s alternate version of early medieval Irish history continues through the period that was traditionally seen as Ireland’s golden age. While the other two antiquarians blamed the incursions of the Vikings for the end of the “Isle of Saints and Scholars,” O’Halloran saw Christianity as Ireland’s downfall because it ended the intellectual golden age that he claimed existed there before Christianity, and because it sapped the military spirit of the Irish by exposing them to the religion of the Beatitudes. O’Halloran’s critique that Christianity undermined the

⁹⁵ In fact, O’Halloran’s relationship with O’Conor eventually fell apart for that reason. O’Halloran had consulted O’Conor and received crucial help and advice from him throughout his career, but eventually O’Halloran’s wild theorizing and uncritical use of Gaelic sources proved too much for O’Conor’s patience. (C. O’Halloran, 40.)

⁹⁶ Sylvester O’Halloran, *An Introduction to the Study of the History and Antiquities of Ireland: In Which the Assertions of Mr. Hume and Other Writers Are Occasionally Considered*, (Dublin: Thomas Ewing, 1772), vii.

⁹⁷ Sylvester O’Halloran, *An Introduction to the Study of the History and Antiquities of Ireland*, 169.

intellectual culture of Ireland and that it was opposed to true scholarship echoes a common argument of the Enlightenment. For example, he states “the early Christians were extremely ignorant, and rather the enemies, than friends of literatures [sic].”⁹⁸ The claim that Christianity made the Irish soft and left them open to the predations of the Vikings and Anglo-Normans is similar to contemporary arguments that Rome had been severely weakened by Christianity’s peaceful ideals; later in that same decade this idea would become an especially hot topic after it appeared in Edward Gibbon’s *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* which blamed Christianity for the fall of Rome. Interestingly, for all of O’Halloran’s invective against Christian anti-intellectualism, he reproaches the intellectual focus of the Irish monks as weak and effeminate, indignant at the idea that “the sons and grandsons of princes and heroes become school-masters and priests!”⁹⁹ Apparently, for all his esteem of learning and advancement of knowledge, it is still far better to be a warrior.¹⁰⁰ In many ways this distaste for intellectuals and preference for a simple, martial life free from the deceit and pretensions of the educated echoes the ideas of Rousseau. The tension between O’Halloran’s commitment to a vision of Ireland that was highly developed and civilized before the arrival of Christianity, as well as the emphasis he places on that learning, clashes with his love of Primitivism and his desire to write a history of Ireland that resembles the world of Ossian.

Another aspect of O’Halloran’s use of epic literature and heroic tales is the emphasis he places on the didactic value of Irish history.¹⁰¹ At one point he claims that a “history of Ireland

⁹⁸ S. O’Halloran, 170.

⁹⁹ S. O’Halloran, 220.

¹⁰⁰ The strange irony is that as a result of O’Halloran’s approach to religion which resembles that of Voltaire, and his unease with civilization *à la* Rousseau, he ends up saying that to kill for beliefs or religion is inexcusable, while simultaneously saying that killing for no other reason than to win glory is honorable.

¹⁰¹ In the context of O’Halloran’s vision of history, Irish mythology and Irish history are largely synonymous due to his belief that the Ossian poems and other epic cycles were historically accurate accounts of real

may afford as much amusement and instruction as that of any other antient [sic] nation whatever.”¹⁰² He goes on to argue that Irish history is more edifying and inspiring than the history of other countries, and even presents it as an alternative to the Classical and Judeo-Christian stories that were used to teach personal and civic virtues as part of the education of the time. For example, he asks:

“Are we taught to venerate Judith for destroying the oppressor of her country? Behold a character more amiable, as less culpable, in an Irish princess of the royal line of Heremon;¹⁰³ exposing her person, whilst she preserved her honour, to rid her country of a foreign tyrant. And do we admire a Curtius, sacrificing his life to the good of his country? how much more sensible, glorious, and worthy of imitation, was the conduct of a Fingal, a Seadhna, and a Connal; who, in the famous sea-fight off Dundalk, finding theirs and their country’s liberty at stake, at one desperate effort, grasp in their arms the commanders of the enemy’s ships and plunge with them into the fathomless abyss.”¹⁰⁴

In essence, O’Halloran is saying “who needs classical and biblical heroes to model ourselves after when we can look to our own Irish heroes in history?” His arguments are interesting because in some ways they foreshadow the cultural nationalism that would take hold a century later, which promoted Cú Chulainn and other mythic figures from Irish literature as the model to be imitated. While the episodes in the quote all date to the Viking wars, O’Halloran

events. While it is not inconceivable that stories that were not 18th century forgeries (such as the Ulster Cycle) had some sort of historical inspiration, they are mythological; Sylvester O’Halloran did not make this distinction.

¹⁰² S. O’Halloran, xviii.

¹⁰³ The princess is Melcha, who helped her father kill the Viking chief Turges.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

also made similar arguments about the pre-Christian world that Ossian supposedly inhabited. Also, it is convenient that these examples fall into the specific time period that this thesis examines, because most of O'Halloran's work is concerned with events before or after that period. Regardless of when his examples date from, O'Halloran is clearly trying to use Irish history to shape identity and cultural values by holding up new historical figures as examples of courage, patriotism, and self-sacrifice.

While O'Connor responded strongly against MacPherson in the Ossianic controversy, O'Halloran originally thought they were genuine, though he argued that MacPherson had shamelessly appropriated Irish legends and passed them off as Scottish. Between the publishing of O'Halloran's first and second books O'Connor managed to convince him to abandon his support of MacPherson's works as legitimate historical sources.¹⁰⁵ O'Halloran's infatuation with the Ossianic tales had a strong impact on his work; the heroic vision of the Ossian poems inspired O'Halloran and meant that he would portray Ireland in a way consistent with the stories. O'Halloran clearly identifies pre-Christian Ireland with the (fictional) world of Ossian, and in a way holds a grudge against Christianity for what he sees as its destruction of a heroic civilization.

O'Halloran's vision of identity for Irish Catholics is based on their descent from the heroic Irish of antiquity and largely ignores the Catholic side of that identity. By claiming that the Irish had an advanced, literate civilization long before the arrival of Christianity, O'Halloran is trying to shift the key aspect of identity from religion to ethnicity, which breaks sharply with the existing tradition that came out of the 17th century as well the work of O'Connor and MacGeoghegan. The difference can be seen very clearly in the Preliminary Discourse, in which

¹⁰⁵ C. O'Halloran, 111.

O'Halloran says that one of his reasons for writing history is “a love for my country, and ALL her sons” and a desire to “banish for ever from amongst us all ruinous distinctions.”¹⁰⁶ Likewise, his benediction at the end of the Preliminary Discourse that thanks the Almighty for the ability to have completed his project takes a novel form as he refers to “that Supreme Being”¹⁰⁷ which allowed his success. In light of his frequent references to religious toleration as one of the highest virtues and bigotry as the worst vice, which bear the clear stamp of the Enlightenment, the Supreme Being reference probably indicates that O'Halloran was a Deist. For Irish Catholic identity in the 18th century this is something truly new under the sun; how would O'Halloran construct an identity for Catholics if he himself was not actually Catholic anymore? The answer is simple, though it points to the messy nature of identity in Ireland: O'Halloran had an “O” in front of his name and had not conformed with the established Protestant Church, so he was automatically a “Catholic” even if he did not believe in the Church’s doctrines.

Ultimately, O'Halloran’s work did not have much influence on historiography or identity. However, his career and writings are notable because of the way they illustrate the changes that were taking place in Ireland at the time. For example, (borrowing the French social hierarchy) between O’Conor, MacGeoghegan, and O’Halloran all three “estates” are represented in this thesis; however, in earlier times someone such as O’Halloran, who was neither gentry nor a cleric, would not have been writing books on history. Likewise, his goal of uniting Catholics and Protestants as fellow citizens of the same nation, which he pursued by trying to write a nonsectarian history, could be seen as a precursor to the vision of Wolfe Tone twenty years

¹⁰⁶ S. O’Halloran, xvii.

¹⁰⁷ S. O’Halloran, xx.

later.¹⁰⁸ O'Halloran's work is useful to examine not only for the sake of completeness, but because it represents a sign of the times.

Caveat

The period I chose to examine leads to a problem with the argument about Irish Catholic identity, because this study ends at the coming of the Anglo-Normans in the late 12th century. By the mid-18th century, the "Old English" who had come from the Anglo-Normans and remained Catholic at the time of the Reformation had long-since melded with the Gaelic Irish in a broader identification as "Irish Catholics." By not examining the interpretations of events after 1170, it becomes impossible to say how these writers addressed this new reality which was a couple of generations old by their time. Since the Old English are half of the Irish Catholic grouping, it is hard to come to an ironclad conclusion about Irish Catholic identity in these writings; but sadly there is no way that I could expand the question to address the medieval period and still have a viable project that could be completed in two semesters. A future study could examine the way these historians treated the topic of the Anglo-Normans to see how this section of Irish Catholics were integrated (or not) into a sense of Irish Catholic identity.

Conclusion

The title of this thesis was chosen to reflect the "emergence" of Irish Catholic historiography outside of Irish and Latin that was the result of these 18th century historians, and in reference to Daniel Corkery's concept of the "hidden" Ireland. For the first time, Irish Catholics were writing their history in a manner that made it accessible to the wider world.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁸ Though not in regard to Tone's separatist republicanism.

¹⁰⁹ Though the earlier Latin accounts would have been understood throughout Europe, they were in manuscript form, which prevented their widespread dissemination.

The “emergence” of history written by Irish Catholics in a new language and the conscious effort to construct an identity for themselves through writing about their history.

By writing about the distant past, and in some cases offering wildly different interpretations, O’Conor, MacGeoghegan, and O’Halloran’s works attempted to influence the conception of Irish Catholic identity and instill pride in that identity. In the cases of O’Conor and MacGeoghegan, these attempts to shape the outlook and historical consciousness of Irish Catholics sought to preserve elements of Irish Catholic culture (particularly Gaelic culture) from before the Treaty of Limerick (1691) and strengthen the identity of Catholics in Ireland, while O’Halloran deemphasized the religious aspect of that identity and focused on an imagined heroic age in his vision of Irishness. Situated between the calamities of the 17th century and the agitation of the 19th, these histories show Irish identity in a period of transition as it simultaneously modernized and preserved a continuity with the past. At the same time, these authors differed in their approach to Jacobitism, which had been the central aspect of identity for Irish Catholics since the late 17th century, with O’Conor consciously trying to move the political identity and ideals of Catholics away from the Stuarts and integrate them into the Parliamentary system, in opposition to others like MacGeoghegan who tried to keep the flame burning as an expatriate in France, while O’Halloran was unconcerned by a movement that was effectively dead when he wrote in 1772. Throughout all these works, however, is a concern with how to present history to construct an idea of “we” for Irish Catholics that made sense given the new realities of the 18th century.

Appendix I: MacGeoghegan, Keating, and the *Cogad Gáedel re Gallaib*

From MacGeoghegan's *History of Ireland*:

“He appointed a Norman king to each province; placed a captain in each territory, an abbot in each church or monastery, a sergeant in each village, and obliged every house to lodge a soldier. The will of those tyrants, supported by military execution, took the place of laws, so that no man was any longer master in his own house.”¹¹⁰

From Keating's *Foras Feasa ar Éirinn*:

“[they imposed] a Lochlannach¹¹¹ king over every canton in Ireland; and a chieftain over every territory; and an abbot over every church; and a steward over every townland; and a soldier or *buanna* over every homestead. And the man of the house was not allowed the disposal of as much as one egg of his own property...”¹¹²

From the *Cogad Gáedel re Gallaib*:

“And such was the oppressiveness of the tribute and rent of the foreigners over all Erinn at large, and generally, that there was a king from them over every territory, and a chief over every chieftainry, and an abbot over every church, and a steward over every village, and a soldier in every house, so that none of the men of Erinn had power to give even the milk of his cow, nor as much as the clutch of eggs of one hen in succour or in kindness to an aged man, or to a friend...”¹¹³

Many of the differences in words used are probably due to translation; the *Foras* and *Cogad* were both translated directly from Irish to English, while the version in MacGeoghegan would first have been translated from Keating's Irish into French, and then from French to English by O'Kelly in the 19th century. Regardless, the common origin of the passages is clear.

¹¹⁰ MacGeoghegan, 218.

¹¹¹ A different Irish word for a Viking.

¹¹² Geoffrey Keating, *The History of Ireland, from the Earliest Period to the English Invasion*, trans. John O'Mahony (New York: P.M. Haverty, 1857), 507.

¹¹³ *Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibh, The War of the Gaedhil with the Gaill*, trans. James Henthorn Todd (London: Longmans, Green, Reader, and Dyer; 1867) 49.

Appendix II: “Seán Ó Duibhir an Ghleanna”

Oft, at pleasant morning,
 Sunshine all adorning,
 I've heard the horn give warning
 With bird's mellow call—
 Badgers flee before us,
 Woodcocks startle o'er us
 Guns make ringing chorus
 'Mid the echoes all;
 The fox run high and higher,
 Horsemen shouting nigher,
 The maiden mourning by her
 Fowl he left in gore.
 Now they fell the wild-wood
 Farewell, home of childhood,
 Ah, Shaun O'Dwyer a'Glanna, —
 Thy day is o'er!

It is my sorrow sorest,
 Woe, — the falling forest!
 The north wind gives me no rest,
 And death's in the sky:
 My faithful hound's tied tightly,
 Never sporting brightly,
 Who'd make a child laugh lightly,
 With tears in his eye.
 The antlered, noble-hearted
 It is my woe and ruin

Stags are never started,
 Never chased nor parted,
 From the furzy hills.
 If peace came, but a small way,
 I'd venture down on Galway,
 And leave, tho' not for alway,
 My Erinn of Ills.

The land of steamy valley
 Hath no head nor rallies —
 In city, camp, or palace,
 They never toast her name.
 Alas, no warrior column, —
 From Cloyne to peaks of Colum,
 O'er wasted fields and solemn,
 The shy hares grow tame:
 O! when shall come the routing,
 The flight of churls and flouting?
 We hear no joyous shouting
 From the blackbird brave;
 More warlike is the omen,
 Justice comes to no men,
 Priests must flee the foemen
 To the mountain cave.

That sinless death's undoing
 Came not, ere the strewing
 Of all my bright hopes.
 How oft, at sunny morning,
 I've watched the Spring returning,
 The Autumn apples burning,
 And dew on woodland slopes!
 Now my lands are plunder,
 Far my friends asunder,
 I must hide me under
 Branch and bramble screen —
 If soon I cannot save me
 By flight from foes who crave me,
 O Death, at last I'll brave thee
 My bitter foes between!¹¹⁴

¹¹⁴ George Sigerson, *Bards of the Gael and Gall: Examples of the Poetic Literature of Erinn, done into English after the Metres and Modes of the Gael* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1897), 231-233.

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