The Shackles of the State & Hereditary Animosities: Colonialism in the Interpretation of Irish History

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‘Another, and even better policy, is to set up colonies ... which will serve ... as the shackles of the state ... Colonies are not expensive; for little or nothing you can send them out and keep them up. The only people hurt are those who lose their houses and fields to new possessors, and they are a very small part of the new state. The ones who are actually hurt, being poor and scattered, cannot possibly do any harm ... [C]olonies are cheaper, do better service, and commit less damage than any other method [of control]...’

Niccolò Machiavelli, The Prince, 1513, ‘Of Mixed Principalities’.1

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‘[Ireland is] prey to the hereditary animosity of the old Irish and English settlers.’
William Pitt favouring the Act of Union, and forgetting Scots settlers, January 22 1799.²

‘If the state conquers a peripheral territory without making the assertion of cultural superiority, assimilation is made much easier to achieve.’
Michael Hechter, Internal Colonialism.³

‘There is never any problem, ever, which can be confined within a single framework.’
Fernand Braudel, On History.⁴

Interpreting Ireland’s modern history is decisively driven by disagreement over whether and how much of the island’s political, institutional, economic and cultural development over the last four centuries is best understood through a colonial framework. A related debate focuses on whether a postcolonial framework best accounts for Ireland’s recent trajectories, but that requires agreement on when decolonization occurred. The merits of colonial frameworks are considered here, with...
1 Machiavelli, Niccolo. ‘The Prince’. A Revised Translation, with Marginalia, R. M. Adams, ed. (New York, 1992), 7, 8, my emphasis. This is a key passage in a book much read by the Elizabethan conquerors of Ireland.
5 A unionist intellectual’s recent efforts to deny the colonial dimensions in Irish history were reviewed in this journal, see Brendan O’Leary, ‘Cuttlefish, Cholesterol and Saoirse: Review Article on Richard English, Irish Freedom: The History of Irish Nationalism’, Field Day Review 3 (2007), 187–204.
7 Roy Foster, The Irish Story: Telling Tales and Making It up in Ireland (Oxford, 2002), xii.
8 See especially, Ian S. Lustick, State-Building Failure in British Ireland & French Algeria (Berkeley, 1985), and Unsettled States, Disputed Lands: Britain and Ireland, France and Algeria, Israel and the West Bank–Gaza (Ithaca, NY, 1993).

some proposed emendations. Colonialism’s importance in understanding Irish and Ulster history is simple. It helps explain the structures of animosity between the descendants of settlers and the descendants of natives, manifest in disputes over land rights, religion, citizenship, public and private employment and services, national identity and statehood, and, indeed, appropriate relations with the wider world.

The major alternative interpretation resists setting it within the general history of European colonialism, which is sited as extra-continental in operation. In ‘the early modern’ era it sees Ireland as a European region, and, at least in the eighteenth century, as typical (or mildly atypical) of many European ‘ancien régimes’. Typical because it was dominated by a landed aristocracy until the late nineteenth century (or early twentieth century), and mildly atypical because neither the Reformation nor the Counter-Reformation triumphed there in early modernity. In this alternative narrative, the competition between Protestantism and Catholicism produced religiously polarized—‘sectarianized’—peoples whose descendants remain in persistent tension, if not always in full-blown antagonism, and form the social bases of competing nationalisms. This alternative reading often ignores the strengths of the colonial interpretation, and, mostly unintentionally, reproduces British colonialist motifs, and sometimes past forms of cultural contempt. It is not wholly misguided: sectarian animosities are part of Ireland’s past and present; the correlations between religion (or religion of origin) and national identity (and political allegiances) are extraordinarily high. Nor is it dishonest. It is, however, conceptually and culturally blinkered. Everything highlighted within it fits with little difficulty into defensible versions of colonial interpretation. From the sectarianized peoples perspective the colonial interpretation is congenial to Catholics, or it is the left-wing Catholic view. In the colonial framework, the sectarianized peoples interpretation tries to erase the legacies of colonialism, which suits the interests of the descendants of Protestant settlers and their allies, including British governments. So what is at stake matters in the present.

Academic exponents of the sectarianized peoples perspective concentrate fire on the weaknesses of writers within ‘postcolonial theory’. Loose understandings of colonialism and post-colonialism may have been propounded by some literary critics—not all should be so tarnished—but they do not undermine sensibly put arguments for the pertinence of colonial categories in understanding Ireland’s history. Literary post-colonialists often do not demarcate when colonization ended in Irish history, but much the same is true of their critics. What some contemporary historians dislike is ‘postcolonial theory’, rather than the term colony, or colonialism, and scholars of literature are often figures of straw for the historical profession. No one, however, has to agree with the works of Edward Said, or Frantz Fanon—or their admirers—to accept that Ireland and Ulster were colonies, controlled by English and British rulers. Roy Foster writes, somewhat scornfully and without documentation, that ‘Colonial discourse analysis, applying the venerable ideas of Frantz Fanon more or less across the board, has hit Irish Studies running.’7 Fanon’s writing, especially The Wretched of the Earth (1961), celebrated violence against colonialism and colonists as medicine, which would restore the health and masculinity of native males, but I have yet to read any Irish Studies scholars endorsing violence for its therapeutic virtues. If they exist let me join Foster in condemning support for such an outlook on violence. Fanon discomfits historians of Ireland, however, not just because of his celebration of violence, but because reading him almost automatically generates comparisons between Britain’s relations with Ireland and France’s relations with North Africa, and there is much to be gained from such comparisons.8

The works of historians of Ireland, of whatever disposition, permit the safe generalization that the colonial past in Ireland is recognized, but it is much more rarely
specified when it ended. The Oxford Illustrated History of Ireland, described on its backcover as ‘the most authoritative history of Ireland ever written for the general reader’ has a chapter entitled ‘Ascendancy and Union’, covering the period 1690–1689, written by its editor, Foster. There he refers to ‘the dependent and essentially colonial derivation of the institutions of Irish government’ [and of] ‘the Dublin parliament’, before the Act of Union. David Fitzpatrick, commissioned to write of Ireland after 1870, observes that, ‘the application of expensive reform measures gave substance to a ‘union’ which, for most of the nineteenth century, had seemed but a shoddy disguise for colonial occupation’. Foster and Fitzpatrick are perhaps Oxford and Dublin’s leading ‘revisionists’, but both firmly recognize Ireland’s colonial past. Fitzpatrick is unusual, however, because he comes close, albeit indirectly, to dating the end of colonialism (the end of the occupation?), to very late in the Union (with the passage of ‘expensive reforms’ between 1881 and 1914). Conceptual clarifications seem to be in order.

Definitions and applications

At least some part of Ireland has conformed to the Oxford Dictionary definition of a colony for most of the time between the twelfth and the twentieth centuries, namely, ‘a country or area under the full or partial political control of another country’. True, that other country, England, or Great Britain as it became after an incorporating union with Scotland in 1707, was not so ‘distant’ as the dictionary suggests is ‘typical’, and its rulers exercised ‘partial’ rather than ‘full’ control before the early seventeenth century, and partial control of part of the island after 1922 (or 1937). Ireland, including Ulster, was, as the same dictionary has it, ‘occupied by settlers from that [other] country’, in particular by the ‘New English’, especially after 1609 in Ulster, though starting in the 1530s in Munster, in south-east Ireland. Ireland, especially Ulster, was also settled in the seventeenth century by those we may call, with minor innovation, the ‘New Scots’, the junior partners in the first ‘British’ colonial project. The colonization of Ulster was coterminous with the colonization of the Americas by the English-speaking peoples. But since the twelfth century, Ireland had been the subject of intermittent colonization projects by the English—not ‘the Normans’—and most historians describe this first colonization as such. A major medievalist’s book is entitled Colonial Ireland 1169–1369. The sixteenth- and seventeenth-century plantations may be usefully described as the second colonization. In its post-Elizabethan phase it was British, not simply English, and it endured, and eventually shackled Ireland more firmly to London governments.

Ulster’s history after 1609 exemplified two further elements of the same dictionary’s definition of a colony, namely ‘a group of people living in such a country or area, consisting of the original settlers and their descendants and successors’, and ‘a group of people of one nationality or ethnic group living in a foreign city or country’. Over time, however, the settlers’ descendants came to regard Ulster (and Ireland) as their home. In this respect they were no different from settler communities throughout the world (or in Ireland from the Gaels to the Vikings). They did not, however, forget their roots, nor did the New English and New Scots ever collectively fuse with the natives. Small-scale mixing is not fusion; and partial acculturation is not the same as fusion, which occurs when group A and group B combine to form a new group C, with each playing some significant role in the fusion, a process that occurred among the Gaelic-speaking Irish and the Old English. Acculturation occurs when group A adopts the culture of group B to become like B. Acculturation in Ulster occurred in language, clothing, material culture and consumption but not significantly in religion.

The same dictionary observes the etymology of ‘colony’. It comes from the late Middle English adaptation of the Latin word colonus, ‘settler, farmer’. While the Roman Empire had organized colonies ‘mainly of
John Gillingham, once my colleague at the London School of Economics, has persuaded me it was wrong to write in The Politics of Antagonism of ‘Normans’ and ‘Anglo-Normans’, even though the terms are standard in Irish historiography, see Brendan O’Leary and John McGarry, The Politics of Antagonism: Understanding Northern Ireland (London & NJ, 1993). Gillingham convincingly argues that the people of the time had no such expression, evidence for his thesis of a very fast assimilation of the Normans into an English identity (even while the elite retained the use of French); see Gillingham, The English in the Twelfth Century: Imperialism, National Identity and Political Values (Woodbridge, 2003); ‘The English Invasion of Ireland’ in Representing Ireland, Brendan Bradshaw, Andrew Hadfield and Willy Maley, eds. (1993), 24–42; and ‘The Beginnings of English Imperialism’, in Journal of Historical Sociology 5, no. 4 (Dec. 1992), 392–409. It was members of the (French-speaking) English ruling class, not the Normans, who organized the invasion of Ireland. I call this the <<Nous sommes Anglais>> thesis. Gillingham’s ‘The English Invasion of Ireland’ (1993) should be required reading, along with his ‘The Beginnings of English Imperialism’ (1992), revised and reprinted in Gillingham (2003). As he points out, the Irish referred to the newcomers as ‘foreigners’ or as ‘Saxons’, not as Normans. See also Marie Therese Flanagan, Irish Society, Anglo-Norman Settlers, Angevin Kingship: Interactions in Ireland in the Late Twelfth Century (Oxford, 1989).

retired soldiers, acting as ... garrison[s] in newly conquered territory’, the original Ulster colonial plantations were not primarily composed of military veterans, unlike some of Cromwell’s subsequent settlements in the 1650s. That said, from the seventeenth century onward the New English and New Scots, and their descendants, often staffed military garrisons in Ireland, especially at officer-level; that is why Irish nationalists sometimes referred to the descendants of the settlers as ‘garrison stock’.

This definitional excursion shows how ‘colony’ may legitimately be employed. Such usages are not guilty of the (indistinct) charge that employment of the term, and its cognates, ‘colonial’, or ‘colonialism’, are vague. Moreover, to pre-empt quick or enraged responses, the expressions ‘settler’ and ‘settler colonial’ need not be politically offensive. To say that a group consists largely of the descendants of settlers is not to declare that its members merit instant expulsion into or over the nearest salt-water, or that the suspension of any of its individual human rights is warranted. Decolonization does not automatically mandate the expulsion of those of settler origin, or automatically justify anti-colonial violence. It does, however, require the end of political dependency, and the transfer of political power from the imperial state to the inhabitants of the former colony–and the establishment or re-establishment of self-government in the colony.

The scholarly approach to controversy is to engage in conceptual clarification and test the best arguments, weighing and using evidence scrupulously, rather than jousting with obviously false theories. In this spirit, what we may call ‘settler colonialism’ has been satisfactorily defined, independently of ‘colony’, by a European historian, as a relationship of domination between an indigenous (or forcibly imported) majority and a minority of foreign invaders. The fundamental decisions affecting the lives of the colonized people are made and implemented by the colonial rulers in pursuit of interests that are often defined in a distant metropolis. Rejecting cultural compromises with the colonized population, the colonizers are convinced of their own superiority and of their ordained mandate to rule.18

Jürgen Osterhammel thereby carefully defines separation from the metropolis (‘often ... distant’) to suggest that the degree of geographical discontinuity between colony and metropolis is not integral to the concept, precisely because he does not want to exclude from the historical record places such as Algeria and Libya (and perhaps Ireland, on which he does not comment, which means his work can be used as that of an impartial outsider). There are four key components to this definition, namely, the

(i) control of one political society by another, with the latter thereby robbed of its possibilities of autonomous development;
(ii) unwillingness of the colonial rulers to make cultural concessions to the natives;
(iii) ethos of superiority of the colonizers; &
(iv) contrast between an indigenous majority and a minority of foreign invaders.

The first component is close to the definition of empire, as ‘effective control, whether formal or informal, of a subordinated society by an imperial society’, now standard in the discipline of International Relations. An empire has dependent or controlled societies under its dominion, ‘the dominant metropole exerts political control over the internal and external policy—the effective sovereignty—of the other, the subordinate periphery’.19 But a colonial relationship does not require that one state subordinate another; colonial government can also be established over a non-statal or tribal people. Moreover, empires and imperialists do not always plant colonies as such; imperialists practice settler colonialism when they infuse settlers into subordinated places. We may distinguish ‘administrative colonialism’, the use of public officials from outside the colony to run its political affairs, from ‘settler
colonialism’, where numerous settlers are brought from outside the colony to make it their home. In Irish history both were frequently in joint operation.

This conception of colonialism, and the four components that operationalize it—control, cultural dominance, superiority and an indigenous-settler cleavage—are not vague; they do not depend on recitations of Marxist, or Fanonist mantras, or on literary criticism; and they require no particular theory of political economy. As one historian writes, medieval ‘Ireland fulfills the strictest theory of political economy. As one historian...

The defeat of O'Neill by the Tudors, of the Irish Confederacy by the Cromwellians, and of the Jacobites by William and his Hanoverian successors, ended native Ireland’s possibilities of autonomous development. Element (i) of Osterhammel’s definition is met by the historical record. The autonomy of native society was destroyed through the intermittent decapitation and expropriation of its elites, comprehensive land-confiscations, and the imposition of settler plantations, settler institutions, settler law, settler religion, and the settler’s language—in which this article is written, albeit with American spelling.

The first ‘coming of the English’, as it was known among the twelfth-century Irish, took place in an expedition by King Henry II, 1171–72, following freebooting adventurers led by Strongbow who had come to the aid of an Irish king of Leinster in 1169. These English imperialists (who numbered others among their ranks) and their descendants did not concede that the Irish had a truly Christian civilization, or a language worthy of esteem, let alone of equal esteem to their own. Over four centuries, however, lack of sufficient replenishment by fresh waves of settlers, and a Gaelic revival, meant that most English colonists went native, despite the recurrent laws forbidding their use of the Irish language, marriages with the Irish, or recognition of Irish laws, modes of dispute resolution, property relations and rules of political succession. This ‘degeneration’ of the English, as Spenser called it, was stopped decisively by New English Protestants. From the sixteenth to the latter half of the eighteenth centuries, the New English—and then British—rulers of Ireland were implacably hostile to making major cultural concessions to the native Irish, in their folkways, law, property regimes, religion, or language. When not...

21 Vincent Carey demonstrates that the Old English ended up speaking Irish, and that their English was creolized by Irish, and identifies a bilingual ‘hybridized Hiberno-English culture’ in traditional areas of English jurisdiction, including Dublin, and that Irish had achieved both lingua franca and high status in sixteenth-century Ireland. See Carey, “‘Neither Good English nor Good Irish’: Bilingualism and Identity Formation in Sixteenth-Century Ireland’, in Political ideology in Ireland, 1541–1641, Hiram Morgan, ed. (Dublin, 1999), 45–62.


23 The quotation marks place the ‘Norman’ not the conquest in doubt.

24 Today this is often cast as much as the Gaelicization of the Old English as the resurgence of the Irish. See Art Cosgrove’s Medieval Ireland, 1169–1534, Vol. II of A New History of Ireland, Theodore William Moody, Francis Xavier Martin and Francis John Byrne, eds. (Oxford, 1987).
office, and subjected to penal legislation. There was no guarantee of equal citizenship after voluntary acculturation.

To stave off democratic and agrarian revolutions, and in partial deference to Enlightenment norms, in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries British rulers made cultural concessions on religion, and eventually granted fuller property, office and voting rights to non-Anglican Protestants, and then Catholics. Tithe payments to the colonial Church of Ireland (read the Church of Anglicans, or the Church of England in Ireland) by Catholics and dissenters were commuted in 1838, but the Church was not disestablished until 1869. These belated concessions recognized the failure of state-sponsored Protestant evangelism. Again no significant or sustained number of powerful settlers or their descendants sought the full conversion and assimilation of the native Irish before the French Revolution. To do so would have required them to be treated as equal and full citizens, their lands and professions protected from the avarice of settlers, and the sustained offer of significant incentives for conversion. Principled egalitarianism did not emerge among some of the settler class of Irish Protestants, especially Presbyterians, until just before the American revolution.

British rulers made cultural and political concessions to Irish Catholicism between the 1770s and 1829 not just because they no longer feared a Jacobite restoration, but because of the American and French revolutions. These globally transformative events showed that Ireland was ripe for mass peasant revolution, for Jacobin conspiracies with Popish instruments, as the rebellion of 1798 was memorably described. In 1829 the British state readmitted some adult Catholic males (and therefore Irish natives) to most offices of citizens, but fell far short of establishing equality with Protestant settlers or with the status of the Scots and English in Great Britain. Indeed Catholic emancipation was accompanied by significant disenfranchisement or de-democratization.25 These concessions were made long after the original habitats, ecologies and property relations of the native culture had been destroyed, marginalized, or transformed beyond overt recognition (evidence of ‘hidden Ireland’ notwithstanding). Democratization (for males) did not begin to make significant progress until the 1860s, the decade after the Great Famine that had reduced the threat that a widened franchise in Ireland might pose to the establishments of the United Kingdom, yet Ireland’s franchise extensions did not match those in the rest of the Union until 1884.26 Linguistic tolerance also came very late to British rule in Ireland. In 1907, one could be arrested for painting ‘Domhnall Ua Buachalla’ (‘Daniel Buckley’) on a grocery wagon. Ua Buachalla had his provisions seized when he refused to pay the fine for not registering his wagon in English.27 Element (ii) of Osterhammel’s concept applies to the history in hand, regarding the native culture, especially its language, and, for much of the time, its religion.

An ethos of superiority among the New English colonizers is well attested.28 Their displays of contempt sometimes masked insecurity: the barbarian natives might ‘usurp’ ‘their’ new lands and properties. Two key figures in English humanism and the early social sciences represent this combination of superiority and fear. The poet and administrator Spenser (1552–99), author of The Fairie Queene, was a major land-grabber in the province of Munster (though not on the scale of his neighbour, the pirate Sir Walter Raleigh). A View of the State of Ireland (1598–1633)29 circulated among English policy-makers, and shaped their thinking. It may be read as a plea for the extermination of the native Irish, or at least the extermination of their culture.30 Among other aspersions, Spenser described the Irish as ‘Scythians’, repeating and distorting classical Greek sources to establish the foul origins of these barbarians;31 and, among other prescriptions, warned of the need to despise the language of the vanquished, and to impose the conqueror’s tongue: ‘The speech being Irish, the heart must needs be Irish.’32 Spenser’s personal fears proved well-founded. He was burned out of his home by ‘the wild Irish’


33 Jonson declared ‘that the Irish having robbed Spenser’s goods and burnt his house and a little child new born, he and his wife escaped, and after he died for lack of bread in London.’ Andrew Hadfield, ‘Spenser, Edmund (1552?–1599)’ in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (2008), doubts whether Spenser suffered such poetic justice.

34 Petty obtained over 18,000 acres in over five counties. He ‘belonged to a tradition in which Ireland was treated simply as a colony akin to North America. On other occasions he accepted as axiomatic that Ireland was a kingdom with its own sophisticated institutions, albeit one which had been conquered and subordinated to England,’ Toby C. Barnard, ‘Petty, Sir William (1623–1687)’ in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, online edition (2004). Petty therefore began one pattern in interpreting Ireland’s status namely, ‘colony or kingdom, or whatever is currently convenient’.

in O’Neill’s rebellion, and, according to Ben Jonson, died bereft in London.33

The second figure, Sir William Petty (1623–87), was no poet, though he was fluent. An anatomist who had held a chair at Oxford in medicine, he became a cartographer, statistician, economist, and surveyor of all-round genius. His meteoric career began as Thomas Hobbes’s secretary. Having become the physician general to Cromwell’s campaign in Ireland, Petty later planned the dictator’s transformative land confiscations. The founding father of demography was a major land-grabber too, also in Munster, but unlike Spenser he died with his properties intact.34 Petty anatomized Ireland, organizing the first accurate all-island cadastral map and land survey in technically brilliant work, and estimated the first ‘census’ in 1659.35 He received extensive land near Kenmare for his efforts, and founded one side of the Shelburne-Lansdowne aristocratic family—one of his descendants led the Unionist opposition to home rule in the House of Lords after 1905.36 Whereas Spenser was passionately ‘ethnocidal’ in spirit, Petty was a calm ‘transplanter’, i.e. he recommended population swaps and
settler-infusion policies (albeit partially reciprocal) to accomplish stability. At life’s end he felt disappointed that Cromwell’s conquest, confiscations and expulsions had not been sufficiently thorough. In his words, *A Treatise of Ireland* (1687) ‘propounds a perpetual settlement of Ireland, with a natural improvement and union of England and Ireland, by transplanting a million of people (without distinction of parties) out of Ireland into England: leaving in Ireland only enough hands to manage as many cattle as that county will feed.’ The arguments were not satirical: the abolition of the Irish nation, and its transfer to England would be good for the transferees, and mutually profitable for all concerned.

The ethos of superiority (with some insecurity) expressed by Renaissance men like Spenser and Petty endured for centuries, and not just among the upper classes. Joseph Lee memorably describes in the scorching prose that opens *Ireland 1912–1985*, the ‘violated machismo’ that the unionist and not just among the upper classes. The ethos of superiority long outlasted the immediate justifications of twelfth-century English dramatically altered their previous portrait of the Irish. From being a saintly people (not exactly accurate), the Irish were now re-described as barbarous, a trait that justified their subjugation. Gerald di Barri (Giraldus) described them as uncivilized in every imaginable way: Gillingham has nicely summarized these accounts as the barbarian at work (lazy), the barbarian at war (savage), and the barbarian in bed (animal-like). Convenienly, this ethnocentrism justified English rule and the reformation of the Catholic church on English lines. Gerald also held that the Irish were descended from the Basques, regarded as barbarians by twelfth-century churchmen in western Europe.

The ethos of superiority long outlasted the immediate justifications of twelfth-century or early modern conquerors. It was full-throatedly articulated during the Home Rule controversies of the late nineteenth century, both in print media and parliamentary debates. As late as 1972, the businessman and fellow of Trinity College Dublin, William Kingston could write, ‘one might almost say with the best will in the world, Protestants [in Northern Ireland] have to regard Catholics as inferior, not only socially, but in terms of religion. Their Calvinist roots go back to a reaction against Rome which regarded those who worshipped in the Mass as nothing less than idolators.’ He went on,

It is true that the religious minority in the Republic has historically had a better deal than the religious minority in Northern Ireland, but it is not true that this is because Southern Catholics are better people than Northern Protestants. It is simply that they have never been able to regard Protestants as inferior, because Protestants have been their social betters.

Kingston’s phrasing would not now be acceptable in polite company, but he was gamely trying to diagnose the reasons for low minority tolerance in Northern Ireland. Of the reasons he identified he thought that, ‘clearly, Protestant conviction of Catholic inferiority will not change.’ Kingston’s perspective had many antecedents. The most notorious were expressed by the Victorian historian J. A. Froude, the author of *The English in Ireland in the Eighteenth Century*. Seven centuries after Henry II’s expedition, Froude characterized the native Irish as rude, anarchic, deviant, untrustworthy and lawless, requiring the smack of firm government from a more advanced people. In *The English in Ireland* Froude’s condescension toward ‘the Celt’ was monumental. So was his contempt: a chapter largely concerned with accounts of murder, rape, terror and the houghing of cattle, was headed ‘Irish Ideas.’ Overtly contemptuous superiority remains a populist force among participants in the Loyal Orders, including the Orange Order. This vibrant component of Unionism still embarrasses those who imagine that a culture of superiority is a matter of the

36 William Petty’s progeny were not petty: his great grandson, William Petty-FitzMaurice (1737–1805), was the Whig Prime Minister when America’s revolutionaries completed their victory over Great Britain (the Earl of Shelburne, later Marquis of Lansdowne, and Prime Minister of Great Britain, 1782–83). Another descendant, Shelburne’s great grandson, Henry Charles Keith Petty-Fitzmaurice, the 5th Marquess of Lansdowne (1845–1927), governed Canada (1865–88) and India (1888–94), served as Great Britain’s War Secretary (1895–1900) and Foreign Secretary (1900–05), and was Leader of the Unionist Peers in the House of Lords from 1903 until 1916, opposing Lloyd George’s budget and home rule for Ireland. His house in Kerry was burned in the Autumn of 1922, so Petty’s descendant had the same experience as Edmund Spenser.
long gone past. Sympathetic observers see Orangeism as a defensive cultural reflex—the display of an exaggerated respect for tradition, and fear of a genuinely threatening out-group—that facilitates group cohesion in the present. But no selective marshaling of evidence is required to demonstrate that element (iii) of Osterhammel’s concept of colonialism has applied to Ireland’s and to Ulster’s past, at elite and mass level, and has more than lingered into the present. Reasonable debate focuses on the depth and scale of the phenomenon. The long-run consequence is obvious: a social frontier between the conqueror and conquered, between the settler and the native, between the Protestant and the Catholic, a boundary which inhibited assimilation.

The New English (& Scots) of the sixteenth and seventeenth century were a foreign minority. Their fresh numbers in the Cromwellian period and after, of approximately 100,000, roughly matched the numbers of Irish Catholics transplanted to the European Continent, America and the Caribbean, or who emigrated in the same years. The fresh settlers and their descendants did not achieve demographic majority status, but they achieved political domination. In 1660 the Old English, the New English and New Scots may jointly have constituted a larger share of Ireland’s population than at any time since the twelfth century, but they never outnumbered those of native descent. Over time, the New English treated the Old English Catholics as Irish Catholics, and this assimilation is well attested, and denied by none—indeed, it was celebrated by one of its examples, Geoffrey Keating (c. 1569–1644). Their fate, however, reflected not just religious exclusion but ethnic downgrading—the Old English were now Irish, according to the New English, an assimilation that mostly occurred outside of Ulster, because west Ulster was not conquered and colonized until after the middle swathes of Ireland and Munster had been taken. In parts of the Munster and Ulster Plantations, however, the new settlers were soon local demographic ‘majories’, and Ulster became the site of the highest concentrations of the new settlers and their descendants. By 1641, at least 15,000 and up to 30,000 New English and Scots had settled in Ulster and 22,000 New English had settled in Munster. Such numbers were significant: the population of the island was no more than 750,000 in 1600, and roughly the same numbers went to New England in the same period. Settlers went into other parts of the island especially after the Cromwellian and Williamite conquests. In Ulster, Londonderry, Coleraine and Belfast were founded. Urbanization, commercial farming and fishing expanded, and cattle-farming took new forms.

All the colonial plantations, Crown-sponsored or private, faced resistance from dispossessed native landowners, from Irish tribal leaders and their immediate dependents. The Elizabethan era had seen four major rebellions, and ended with a comprehensive rebellion in Munster (1598) and the Nine Years War with the Great O’Neill (1594–1603) and his ally Red Hugh (Aodh Ruadh Ó Domhnaill), 1572–1602. Cahir O’Doherty’s rising occurred as the plantation began. There was a conspiracy in Ulster in 1615; and all the plantations, beginning in Ulster, were attacked in the rising of 1641. Blood flowed copiously; reprisals and quests for vengeance proliferated among the settlers for the atrocities they had undoubtedly suffered. They were expressed and magnified in depositions and books of martyrdom. The wrath of Cromwell followed. Then, and after the subsequent Williamite settlement, a minority of foreign invaders and their descendants owned Irish land, and controlled the Irish parliament until its dissolution in the Act of Union. Element (iv) of Osterhammel’s conception, a distinction between an indigenous majority and a minority of foreign invaders, and their respective descendants, is therefore met for the whole island of Ireland, not just Ulster. Quod erat demonstrandum. The applicability of Osterhammel’s concept of colonialism to Irish history has been illustrated.

The merit of this classification does not, of course, close discussion, but rather
opens key questions. It is essentially a conception of ‘settler colonialism’ as opposed to administrative colonialism. It is focused on political and cultural relations (not economic). It opens other questions. What was the purpose of the colonization of Ireland? How did it relate to religious conflict in Reformation and Counter-Reformation Europe? Where does Ireland fit within a taxonomy of colonies: in particular, is it an example of ‘internal colonialism’? Is the use of ‘colonialism’ an ahistorical application, taken from the experience of transcontinental European experience in the Americas, Africa and Asia? How can this classification be reconciled, if at all, with the arguments of those who regarded Ireland’s development after 1534 as that of an autonomous ‘kingdom’? Or with those who argue that pre-contemporary Ireland was a normal European ancien régime? What periodization is most useful in applying the concept? When, in particular, did the decolonization of Ireland begin and end? What is the relationship between Irish nationalism and decolonization?

Purposes and Types

The functions of the plantations were firstly strategic. The Crown and its officers created centers of command and control over the island, and barricades against invasions by other European great powers. The policy worked in Ulster. “The protestant community in Ulster served British interests as well as its own by its conscious separation from, and sense of superiority to, the expropriated [C]atholic community.”

Notably in 1641–49, 1688–91, 1794–98, 1886, 1893 and 1916–21, Ulster Protestants were loyal and in the vanguard of resistance to Catholic or nationalist rebellions or movements (with the notable exception of some Presbyterians in the 1790s). The plantations proved to be Machiavelli’s ‘shackles of the state’ described in The Prince, much read by the Elizabethan ‘humanists’.

Strategic purposes were evident in the Cromwellian plans for four-mile Irish-free zones on the Connacht coastlines, and along the banks of the Shannon, the largest river in the Isles.

Two types of plantation in the sixteenth century illustrated different strategic
purposes. The first, proto-assimilative in nature, was the ‘exemplary plantation’, pockets of English colonists were to be model farmers for the Irish to emulate. The second, Machiavellian in form, was ‘punitive’, English settlers took over lands confiscated from defeated rebels. In Queen Mary’s reign (1553–58), Queen’s County (now Laois) and King’s County (now Offaly) were planted, complete with the new county towns of Maryborough (now Port Laoise) and Philipstown (named for Mary’s husband Philip of Spain). These counties were taken from the lands of the O’Moorees and O’Connors, frequent raiders of the Pale. The plantations were a limited success, provoking decades of resistance, before Elizabeth’s administrators exterminated the leading families in each clan. That Mary, a Catholic, had started such plantations, confirms that their functions were primarily strategic rather than religious.
Other motives were strongly present, but were fully consistent with imperialist policy. The Crown also hoped to make Ireland profitable, both through increasing revenues from its own lands, and from taxation of what it hoped would be better organized agriculture and commerce. The envisaged profitability of plantations was intended to ensure that Ireland paid for ‘its’ administration and garrisons. Wentworth certainly tried to make Ireland profitable for Charles II, but thereby set in train some key events that led to the English Civil War.

In Cromwell’s time Ireland paid for its own conquest through land grants to the officers and men of the New Model Army, and to ‘adventurers’ who had advanced loans to the roundhead regime. Plantation colonies also promised to address demographic difficulties providing opportunities for ‘younger sons’ who would not inherit land, and for ‘surplus’ people generated by the commercialization of English agriculture.

A deeply felt colonial civilizing mission was projected in the plantations invested in by the Crown and the merchants of the City of London. Bringing civility and right-ordered religion to the wild, tribal and unpacified Irish, as well as to the degenerate Old English, nicely combined nobility of spirit with material interest. Well-ordered towns and townlands were to be forward bases for the mission. Historians observe that the smaller, privately organized plantations were often more enduring and successful enterprises in Ulster than the large Crown-sponsored operations, and occasionally suggest that the historical significance of the Crown plantations is misplaced. (Charles I’s expropriation of the City’s interests, on grounds of corruption and breaking of contracts, is perhaps an early example of a London government that fell because it had incurred the City’s displeasure). It is true that in Antrim and Down, Hamilton and Montgomery and others took over the lands of the Clandeboye O’Neills, through the latter’s indebtedness (and alcoholism), and through challenges to the legality of their titles. These successes, however, were parasitic upon the security provided by Crown forces and patronage—without whom these land speculators would have met grisly fates—and upon the enforcement of English law, including the usually iniquitous and rarely impartial device of inspecting the merits of land titles. In the seventeenth century, as in the twenty-first, the successes of private enterprise were rooted in a state infrastructure paid scant gratitude by its frequently corrupt beneficiaries.

That English colonization and Irish resistance have had sustained and strong religious colorations should not deceive. To be Protestant was to be a descendant or part of the New English and the New Scots. To be Catholic was to be a descendant of the native Irish, or of the Old English whom they had culturally assimilated—or, lastly, to be from the old Scots, by ancestry and former speech fellow Gaels. Low rates of intermarriage, and low rates of conversion, preserved inter-group differences between settlers and natives in religion, names, and familial memories of descent. While the descendants of the New English and New Scots came to see Ireland and Ulster as their homeland they did not forget their ancestors’ origins, names, ethnicity or creeds, and while the Irish shifted to English speech they did not forget that the island had once been their ancestors’ possession (or at least that of their lords).

In 1920 the Parliament of Great Britain partitioned Ireland into two entities. Northern Ireland was constructed around the areas of densest New English and New Scots settlement on the island, in six of the nine counties of historic Ulster. Their descendants were defined as a democratic majority by the expedient of constructing a novel border without which they would have remained a colonially derived minority. Did this partition mark the erasure of the contrast between an indigenous majority and a minority of foreign invaders—the last element in Osterhammel’s component of colonialism? Within Northern Ireland the descendants and relations of the natives were now outnumbered by the descendants and
Autograph letter in the third person from Victoria (1819–1901), Queen of the United Kingdom of Great Britain & Ireland, Empress of India, to Lord John Russell (1792–1878), Prime Minister (1846–52), in which she states that ‘The Foreign Affairs [in Ireland] give the Queen very great anxiety.’ Signed at Windsor Castle, 26 October 1847. Courtesy of Ireland’s Great Hunger Museum at Quinnipiac University.
relations of the settlers, a fact that endures, though it is now under challenge.

When Northern Ireland was formed, the ethos of superiority had somewhat attenuated, major cultural concessions had been made, and many English politicians were willing to countenance the independence of much of Ireland. But partition did not conclude colonialism in Ireland. It registered a retreat, the re-consolidation of British rule around the most durably colonized parts of Ireland, in what became Northern Ireland, along with the insistence on British military and naval ports in the Irish Free State, whose sovereignty in foreign affairs was constrained. In the rest of the island, partition marked a nearly comprehensive reversal of colonial power-relations, and was partly a response to a new native-dominated rebellion. By contrast, building ‘a new Pale’ in part of Ulster was the line of retreat of the progeny of the New Scots and the New English. Northern Ireland, albeit under different regimes, and parliamentary and democratic forms, extended the life of colonialism until the end of the last century. It should be taken as settled that Ireland conformed throughout much of the last millennium to the conception of colonialism articulated by Osterhammel, but the period since 1884 is obviously more controversial. So when did colonialism end? The thesis suggested here, to be defended at length in my current book project, is that colonialism ended in much of Ireland; but did not end in the North until 1998–2007. This position is distinct from that of classical Irish left republicans (for whom the end of colonialism cannot occur until all of Ireland is under one sovereign Irish government), and from that of Irish unionists and Irish ‘revisionist’ historians (for whom it implicitly ended under the Act of Union, when its existence is conceded). The conception of colonialism expressed here is political. It does not address whether colonial mentalities persist or linger after political decolonization (though they likely do) or whether neo-colonial economic relations persist after political decolonization (though they likely do). A political reading of colonialism permits greater precision and helps illuminate political antagonisms—including the politics of religion.

Godly matters

The Protestant Reformation is usually dated from Luther’s theses of 1517, and the Counter-Reformation from the Council of Trent (1545–63). It notoriously divided European Christendom, and led to multiple civil wars across the continent, only partially concluded by the Treaty of Westphalia of 1648 which, broadly speaking, left each sovereign free to determine the religion of his subjects. Ireland was in the headwinds of these doctrinal battles, partly because Henry VIII was one of the earliest and most powerful Protestant reformers. It is typically said that the Reformation succeeded in Great Britain, but failed in Ireland; however, nearly thirty-five years ago, Nicholas Canny asked whether explaining this pattern is a well-posed question. He argued that the failure of the Reformation in Ireland, insofar as it failed (it had won some converts among the Old English and native Irish), was not a settled question before the nineteenth century. He challenged not only the thesis that the Reformation failed during Catholic Mary’s reign, when the New English embarked upon a more coercive approach to winning souls than that adopted in England, but also the general thesis that the Reformation had failed in Ireland under the Tudors. He separately suggested that the Catholic natives largely remained ‘pre-Tridentine’ in their practices before the nineteenth century—cleverly implying that neither the Reformation nor the Counter-Reformation had succeeded (or failed) in Tudor Ireland. He questioned, rather than completely rejected, the view that ‘the Reformation movement was a foreign implant in Ireland; that its supporters in Ireland were colonists, English governments or local opportunists; that popular feeling in Ireland was from the outset opposed to reformation; and that the support seemingly provided by Irish parliamentarians was the product
Satirical cartoon of British imperialism depicts England as a 13-armed cephalopod in a top hat. It reaches for Egypt; it already has a hold on India, Canada, Jamaica, Cyprus, Ireland, Cape Colony, Gibraltar, Boersland, Malta, and Heligoland. (Photo by Stock Montage/Getty Images).

of compulsion rather than conviction.62 There had been English and Irish Protestant reformers in Ireland, participants in a European-wide movement; there was popular support to reform clerical abuses; and the fate of Christendom in Ireland remained open. He concluded that insofar as failure could be said to have occurred it was the result of failed evangelization projects by the English state, and the overwhelmingly materialist dispositions of the Anglican clergy and its dominant settler class.

In an impressive rejoinder Karl S. Bottigheimer agreed that Canny had corrected some stereotypes, and clarified important events,63 but while the failure of the Reformation may not have been an irreversible sixteenth-century event, it was implausible not to register that the Counter-Reformation had actively recovered much of the island for Rome by the 1590s, with a full

64 See also the later study of Brian Mac Cuarta, Catholic Revival in the North of Ireland, 1603–41 (Dublin, 2007).
ecclesiastical order, and numerous secular priests and Franciscan friars administering a fully parallel Catholic counter-church by the 1640s, in opposition to the established (Anglican) Church of Ireland. Protestantism had been decisively rejected by the overwhelmingly majority of the Irish (and Old English). Answering why ‘Ireland is the only country in Europe where the [counter-]reformation succeeded against the will of the head of state’, remains a very good question, maintained Bottigheimer, to which diverse answers are possible. These include: better organizational ecclesiastical capacity among Catholics; Protestants being too late in getting the bible and other religious literature translated into Irish; Anglicans having too few industrious, Irish-speaking and newly educated clergy; Old English and native Irish resistance to foreign modifications of the traditional faith, including among their respective aristocracies and their European-educated clerical relatives; antagonisms over doctrine and office among the Old and New English; and a lesser developed urban structure in Ireland, which arguably would have provided better soil for Protestantism. Bottigheimer persuasively argues that what occurred in Ireland was comparatively remarkable because the failure of Protestantism to make significant headway was not just confined to the failure of the state to accomplish nominal conformity among the elite and mass lay public, but in the overt and large-scale rejection of the Protestant doctrines infused into the established church. In broad agreement with Brendan Bradshaw, he suggests that the ‘colonial setting’ of Protestantism in Ireland ‘caused it to adopt forms which made it repellent to the majority of the population’, including the eventually self-defeating view that the entire native Irish population was ‘predestined to damnation’.66

When scholars with command of primary sources disagree, their readers cannot arbitrate their differences without performing the same readings and developing the same skills.67 No attempt is made here to adjudicate this debate. But it is always possible to see if scholars’ perspectives are consistent with general explanatory frameworks. The views of Bradshaw and Bottigheimer are broadly consistent with the colonial framework just advanced. Yet so are Canny’s because he holds the view that Ireland was both a kingdom and colony—as does Bottigheimer (and as did eighteenth-century Irish Protestant Patriots). Indeed Canny’s Making Ireland British, his later magnum opus, is, on any reading, a superb study of colonization, as both a security and civilizational project—loyal Protestant settlers were to remedy the failures of the first English colonization. Their tasks and their dispositions did not make them suitable exponents of a policy of religious conversion through persuasion.

**Internal Colonialism**

‘Internal colonialism’, carefully defined, is a useful conceptualization of Irish history under the Act of Union (1801–1922), and of Northern Ireland between 1920 and 1972. It is not necessary, however, to accept the general or particular claims articulated in Internal Colonialism: The Celtic Fringe in British National Development (1975), Michael Hechter’s stimulating book.69 The conception of internal colonialism proposed here is different.70 The focus is political, and rests on a simple antonym. On this understanding external colonialism requires an imperial policy, through which an empire creates politically dependent polities, outside the core of the imperial state, to which administrators (and sometimes settlers) are then sent for purposes of control. Ireland before the Act of Union fits this description. As did the British colonies established in America in the seventeenth century, in Asia and the Pacific in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and in Africa in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Under internal colonialism an originally external but dependent polity is brought into the core political system, but is not fully integrated. It retains its colonial character if the historically established settlers dominate the world.

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67 Ian S. Lustick, ‘History, Historiography, and Political Science: Multiple Historical Records and the Problem of Selection Bias’.
68 Nicholas Canny, Making Ireland British, 1580–1650.
Scotland, for instance, was much more politically integrated into Great Britain than Wales before 1966 (in the sense of having an expected propensity to vote Conservative given its social structural (including class) configuration). Since Page’s paper is often misread it should be underlined that it ‘does not attempt to demonstrate that the process of development in the British Isles cannot be described as colonial’ (Page, 296). I agree with him that causes of current Scottish and Welsh nationalism cannot be convincingly traced to English exploitation or to economic variables.

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70 Hechter (1975). The analysis here is closer to Hechter’s later work, Containing Nationalism (Oxford, 2000), in which direct rule is seen as more likely to trigger nationalism, whereas indirect rule is likely to contain it. Except, that one must distinguish indirect rule in which settlers rule from that in which natives rule.
See for example, Conor Cruise O’Brien, States or Ireland (St. Albans, 1974); Paul Bew, Peter Gibbon and Henry Patterson, The State in Northern Ireland 1921–1972: Political Forces and Social Classes (Manchester, 1996), 21ff; David Fitzpatrick, The Two Irelands, 1912–1939 (Oxford, 1998); and Michael Farrell, Northern Ireland: The Orange State (London, 1980). The first three of these authors obtained PhDs in history, but this is not a disciplinary matter; it is simply mistaken or loose usage (in which state is equated with province or region in a federation). Northern Ireland has never been a state in any legal sense, see e.g. Nicholas Mansergh, The Government of Northern Ireland: A Study in Devolution (London, 1935), 16, 108, 149, who emphasized that Northern Ireland was not sovereign, had no constituent power, was a devolved rather than a federative entity, and was (when he wrote) wholly subject to having its status altered by the Westminster Parliament. The Stormont regime had attributes fairly described as those of a ‘quasi-state,’ but a quasi-state, no matter how quasi-, is not a state. In this respect, Brendan Clifford in Northern Ireland: What Is It? (Belfast, 2011), is correct. For a neo-Weberian account of the state see Brendan O’Leary, ‘Introduction: The Elements of Right-Sizing the State’, in Right-Sizing the State: The Politics of Moving Borders, Brendan O’Leary, Ian Lustick and Tom Callaghy, eds. (Oxford, 2001).

descendants of the natives within the relevant territory, and if authoritative administration is executed by the metropolitan core, or by the settlers’ descendants (or both). Internal colonialism also occurs when a territory nominally within the core state is planted by metropolitan settlers who dispossess or displace natives. Some historians describe Ireland’s relations with England this way, when they treat Ireland as part of the English Crown before the seventeenth century, and before the Act of Union. Internal colonialism may, however, also exist after formal decolonization. Where a colony is demographically dominated by settlers, for example, and the settlers establish their independence from the metropole, the natives need not be treated as equal citizens—the fate of Native Americans, defined as ‘dependent nations’ by the US Supreme Court,71 and Aboriginals in Australia.

This is a political understanding of internal colonialism. No assumptions need be made about patterns of economic exploitation, underdevelopment, investment, or capital and labor flows, or about inter-cultural relations. As it happens, however, under either external or internal colonialism, no one is surprised if the modal settler benefits more from access to land, capital, trade, education and opportunities for employment than the modal native, or if the settlers’ culture is ranked above native culture.

From 1922 the Irish Free State was no longer politically within the Union, though it was obliged by the Treaty to be within the Commonwealth. The descendants of natives were demographically dominant. Its legal and sociological description therefore does not match any plausible conception of internal colonialism. The UK, however, as the text of the Treaty indicates, wanted to keep the Free State within its system of imperial security, and to keep it externally dependent. The Free State sought to liberate itself from its surviving external dependence upon Great Britain, exemplified politically in the Treaty (and economically in Ireland’s reliance on trade with Great Britain, continued use of sterling, and continuing flows of unskilled Irish labour to Great Britain). In 1937, however, the Free State established its political sovereignty, manifested through the popular ratification of its Constitution (made without British supervision or veto), renaming itself Ireland, and thereby repudiating the Treaty (from the perspective of Irish nationalists a noxiously encoded form of political dependency).

Northern Ireland, of course, remained within the Union after partition, but it was not integrated within it. Reconfigured settler rule (home rule for ‘Ulster’) was a shift to internal indirect rule. Resolving whether Northern Ireland’s formation was a concession to settler opinion and strength, or rather an imperial decision to sustain some political control over part of Ireland, or both, is not critical to understanding the political status of the place (in which all of its institutions were subordinate to Article 75 of the Government of Ireland Act, which expressed the absolute legal supremacy of the Crown in Parliament over all of Ireland).

Northern Ireland’s political development between 1920 and 1998 displayed both internal and external colonial traits. Unlike the Irish Free State, it was not a State; it was a wholly dependent polity. It was subject to the full sovereignty of the Westminster Parliament, which could abolish it and override all its laws; it had no treaty-making powers; it was ‘put together’ by the metropole, on terms which allowed its borders to be redrawn; and it was soon heavily dependent upon the UK exchequer. It has never been a state, though some distinguished people have suggested that in their book titles.72 Northern Ireland was a devolved and nominally democratic polity with representation at Westminster. There was a Northern Ireland Parliament, and adult universal suffrage applied to elections to that Parliament (though not to its local governments). Irish nationalists or Catholics were not formally excluded from eligibility for political office (apart from the monarchy, the First Lord of the Treasury (prime minister) and the Lord Chancellorship). In this formally democratized polity, the settlers’