

# **THE TRANSITION TO A LITERATE SOCIETY**

**THE CASE OF IRELAND**

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*'The god from whose hand writing has emerged always possesses a particular and privileged place in the hierarchy of divine powers.'* [Cassirer]

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## **Thesis Abstract**

Has writing changed history or has it merely recorded historical change? Within the field of Literacy Studies, opinions on the role of writing in bringing about historical change have tended to polarise into two camps. The ‘autonomous’ school sees literacy as a dynamic force for change and accords it a central role in the development of civilisation. The ‘ecological’ school sees literacy as embedded in specific social contexts and disputes that it plays any autonomous role in historical change. This thesis will discuss both theoretical approaches and evaluate these contrasting positions in a specific historical context.

The focus of this study is on the role that literacy played in Ireland from the medieval to the modern period. Ireland is a useful case study because it contains virtually all the elements that arise in the wider debate: restricted literacy and pragmatic literacy, the relationship of language change to literacy, the presence of disparate literate practices, and the role of literacy in advancing development and spawning uneven development. As well as examining the role of literacy in Ireland from the late Middle Ages to the early modern period, this study compares the development of literate practices in Ireland to those in England, Scotland and Wales and assesses their role in responding to the Reformation and political centralisation. This thesis also compares the origins and the early development of capitalism in Ireland and Scotland, and attempts to assess the role of literacy in explaining the divergent paths taken by these societies. Finally it examines the relationship between the emergence of mass literacy and the rise of national identities. From the study of Ireland and its neighbours, the thesis attempts to draw some general conclusions about the relationship between literacy and historical change.

# **Writing and Historical Change: The ‘Great Divide’ in Literacy Studies**

## **Introduction**

How has writing changed the world? Has it done so at all, or has it merely recorded changes? Within the field of Literacy Studies, opinions on the role of writing in bringing about historical change have tended to diverge into opposing currents. A pioneering generation of scholars stressed the transformative role of literacy and writing, while a later generation challenged this emphasis for failing to acknowledge the extent to which writing and literacy are always embedded in specific social contexts.

This thesis will examine whether the historical role of literacy in Ireland fits either of these models or whether an alternative approach, perhaps involving a synthesis of elements of both, might prove more fruitful for the development of Literacy Studies.

This particular chapter will introduce some of the most important writings on the question of the relationship between literacy and historical development and attempt to evaluate them.

## **The Pioneering Works of Literacy Studies**

Until fairly recently the question ‘how has writing changed the world?’ would have been understood to mean how particular texts or writers or schools of thought have changed the way people think. Attention was focused on the content of writing or its literary technique rather than on writing itself as a form of communication. In the decades following the Second World War a series of pioneering works appeared that have opened up the study of writing as a mode of communication. In this context people’s capacity to read the written word acquired a new significance, and literacy itself became a focal point of research.

In France, Lucien Febvre and Jean-Marie Martin published the original version of *L'Apparation du Livre* in 1958 while in Germany Jürgen Habermas published *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* in 1962. Eric Havelock's *Preface to Plato* and a seminal essay by Jack Goody and Ian Watt, *The Consequences of Literacy*, were both published in 1963 and came to have an influence that transcended disciplinary boundaries. In the same decade a number of other innovative works appeared, including Carlo Cipolla's *Literacy and Development in the West* and Walter Ong's *The Presence of the Word*, that together helped to open up a new field of study and a new perspective on history.

The timing here is worth noting. These were decades that saw the flowering of new forms of communication. Radio and cinema had of course preceded the war, but it was the combination of the audio and visual elements into a widely accessible new medium, television, that most likely encouraged social thinkers to investigate the older medium of writing, which some now perceived as redundant. This emphasis on writing as a mode of communication also carried with it a new emphasis on literacy, or more to the point, saw the question of literacy brought to a more central position in the human sciences, no longer a sole concern of educationalists but of crucial importance to the study of history, anthropology, sociology, psychology.

In 1958, Lucien Febvre and Henri-Jean Martin published *L'Apparation du Livre*, later translated as *The Coming of the Book*, a study of the origins of the modern book and of the impact of printing from the Renaissance era to 1800. *The Coming of the Book* covered an enormous range of issues from the technical and economic factors involved in book production, to a study of the social world of printing. It explored the geographical distribution of the book and assessed the cultural impact of this new commodity. One of the notable conclusions of Febvre and Martin's work was the extent of cultural entropy evidenced by book production. Up until the seventeenth century most book titles being published were still in Latin and most books being published were of a religious character, many of them devotional. The most important of all was Luther's German translation of the Bible which remained the best selling book in Germany for centuries. Another notable conclusion was the singular failure of successive attempts at censoring books by most of the *anciens régimes* of Europe. With its

emphasis on the crucial importance of printing in bringing about the Reformation, the *Coming of the Book* helped to change people's understanding not only of communications, but also of the emergence of modern Europe.

Four years later, Jürgen Habermas published *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit*, translated into English in 1989 as *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*. According to Habermas, from about 1700 onwards a new social sphere emerged which sought to mediate between people's private lives and the larger social and political world. Previously the only arena where opinion mattered was at the courts of kings and princes. Now with the spread of journals and newspapers and the proliferation of coffee-houses, pubs, clubs, and salons, people could get much more information about the world and debate the issues of the day. This new public sphere did not so much give a voice to public opinion, as create a public opinion in the first place. Habermas did not discuss the question of literacy at length, though he was obviously aware that a certain level of literacy was necessary for such a sphere to arise in the first place. He was aware that literacy in England, one of the societies he studied, may well have fallen in the eighteenth century, in the very era when the public sphere was supposed to be coming into being, though he did not explore this issue closely. He has been criticised for focusing almost exclusively on the bourgeois public sphere and failing to acknowledge the presence of a vibrant plebeian culture, an alternative public sphere. The main point, however, that Habermas wanted to make was to contrast the openness of public debate in the eighteenth century compared to its closure in the twentieth century, where media ownership had become monopolised by a small number of corporations and any project of facilitating rational debate had been discarded in favour of manipulating mass opinion.

Lucien Febvre was editor of *Annales*, one of the most influential journals of History and the Human Sciences in France. Habermas worked with Adorno, and was seen as a representative of the younger generation of the Frankfurt School. While neither work made much immediate impression on the anglophone world, both had a big impact within their respective national cultures, and came gradually to have an influence beyond their national boundaries. The effect of these works was not so much to change a field of study, as to open one up.

In 1963 Eric Havelock, a classics scholar, published *Preface to Plato* where he explored the cultural background to Plato's philosophy. His particular concern was to raise questions about Plato's attitude to the Greek poets. Plato had outlined a series of criticisms of the poets, accusing them of inculcating the youth of Greece with a set of values that was damaging to society. The poetry glorified the highly questionable deeds of the heroic pantheon, exalting social prestige above morality. The intention of the poetry was to educate the youth into the traditional culture of the Greeks, but its very emphasis on memorisation was intellectually damaging, while the values being promoted were socially harmful. What motivated these criticisms? Havelock concluded that given the traditionally oral character of Greek poetry, and that Plato was developing a tradition of prose writing, the real aim of the criticism may have been to replace orality with writing, or an oral way of thinking with a literate one. Havelock also concluded that underlying these changes in consciousness was the development of the Greek alphabet, which because of its much greater simplicity, compared to the Semitic scripts from which it was developed, enabled Greek writers, including the poets, to develop much richer works of literature. Some of these conceptions Havelock would later revise, but his work came to have an influence far beyond the field of classical studies because they helped to inspire a seminal essay by Jack Goody and Ian Watt, *The Consequences of Literacy*, published in the same year.

Carlo Cipolla's *Literacy and Development in the West* traced the close links between the spread of literacy and social and economic changes in Europe. Cipolla was an economic historian and his book is particularly concerned with issues of economic development. Throughout European history, changes in literacy patterns seem to dovetail major social and economic changes. So in the 'Dark Ages', the marginalisation of literacy occurs alongside economic stagnation. The 'commercial revolution' of the twelfth century accompanies educational expansion and the rise of the universities. Later in the Renaissance era, the 'rediscovery' of classical culture goes hand in hand with the rise of vigorous trading and manufacturing centres in Italy and Flanders. The emergence of mass literacy in the early modern period lays the foundation for the later Industrial Revolution. While Cipolla does not assert that education and literacy in any way automatically bring into being economic expansion, the implication of his study was that the links between the two were very close. [Cipolla, 1969]

The last few decades have seen a huge body of work engaging with literacy and with writing as a means of communication. They have also seen a highly polarised debate around the specific concerns of this thesis: the relationship between literacy and historical change. This is evident even in the case of works that are not especially polemical in intent. A good example here is David Barton's *Literacy: An Introduction to the Ecology of Written Language*. Barton covers a wide range of issues dealing with different aspects of literacy to provide a general introduction to the subject. Much of our thinking, he argues, is based upon metaphors, even if we are not aware that we are thinking metaphorically. Some commentators on illiteracy treat it as a disease; others see literacy as a set of skills. Both are metaphors, which can act as organising ideas for understanding a field of study. Barton chooses the ecology metaphor because it focuses attention on the specific relationship between the activities of reading and writing and the environments in which they occur. He distinguishes between literacy *events* and literacy *practices*; the first refers to particular situations where people use reading or writing or attempt to do so, the second deals with how literacy is used in the wider social milieu. This distinction is used to draw attention to the specific ways in which literacy is used in different cultures.

The main thrust of Barton's work is to stress the importance of difference in how literacy is used, and to resist any attempts to construct a single all-encompassing theory of the role of literacy. Barton's approach leads him to pay particular attention to the fact that literacy is always embedded in particular languages, and to emphasise the importance of this for educational contexts in multi-lingual societies. In a section entitled 'Literacy and Historical Change', Barton contrasts the ecological approach he proposes to what Brian Street characterises as the 'autonomous' view of literacy proposed by writers like Jack Goody and Erik Havelock. Barton disputes the notion that the alphabet is a uniquely successful system of writing. He argues that many of the claims made for the superiority of the alphabet as opposed to other writing systems are based upon ignorance of these other systems. In particular, the widely repeated assertion that it is necessary to learn up to fifty thousand separate characters in order to read Chinese is simply erroneous. Each writing system has certain advantages and certain disadvantages, and establishing any hierarchy among them is unhelpful.

In an overview of writings on literacy over the last few decades, James Paul Gee similarly suggests a dichotomy between those who emphasise a radical distinction between literate and oral societies, and those who argue that literacy is necessarily plural. Literacies are linked to particular discourse practices which are tied to the worldviews of particular social and cultural groups. [Gee, 1994] From the opposing perspective, David Olson likewise distinguishes between two camps in terms of understanding cultural changes associated with shifts in communications: one camp which assumes that – whatever social and institutional changes might occur – cognitive processes remain unchanged, and another which interprets these same changes in terms of altered forms of representation and forms of consciousness, placing himself, Goody, Ong and others in the latter camp. [Olson, 1991] These two camps would seem to represent a ‘great divide’ within Literacy Studies. Before looking more closely at the issue of literacy and historical change, it is worth examining whether these approaches really are as incompatible as has been suggested.

### **Literacy and Cognitive Transformation**

The work of Jack Goody has probably been the most cited, across a range of disciplines; it has also been most subjected to critique. Aside from the pioneering essay mentioned above, co-authored by Ian Watt, Goody has written three full-length books and many shorter articles on the role of writing in historical development. This work itself is but part of a much larger corpus of writing that includes anthropological casework in west Africa, work on the development of family systems, an analysis of the role of the state and technology in Africa, a comparative study of cooking and cuisine in Africa and Eurasia, and even a full-length work on the use of flowers in different parts of the world. Despite this huge range of topics Goody has written on, there are unifying themes to his work, and his arguments about writing fit into this wider framework. While the sheer breadth of work makes summary difficult, his books on writing are to a large extent elaborations on the pioneering essay, which makes it a good place to start an engagement with his work.

An anthropologist by profession, Goody’s starting point in *The Consequences of Literacy* is a critical reflection not merely of received opinion in anthropology, but on the very discipline of anthropology itself. In what way does the object of study of anthropology differ from that of sociology? To an earlier generation, the

answer to the question was easy: anthropology studies primitive man, sociology studies modern man. Yet studies by anthropologists, linguists and others have shown that the thinking processes of 'primitive' peoples were not qualitatively different to those of modern peoples. In both cases there is clear evidence of rational thought, but also of mythical and irrational thought. In reacting – or over-reacting – to ethnocentric notions, many now have come to deny that any valid distinction might be made between non-literate and literate societies.

The differences become clearer however if one considers the issue of the transmission of cultural heritage in non-literate societies. Aside from material goods and ways of behaviour, the cultural content of a society is held in memory and passed on through speech. Because there are limits to what can be stored in memory, those parts which are not of contemporary relevance tend to get discarded. Goody gives the example of genealogies among the Tiv in Nigeria. Early British colonial administrators, realising that these were important, made a point of writing them down for posterity's sake. A few decades later when anthropologists began to do field work, the Tiv were still using the same genealogies, but they claimed that the written versions were mistaken. Circumstances had changed leading to a revision of collective memory, while the colonial authorities insisted on the accuracy of the written word. Such 'structural amnesia' is inescapable in non-literate societies, because social memory is inevitably limited and the past must always be subordinate to the present. In such societies, myth and history are inseparable. Goody argues that writing changes all this.

*The Consequences of Literacy* briefly examines the development of writing from pictogram to logogram to syllabic systems of script. Pictograms have the disadvantage that a huge number of signs are needed to convey information. Logograms permitted a wider range of meanings, but it was the addition of a phonetic element that advanced the communicative potential of writing. These early systems of writing involved huge numbers of signs which made learning these scripts a formidable task and consequently tended to reduce the number of potentially literate members of a society. So while writing played a very significant role in the Near Eastern civilisations of Mesopotamia, Egypt and China, enabling great advances in administration and technology, very few people were actually literate. It was in the interest of this literate stratum to maintain a monopoly of reading and writing and to preserve the distinction between the literate culture and the wider oral one.



The alphabet emerged very gradually and what is most remarkable about it is not its late emergence but the fact that it emerged at all. By symbolising not objects from the world, but human speech, the alphabet permitted a system of written communication to develop that captured all the nuances of human thought. This included the recording of more individual expressions, which would not have been possible in a system where only a more limited number of thoughts could be symbolised and where collective agreement on these would be needed. The development of the alphabet occurred very gradually, 'the supreme example of cultural diffusion'. Such a development was more likely to occur in a new culture starting from scratch than in one of the major power domains where logographic systems were well established. The Semitic languages had already developed a system of recording consonants along with syllables. The Greeks borrowed the Semitic script but refined it by using some of the redundant Semitic letters for consonants to represent their vowels. The development of alphabetical writing greatly facilitated the spread of literacy because it was much simpler to learn than logographic systems, though the process of diffusion would take a very long time before mass literacy was achieved. While difficulties remained with Greek writing – for example words were not generally separated – from the "sixth century (BC) onwards literacy seems to have been increasingly generalised in the public life of Greece and Ionia". [Goody & Watt, 1968, p. 42]

Greece then becomes the model for understanding the transition to a fully literate society. According to Goody and Watt, all the other societies where alphabetical literacy became widespread borrowed from the Greek example. Is it a coincidence that this first fully literate society should also be the first to experience a transition from a mythical to a 'logico-empirical' mode of thought? Once the poems of Homer and others, which contained so much of the Greek tradition, came to be written down, later generations of scholars came to note inconsistencies and wondered how far these narratives should be understood literally. While sceptical attitudes may be present in oral societies, it is never possible to establish a sceptical tradition there. The fact that the written sphere was no longer the preserve of a small priestly caste added to the questioning impulse. Over time, a more critical attitude towards the written tradition emerged, and it became possible to separate the present from the past, and history began to distinguish itself from myth. [Goody & Watt, 1968]

More than that: Greek literacy begot logic. The very process of reading and writing in alphabetical systems encourages people to isolate the constituent elements of thought and recombine these in distinct ways. Just as Aristotle used letters as abstract symbols for his syllogistic logic, so writing itself became a model for the development of the categories of knowledge which the ancient Greeks bequeathed to later generations. Goody's essay concludes with a discussion of some of the characteristic features of literate culture. Because of the huge range of writing available, people have a great choice in deciding which parts to read, and as a result their intellectual formation is much more individualised. Private thought is encouraged by the very objectifying character of the written word; the replacement of myth and epic by the novel clearly expresses this.

Goody and Watt were aware that this is a very partial picture of the modern world and they attempted to draw this awareness into their thesis. Not only is a literate culture much more differentiated than an oral one, but it is also more easily avoided, and often quite shallow. The intellectual differentiation intrinsic to literate culture is accompanied by uneven degrees of access to literate culture, resulting in various shades of literacy and illiteracy. Even in literate societies, the "oral tradition – the transmission of values and attitudes in face-to-face contact – nevertheless remain the primary mode of cultural orientation". [Goody & Watt, 1968, p. 58] They also note that the new modes of communication like radio, cinema and television have less of an abstract and solitary character and are consequently more in tune with oral cultures.

In a series of later books and articles, Goody elaborated on these themes. Before discussing these it is worth considering Goody's writings on literacy in the context of his broader corpus of work. This is something his critics within Literacy Studies rarely do, but which is important for assessing his arguments about writing.

Since the Age of the Enlightenment, if not before, European writers have endlessly contrasted Europe with Asia. Given the European states' domination of global trade, and the later industrialisation of Europe, these writings have tended to take the form of reflections on the 'rise' of the West and its corollary, the 'stagnation' of the East. So entrenched has been this East/West binary opposition that it has been difficult to think outside of it. Perhaps more than anyone else's, Jack Goody's work challenges this. While writers like Edward

Said [1985] have pointed out the underlying prejudices of 'Orientalist' thought. Goody's work has tried to show that the whole East/West opposition is based upon a misconception. Looking at Europe and Asia from the perspective of (sub-Saharan) Africa, what is most striking is not what separates them, but what they have in common. Far from being stagnant, Asia experienced a tremendous degree of cumulative growth over a period of millennia, and it was only after the fifteenth century that Europe caught up with – and overtook – Asia in terms of wealth and power.

In *Technology, State and Tradition in Africa*, Goody was critical of what he regarded as shallow characterisations of Africa as feudal. The distinctive features of African society are not best understood by projecting pre-modern Europe onto it. In contrast to Eurasia, sub-Saharan Africa (with the exception of Ethiopia) did not acquire the wheel or the plough; environmental conditions did not permit horse-drawn transportation. As a consequence the social and political evolution of Africa was very different to that of Europe and Asia, which developed sharply divided class systems, intensive commercial networks, urban concentrations, and bureaucratically-organised state structures. This focus on what Europe and Asia have in common, in contrast to Africa, is developed in a series of other studies. Common to all these studies is an attempt to explain long-term historical development and the contrasting trajectories of different societies. In particular, Goody rejects any attempt to explain long-term differences in terms of underlying mindsets or mentalities.

This insistence on the need for *historical* explanations of human differences was at the heart of Goody's critique of Lévi-Strauss's conceptions of the primitive mentality. While Lévi-Strauss points out both similarities and differences between the 'modern' and the 'primitive' ways of thinking, he makes no effort to understand why such differences came into being. In *The Domestication of the Savage Mind*, Goody stresses that he wishes to "maintain a balance between the refusal to admit of differences in cognitive processes or cultural developments on one hand and extreme dualism of distinction on the other". [Goody, 1977, p. 16] He sees the development of writing, and the written tradition which this makes possible, as the crucial element in explaining these contrasting modes of thought. It is not that people are born with different kinds of mind; on the contrary it is quite possible for someone born in a 'primitive' village to become an engineer or the General Secretary of the United Nations.

In an interview a couple of years ago, Goody remarked that one of the most formative influences on his thinking was reading, in a German prisoner-of-war camp, a copy of Gordon Childe's *What Happened in History*, a book which outlines the origins of the agricultural (and as a result, urban) revolution in the Near East, and the technological developments that went with it. [Pallares-Burke, 2002] This revolution was gradual, but accumulative, and it laid the foundations for all that came later in Asia and Europe. For Goody, the development of writing runs parallel to this and is similar in its cumulative effects.

In *Orality and Literacy*, published in 1982, Walter Ong synthesised a wide range of research to contrast the mentality of oral societies to literate ones. His discussion on what he called the psychodynamics of orality is particularly interesting. Because oral societies cannot record speech or ideas, they are compelled to develop other methods of remembrance. How can someone in an oral society recall an idea they have laboriously thought through? The answer, Ong suggests, is to "think memorable thoughts." [Ong, 1982, p. 24] Oral cultures must, in other words, develop mnemonic devices to assist their recall: repetition, rhythmic patterns, alliterations, assonances and so on. He goes on to outline a series of features characteristic of oral modes of thought. Clauses in longer sentences tended to be additive rather than subordinative, and nouns will tend to be closely associated with particular adjectives, in a manner that might sound clichéd to someone raised in a literate culture. Redundancy and repetition are commonplace. Knowledge in such societies is hard to acquire and precious; there is only limited opportunity for innovation. These and other features tend to establish a clear contrast between oral cultures where expressions are always situated and close to the human lifeworld, and literate ones where writing enables a distinction to be made between the knower and the known, and thus encourages more abstract modes of thinking.

For Walter Ong, writing is a technology that restructures consciousness. "Oral communication unites people in groups. Writing and reading are solitary activities that throw the psyche back on itself." [Ong, 1982, p. 69] Because writing separates the reader from the writer, preventing immediate questioning and feedback, the reader is forced to interiorise thought and comes to see him or herself as situated in time and place. The ascendancy of writing also shifted the

balance of culture from a hearing- dominated sensory world to one dominated by vision. Even more than writing, printing increases the sense of distance and encourages the notion that words are things. Literate culture also involves changes in the structures of narratives, enabling more complex plots to be developed, and because the authors are in a position of much greater control of the plot than an oral teller of tales, they are able to construct concise conclusions. Ong questions the notion of 'oral literature'. Not only is it oxymoronic, but the very use of the term indicates the difficulties modern scholars have in dealing with oral societies on their own terms. A sub-text of Ong's study is the notion that we are now entering a 'second orality' with the development of various electronic media.

Periods of widespread literacy, however, are fairly rare in history; for most of recorded time literacy has been the monopoly of a small minority of the population. Of what use is an oral/literate divide to explain the culture of these 'transitional' societies? Within the work of Goody and Ong one finds an interesting sub-text (or even counter-text). Both examine forms of writing which seem to display features of a more oral society; Ong describes these as 'oral residues' within writing. Such features can be valuable for investigating the process of transition from a predominantly oral society to a predominantly literate one. Goody goes further and shows that for considerable periods of time, literacy, far from functioning as an innovate element in society, played a deeply conservative role, not only politically but culturally too. Neither writer, however, developed a conceptual framework for explaining why literacy appears to have been innovative in some societies and conservative in others. [Goody, 1977, 1987; Ong, 1982]

David Olson has attempted in a number of writings over the years to establish evidence of a direct link between literacy and rationality. In an early study (discussed by Brian Street below), co-authored by Angela Hildyard, he sought to demonstrate that the fact that writings can be taken out of context, not only permits but actually encourages critical analysis, and thus leads to intellectual advance. This assumed link between literacy and rationality was challenged by a study conducted by Sylvia Scribner and Michael Cole among the Vai in Liberia. They concluded that while the experience of schooling produced measurable cognitive changes, the acquisition of literacy in itself did not do so. [Scribner &

Cole, 1981] In a later work, Olson attempted to reformulate his theoretical approach to take account of the findings of Scribner and Cole. The cognitive implications of writing are best understood in the context of how writing developed, which was not through an attempt to represent speech, but rather to record information. The Greek alphabet owes its development to a 'misfit' between the Semitic script, which it borrowed, and the Greek language, which encouraged them to substitute the redundant letters from that script for the Greek vowels. For Olson, it was not that writing came to represent speech, but rather that it became a model for speech. He argues that the same principle is evident among children learning to read and write today, with the process of writing and reading encouraging them to think in a more analytical way about language. [Olson, 1995]

### **New Literacy Studies**

In '*Literacy versus Non-Literacy: The Great Divide?*' Ruth Finnegan challenged the idea that the literate/oral distinction represents a deep cultural chasm among human societies. The existence of a rich 'oral literature' in non-literate societies, she suggests, belies the notion that literacy has consequences for modes of thinking. She notes that in African oral based narratives, animal forms play a very similar role to masks in Greek drama, enabling the storyteller to engage in sharp social or political criticism, without being too overtly confrontational. Oral performance can achieve its own artistic detachment: the unique character of the aesthetic moment is made clear by the use of specialised language. Irony is widely used in 'oral literature', as are other sophisticated aesthetic forms. Finnegan suggests that oral peoples may in fact be much more immersed in literary culture, because an African peasant or an inhabitant of a remote Pacific island, cannot "escape the experience of hearing lyrics, or stories, or sagas throughout his life". [Finnegan, 1973, p. 112] There is a considerable degree of variability and creativity in oral story-telling and very little concept of verbal accuracy. This notion of a once-and-for-all authentic version is more characteristic of literate societies, or more precisely, of societies where printing has become dominant. It may well be that printing is a more important break point than writing.

Harvey Graff's *The Literacy Myth*, published in 1979, was a provocative challenge to conventional conceptions of the role of literacy in the modern world. In a study of Canadian cities in the nineteenth century, he shows that literacy was not as important for economic development or social mobility as has often been suggested. Industrialisation was often accompanied by a decline in schooling levels and literacy rates. Some illiterates achieved wealth while most of the lower social occupations were staffed by people who could read and write. In nineteenth century Canada, social mobility was determined more by ethnic background than educational achievement. The real significance of basic education lay elsewhere, in securing popular acceptance of the new industrial order. There was considerable resistance among early industrial workers to the labour regimes of factories. Schooling was particularly useful in instilling in children patterns of disciplined behaviour, which could later be transferred to the factory floor. The acquisition of the cognitive skills of literacy was of secondary importance. The example of nineteenth century Canada lead Graff to conclude that much of the current discussion on the importance of literacy, both as regards social mobility in the developed world, and economic development in underdeveloped societies, is misguided.

Brian Street's *Literacy in Theory and Practice* [1984] is probably the most comprehensive critique of the 'cognitive implications' conception of literacy. Street argues that a cleavage runs through Literacy Studies between two radically divergent models: the 'autonomous' model, which he ascribes to writers like Olson and Goody, and the 'ideological' model, which he ascribes to historians like Michael Clanchy and Harvey Graff, anthropologists like Ruth Finnegan and John Parry and educationalists like Shirley Heath. While none of these writers necessarily adopts all the elements of either model, Street regards this paradigm of a polar opposition within Literacy Studies as useful nonetheless, because it draws attention to underlying theoretical continuities in their arguments.

The autonomous model assumes that literacy develops in a single direction, which is associated with progress and civilisation, and is seen as essential for democracy. It sees literacy as an independent variable whose consequences can be studied in isolation. The ideological model by contrast insists on focusing on the specific social practices of reading and writing and sees these as ideologically and culturally embedded. The meaning of literacy in any society is closely linked to the overall process of socialisation. Because literacy is always

embedded in ideological and social structures, it cannot be usefully treated as though it had any autonomous role. It further focuses on the overlap between the oral and literate modes and is sceptical about claims that literacy is associated with rationality and critical awareness.

Street's method is to examine the work of a number of writers concerned with the theory of literacy, show the underlying similarity of argument and, in the case of the 'autonomous' model writers, critique them. Street's first engagement is with a 'strong' version of the 'autonomous' theory put forward by Angela Hildyard and David Olson. Hildyard and Olson argue that written language does not have the same interpersonal function as oral; it can be conducted over space and time and as such permits greater analysis of its elements. They draw on the work of ethnologist Patricia Greenfield which suggests that speech is always context-dependent, whereas written language, because it involves departure from context, encourages more abstract modes of thought. Greenfield's study involved tests carried out among Wolof children in Senegal which suggested that those who received schooling demonstrated the ability to carry out certain logical operations, while those who had not been to school could not carry out these tasks. These studies also seemed to show that children who had received schooling demonstrated greater self-consciousness and consequently had a less self-centred view of the world. Street argues that what the tests actually show is that the schooled children use more explicit language, and this usage, as well as familiarity with systems of tests, is a learned convention, not a result of literacy *per se*. Such tests do not examine any universal facility for logic, rather the social conventions of a dominant class.

If it could be established that literacy constructs superior logical functions, it would follow that illiterates possess inferior logical functions. In fact a variety of anthropological studies have shown that rational and logical thought exist among all human groups, as do irrational and expressive modes. The very use of language itself involves abstraction, while no form of writing is completely context-free. The attempt to create a 'great divide' between literate and non-literate cultures gives new life to this older intellectual tradition which posited an irreducible gulf between the primitive and the modern, or the logical and the pre-logical. Whereas earlier generations of scholars claimed differences in cognitive *capacity* between cultures, what is now being claimed is a difference in cognitive *development*. The notion of cultural superiority remains.



Street goes on to challenge the work of Jack Goody whom he describes as the most influential exponent of the 'strong' version of the autonomous model. Goody's conception of literacy as a 'technology of the intellect' diminishes its social significance and his work is characterised by a 'technological determinism'. Despite the social detail of Goody's writings they display a 'peculiar lack of sociological imagination' in ascribing to literacy features which are characteristic of the society within which it functions. The contrast between literate and oral cultures is of little value because it is never possible to isolate a society where such hypotheses can be tested; there is always some kind of a mix of these modes. In the case of ancient Greece, alphabetical literacy long preceded the development of philosophy. Street draws on the work of Ellen and Neil Wood to suggest a social context for understanding the rise of Greek philosophical thought. The writings of Plato and Aristotle are relevant today because they articulated specific social experiences, not because they came to attain any universality or 'objectivity' as Goody or others might imply. There is no evidence that history became separated from myth in ancient Greece, and as a result it is futile to ascribe to the literate tradition a central role in bringing this about.

Goody's argument that the acquisition of writing enables one to compare information and ideas from different times and places, side by side, and as a result achieve a critical advance in learning, does not hold up because it can be shown that critical analysis is also possible in oral societies. Street is aware of the many qualifications which Goody makes in developing his argument, but he is inclined to dismiss these because it is "the grand claims rather than the caveats that other writers tend to follow". [Street, 1984, p. 52] He notes the distinction that Goody makes in *The Domestication of the Savage Mind* between 'restricted' literacy and the full realisation of the potential of literacy, but regards this distinction as being of very little value because it suffers from the same deficiency as the literate/non-literate distinction: the two cannot be clearly distinguished because one shades into the other.

## **Evaluating the Literacy Studies Debate**

Much of the debate around the role of literacy in affecting historical change hinges on an evaluation of the work of Jack Goody. How valid are the charges levelled against him by his critics, and can they in turn provide a more fruitful approach towards understanding the role of literacy in historical change?

One of the most consistent charges levelled at Goody's work is that it re-creates a 'great divide' in human history between oral and literate cultures. Whereas anthropologists and others have battled, largely successfully, to rid serious scholarship of notions of a radical difference in thought patterns between 'primitive' and modern peoples, here we have a social theorist coming back to re-assert a binary opposition at the heart of the human sciences. It is a charge which Goody himself explicitly rejects: 'This is not a great divide theory'. [Goody, 1977, p. 50] The contrast between oral and literate cultures that he suggests is qualitatively different to those proposed by earlier anthropologists because it is not in any sense a natural distinction, but a social one, a distinction based on cultural development. Precisely because it is a social contrast, and not a natural one, it is a gap which can be overcome within a generation, through the medium of education. However, the very existence of such a gap is contested by many critics. For Street and Finnegan there is no qualitative difference in the thinking processes of literate or non-literate people. Moreover, because there are no purely literate or purely oral cultures today, all cultures involve a mixture of modes, and by emphasising a sharp distinction between oral and literate, Goody and others are drawing attention away from what needs to be investigated: the manner in which these modes combine. These are two separate arguments and they need to be examined separately.

One way of thinking about the concepts of oral societies and literate ones would be to see them as 'ideal types' that help one conceptualise older societies and cultural change. It may be true of course that there are no purely oral societies today, and it is certainly true that there are no purely literate societies (societies where all communication takes place through writing) nor are there ever likely to be any. However, there certainly have been purely oral societies; indeed for most of human history society has been purely oral. For those interested in long-term change, being able to conceptualise oral societies is vital.

It is certainly possible for illiterate people to think rationally and argue coherently. This, however, does not detract from the argument that writing encourages logico-empirical thought, because it enables one to scan what has been written. Inconsistencies appear in both writing and speech, they are just easier to spot if they are written. That there may be differences in the most common modes of thought used by oral or literate cultures does not in itself imply intellectual superiority by literates. The opposite may well be true. Jared Diamond has suggested that hunter-gatherers were probably much smarter than modern peoples. [Diamond, 1998] Any fool, as it were, can drive a car, but not everyone can catch an elk.

The charge that Goody's work distracts attention from the manner in which oral and literate modes overlap is an odd one considering that not only has he written a book on this topic, *The Interface between the Written and the Oral*, but in virtually everything he has ever written on the subject of literacy, he has also been examining how the two modes overlap. It is arguable that Jack Goody and Walter Ong have done more than anyone else to draw attention to the shades of literacy and orality. For a medieval historian like Michael Richter, Goody's work has been an inspiration for examining the links between oral and literate culture among the 'barbarians' in the early Middle Ages. [Richter, 1994] There may be writers who ignore Goody's qualifications to his 'grand theory', though Goody might argue that such misunderstandings would have been much more likely to occur had he simply spoken about such qualifications, and not written about them. The social and political implications of Goody's argument then are radically different from those of the 'Great Divide' theorists. This is a charter for education, not for colonialism, as Goody's own involvement in the independence movement in colonial Ghana should make clear.

The charge of technological determinism is a more difficult one to counter, not least because Goody does not refute it. He certainly does say that his aim throughout his work has been to explore links between literacy and social structures, but he seems to leave open the question that literacy may have had causal primacy. His focus on writing as a 'technology of the intellect' rather than the social structures where it is found may be due to the fact that he seems to take social context for granted, too obvious to be stressed. His general response to criticism seems to be to write another book, providing supporting evidence for his case, but this does not really clarify these issues. In a recent study, *The East in the West* [1996], he remarks that his overall theoretical objective has been to

ensure that the study of means of communication should complement the study of means of production for our understanding of historical change. It would seem that Goody sees his own work as a corrective to historical materialism, rather than a repudiation of it. Within the historical materialist tradition itself, virtually all the major western European theorists, at least in the twentieth century, have been sharply critical of technological determinism and have sought to distance themselves from any lingering suspicion that they might have some association with it. Goody's reluctance to follow the same course opens up an interesting arena of debate.

The critics point out that ancient Greece was a special case, that it took a long time before logico-empirical thought developed there, and that there is very little evidence to suggest that it arises more or less automatically within literate cultures. The thrust of Goody's argument is not that such a development is inevitable in a 'fully' literate culture, but that it is probable, that it is more likely to happen than not, or at the very least that it is fairly likely to happen. While these qualifications soften the argument, they do not take away its essential edge, that technology is not just a servant of the social order, but can have a predominant influence on historical development. To engage with these issues without descending into a sterile debate, it might be worthwhile re-formulating these questions to open up avenues for research. What circumstances within a literate culture make the development of a logico-empirical discourse more likely to occur? What factors would tend to discourage it?

In pre-modern times, situations where only a small section of the population was literate would seem to have been more common than situations of mass literacy. In this context of 'restricted' literacy, the literate stratum, often a priestly caste, had quite a degree of self-interest in ensuring that literacy remained restricted. If literacy became generalised, the skills and status of this stratum would be devalued. Moreover, if this literate stratum was the guardian of sacred truths or some other esteemed inheritance of a culture, they were unlikely to undermine their own position by adopting a sceptical attitude towards traditional beliefs. If this were the case, it would seem that the same factors which inhibited the diffusion of literacy among the broader population, were also inhibiting the development of a more scientific culture. The examples of China and India where something approaching the literacy levels in ancient Greece existed – at least for significant periods – give some support to this thesis.

Kathleen Gough has suggested that literacy was quite widespread in parts of India at various periods going back to the third and fourth centuries B.C. and may even have reached levels close to those of ancient Greece. It was universal among the upper castes and widespread among the middle castes of merchants and craftsmen and even among some of the peasantry. It also appears to have been widespread in China going back to the third century B.C. India had acquired an alphabetic system in the sixth or seventh century B.C. Like the Greek alphabet, it was derived from the Semitic one, though it retained a significant syllabic element. China, of course, possessed an ideographic system, which it still retains. One might have expected, from the original Goody/Watt hypothesis, that of the two, India would have developed a more scientific culture, whereas in fact it was China, despite its ideographic system of writing, which went much further down the road in that direction. Prior to the Muslim period, India had virtually no historical records; history and myth were indistinguishable. The Chinese, however, have been keeping historical records for four millennia. Both cultures developed systems for calculating short units of time, though it was the Chinese again who showed greater interest in precise measurements. Geography and cartography were well developed in China, but not in India. In both cultures astronomy was studied, though in both, as with pre-modern Europe, it shaded into astrology. Both cultures developed scientific logic from an early date, and both had divided knowledge into distinct cognitive fields, similar to the Greeks. While the study of medicine was advanced in India, China was well ahead in most of the natural sciences, and indeed Chinese knowledge helped to lay the foundations for much of European science. [Gough, 1968]

The great difference between the Chinese and the Indian achievements in scientific development would seem to flow from the contrasting worldviews of their respective literati. The Chinese had a pragmatic worldly attitude to knowledge and to life, while the Indians tended to focus on the spiritual realm. [Gough, 1968] This contrast itself may have been due to the much more direct role that religious belief played in legitimating the Indian social order. Belief in re-incarnation was crucial for upholding the caste system: next time around life will be so much better. [Braudel, 1995; McNeill, 1963] Although the Chinese were aware of the alphabet from the second century A.D., they maintained a logographic script in preference. Gough suggests they may have done so because there existed a large body of literature in the old script and it was also closely

associated with the educated elite. [Gough, 1968] David Barton points to some other features that may explain this reluctance to adopt the alphabet. Firstly, the Chinese script is built for the most part upon characters which contain both a clue to meaning and a phonetic clue. As a consequence it is not necessary to memorise thousands, or tens of thousands, of unrelated signs to be literate in Chinese. Secondly, because of the wide differences in spoken language, the existence of a single written script permitted communication across the empire. [Barton, 1994; Chinese Languages, 2008]

An underlying theme of the ‘autonomous’ versus ‘ecological’ debate is a disagreement over the very notion of ‘development’ or ‘progress’. Both terms are ideologically loaded, often carrying the implication that development involves moral or cultural superiority. Very often the concept is used to imply that some straight line runs through history, bringing humanity to higher and higher levels. Unwilling to concede this, many social scientists reject the notion of development altogether. Yet technological development has certainly happened, and needs to be engaged with. To argue that development is an important concept for understanding human history is not necessarily to suggest that modern societies possess any *moral* superiority over older societies. Auschwitz, Hiroshima, and the gulags have made any notion of the modern world having some moral pre-eminence over earlier societies hard to credit. What has occurred has been an increase in *power*. This involves power over nature and power over other people. It has involved an enormous increase in human productive capacity, and with it, human destructive capacity. How important has literacy been in this development of power? Has it simply been a useful tool, or has it been an active element in this development process?

It should be possible to adopt Goody’s concept of literacy as a ‘technology of the intellect’ without endorsing technological determinism. A technology can be socially constructed and have social effects at the same time; one need not preclude the other. That literacy as a technology can involve power over other people points to an important feature of the role of literacy in historical change, one which Goody has not much explored in his writings. Power is always contested. The acquisition of literacy can involve a striving for social power.

A difficulty in the work of Street and Graff is a lack of recognition that being literate is a form of empowerment, and that conversely, at least in the modern world, to be illiterate is to be radically disempowered. Graff gives examples from Edward Thompson's work showing that illiterates could and did participate in political debates in nineteenth century England. While this may be true enough, it is doubtful that these debates could have happened among the working class of the time had a significant section of them not been literate.

Among the 'New Literacy Studies' current there is a tendency to underestimate the importance of literacy for daily life. The fact that ethnic discrimination was rampant in nineteenth century Canada does not mean that literacy was irrelevant to the 'life chances' of the Canadian working class. On the contrary it could be argued that for members of the disadvantaged ethnic group, being literate was all the more important for their life chances. If one is not a member of a dominant ethnic group, one will be less able to avail of informal channels of social advancement and formal educational achievement becomes so much more necessary.

These issues have a contemporary relevance in discussions concerning the role of literacy in the 'developing' world today. Since the 1980s, the educational budgets of many 'developing' countries have been slashed at the behest of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. If the arguments put forward by Graff and Street are correct, and literacy is best understood as a mode of socialisation, then this would be no great loss. In fairness, these works were written before the effects of 'structural adjustment' became widely known, but the theoretical positions they advanced in these studies leave them ill-equipped to defend public education. Other 'New Literacy Studies' writers have approached this issue in a different way. David Barton expressed concern about the educational effects of 'structural adjustment' programmes and concluded his book with the suggestion that 'the eradication of illiteracy is possible but only if it is preceded by the eradication of poverty'. [Barton, 1994, p. 218] First end poverty and then illiteracy. This overlooks the possibility that a wider level of literacy might encourage the poor to organise to ensure a more equitable distribution of resources and a model of development that favours their needs.

A more general question arises as to whether the diffusion of literacy contributed to the rise of capitalism. Some development theorists in the post-war period imagined that with a certain level of literacy – 40% was the magic number for a period – economic development would ‘take-off’. Others, like Graff, point to the fact that a high percentage of the first factory workers were illiterate, to disprove the notion that there existed any link between industrialisation and literacy. Marx had already noted in the 1860s that literacy rates were lower among printing workers than they had been a century before. [Marx, 1976] The point Marx was making was that the rise of factories had led to a decline in the quality of life for those working in them. A few decades later, the pattern of literacy levels turned around, and most industrialised countries acquired something close to universal literacy. Marx never really explored in any depth the relationship between the sphere of production and that of communications. Since the time when Marx wrote, the whole realm of communications has grown enormously and this has made the question of the relationship between the spheres of production and communication less avoidable.

While it is true that full literacy did not exist in the first phase of industrialisation, and that in some countries, like England, there may even have been a fall in literacy rates, it does not follow that literacy was irrelevant to the rise of capitalism. England did have a relatively high level of literacy in the centuries before the industrial revolution, and it is arguable that this contributed significantly to later developments. There was much more to industrialisation than building factories: it presupposed a whole social order wherein literacy played a major role. Scotland and Sweden may have had higher rates of literacy than England (though R. A. Houston contests this for Scotland), but industrialisation did spread to these countries much more easily than it did to countries with lower rates of literacy.



## **Thesis Outline**

This thesis will examine patterns of literacy in Ireland at different points in the passage from the medieval to the modern era, and compare these patterns to neighbouring countries in the Atlantic Isles. It will consider whether the Irish case supports either of the main currents in the Literacy Studies debate: whether literacy practices are best seen as embedded in social structures or whether literacy acted as a force driving historical change.

Ireland makes a good case study, because it permits an exploration of many of the elements that arise in the wider debate: the contrast between restricted literacy and pragmatic literacy, the relationship of language change to literacy, the presence of disparate literate practices, the role of literacy in advancing development, and the question of whether mass literacy served as a vehicle for socialisation or emancipation.

Furthermore Ireland from the late middle ages to the modern era was closely linked with the other countries of the Atlantic Isles, while developing along very different lines. These divergences allow for a comparative study of the role of literate practices in shaping historical change and development.

## Methodology

### Introduction

This thesis is concerned with developing a general framework for understanding the role of literacy in socio-historical development. To do so, it needs to develop a research agenda which has a clear focus, and to formulate *specific* research questions which can contribute to answering the more *general* question of whether literacy practices help bring about historical change.

The advantage of a historical perspective is that it enables one to see modern literate practices in their *genesis*, in the way that knowledge of someone as a child gives one insight into their character as an adult. There are, however, dangers here too. There are many historical studies which show the progress of literacy in historical societies, but which are of limited value for explaining why literacy developed at all. The retrospective view can give historical events an aura of inevitability. The spread of literacy, like the spread of money, comes to be seen as something natural. One ends up with something like a cognitive version of the 'Whig theory of history'. If studies of the expansion of literacy are to have any explanatory value they need to distinguish between the different strands in socio-historical development and understand how they relate to each other. One way of avoiding this danger is to see history from the margins, to go against the grain. By examining contexts where literacy came to be diffused, alongside contexts where no diffusion occurred, the distinctive features promoting or blocking the diffusion of literacy should be more apparent.

## Research Questions

This chapter will pose a series of research questions which the thesis will address and outline a methodology for answering them. Each of the subsequent chapters will address one of the following questions:

1. What role did literacy play in Gaelic Ireland in the mid-to-late medieval period and why did Gaelic literacy practices not develop in line with the 'typical' west European pattern of that time?
2. What role did literacy play in Anglo-French Ireland in the mid-to-late medieval period and why did literacy practices diverge from the 'typical' west European pattern of that time?
3. Why did religious Reformation and political centralisation fail to take hold in either Gaelic or Anglicised regions of Ireland and did literacy play any role in this failure?
4. How did literacy come to be diffused in England, Scotland, and Wales between the medieval and reformation periods and what role did language differences play in the process?
5. Did the fact that mass literacy developed much more slowly in Ireland than in Scotland play any role in the radically divergent responses to capitalist industrialisation of those two countries?
6. How can one explain the paradox of Ireland's cultural and linguistic assimilation into the British social formation in the nineteenth century with the simultaneous rise of a mass movement for national independence?
7. What are the implications of the findings to the above questions for our understanding of the relationship between literacy and historical change? In particular do they support either of the main approaches in the Literacy Studies debate?

Each of these questions will be the focus of one of the thesis chapters. To answer them the thesis will draw on a wide range of mostly secondary sources. While the approach here is historical, it is not conceived as a work of ‘history’ in the academic sense of the word. It is not a history of Irish literacy, but an exploration of the role of literacy in Irish history.

### **Historical Methodology**

A research methodology is determined not only by the questions being asked, but also by the nature of what is being investigated. Adopting a historical approach brings with it a whole range of methodological problems.

The natural sciences have had a huge influence on many other areas of knowledge and study, yet the types of mathematical calculation they utilise, and the experiments they engage in to test their hypotheses are not so readily adaptable to the human sciences, and perhaps least of all to history. There are of course situations in historical study where quantitative methods can be very useful indeed, but this is most often the case in contexts where quantification already played a significant role in these societies. Quantitative methods can be hugely useful for studying the economies of early modern Europe, or slavery in North America or military organisation in the Roman Empire, but are of little use in contexts where detailed quantitative records were not kept. This is not to suggest that the natural sciences with their greater precision have nothing to offer the study of the past; in fact, both archaeology and geography, for example, shine ever more light on the past, and will surely continue to do so. The more fundamental difference between history and the natural sciences is not so much the inadequacy of quantitative methods, but rather that historical knowledge is not readily open to scientific experiment. Historians of the Third Reich cannot reproduce the object of investigation in order to test their theory of its origins. They might of course examine the relationship between economic collapse and authoritarian regimes in Latin America to make comparisons, but the two situations will never be quite the same. Comparative analysis, while extremely important for our understanding of history, is only a thought experiment, not an actual one. One of the first tasks of any comparative study is to assess the *differences* between two situations.

If students of history cannot normally test their hypotheses through experiment, this is not to say that evidential veracity is less significant, only that what constitutes evidence and proof is very different in character from the natural sciences. In sociology in particular, a huge amount has been written, much of it rancorous, on these very issues. It is not intended to reproduce these debates here, rather to seek some ways around them.

Edward Thompson suggested that the law represents a better paradigm for thinking about historical knowledge than the natural sciences do. Like the lawyer in court, the historian attempts to argue a case, and marshals all sorts of evidence in support of that case. [Thompson, 1978] A court case, of course, can rarely be proven to a mathematician's satisfaction. Nor is it expected to be. Because absolute certainty is unavailable in court, what needs to be shown is *probability*. What is demanded is that the case be proven *beyond reasonable doubt*.

Despite the growing contribution of disciplines like archaeology and geography to our understanding of the past most of our knowledge of the historical past comes from the study of texts. We know that many texts have been lost; quite how many we have no way of knowing. The texts themselves do not provide the type of information that a social scientist might expect to have at hand for studying a contemporary society. For example, we can only guess the size of the population in late medieval or early modern Ireland. More than that: these texts were written within a specific context. Their authors presumed a *background* knowledge about the world they lived in, and they had no reason to put this on paper, even if that had been possible. [Lotman, 2001]

Making sense of a historical text involves more than interpretation: it necessitates reconstruction. One needs to know the historical context in which it was written. For all the destruction of documents that has occurred in Ireland, there are still far too many texts – written in at least four languages – for any one person to read them all, even given a few lifetimes. Our understanding of any particular text is going to be based, at least in part, on our broader historical knowledge. This knowledge comes largely from secondary historical works, that is, from other people's interpretations of texts. While individuals struggle to investigate and understand the past, historical knowledge is a collective project. In this it is perhaps closer to the natural sciences than many of its practitioners

acknowledge. When physicists experiment, they assume a huge amount of 'settled' science, otherwise they could not carry out their tests. It may well turn out that much of what they have assumed is later shown to be mistaken, which may or may not invalidate their findings. Physicists are often aware of this but carry on regardless: such is the nature of science. [Kuhn, 1996]

The situation in history is something similar. It possesses a certain provisional character. The past is never quite finished and put to bed. Despite publishers' blurbs, there are no definitive works of history. Some areas, of course, are more certain than others. It seems most unlikely that future historians will discover that Roman legions once occupied Japan. In general it is easier to *disprove* hypotheses than to prove them. To say that our knowledge of history is incomplete and contingent is not to say that there is no historical truth. Historians of all persuasions seek to base themselves on the *facts* and ascertaining these facts is the baseline of all historical study. But history can never be simply a matter of collecting facts, because it always involves a process of *selection*. Historians have to decide what facts they regard as *significant* and what ones can be ignored. [Thompson, 1978]

Little more than a century ago, most of the history being written focused on political, constitutional or military matters. To the extent that cultural or social issues were the objects of study, these were mostly focused on elite circles, while the social, cultural and economic concerns of the lower social strata were regarded as less significant and thus frequently ignored. The scope of historical study has broadened vastly since then. Most likely as part of a broader shift in social values, historians began to show a greater interest in the concerns of 'ordinary people'. But over and beyond this the scope of historical study has widened and deepened because historians came to realise that the social, cultural and economic concerns of the wider population are of historical significance *because they impacted on society as a whole*. The lower social strata were not merely passive spectators of historical events, but they contributed to the shaping of history. Consequently knowledge of their lives and their beliefs came to carry a whole new importance for the study of the past. This shift in the focus of historical research has created a wealth of knowledge about the lives of the general population in centuries past, on which this thesis intends to draw.

## Literacy Studies and Social Organisation

While having a historical focus, this study is conceived primarily as a contribution to the field of Literacy Studies, a cross-disciplinary area that draws on other disciplines, such as Linguistics, Psychology, Sociology, and History. This is not to suggest that it can accept looser standards of evidence for its conclusions than a work of History proper, but that it will base itself, to a large extent, on the published work of historians. History, in this narrower sense, concerns itself, first and foremost, with *what* happened in the past. The approach here is perhaps closer in spirit to historical sociology, with understanding *why* certain developments occurred over a longer period. In order to understand how society affected literacy, and how literacy affected society, it is necessary to understand how literacy *fitted into* particular societies. This involves a dual operation: envisaging the workings of past societies and assessing what role literate practices played within them.

How is one to imagine a past society and what kind of objective criteria exist that ensure the observer is not just projecting his or her own prejudices onto the past? Historians, anthropologists and sociologists have adopted various approaches in their efforts to imagine how past (or surviving pre-modern) societies operated. Some have sought to focus on the main ideas of that society, the 'spirit of the age', and have seen its social practices as expressions of that spirit. Others have focused on a society's rulers and how they maintained their power. Others again have focused on the material production of a society and have seen its other features as reflections of the sphere of production. While each of these approaches can supply a good deal of knowledge about a given society, none provides a complete picture.

A better approach might be to examine the connections between the operation of power, material production and the ideas of a given society. Few would dispute that an essential feature of any society is its ability to preserve itself across time and space. This criterion would seem to be independent of any value judgement about that society, or about its functioning. It leaves open the question of whether the failure of a society to maintain itself is due to the inability of the rulers to keep control of their territory or a result of changes in social values or whether it might be due to problems in its productive sphere. One should not infer from the presence of literacy in a given society, that literacy is essential to that society's survival. That would need to be demonstrated. But it does provide

a useful point for investigation, a point for exploring how literacy links into the triangular matrix of power, culture and production.

How can one evaluate the role of literacy in a predominantly oral society considering that most of our knowledge comes from literate sources, which were by definition untypical of that society? If the poor and the powerless were excluded from the picture of traditional historiography, so too, for the most part, were the illiterate. But writing never exists in isolation. It forms part of a broader social discourse, most of which never gets written down. [Bakhtin, 1986] For us to understand what caused particular forms of writing to be used, or not to be used, we need to conceive of this broader discourse, and the forms of life, within which this discourse was inscribed. The problem that oral societies create for historians is that, by definition, they leave no records. At first glance it might seem that oral societies, or the oral parts of societies, cannot be known, but in fact the silence of the oral world is never total.

Knowledge of this oral world comes not from what its inhabitants said, but from what they did, or did not do. It is above all by judging people's *actions* that we can assess what their lives were like, and what they might have thought. The manorial records leave no account of the meetings of the peasant unions, but they do record how much they worked, and how much produce they forfeited, when they refused to work and when they fled. The court records tell us of their encounters with the law, and the priests' writings on sermons tell of their sins, real or imagined. The decrees passed by parliaments tell about the intentions of the law makers, while the repetition of the same edicts tells us of the failure to achieve their objectives.

The rise of interest in literacy in recent decades, across a range of disciplines, has not prevented some of the more traditional notions of the literacy/orality dichotomy being reproduced in these newer studies. Stock's study of medieval literacy and its impact is a case in point. While valuable in showing how literacy impacted beyond the boundaries of those who could read and write, it tended to see this process as a one-way street. Aron Gurevich has shown that medieval writers often wrote with a popular audience in mind. The texts influenced the audience, but the intended audience also influenced the texts. Thus even though the oral population could not write their own history, records about them or documents addressed to them enable us to identify many of their beliefs and concerns. [Stock, 1983; Gurevich, 1988]



## **Thesis Structure**

This thesis will explore different periods in Irish history – ranging from the medieval to the modern era – and different social dimensions of literacy. Earlier in this chapter a series of specific research questions were outlined. Engaging with these questions will constitute the core of the thesis. The final chapter, Chapter Nine, will attempt to place the research results from the previous chapters into the context of the wider Literacy Studies debate.

### **Question 1**

The first of the questions (posed on page 26) is addressed in Chapter Three and concerns the role of literacy in Gaelic society in the mid-to-late medieval period. While drawing in part on primary sources, the bulk of the evidence will be based on secondary sources, especially the work of the major scholars in the field. In part this will involve synthesising existing studies, but goes beyond synthesis in arguing that greater weight needs to be given to the social relations of production to explain the political dynamics at work in Gaelic Ireland. Drawing on comparative studies of pastoral societies by sociologist W. G. Runciman, and anthropologists Maurice Godelier and Ernest Gellner, Chapter Three will argue that Gaelic society was characterised by similar features, which bolstered strong kinship relationships and impeded political centralisation, even at a local level. The discussion on Gaelic Ireland draws heavily on the work of Kenneth Nicholls and Katherine Simms, but takes issue with them on one important point: the extent of political centralisation in Gaelic Ireland. While accepting their arguments that there was a definite trend towards centralisation, this thesis argues that there were important limitations to the process. What is involved here is a shift of emphasis, not a quarrel over evidence. However, it is argued here that by making this shift of emphasis to the obstacles to centralisation, the wider developments in sixteenth century Ireland, the social chaos and the resistance to anglicisation and Reformation, become much more comprehensible.

## **Question 2**

The second question is addressed in Chapter Four. This chapter will explore why literate practices in those parts of Ireland colonised by the Anglo-French aristocracy developed very differently from those in England. During the High Middle Ages, England and Anglo-French Ireland shared a similar political, legal, and administrative system as well as a similar socio-economic structure. Drawing on secondary sources, this chapter will compare developments in the colonised region of Ireland to developments elsewhere in Europe.

In Anglo-French Ireland, and across most of Europe, the fourteenth century was characterised by a deep systemic crisis. [P. Anderson, 1974a, 1974b; Brenner, 1982, 1985, 1996; Hilton, 1985] This chapter will attempt to explain why the outcome of the fourteenth century crisis was so different in Anglo-French Ireland from England and what the implications were for the social structures of literacy in both societies. The evidence used here is mainly a synthesis of standard secondary sources, except that these are re-ordered by drawing on general analysis of the fourteenth century crisis and linking this in with the analysis of the Gaelic order. From this, an argument will be developed concerning the impact on literacy practices.

## **Question 3**

The third question is addressed in Chapter Five. This chapter looks at literacy in sixteenth century Ireland and the failure of the Reformation there. While Chapters Three and Four examine the social constraints on literacy practices, in Chapter Five this schema is largely turned around to investigate how literacy practices impacted on society. It was in the sixteenth century that the 'Renaissance' came to have a significant effect on northern Europe, even on its western periphery, Ireland. The Tudor attempt to absorb Ireland was closely linked to the extension of new – at least to Gaelic Ireland – practices of literacy, though some of the 'new literacy' that characterised the Renaissance era may already have been developing in Ireland. English law, both criminal and civil, was extended to the whole island, and to all the population, and written forms

came to acquire a much greater significance than they had in the period of Anglo-French expansion. In Clanchy's account of medieval England it was the development of law and state organisation that played a catalytic role in the diffusion of literacy. In the framework of sixteenth century Ireland this pattern is present, but re-arranged somewhat, so that literate forms are crucial in the attempt to consolidate law and state, but meet all sorts of obstacles.

Ireland, and not least the Gaelic zone, experienced a good deal of social change in the sixteenth century and this chapter will attempt to outline the role that literacy played in this process. Fortunately, a significant amount of documentation has come down to us from the sixteenth century which makes it easier to sketch the main lines of change. A number of recent studies have examined the changes in Gaelic literacy practices in the period following the Elizabethan conquest. Chapter Five will employ these to link an analysis of literate practices to social context. [Caball, 1998; Leerssen, 1996]

In order to examine how practices of literacy were related to the conquest, it will be necessary to outline a theory of how the conquest came about and provide a very broad outline of the process of conquest. Aside from mere descriptions of the conquest, there is a growing literature which seeks to explain the process. Traditional conceptions which viewed the conquest as the inevitable result of national difference are now discredited as anachronistic. Contemporary historians tend to focus on the role of political strategies or ideologies in their explanations.

For Nicholas Canny, the decisive factor was ideological: the English adoption of 'Renaissance anthropology' led to their viewing Ireland through the prism of the colonial ideologies developed by the Spanish in the course of the conquest of the Americas. Others have argued that the 'racial' stereotypes of the Elizabethan ideologues are in fact re-workings of the older 'high medieval' perceptions of the Irish. Ciaran Brady is critical of this emphasis on ideology, stressing the role of practical political issues, not least the heavy burdens of taxation and 'militarisation' imposed upon the more settled regions of Ireland. [Brady, 1986; Canny, 1976; Morgan, 1999]

Brendan Bradshaw, in his earlier work, stressed the importance of the adoption of a Calvinist theology by the 'new English' elite. The deep-seated pessimism of Calvinist doctrine effectively precluded the development of any serious evangelisation programme for Ireland. If salvation and damnation were predestined then an effective military strategy was more suitable for the country than one based on conciliating those who rejected the word of God. In his later work, Bradshaw shifted emphasis to the failure of the English government to incorporate the Hiberno-English elite into the ruling strategies; by abandoning their strongest card in Ireland they made the later recourse to military domination virtually inevitable. [Bradshaw, 1978, 1996] More recently Patricia Palmer argued that these hypotheses are not mutually exclusive. To explain the Irish conquest, though, they need to be complemented by a focus on language: how the emergence of English cultural nationalism encouraged a linguistic imperialism that militated against policies of conciliation. [Palmer, 2001] This chapter will attempt to synthesise these diverse interpretations, while arguing that they need to be grasped in their social context.

#### **Question 4**

The fourth question is addressed in Chapter Six. This chapter attempts a comparative study of how literacy came to be diffused in England, Scotland and Wales. In each of the four countries of the archipelago, literacy came to be diffused in very different ways. This chapter will examine the similarities and differences between the practices of literacy that developed there. Particular attention is paid to the relationship between literacy, legal systems and language issues.

The response to the Reformation was very different in Scotland, Wales and Ireland. Why was this and what role, if any, did literacy or literacies play in this? In the case of Scotland, Chapter Six will focus on the contrasting developments of the Highlands and Lowlands, and compare these to patterns of change in Ireland.

In the case of Wales, the focus will be on the Welsh language. Welsh fared better than the other Celtic languages in the archipelago and is still the most widely spoken of the three. Why did the Welsh language prove more resilient than either Scottish or Irish Gaelic?

This earlier focus on the smaller countries in the archipelago will be used to try to draw out what was specific about the development of literacy in England. The chapter points out the remarkable linguistic feature of medieval English (and Lowland Scottish) development whereby the elites abandoned their primary languages to adopt the languages of the lower strata. This linguistic shift is drawn on to explain the significance of the changing character of social power that occurred in these countries in the wake of the fourteenth century and which is argued laid the foundations for much of what is distinctive about the modern world.

### **Question 5**

The fifth question is addressed in Chapter Seven. It compares Ireland to Scotland and examines whether the different pace in their acquisition of mass literacy contributed to their very differing responses to capitalist industrialisation.

There is a huge literature on the origins of capitalism, and a huge variety of interpretations attempting to explain how capitalism came into existence. Very little of this engages with the possible formative role of literacy in the process. Such studies as do touch on the topic, note a historical linkage, but make very little attempt to explain what role literacy may have played in the process. Nonetheless, the striking contrast between Ireland and Scotland suggests these connections deserve closer examination. Scotland, or at least the Lowlands region, had achieved high levels of literacy prior to the Industrial Revolution, Ireland had not. When the Industrial Revolution originated in England, the responses of Scottish and Irish societies to it could hardly have been more divergent. Scotland industrialised, Ireland entered a cycle of chronic underdevelopment. Could the earlier advances in literacy explain the difference?

Clearly, a simple quantitative correlation here has little explanatory value. It would merely confirm what is already known. What this thesis attempts is to examine the role of literacy in the two countries in the light of two contrasting theoretical frameworks for explaining the origins of capitalism. One of those is 'world systems theory' inspired by the work of Immanuel Wallerstein, which

emphasises the central role of the establishment of a global market, and how different countries and regions become allocated positions within this framework. Dennis O'Hearn has recently written an account of Irish economic development from this perspective. An alternative theoretical framework has been elaborated by Robert Brenner which emphasises the role of changing social property relations in determining long-term social and economic development. [Wallerstein, 1974; O'Hearn, 2001; Brenner, 1985] Drawing on a wide range of Irish and Scottish historians, Chapter Seven will seek to examine the relevance of these theoretical explanations for Irish and Scottish developments and explore what role the diffusion of literacy may have had in the process.

### **Question 6**

The sixth question is addressed in Chapter Eight. This chapter looks at the paradoxical combination of Ireland's cultural and linguistic assimilation into the British social formation and the simultaneous emergence of political resistance in the nineteenth century. It is concerned with the relationship between the acquisition of literacy and the process of socialisation.

Ireland developed a powerful national independence movement in the same era that the population became anglicised. This creates problems both for Romantic conceptions of nationalism (which emphasise the centrality of language for nationality), and also for those theories of education that give explanatory priority to the process of socialisation. Clearly there were factors pushing for independence that proved more powerful than those promoting conformity. Chapter Eight attempts to explain what these factors were and what role literacy played in the process. While this chapter does not seek to elaborate an alternative theory of education, it does suggest a framework for understanding how literacy has impacted on modern consciousness. This chapter is influenced by the work of two theorists who have sought to explain the phenomenon of modern nationality and nationalism, Ernest Gellner and Benedict Anderson, both of whom stress the importance of the rise of mass literacy in the process. The chapter aims to assess these theories in the light of the Irish experience. [B. Anderson, 1983; Gellner, 1983, 1996]

For Gellner, nationalism arises in response to the social changes wrought by industrialisation. In pre-modern societies, collective identities were irrelevant to political legitimacy. Industrialisation introduced social mobility and created the need for cultural conformity in order to make communication easier. The very mobility and insecurity of the modern world creates the need for cultural homogenisation. The only agency capable of creating such homogenisation is a central state: “the only way a given culture can protect itself against another one, which already has its own protector-state is to acquire one of its own, if it does not already possess one.” [Gellner, 1996, p. 110] The difficulty the Irish case provides for Gellner is that nationalism emerged in the very period when Ireland was becoming assimilated into British culture, most clearly evidenced by the adoption of the English language.

Benedict Anderson’s theory of nations as ‘imagined communities’ fits more closely with the Irish evidence. Nations are imagined communities in two senses: because one never gets to meet all the other members and also because people imagine a sense of solidarity with the other members. Like Gellner he sees nationalism as a largely spontaneous development, closer in character to kinship or religion, than to political doctrines like liberalism or fascism. For Anderson, the great catalyst of nationality was print capitalism, which eroded earlier cultural forms and heralded new ones, in particular the newspaper and the novel. These forms both expressed and promoted altered conceptions of time and space. Anderson quotes Hegel’s remark that modern man reads his newspaper the way medieval man said his prayers. In both cases they are communing with the world, as they understand it. The two worlds are very different of course, one filled with supernatural being, the other comprising what Anderson calls ‘empty homogenous time’. This empty time of the modern world creates the need for a place-bound sense of community. Anderson’s emphasis on the historical importance of changing conceptions of time and space is reiterated throughout this thesis, though the research here suggests some significant qualifications to Anderson’s thesis.

### **Question 7**

The seventh question is addressed in Chapter Nine. This chapter will attempt to summarise the evidence from the previous chapters and examine how the findings fit into the wider Literacy Studies debate on the relationship between literacy and historical change. Is either of the main theoretical positions consistent with the findings of the research here or would an alternative theoretical framework better explain the relationship between literacy and historical change? This chapter will consider whether the notion that literacy is always situated within specific social contexts is necessarily incompatible with the notion that literacy can also be a dynamic factor in facilitating historical change.



## **Literacy and Social Organisation in Late Gaelic Ireland**

### **Introduction**

In the mid-to-late medieval period, literacy began to spread across western Europe. At the turn of the first millennium, literacy in western Europe was confined primarily to clerics, and most writing was in Latin. By 1500 the picture had changed considerably: literacy was now commonplace among the nobility and burgers and was increasingly found even among the peasantry and artisanate. Alongside this spread of literacy was a gradual shift towards the use of vernacular languages for writing. This drive towards a more widespread literacy appears to have resulted in the main from the rise of ‘pragmatic’ writing, i.e. the increased use of writing for administrative, legal and commercial purposes. [Clanchy, 1993]

Ireland in the pre-Reformation period can be divided into two different entities: the Gaelic territories, under the control of Gaelic chiefs, and the Anglo-French parts, under the control of the Anglo-French aristocracy. While there were no clear demarcation lines, and a good deal of interaction between the two, Gaelic Ireland and Anglo-French Ireland possessed different social structures and developed along different lines. The following two chapters deal with Irish society before the Reformation era and will examine these two different social systems and their respective literacy practices.

This particular chapter will explore the role that literacy played in Gaelic Ireland in the mid-to-late medieval period and will attempt to explain why Gaelic literacy practices did not develop in line with the ‘typical’ west European pattern of that time.

## Writing and Writers in Gaelic Ireland

A wide variety of texts from mid-to-late medieval Ireland survive, mostly from the period after 1350. These include poetry, annals, genealogies, sagas, romances, and religious writings as well as legal and medical texts; they are written in both Latin and Gaelic. [Nicholls, 1972; Simms, 1987] Aside from the work of religious scribes, these texts were composed by members of the traditional learned stratum, the *aosdana*.

The Gaelic literate stratum enjoyed a high status, but the poets, or at least the chief poets, were held in particularly high regard. Not only were the poets respected, they were feared. Legend had it that a satirical attack in a poem could have fatal consequences; more prosaically, it could seriously damage a reputation. Members of the literate stratum could and did travel throughout Gaelic Ireland – and Gaelic Scotland – and could expect to receive a hospitable welcome.

The component branches of the *aosdana* – the poets, lawyers and medics – each ran their own schools where initiates received their training. These schools survived until the early seventeenth century. The poets had an intensive linguistic training and their poems, especially the praise poems, are highly complex constructions using syllabic metres along with rhyme, consonance and alliteration. The lawyers were trained not only in the principles of traditional Irish law, but also in canon law. An earlier system of Irish medicine had existed but from the twelfth century onwards this was supplanted by the Arabic tradition of medicine (from Latin translations). While the main schools of law, medicine and poetry were conducted through Irish, there were also schools of Latin in Gaelic Ireland. Some Irish scholars received higher education abroad, especially the mendicant bishops, but there were also many instances of Gaelic law and medical students studying abroad, the former particularly in Oxford, the latter in Montpellier. [Caball & Hollo, 2006; Nicholls, 1972; Simms, 1998]

The relationship between the clergy and the secular literate strata seems to have been complex, close at times, at other times antagonistic. In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries there is evidence of mutual antipathy between the clergy and the poets. It seems likely that a secular literate stratum emerged at least in part as a response to twelfth century reforms within the church that resulted in a sharper

distinction between the religious and secular functions of the clergy. In the second half of the fourteenth century a rapprochement between the churchmen and the *aosdana* seems to have occurred. While literacy was important for all of the learned groups, in practice they operated within an oral environment. The poets composed their work in darkened rooms, only later putting it into writing. The poems themselves were for public performance, often accompanied by music. While the *brehons* (lawyers) might draw on a written tradition of legal principles, in practice they operated without case files, giving judgements at public assemblies. [Fletcher, 2000; Flower, 1994; Fitzpatrick, 2004; N. Patterson, 1989]

### **The Distinctiveness of Gaelic Literacy**

The decline of Irish Gaelic as a spoken language in the modern age is widely – and plausibly – explained by its failure to evolve as a printed language in the early modern period. It was through the medium of print that the modern languages of Europe – including the smaller ones – consolidated themselves. Yet behind, or before, the cultural transformations wrought by the ‘printing revolution’ lay the earlier diffusion of literacy across considerable sections of European society. It was this fairly widespread literacy which created the demand for the printed word. Gaelic literacy, despite being one of the oldest literate languages in northern Europe, did not undergo such diffusion, which is evidenced by the atypical nature of the surviving documents from that era.

Political and legal texts certainly survive from the late Gaelic period, but they tend to be of a very different character from those predominant elsewhere. In the legal sphere the *brehons* continued to revere the venerable texts and claimed their authority as the basis for decision making. How closely Gaelic society continued to observe traditional law is a matter of debate, because the *brehons* did not leave behind the type of documentation normal for late-medieval courts. The only case histories that survive come from the late-Elizabethan era when the Gaelic areas were losing their autonomy. The actual practice of Gaelic law seems to have been overwhelmingly oral. [Binchy 1975/1976; N. Patterson, 1989]

A number of tax-gathering and other political type documents survive. These take the form of lists of the customary entitlements of chiefs. Significantly, they are generally written in verse. The surviving treaties between Gaelic and Anglo-French leaders tend to be in Latin, French or English but at least one treaty between two Gaelic chiefs, written in Irish, survives. The most common form of politically inspired texts are the bardic poems. Typically these are praise poems for a Gaelic leader to whom they are addressed but some are critical of Gaelic rulers and – particularly in the Elizabethan era – openly hostile towards the whole process of anglicisation. What one does not find are the administrative records and reports typical of other late-medieval and Renaissance polities. [Nicholls, 1972]

Absent too are the day-to-day business records of merchants, which played such an important role in ensuring that literacy became a common part of life elsewhere in Europe. It is clear though, that a good deal of trade occurred between the Gaelic and the anglicised areas, especially the towns; the frequent English government attempts to prohibit such trade is clear testimony. There was also trade between the Gaelic areas and English, French and Spanish merchants. Despite this ‘external’ trade, there was little evidence of markets in Gaelic regions and urban settlements were very thin on the ground. [Nicholls, 1972]

### **Literacy and Insularity**

The most obvious and common explanation for the failure of Gaelic society to develop a more widely diffused literacy in the late medieval era has to do with its geographical isolation: its position on the far periphery of Europe and its resulting ‘backwardness’. Actually this explains very little. Europe, before and since, has seen many twists and turns in what was considered ‘central’ and what was ‘peripheral’. It is not that geography was of no relevance, but it cannot carry the full weight of explanation for historical development. Most obviously it is unable to explain transformations in geographical supremacy: the late medieval era itself witnessed a gradual shift of wealth and power from the Mediterranean to north-western Europe. Moreover, Gaelic Ireland can hardly be described as being impervious to external influences: both its adherence to Christianity and its long tradition of literacy are clear evidence of engagement with the outside world.

From the twelfth century onwards Gaelic society was closely involved with, and heavily influenced by, Anglo-French feudalism, a social and political order identical in most respects to that which dominated most of Europe in this period. The twelfth century encroachment by Anglo-French knights, owing allegiance to the English monarchy, was part of a broader process of aggressive expansion by the Latin Christian warrior elite and the establishment of a seigniorial order in the territories which they seized. Arriving in 1169, Anglo-French knights had taken most of south-eastern Ireland within a decade and most of the rest of the country by the early part of the thirteenth century. In the areas where the Anglo-French aristocracy secured their power they introduced English law and administration, and a manorial system with markets and coinage. Throughout the following centuries the Gaelic and Anglo-French worlds were closely involved with each other, with outright military confrontation giving way to a more complex system of alliances, often cemented by inter-marriage between Gaelic and Anglo-French families. [Bartlett, 1993; Otway-Ruthven, 1980]

Gaelic Christianity, despite its distinctive traditions, was an integral part of the Latin Church. While there was considerable tension between Gaelic and Anglo-French churchmen, there was also a great deal of interaction between them, and the Church became an important arena for cultural exchange. [Watt, 1998]

Gaelic cultural borrowing was not confined to the religious sphere. Gaelic poetry is littered with references to figures from classical literature. Literary forms such as courtly poetry were imitated and there was a good deal of direct translation from French and English as well as the classical languages. Gaelic medical texts were based on Arabic sources. [Cronin, 1996; Ó Cuív, 1961, 1976] The most striking evidence of the impact of the Anglo-French community on Gaelic society is linguistic. Not only did Gaelic borrow numerous words from English and French but its pronunciation was also significantly altered. Anglo-French settlement was strongest in Munster and Leinster. To this day, the Irish spoken in Munster – no dialects of Leinster Irish survive – retains the French pattern of stressing the last syllable in polysyllabic words. [Bliss, 1984]

The picture of Gaelic society as wholly introverted and isolated from wider developments does not match the historical evidence. Gaelic society was heavily influenced by the European feudal order throughout the very time period when this world was experiencing a wider diffusion of literacy.

## **Gaelic Literacy and Anglo-French Feudalism**

On the wider European stage the late Middle Ages saw an increase in administrative, legal and commercial activities, which greatly encouraged the spread of literacy beyond the specialised fraternity of scribes. Each field was characterised by particular genres, though these were not necessarily exclusive: administrative files, legal documents (such as contracts and property titles), and commercial records. [Clanchy, 1993] While all these genres were well represented in Anglo-French Ireland, they were virtually absent in Gaelic Ireland.

The conventional assumption is that the administrative, legal and commercial sectors remained underdeveloped in Gaelic Ireland because it was poor and backward, but this explanation seems insufficient. Feudal kings, princes and lords elsewhere did not develop efficient administrative systems because they were wealthy; they developed them in order to acquire wealth. Nor is it at all obvious that the ordinary people in the feudal regions of Ireland were more prosperous than their Gaelic counterparts: accounts written by outsiders comment on the healthy physique of the native population. [Quinn, 1966] Perhaps the most striking evidence pointing to the weakness of such explanations was the change in political fortunes of the two Irelands. From the beginning of the fourteenth century, it was not the Gaelic world which found itself on the defensive, rather the reverse. Not only did the Gaelic clans reclaim substantial territory, but their language and customs, and even law, also came to be adapted by much of the Anglo-French community. By the sixteenth century, Gaelic had become the dominant language throughout most of Ireland. French had long since disappeared and English was spoken only in the towns and in a few small rural areas, to the north of Dublin and south of Wexford. It seems that most of the lords of Anglo-French extraction who attended the 1534 Parliament in Dublin – where Henry VIII was declared King of Ireland and head of the Church – did not understand English. [Quinn & Nicholls, 1976]

In explaining the reverses suffered by the Anglo-French order in late medieval Ireland, historians have tended to concentrate on military and constitutional factors, and to under-emphasise the broader socio-economic context within which this reversal occurred. It is certainly the case that from the late thirteenth

century, the feudal colony had serious difficulties defending itself from Gaelic attacks, yet it seems clear that these military difficulties were linked to the colonial administration's inability to raise the material resources necessary for their defence. Moreover the changed military balance in Ireland was indicative that the Gael were learning from their enemies. Military reverses and cultural assimilation were organically bound. [Frame, 1998]

From a broader perspective it is evident that the difficulties experienced by the English colony formed part of a more general political and social disorder – the fourteenth century crisis – that tore apart the medieval world. The old feudal order could no longer function in the way it had in the preceding centuries and new social, political and cultural forms emerged. These new forms, the outcome of the crisis, varied greatly in different parts of Europe and would have immense long-term consequences. [P. Anderson, 1974a; Brenner, 1996] In the case of Ireland, the fourteenth century crisis resulted in a resurgent Gaelic power. Gaelic resurgence though, led to greater, not less, contact between the English and the Gaelic worlds, which came to be interconnected in a myriad of ways. This outcome, however, makes the failure of Gaelic society to develop a 'typical' late medieval pattern of literacy all the more difficult to understand.

### **The Traditionalism of the Literate Caste**

An alternative explanation for the failure of Gaelic society to adapt the typical late-medieval literate forms might focus on the role of the literate caste.

In the medieval period aside from the clergy there also existed a distinctive secular literate stratum, the *aosdana*, comprising three main groups: the poets (*fili*), the legal profession (*brehons*) and the medical profession. There seems little doubt that they were, in general, highly conservative, determined to preserve the traditions – real or imagined – of the Gaelic order. In particular, they were understandably anxious to preserve their own privileged position within that order. The archaic character of Gaelic literacy is clear from the structure of the literate stratum – dominated by learned families – and from the range of genres which they produced. [Nicholls, 1972]

Despite the evident traditionalism of the learned strata it would be hasty to pinpoint the sole responsibility upon them for the failure of the Gaelic world to use written language along the normal late-medieval lines. Had the Gaelic chiefs been determined to develop their own bureaucratic administration they would certainly have found educated persons willing to take up the task. The *fili* were eager for patronage. While the leading poets would most likely not have deigned to sink to such prosaic activity, there would surely have been many less skilled, but still literate figures, willing to do the job.

The *fili* were not the only reserve of literate culture available to the Gaelic chiefs. Elsewhere in Europe it was the clerics – thus the word – who undertook to develop a secular bureaucratic system. [Bloch, 1961] Throughout the late medieval period the leading Gaelic chiefs made a point of cultivating close relationships with religious orders. The Gaelic clerics themselves had long been proponents of political centralisation in Ireland. They had earlier played a key role in codifying Irish law and ensuring that it carried some trace of canon law. Given their international connections and their command of Latin, they were ideally placed to transmit Roman law, and the skills of bureaucratic organisation into Gaelic Ireland. [Mooney, 1969; Watt, 1998] There is little reason to doubt that the priests and monks would have performed such a function in Ireland had they been called on to do so.

To conclude: neither geographical isolation nor the innate traditionalism of the learned strata adequately explain why Gaelic society failed to develop a more diffuse pattern of literacy. Gaelic society was changing and it was borrowing many features from its neighbours, but there appear to have been crucial limits to this borrowing. The failure of the Gaelic rulers to develop their own bureaucratic apparatus, or to mint their own coinage, would seem to point towards their political weakness. Political weakness on the part of the Gaelic chiefs, however, would seem to run against the evidence presented by the historians of the period, that from the fourteenth to the sixteenth century the Gaelic chiefs significantly increased their political and military power within their own territories. [Nicholls, 1976; Simms, 1987]



## The Evolution of the Gaelic Polity

Unlike other West European countries in the late medieval period, Gaelic Ireland did not develop an administrative system based on writing. This deviation from “typical” West European development needs some explanation.

From the thirteenth century onwards, Gaelic chiefs began building castle-type fortifications, first of wood and later of stone. They also began to recruit warriors from outside their own kin groups. These changes in the physical and social structures of military power suggest that the chiefs significantly increased their power in the late medieval period, which might justify the claims by Elizabethan administrators and propagandists that they operated as despotic rulers within their own territories. [Quinn, 1966; Spenser, 1970] There are grounds, however, for doubting whether the power of the Gaelic chiefs really was as great as it appears in the writings of the Elizabethan commentators.

The annals of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries document a seemingly endless succession of cattle-raids and feuds – the two went hand in hand – between and within septs, which makes the picture of the Gaelic chiefs exercising a monopoly of force within their territories difficult to credit. [Annals of the Four Masters, Annals of Ulster] Right throughout the late Middle Ages one finds the English administration trying to pressurise the Gaelic chiefs to control their own followers, and while the chiefs were willing enough to give such guarantees, they appear to have been unable to implement them. One historian has described political life in late medieval Ireland as ‘very much an endless competition for power between chiefs and would-be chiefs. In such a struggle the decisive factor was the possession of the wealth likely to attract support’. [Frame, 1998, p. 253]

As well as controlling their followers, despotic chiefs might have been expected to ensure a peaceful succession. In fact, uncontested successions of chieftainship seem to have been rare in late Gaelic Ireland; uncontested cases of primogeniture rarer still. The survival of the institution of ‘tanistry’ – whereby a deputy chief had his own power base – certainly militated against the passing of power from a chief to one of his sons. [Nicholls, 1972] The very fact that such an institution as tanistry survived into the late sixteenth century, despite the best efforts of the Tudor government, suggests the operation of power in Gaelic

Ireland was a good deal more complex than the Elizabethan writers imagined. If chiefs were so powerful within their own territories, why would they permit a rival centre of power to exist?

The increased use of warriors from outside their own sept in the late medieval period would certainly have changed the balance of forces within a given territory, as well as making late Gaelic Ireland a more militarised society. Yet one needs to be cautious before assuming, as some historians have done, that the military situation in late Gaelic Ireland was analogous to warfare in say, Renaissance Italy. [Simms, 1987] It was not only the major chiefs who began hiring outside fighters; it would appear that most of the sub-chiefs did so too. Historians normally refer to these warriors as mercenaries, which implies that they worked for a wage, but money played only a limited role in the Gaelic economy. As late as the 1590s, Gaelic clansmen were bartering cattle to acquire weapons from the towns. [Calendar of State Papers, 1860-1912]

The first 'mercenary' grouping were the *Gallo glaigh* (literally foreign warriors) recruited from the Norse-Gaelic communities of the Scottish islands who served Gaelic chiefs of the north and west from the fourteenth century. Significantly these groups of warriors were themselves organised on a kinship basis and were compensated for their services by grants of land. The Anglo-French lords were the first to use *kerne*, foot-soldiers of Gaelic extraction, once again organised in kin-groups, but by the sixteenth century their use was widespread throughout Gaelic Ireland. In the sixteenth century, these *kerne* were being compensated for their services with cattle (though valued in money terms). [Nicholls, 1972; Simms, 1987]

Mercenaries, especially outsiders, have always been useful to rulers because they are not part of networks of local loyalty. The great danger with using mercenaries is that they become too powerful and attempt to usurp power themselves, as happened on occasion in Renaissance Italy. There are no examples of this happening in Gaelic controlled regions, though it did happen in Leinster, where Gaelic warriors employed by Anglo-French lords seized territory in their own name claiming it as their ancestral lands. This suggests that while mercenaries were important in Gaelic regions in late-medieval Ireland, they never acquired too much power.

For any ruler seeking to centralise power, be it locally or regionally, it would have been clearly necessary to significantly increase the resources available to them, or to increase their *share* of those resources. If the Gaelic chiefs had acquired a monopoly of power in their territories, it would surely have involved a considerable increase in the level of exactions, to use the Elizabethan term, that they were able to impose. The evidence here is interesting, because a document from the sixteenth century makes it clear that in the O'Neill country – the most powerful Gaelic chiefdom – no such increase had occurred. It is only at the beginning of the seventeenth century that there is evidence of a significant increase in the level of surplus extraction. [Dillon, 1966; Simms, 1987] This would seem to point to the late sixteenth century as the crucial era of transformations of power *within* Gaelic Ireland.

The failure of Gaelic chiefs to develop a bureaucratic administration based on writing becomes less puzzling if it is accepted that throughout the late-medieval period they actually possessed fairly limited power within their own territories. The really dramatic changes come in the Renaissance era, especially towards its end in the late sixteenth century. This thesis will attempt to examine how these changes related to the practice of literacy in Ireland, but before doing so it will be necessary to see what was being changed: to examine how literacy did function in late-medieval Gaelic Ireland.

### **Law in Gaelic Society**

Alongside the failure of the Gaelic chiefs to develop an administrative system based on writing, the legal system in late Gaelic Ireland was atypical in a wider European context.

The role of law in late Gaelic society seems puzzling: there are numerous texts on or about Gaelic or brehon law but no case files. This has led some scholars to doubt whether brehon law functioned at all in the late medieval period. It has been suggested that the brehons, whether acting as arbitrators or advisors, operated in a purely pragmatic way, while maintaining the fiction of adherence to ancient law. [Binchy, 1975/1976]

There is in fact ample evidence, not least from English sources, that central elements of brehon law continued in operation until the defeat of the Gaelic forces in the Nine Years War (1594 – 1603). A key facet of Gaelic law was the concept of collective responsibility for crime. Although this was strongly denounced by English commentators, the Dublin administration was willing to collude with it, when it suited its purposes, holding an entire sept responsible for the actions of some of its members. [Frame, 1998; N. Patterson, 1989]

The principle of the ascendancy of the collective – the kin grouping or *sliocht* – ran through all aspects of Gaelic law. Despite the enormous changes that had occurred from the time Gaelic law was first written down to the close of the Gaelic order, a thousand years or so later, there are important elements of continuity in the basic features of law.

The primacy of the kin grouping was particularly important in the area where legality and the written word were at their most critical in late medieval society: land ownership. Individual land ownership did not exist in Gaelic society; control of land was vested in the corporate grouping, the *sliocht*. The whole notion of land ownership had little relevance to the Gaelic order: what mattered was *access to* and *rights over* land. Both were determined by membership of the *sliocht*. Documentary evidence of land ownership carried little weight here, and consequently there was no great requirement to be able to read such documents. All this would change of course once the Tudors began the process of incorporating Gaelic Ireland into their dominion, but it is precisely the radical character of these changes that needs to be underlined.

### **Social Production and Exchange in Gaelic Society**

The third aspect, in which late Gaelic Ireland differed from the ‘typical’ West European pattern, was the form of exchange and commercial activities.

The proliferation of money and of commerce in the high and late Middle Ages appears to have played a crucial role in the spread of literacy across western Europe. [Clanchy, 1993; Schousboe, 1989] Throughout most of this period there was extensive trading between the Gaelic regions and the towns. Despite this, money remained on the margins of Gaelic life and Gaelic chiefs did not mint their own coins. This seeming resistance to monetisation needs some explanation. [Dolley, 1987; Nicholls, 1972]

Historical anthropologists have distinguished three different forms of distribution of resources in societies: market exchange, redistribution and reciprocity. [Polanyi, 1971] All three are to be found in late Gaelic Ireland, though not in equal measure. The major form of wealth was also the primary medium of exchange: cattle.

The major patterns of material production in Gaelic Ireland did not change very much from the early medieval to the late medieval period. Ireland was and remained a predominantly pastoral society. Cattle production was central, with the growing of oats a secondary element.

A distinctive feature of pastoral societies is the mobility of their major resources. Livestock circulate easily and increase rapidly, facilitating accumulation and inequality. They are also vulnerable to theft or seizure. [Godelier, 1986] As against this, cattle-herders are well placed to avoid what they might consider to be excessive exactions placed on them by fleeing with their herds. [Runciman, 1989] Nor does pastoral production respond to strategies of labour intensification: cattle watched harder or longer do not increase more rapidly.

There was a close correlation between wealth and power in Gaelic Ireland. The possession of cattle attracted followers whose numbers were necessary to protect the cattle from seizure or theft. Without cattle – or the prospects of them – there was little chance of acquiring followers, and without followers or allies, it might prove difficult to keep one's cattle. Substantial herds were certainly held by chiefs and other wealthy persons, yet it is in the very nature of cattle grazing that there are limits to the concentration of cattle. Aside from over-grazing, a significant degree of dispersal of cattle is important to prevent, or at least limit, the spread of disease. [N. Patterson, 1994]

Pastoral societies display paradoxical features. The facility to accumulate cattle is accompanied by the need to disperse them, while the facility to seize the wealth of a more vulnerable party is matched by their ability to escape from domination. Because wealth and power were inseparable, these tensions went to the heart of power relations in Gaelic Ireland.

Strong kinship networks were common enough in medieval Europe; what distinguished the Gaelic world, even as late as the sixteenth century, was their durability and their pervasiveness. These kinship forms survived so long and remained so strong because they provided a framework for managing these basic tensions at the core of pastoral social organisation.

### **Gaelic Social Organisation**

The key elements of power in this society centred on access to land and cattle. Access to land was crucially determined by relations of kinship. The notion of individual ownership of land was alien to the Gaelic order. Land was a collective inheritance, the legacy of the clan. Kinship gave one a share. Access to cattle was more complicated. Unlike land, cattle were individually owned. [Nicholls, 1972, 1987] To prevent over-grazing, disease and seizure, cattle would be dispersed. This generally took the form of 'lending' cattle to poorer kinsmen or to other herders outside the sept. These 'clients' would look after the cattle, and provide the lender with calves and dairy products in return. [N. Patterson, 1994] Both parties could be seen to benefit from this arrangement. The lender had someone else look after his cattle, while still receiving meat and dairy products. The client had access to dairy produce and some meat.

The early law tracts distinguished between two types of clientship: dependent and autonomous. [Kelly, 1988] While this distinction seems to have disappeared by the late Middle Ages, it captures something of the ambivalent character of the basic relationship of clientship. The receivers were clearly dependent on the 'generosity' of the donors, yet the fact that they were in actual possession of the cattle, which they could move if they felt they had to, gave them some real leverage in the situation. This leverage must have acted as a disincentive to the use of coercion in the event of dispute. While coercion might have worked in the immediate situation, in the long run it could be counter-productive. What mattered most to the lender was the maintenance of an enduring association and this could best be achieved by mutual accord. Such an accord was more likely to be achieved where strong bonds of kinship existed.

These barriers to extracting surplus produce at the micro level of the patron/client relationship were similar to those that operated at the broader level of the *tuath* (local territorial unit), or indeed at the national level. According to the old law texts, chiefs were chosen by the inner circle of the leading lineage, in consultation with other lineages of the *tuath*. In practice, by the late Middle Ages, the position of chief went to the person from the leading lineage who had the greatest number of followers. [Simms, 1987; Nicholls, 1976] These followers would have included warriors, clients who were indebted to the would-be chief, and allies, who could supply their own warriors as well as provisions. To create such a coalition of followers the prospective chief would have needed not only to be a charismatic figure, perhaps best measured in military prowess, but also to be bountiful. Without bounty, support would abate.

The office of chief entitled the holder to reserves of land across the *tuath*, as well as tribute. The same was true for the office of *táiniste* (second in command), who acquired a smaller reserve of land and tribute. Acquiring and maintaining these positions involved the use of force, but it involved more than that. The distinction between subalterns and allies must have been a grey one.

The principle of reciprocity permeated every aspect of Gaelic society, from top to bottom. Land was shared among kinfolk. So too was agricultural labour, though the clan elite were of course exempt. 'Clientship', the most general form of social exchange, assumed the guise of reciprocity: the donor gave a gift of cattle to the client who reciprocated with calves and dairy produce. Aspiring leaders gave gifts of cattle to their followers. Every gift demanded a return. Generosity was the highest virtue; parsimony the most contemptible of vices. [Nicholls, 1972; Watt, 1987]

This emphasis on gifts was most likely related to the weakness of centralised political power in Gaelic Ireland. Chris Wickham has noted what he describes as an essential tenet of comparative sociology: "the less hierarchy, and the less stable and inherited authority there is in a society, the more people one has to win with generosity, food or charisma to gain political support, and the longer one has to go on doing it." [Wickham, 1992, p.241]

The principle of reciprocity here does not imply or assume an equality of power. Quite often it disguises a relationship which is not only unequal but exploitative, with the more powerful player extracting surplus produce. A major form of tribute in Gaelic society was 'guesting'. Chiefs and their retinues would tour their territories and expect lavish receptions wherever they stayed. While these occasions clearly stretched the resources of their hosts, they took place under the veil of customary hospitality. [N. Patterson, 1994; Simms, 1978]

The major form of tribute to chiefs took the form of payment in cattle. There was small chance here of cloaking the asymmetrical character of the exchange, nonetheless the theme of reciprocity was maintained. In return for tribute the chiefs guaranteed protection. Assurances of protection were of course the stock-in-trade of medieval lords across Europe. In a pastoralist economy, however, where communal resources were much more assailable, the issue of protection was more pressing and these pledges seem to have carried more weight than elsewhere. The emphasis on reciprocity remained.

### **The Social Function of Gaelic Literacy**

The above discussion on social power in the Gaelic order shows the social context within which Gaelic literacy functioned. In the absence of a centralised authority, maintaining a sense of tradition was vital to upholding social order.

The function of the learned stratum in the Gaelic order, according to medieval historian Michael Richter, was to pass on the traditional learning: the *seanchas*. Originally this tradition had existed in oral form, in verse, but following the adoption of literacy, it came to be written down, though much of it remained in verse. [Richter, 1994] The high status accorded to the learned stratum indicates that this traditional learning itself carried great weight. [Ó Cuív, 1961, 1976]

The bardic poets have been the focus of a debate among historians in recent years. Some have stressed the role of the *filii* as the articulators of the Gaelic mindset or at least of the mindset of the Gaelic elite. The poets were attempting to influence the Gaelic rulers. Other historians have argued that because their poetry was produced for patrons, it was these patrons who determined the content of the poetry. Moreover while individual poems may display stylistic virtuosity, they conform closely to generic conventions and display very little



originality of thought. Some modern scholars have been dismissive of the learned stratum of late Gaelic Ireland, accusing them of being blind to the political and social changes occurring around them. [Caball, 1998; Dunne, 1980]

The typical praise poem emphasises the martial valour and generosity of the leader to whom the poem was addressed, and invariably presents the patron in a historical tradition of heroic leadership. This stress on the patron's generosity is usually interpreted as referring to his relationship towards the poets; the analysis of Gaelic society presented above suggests that the spirit of generosity being praised may have had a wider resonance than that conferred on the poets.

Most of the late-Gaelic writings do indeed display a preoccupation with the past and an insistence on the importance of continuity, custom and tradition. One should not, however, assume that the *filí* were out of touch with what was happening in Renaissance-era Ireland. Given that they were the only grouping in Gaelic Ireland who really operated on a national basis and who travelled throughout Ireland (and the Gaelic areas of Scotland) it seems most unlikely that they were either unaware of or indifferent towards the changes taking place around them. [Caball, 1998; Leerssen, 1996]

People living in medieval Europe had a very different sense of time from our modern conceptions. [Gurevich, 1985] In this respect, the Gaelic sense of time was not so different except that it persisted into the Renaissance era whereas elsewhere in Europe a new sense of time emerged. The term Renaissance is, of course, notoriously difficult to define; the term itself was first used in the nineteenth century. Yet certain elements do stand out. "From the fourteenth to the sixteenth century and from one end of Europe to the other, the men of the Renaissance were convinced that the period in which they lived was a new age as sharply different from the medieval past as the medieval had been from classical antiquity and marked by a concerted effort to revive the culture of the latter" [Panofsky, 1960, p.36] This changed historical consciousness has been emphasised by other scholars. It is precisely such a consciousness of living in a new age that appears so strikingly absent in the Gaelic world, at least prior to the Tudor expansion. Everywhere in Gaelic culture the emphasis was on continuity with the past, not on any radical breach with it. This emphasis of continuity does not mean that no changes occurred or that there were no ruptures, even in the cultural sphere, but that Gaelic writers, unlike most of their counterparts in Europe, chose for their own reasons to emphasise continuity with the past. The

notions of progress and development had no place in their thought. The past was no foreign country. Individuals and generations came and went of course, but the deeper truth lay in the continuity of life. It is not that people were unaware of change but that change was not equated with progress.

All the major genres of Gaelic literate culture – the legal texts, the bardic poetry, the genealogical texts, the lives of saints, the heroic sagas – share this sense of time. It expresses, not so much a preoccupation with the past, as an insistence on continuity with the past. This is clear even with the annals, the one genre which seemed to be focused on the present. For anyone reading the annals the message of time is clear enough. Everything which happens merely repeats what has happened in the past.

This immersion in tradition, especially on the part of the literate stratum, was not a product of their ignorance of their world, it was based rather on an acute understanding of *their* world, the Gaelic social order. For the learned stratum of Gaelic Ireland, the alternative to tradition was not progress or development, it was chaos. The perpetual spectre of chaos was a direct counterpart to the weakness of any central power in the Gaelic world. In this situation the normative power of tradition acted as a vital contribution to the maintenance of order.

This is clearly evident with Gaelic law. Cattle-raiding seems to have been endemic in pastoral societies. A system of collective responsibility for crime was probably the only form which was likely to work in a society where powerful kinship networks were crucially important and where state institutions were very weak. Through collective responsibility the Gaelic chiefs and their brehons could prevent a crime turning into a full scale feud; the payment of hefty compensation, usually of cattle, helped ameliorate the feelings of the injured group while encouraging the others to impose restraint on their own members.

A similar pattern is apparent with the poets. Their poetry legitimated contemporary chiefs by associating them with traditional heroism and generosity. The same association between tradition and social order can be observed in relation to all the genres in Gaelic literate culture. The *fili* then are not merely praising a particular leader within a poem, they are legitimating the traditional Gaelic social order. It is only when this social order is itself facing extinction that a rupture appears in Gaelic literacy.

## **Literacy and the Gaelic Order: Summary and Implications**

On the wider European stage the late Middle Ages saw an increase in administrative, legal and commercial activities, which greatly encouraged the spread of literacy beyond the specialised fraternity of scribes. This did not happen in Gaelic Ireland.

In the mid-to-late medieval period, Gaelic Ireland had a predominantly pastoralist economy. Tensions and antagonisms in this type of society could be best contained through the maintenance of strong networks of kinship. The primacy of the kin grouping was particularly important when it came to land ownership. Individual land ownership did not exist in Gaelic society and membership of a kinship network guaranteed access to and rights over land. Since land ownership was collective, there was no need to document individual possession of land and to keep written records.

The major patterns of material production in Gaelic Ireland did not change very much from the early medieval to the late medieval period. Pastoralist production was predominant and cattle remained the major form of wealth and the primary medium of exchange. Money operated on the margins of Gaelic life, and Gaelic chiefs did not mint their own coins. There was little evidence of markets in Gaelic regions and urban settlements were very thin on the ground. The proliferation of money and of commerce in the high and late Middle Ages which appears to have played a crucial role in the spread of literacy across western Europe, remained on the margins in Gaelic Ireland.

While the Gaelic chiefs significantly increased their power in the late medieval period, they never achieved a monopoly of force within their own territories. This limited power helps to explain their failure to develop a bureaucratic administration based on writing. While the development of administrative systems elsewhere in Europe encouraged the diffusion of literacy, this change did not occur in late Gaelic Ireland.

The literate stratum in other West European countries was drawn into administrative, legal and later commercial activities, and thus helped to spread literate practices. This, however, did not apply in Gaelic Ireland. In the absence of administrative structures, it fell to the Gaelic literate caste to uphold a

normative order, which was best achieved through the preservation of social and cultural tradition. Their role was to maintain the continuity of social order over time. The Gaelic literate caste was dominated by learned families, who were anxious to preserve their own privileged position within that social order, and thus instead of helping the spread of literacy inhibited it.

Collective landownership, a mainly pastoralist economy and the lack of administrative structures distinguished Gaelic Ireland from other West European countries in the late medieval period. Since the political, economic and legal structures did not require the keeping of written records and documentation, a wider diffusion of literacy was less necessary in Gaelic Ireland than elsewhere in Western Europe. The different social context led to different literacy practices and delayed the diffusion of literacy in Gaelic Ireland.

The study of literacy in Gaelic Ireland reveals a situation where literacy practices are firmly embedded in a particular structure of social relations. There is little to indicate that literacy practices display any spontaneous tendency to encourage social development or bring about structural changes in the organisation of society. This picture is certainly consistent with that drawn by the 'new literacy' theorists in their discussion of the historical role of literacy. It is not, however, incompatible with Goody's discussion of situations of 'restricted literacy', whereby a literate caste can play a culturally conservative role, seeking to preserve its own privileged position within society. It has already been noted in Chapter One that it is not at all clear how this characterisation of restricted literacy fits into a theoretical perspective that argues for the primacy of writing in determining historical change. If patterns of literacy can play a conservative role in societies for an extended period, this surely raises questions as to whether any inherent tendency exists within writing as a mode of communication to promote long-term change.

## **Literacy and Social Organisation in the Anglo-French Colony**

### **Introduction**

The previous chapter explored the literacy practices and social organisation of Gaelic Ireland in the mid-to-late medieval period; this chapter will look at the literacy practices and social organisation of Anglo-French Ireland in the same era.

In the twelfth century Anglo-French knights colonised substantial parts of Ireland, especially the south and east. They established a social organisation along mainstream western European lines and introduced a corresponding pattern of pragmatic literacy covering administrative, commercial and legal fields. Yet the trend towards a more general diffusion of literacy – associated with the widespread use of vernacular literacy – does not appear to have occurred, and there is little evidence that literacy became diffused beyond the aristocratic, clerical or mercantile elites.

This chapter will explore the role that literacy played in Anglo-French Ireland in the mid-to-late medieval period and will attempt to explain why literacy practices came to diverge from the ‘typical’ west European pattern of that time.

### **The Structure of Anglo-French Ireland**

Superficially at least, the socio-political evolution of England and the southern and eastern regions of Ireland in the eleventh and twelfth centuries seems fairly similar. Both were conquered by French-speaking knights who established a seigniorial social order under the authority of the English monarch. In both territories a manorial economy was developed along with castles, trade and urban centres. The Latin Church played a crucial role in their cultural life; most of those who could read and write were clerics, and the Latin language played a central role in their culture.

A few centuries later, certainly by 1500, literacy was becoming diffused throughout England. Latin retained a position of importance, but it was in the process of being superseded by the vernacular. Alongside the development of a vernacular English literacy in the second half of the sixteenth century, English itself came to acquire – through the medium of the Chancery – a standard written form. [Fisher, 1986] Literacy was no longer confined to clerics or professional scribes, but had become much more widely diffused, not only among the nobility, but throughout English society. [Clanchy, 1993]

Across most of the south and east of Ireland, the descendants of the French-speaking warrior elite retained control and for the most part remained loyal, at least nominally, to the King of England. But while a good deal of ‘pragmatic’ writing survives, there appears to have been little general diffusion of literacy. Later in the thesis, the implications of this will be explored, but the more immediate concern here is to explain why literacy in eastern Ireland did not undergo the same diffusion that occurred in England.

Before examining these issues it is worth pointing out the very real achievements of the Anglo-French elite in medieval Ireland.

*Political supremacy:* Within a few decades they had established military supremacy across most of the island; by the end of the thirteenth century they controlled over two-thirds of Ireland. Gaelic power was confined to the western regions or mountainous and marshy areas of the south and east, and even there, they were usually subordinate to the local Anglo-French feudal lord.

*Government and law:* While the Anglo-French knights’ involvement in Ireland began as something of a freelance adventure, it was quickly brought under the control of the English monarchy, with the imprimatur of the Papacy. The institutions of royal government and law were developed in subsequent decades.

*Manorial organisation:* Throughout most of the south and east of Ireland, the Anglo-French lords established a vibrant manorial economy, based upon intensive arable agriculture and involving a significant movement away from pastoral husbandry.

*Urban growth and commerce:* Alongside a manorial economy, an extensive trade network and urban development occurred. The Vikings had already established towns along the Irish coastline; these were occupied and consolidated by the Anglo-French forces, and new cities were established.

*Religious organisation:* The conquest was accompanied by the introduction of 'orthodox' religious structures and monastic organisation; from the twelfth century onwards, the Christian Church in Ireland was systematically re-organised in line with orthodox Roman practices.

These social, political and cultural developments which transformed Ireland in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries were part and parcel of a wider European dynamic which would lay the foundation for the early modern state, with its extensive pattern of literacy. Yet despite their achievements, the Anglo-French elite in Ireland did not bring about a more general diffusion of vernacular literacy, neither in English, French, or Gaelic, nor – as occurred in England – did a new linguistic synthesis emerge.

### **Language and Literacy in Anglo-French Ireland**

The Anglo-French colonisers of the twelfth century brought with them to Ireland a regime founded upon literate practices, similar to that operating in England. The English system of law and government was transferred to Ireland virtually unchanged. Like England, literacy practices were focused upon religion, law and government and writing was carried out in two languages: Latin and French. Latin was the primary language of religion; Latin and French were the only languages of law and government.

Record keeping was at the heart of the system of law and government. All landholdings derived ultimately from royal bequest and all such holdings had to be recorded. The functioning of government depended upon its ability to tax, and any taxes raised, in whatever form, had to be carefully documented.

While French was not widely spoken, it seems to have been commonly used not only in aristocratic and clerical circles, but also in the commercial life of the towns. It was used by the burgesses of Irish towns to record important events. There were also some literary works in French from the twelfth century; no literary writings in English appear in Ireland before the fourteenth century. Both Latin and French were used to record acts of the Irish parliaments until 1472, when English came to replace French. [Picard, 2003]

The warrior and clerical elite who conquered the east and south of Ireland spoke a dialect of French as their first language, though this began to decline over the course of the thirteenth century. French continued to be used (alongside Latin) for government documents and legal records up until the end of the fifteenth century, and was also used as the *lingua franca* of trade and commerce.

Apart from the French-speaking elite, the twelfth century witnessed a substantial popular migration of English – and to a lesser extent Welsh and Flemish – speakers into Ireland. For a period the three languages – English, French and Irish – appear to have vied with each other for supremacy. However, by the late thirteenth century English had clearly become the dominant language of the towns and large parts of eastern Ireland, developing its own dialect characteristics, known to historians as Hiberno-English (not to be confused with modern Irish dialects of English).

English was not widely used in official documents in Ireland until the later part of the fifteenth century. The municipal statutes of Waterford were exceptional in being recorded in Hiberno-English from 1365. The same dialect was used in some private documents in the fifteenth century. After 1500 English was widely used in writing, though by the middle of the century no longer displayed features of the Hiberno-English dialect. This increased use of written English in the later part of the fifteenth century is somewhat paradoxical: it came *after* English had declined as a *spoken* language in Ireland, to be replaced by (Gaelic) Irish. [Bliss, 1976]

From the mid-fourteenth century onwards, English from having been widely spoken across eastern Ireland, declined significantly to a point where by the early sixteenth century it was not spoken at all outside of the towns and a couple of small rural areas (the Forth and Bargo area south of Wexford town, and Fingal in north county Dublin). In the towns themselves the poorer population



seem to have spoken Irish as a first language and it would seem that most English-speakers were bilingual. The clearest evidence for the decline of English in medieval Ireland comes from the acts passed by an Irish parliament in 1366 – the Statutes of Kilkenny – which prohibited the use of the Irish language, on pain of losing one’s lands. The statutes make clear that the English colony in Ireland had undergone a profound transformation in the fourteenth century, of which linguistic change was only one element. [Bliss & Long, 1987]

### **Law and Social Structure in the English Colony**

There is no way of calculating the exact size of the English community in medieval Ireland though it seems clear that there was a mass English settlement in Ireland in the twelfth century. Historians cannot quantify quite how dense the settlement was, though there is little doubt that there was a substantial merchant, artisan and peasant English community in the south and east of Ireland in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. This mass migration clearly differentiates the thirteenth century conquest of Ireland from that of England a century earlier, where the settlement was confined to an aristocratic – warrior and clerical – stratum. [Empey, 1986; O’Brien, 1993]

From the broader perspective, this migration can be seen as part of the wider expansion of the feudal social order across the European continent. The knights were able to use their superior military power to seize large stretches of territory but these territories were of no use to them without peasants to work them. This same period saw a demographic boom which ensured that there were large numbers of peasants looking for new land to farm. In order to make it worth their while to travel long distances to a new home, the lords granted them favourable conditions, including freedom from servile status. [Bartlett, 1993; Brenner, 1996]

The conquest of England occurred before the major demographic expansion of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Perhaps more importantly, England had been manorialised long before the coming of the Norman-French and it was more densely populated than Ireland. [Empey, 1986] While arable agriculture did exist in Ireland before the Anglo-French conquest, it had always played a subordinate role to pastoralism. To develop demesne agriculture and take advantage of trade, the Anglo-French lords needed to encourage settlers. As well

as building castles and dividing up their new lands, the lords established towns, or at least burgage tenure appropriate for urban growth. [Empey, 1986]

By the mid-thirteenth century the Anglo-French colony was at the height of its power. Most of Leinster, Munster, and eastern Ulster had been subdued, and Anglo-French knights had even established military supremacy in Connaught. Throughout most of the conquered region, a manorial economy had been established which produced a surplus large enough to permit a substantial export of grain and other produce. The existence of a large agricultural surplus encouraged the formation of an extensive urban settlement and helped finance many of the English wars against Scotland and France. [Down, 1987; O'Brien, 1993]

The peasant population was divided into two main groups: a stratum of small free peasants who were predominantly of English extraction, and the unfree *betagh* population, the original Irish inhabitants. In the documents of the time the terms *hibernici* and *servi* tend to be used interchangeably. It seems that the *betagh* continued to farm in their traditional manner, in kindred groups, while at the same time contributing labour services to their Anglo-French lords. This servile Irish population, like the unfree *villein* class in England, was excluded from royal law. They were also prohibited from making wills and testaments. The killing of an Irishman was not a felony, while, correspondingly, to accuse someone of being Irish was considered defamatory. A petition by leading clerics to have English law extended to the Irish population of the colony in the 1270s was rejected by the Crown. [Bartlett, 1993; Hand, 1966a]

The exclusion of the Irish population – like the exclusion of *villeins* in England – from royal law had the effect of increasing the power of the lords; the unfree peasant had no legal protection from their arbitrary demands. “The essential point is that the services were uncertain. The only restriction on the lord’s power to set the number of days to be worked on his domain was the custom of the manor. If any dispute arose it could only be litigated in the lord’s court. Villeins had no right to bring an action in the king’s court. The villein’s unfree status meant that he had no rights against the lord: the relationship was one of power, the power of the lord over the tenant, rather than a relationship of law in which the parties had rights and duties in relationship to each other.” [Lyall, 1994, p. 57]

Such a situation would hardly have seemed propitious for the gaelicisation of the English population in Ireland, yet over the next century, much of the English colony did indeed become gaelicised. While the formal legal framework persisted, the actual social context of the Anglo-French colony was transformed. Historians have traditionally explained the gaelicisation of the fourteenth century in narrowly military or political terms, but neither Edward Bruce's military engagement in Ireland in the course of the English/Scottish wars, nor the increased military capacity of the Gaelic septs can convincingly explain this transformation.

The records of the 1297 parliament, long before the Bruce campaign (1315-1318) make it clear that the colony was in a deep crisis, while the military weakness of the Dublin administration in the fourteenth century is directly related to their declining revenues. [Connolly, 1984] The breakdown of the Anglo-French order in the fourteenth century becomes less mysterious if it is borne in mind that all the evidence points to a generalised crisis of European feudal society in these years. [P. Anderson, 1974a; Hilton, 1985]

The Statutes of Kilkenny in 1366 were not directed solely, or perhaps even primarily, against the indigenous Irish community. They clearly targeted people of English descent (defined by law as 'English') who were unable to speak the English language. Any 'English' person holding a benefice who did not speak English was given six months to learn it, or they would forfeit their benefice. These prohibitions were not confined to language issues; they were directed against a whole range of social customs, including the use of Irish dress, names, music and sport. They testify to the gradual gaelicisation of the 'English' population in the colony.

This process of gaelicisation involved more than simple cultural absorption; it seems clear that the colony was experiencing a deeper social crisis. Many of the statutes were of a more direct socio-economic import. The price of merchandise was to be fixed by officials, as were the wages of labourers. Labourers were forbidden to emigrate and any caught doing so were to be sentenced to a year's imprisonment. [Hand, 1966b]

Such measures were not confined to Ireland. The European feudal social order as a whole was rocked by a deep social crisis throughout the fourteenth century. One of the symptoms of this crisis was widespread revolt against servile conditions and status. While interpretations of the fourteenth century crisis differ, some of its key features are beyond dispute. The productive capacity of medieval agriculture had reached its limits. Feudal lords found themselves faced with increased costs and reduced income and attempted to deal with this by making new impositions upon the peasantry. The peasants responded with resistance or flight. It would seem that the relative ease of flight in the Irish context made full-scale resistance unnecessary.

Many of the measures proclaimed by the Kilkenny parliament in 1366 were repeated across the Latin Christian world with varying degrees of success. The attempt to restrict the rights of labourers replicates the Statutes of Labourers passed by the English parliament in 1349-51. [Hilton, 1985] What is not clear is how these attempts to restrict the freedom of labourers relate to the laws against the use of Irish language and customs. What is the connection between the attempted imposition of serfdom and the assault on gaelicisation?

### **The Crisis of the Feudal Order**

The fortunes of Anglo-French Ireland in this era mirror those of European feudalism as a whole. The amount of land under arable cultivation increased considerably, with a corresponding decline in pasturage and meadowland; as a result manure was less available to fertilise the land. Despite the large surpluses of grain exported or sold on the home market, yields were low. Population had increased and seems to have reached a point of over-population in settled areas by the end of the thirteenth century. [Down, 1987; Nicholls, 1982]

Given the low yields and large surpluses extracted, the living conditions of most of the peasant population must have been precarious. Throughout the High Middle Ages, there was little real technical advance in Europe's agricultural production. Increases in agricultural output were achieved not by greater productivity of the land, but by greater productivity of labour: the peasants worked longer. In this respect feudal Ireland was hardly unique. [Brenner, 1996]

This situation of declining productivity and over-population set the stage for conflict between lords and peasants. The earlier privileges enjoyed by the free peasants began to be eroded. Rents appear to have risen considerably and many lords increased the size of their demesne holdings at the expense of small tenures, a practice that reduced the position of free tenants to labourers. [Down, 1987]

By the beginning of the fourteenth century, many of the formerly free peasants were little better off than serfs, and perhaps worse. In north county Dublin, in the heart of the colony, English tenants, technically free, were subject to servile labour harsher than that imposed on the *betagh* peasants. [Lyons, 1984; Mills, 1890/1891] The laws passed against the flight of labourers do not specify whether these labourers were of English or Irish extraction but given that many were fleeing to England, it seems reasonable to conclude that a substantial number were indeed of English extraction.

These social antagonisms seem likely to have undermined any latent sense of solidarity between the lords and the immigrant peasants against the native population. The colony's earlier cohesion against Gaelic raiding parties depended upon such solidarity, but already by the end of the thirteenth century the Irish parliament was complaining that "felons frequently escape with their plunder because the people of the district do not rise together" and some of them were even "rejoicing in his neighbour's damage and ruin, whereas rightly they should grieve, feign and hide themselves, allowing such felons to pass unscathed with their plunder." [Quoted in Connolly, 1984, p.153]

Even the legal advantages which the English peasant community had earlier enjoyed appear to have been eroded by the fourteenth century. The *betagh* communities, while excluded from English common law, maintained a customary tradition of law by which they were bound. In theory, Irish felons could have been punished by English (royal) law. In practice, lords found it expedient to maintain a relationship with their Irish tenants *as communities*, and the best way of doing so was to operate by customary law, which was probably a mixture of Gaelic law and French baronial law. [Nicholls, 1982] By 1316, the English king was petitioned with a complaint that Irish felons were getting off with fines, even for the homicide of an Englishman. [Hand, 1966a]

By the fourteenth century the flight of English tenants – free or otherwise – had reached such proportions as to undermine much of the manorial economy. Faced with a population flight of English tenants and labourers, the lords were compelled to offer better tenure conditions to their *betagh* communities. Unlike the English tenants, the Gaelic peasants would have been in a better position to depart, with their animals, to autonomous Gaelic areas, and would no doubt have felt less vulnerable to Gaelic raiders. By the early fourteenth century, labour services in Ireland were significantly lighter than in England. [Otway-Ruthven, 1951]

The Black Death, the great plague that cut a swathe through Europe in the fourteenth century, reached Ireland in 1348. It appears to have affected the country unevenly, impacting most on the anglicised areas, especially the towns, with the Gaelic areas suffering much less. [Lydon, 1998] It seems likely that in Ireland as elsewhere, poverty “brought about an enfeeblement of the population’s resistance to disease” [Hilton, 1985, p. 244] Recurrent plague and famine certainly deepened the crisis of the feudal order in Ireland, resulting in serious population loss. The state papers of the time give reports of abandoned villages and depopulated lands. The collapse of population strengthened the position of the peasantry against the lords. The institution of serfdom – in Ireland known as *betaghry* – declined throughout the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries and had virtually died out by 1500. [Down, 1987]

Fourteenth century Ireland saw a substantial shift back to pasture, and with it a different form of social organisation. “The classical kindred organisation of Irish society was particularly suitable for pastoral husbandry, but arable farming worked better with either servile or wage labour.” [O’Brien, 1993, p. 86] In much of the colonised region, a hybrid system seems to have emerged, combining features of Gaelic pastoralism and ‘feudal’ village organisation, with much of the formerly ‘English’ population becoming assimilated to the surrounding Gaelic communities. The disappearance of serfdom forced lords to adopt alternative strategies for acquiring income. Rather than manage their own demesne lands, they increasingly found it expedient to let the land instead. By the fifteenth century the peasantry was renting land, for the most part, and was consequently in a stronger position vis à vis the lords because they now had direct control over their own productive resources.

## **The Changing Role of Towns**

Towns played a crucial role in the development of literacy across Europe. Right up to modern times literacy rates in towns tended to be significantly higher than in the countryside, and those who were literate in rural areas tended to be those who had most contact with urban life. [Houston, 1988] The Anglo-French lords – keenly aware of the economic importance of towns – consolidated their hold on the earlier Viking-built urban settlements and also organised the building of new urban centres across the southern and eastern regions of Ireland. The prosperity of the towns was dependent on trade – on the surplus produced by the agrarian economy. They flourished in the course of agricultural expansion of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, and were hit hard by the fourteenth century crisis.

The decay of the manorial economy in fourteenth century Ireland was accompanied by a dramatic decline in the urban population. Urban decline was common enough across Europe in the fourteenth century, but it seems to have been particularly marked in Ireland. Exact population figures are unavailable, but it has been calculated that the population of Dublin was in the region of between 20,000 and 30,000 inhabitants in the mid-thirteenth century; it fell heavily in the fourteenth century and by as late as 1476 it had not risen to more than 6,000. A similar situation is apparent in the other urban centres. Some towns disappeared altogether while others saw their agricultural hinterland severely shrunken. Even in the capital, Dublin, defence became a serious problem: the frontier began a few miles south of the city walls. [Down, 1987]

This new vulnerability appears to have increased the towns' reliance upon the crown. There were frequent appeals to London for military and financial aid, or at least for the abrogation of taxes due. Not only did the towns maintain close relations with the English government, but they battled to maintain their English identity. Fifteenth century ordinances in Dublin sought to exclude people of 'Irish blood' from becoming citizens or living within the town walls. Similar statutes were introduced in Waterford and other towns. Despite these rulings, many Irish did become citizens, though few held high office. [O'Brien, 1993]

For much of the fourteenth century the English monarchy was itself in a poor position to help the Irish towns. The English kings had their own problems at home and on the continent, while Ireland no longer produced a substantial surplus of grain that might have attracted their interest. Over the course of the century the towns became more distant from the crown and developed closer links with the regional magnates, Dublin with Kildare, Waterford and the south-eastern ports with Ormond, Cork and the southern ports with Desmond.

The changing political direction of the towns in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries corresponded to a shifting economic orientation. Despite their efforts to maintain an English exclusiveness, they had no option but to trade with the Gaelic – and gaelicised – countryside. Though such trade was illegal, the crown had little choice but to tolerate it; besides, they had little power to prevent it. The new commerce reflected the altered social character of the Irish countryside – it was no longer grain which was being exported but hides, wool, and fish, while the main imports were luxury goods, especially wine. The trading partners also changed. Irish ports, especially the southern ones, came to trade in the main with France and Spain, England's major rivals. [Down, 1987; O'Brien, 1993]

### **Christianity and the Transition from Anglo-French to Anglo-Gaelic**

These social trends in mid-to-late medieval Ireland have interesting parallels with developments in the religious sphere. For medieval people, religion was not really a separate domain at all, but an integral part of life. The natural and the social worlds were part of a greater cosmic order, shot through by forces of good and evil. Developments within, or against, the Christian Church had ramifications across society. The Church was also a key practitioner of literacy and changes within in, and relations between it and the wider population, had a great impact on the use of literacy.

The Christian Church was not only an integral part of the Anglo-French colonisation, but in many ways it spearheaded the process. In the decades before the arrival of warriors in 1169, dozens of Cistercian and Augustinian houses were established in Ireland. Their arrival in Ireland occurred at a time when the Latin Church across western Europe had itself been transformed and had come



to play a pivotal role in the whole social order. The new visitors were clearly welcomed, but before long deep tensions developed which set the Christian churchmen against Gaelic tradition. [Southern, 1953; Watt, 1998]

The conflict between the clerics and Gaelic tradition was not, at this stage, motivated by ethnic prejudice, rather the whole evolution of the Latin Church in the eleventh and twelfth centuries set them strongly against central features of Gaelic society. The 'evangelical awakening' of this era was strongly directed against social chaos and the violence of the warrior elite across western Europe. The Church response was not to advocate pacifism, but rather to advocate obedience towards legitimate authority. [Chenu, 1998] The failure of Ireland to establish a stable monarchy no doubt discredited the Gaelic polity in their eyes. As for Gaelic literary culture, it is difficult to imagine a 'structure of feeling' more at variance with the mood of twelfth century churchmen than that expressed in the heroic sagas of the Gaelic tradition. If the first Christian missionaries came to Ireland when the Latin Church was at its lowest point, and showed exceptional tolerance towards Gaelic tradition, the twelfth century visitors came when the Papacy was at the summit of its power and they displayed a corresponding intolerance towards the 'pagan' legacy of the Gael. In the words of St. Bernard of Clairvaux: "Never before had he known the like, in whatever depth of barbarism: never had he found men so shameless in their morals, so wild in their rites, so impious in their faith, so barbarous in their laws, so stubborn in discipline, so unclean in their life. They were Christian in name only, in fact they were pagans." [Quoted in Watt, 1998, p.17] Clerical fire was likewise directed against the loose marriage practices of Gaelic society; this too, was part of a broader campaign to consolidate the marriage institution, and in the process, to institute clerical celibacy. [Goody, 1983]

The monastic houses were initially founded as co-operative type ventures, aiming at self-sufficiency and worked by lay brothers; the monks themselves focused on prayer. By the mid-thirteenth century they had greatly increased their holdings and changed their character. No longer concerned with self-sufficiency, and with seemingly fewer lay brothers, they no longer farmed for themselves, but behaved like any other landowner. Lands were either rented out to peasants or else worked by labourers, dependent or otherwise. [Graham, 1993]

The Church in Anglo-French Ireland was a massive landholder. By the end of the Middle Ages, they owned something like half of all the land in county Dublin alone. [Down, 1987] The picture here is consistent with the general European pattern by the late Middle Ages, with much of the clergy having become a virtually indistinguishable part of the feudal ruling class: rich, venal and little loved by the laity.

Alongside tensions between land-owning clerics and their peasantry, the late-medieval church in Ireland was riven by divisions between Gaelic and Anglo-French clerics. In the thirteenth century, in the powerful Cistercian order, conflict between Gaelic and Anglo-French monks led to violent confrontations, and resulted in the suppression of houses and the expulsion of monks. New rules were instituted insisting that only someone who spoke French or Latin could be admitted as a monk, and Irish monks were prohibited from being appointed to the position of abbot. In some dioceses a formal administrative division occurred between an *Ecclesia inter Hibernos* and an *Ecclesia inter Anglos*. [Watt, 1998]

The ethnic polarisation of the Church in Ireland in this period was not an absolute. The arrival of the mendicant orders in the thirteenth century added a novel element to the religious picture in Ireland. The mendicant movement emerged on the Continent in response to the spiritual crisis that flowed from clerical decadence and the absence of pastoral leadership within the new urban communities. [Rosenwein & Little, 1974] The mendicants looked back to the early forms of Christian monasticism and appear to have been close in spirit to the early Gaelic monastic tradition. They rejected the comfortable life of the wealthy monasteries and subsisted by begging for alms. Their objective was to preach the Gospel and to transform the inner life of the populace. Initially in Ireland, as elsewhere, they were urban-based but within a short period they opened up friaries across the country, especially in Gaelic areas where Church institutions had decayed. Both in terms of their own orders, and in terms of their audience, they appear to have played an important role in bringing together the popular Gaelic and Hiberno-English communities. [Mooney, 1969; Walsh, 1988; Watt, 1998]

The contrast between the patterns of Gaelic and English literacy in late medieval Ireland has already been noted, one almost entirely 'pragmatic', administrative, legal or commercial; the other overwhelmingly literary. But just as there are a few pragmatic texts in Gaelic, so there are a few literary works in Hiberno-English, and both rarities are very revealing. The main body of literary work in Hiberno-English is a collection of poems by a Franciscan friar. The poetry is striking for its linking of religious and social themes, empathising with the poor and condemning avarice. Such a message, and the personal poverty of the friars, no doubt explains their popular esteem, and the hostility with which they were often viewed by the clerical authorities. [Lucas, 1995; Gwynn, 1949]

### **The Gaelicisation of the Anglo-French**

It was not only among the peasant communities that a trend towards gaelicisation emerged in the fourteenth century. A similar tendency was apparent among the aristocracy, at least in the 'frontier' regions. At the boundaries of Anglo-French territory, life was never quite the same as in the settled areas. A study of the manorial economy in medieval Ireland shows that the closer a manor was to autonomous Gaelic areas the less the labour services, the smaller the demesne area and the lower the rents. English settlers were harder to attract, and if attracted, harder to keep, while Irish tenants would no doubt have demanded the continuation of their own customary arrangements. [Lyons, 1984]

If the income from these frontier lands was lower, the price of maintaining them was a good deal higher. To compensate, land grants in frontier regions tended to be larger. For the aristocracy, keeping a grip on frontier lands was inseparable from military engagement. The construction of the network of castles, large and small, that dotted the frontier between Anglo-French and Gaelic zones obviously contributed to their defence. But castles themselves do not produce an income. Without tenants to work their lands, the land was of no value. The English tenants fled the danger zones, while the Irish tenants had little inclination to engage in the heavy labouring that went with arable agriculture. If the frontier lords permitted Gaelic tenants to engage in pastoral farming, they left themselves open to the cattle raids familiar to Gaelic Ireland. Faced with empty

lands or Gaelic pastoral farmers, they chose the latter. In many regions, Anglo-French lords invited Gaelic septs to farm their lands, in return for rent, and often required their military services in the event of conflict. Elsewhere Gaelic clansmen simply seized land conquered in the twelfth or thirteenth centuries or declared their autonomy from the feudal lordships.

Over time the Anglo-French elite learnt that the most effective way to limit, if not prevent, cattle-raiding was to establish agreements with local Gaelic chiefs. They also learnt the value of 'brehon law' and its subtleties, much of it designed for these very purposes. Sometimes the agreements with the Gaelic septs were secured by exchanging hostages and sometimes through developing friendships and alliances, not least through inter-marriage. The priorities of defence and self-reliance militated against heirs dividing up their possessions and many families of Anglo-French descent found it useful to elect a head capable of providing political and military leadership, rather than risk the vagaries of primogeniture. A strict adherence to English law could have had disastrous consequences for a ruling lineage that produced no direct heir: absentee landowners could hardly protect a frontier lordship. [Cosgrove, 1981; Frame, 1998]

The ubiquity of inter-marriage between natives and settlers ensured that much of the population of Anglo-French or English background – patrician or plebeian – would have spoken Irish fluently. This in turn facilitated the assimilation of other aspects of Gaelic custom and *mentalité*. By the sixteenth century the old Anglo-French elite had begun to adapt many of the literate practices of the Gaelic order. Many lords began to cultivate Gaelic bards, who in turn composed extravagant praise poems in their honour. Their social function here would seem to have been essentially the same as in Gaelic areas: “to confer an aura of legitimacy on the authority of the reigning chief.” [Simms, 1989, p.181] They likewise drew on the services of Gaelic brehons for legal proceedings.

To speak of the 'gaelicisation' of the Anglo-French elite is not to suggest that this was a completed process. On the contrary, there appears to have developed a hybrid social formation – which one could describe as 'Anglo-Gaelic Ireland' – which combined Gaelic and English (or Latin-feudal) elements in a somewhat unstable mixture.

Across much of the colonised region of Munster and Leinster, the old village pattern of settlement appears to have survived into the early modern era. The 'Anglo-Gaelic' lords in these regions appear to have had considerably greater power over their peasant populations than did Gaelic rulers over their subordinates. However, this did not involve a simple return to servile conditions. [Curtis, 1932] The major losers from the development of this variant of 'bastard feudalism' in late medieval Ireland may have been the lower sectors of the aristocracy. Whereas in England the crown ensured – through the recognition of their land titles – that there would be a substantial lower aristocratic layer to check the power of the larger feudal magnates, in Ireland no such check operated. The major feudal lords developed substantial armed retinues of their own, and the only real protection that the lesser lords had was through developing close ties with their more powerful neighbours.

If many 'Anglo-Gaelic' lords abandoned all pretence of loyalty to the English crown, many others, including the most powerful (the Butlers and the Geraldines) continued to give formal allegiance to London, and indeed sought to control the English government administration in Dublin. Maintaining formal, albeit tenuous, loyalty to the Crown carried with it a practical obligation to keep in touch with the workings of English law. Legal practice in 'Anglo-Gaelic' areas combined features of 'brehon' law, English common law, and probably French manorial law. They also maintained close links with the predominantly English-speaking towns. The export of grain though gave way to the export of products associated with a pastoral economy. [Lennon, 1994; Nicholls, 1982]

If the 'Anglo-Gaelic' world was distinctive, it was not a unitary formation; some sectors were almost wholly gaelicised, others barely. Its unity was derived less from within than from without. Thirteenth century English government documents distinguish between the King's Irish enemies and his English enemies; by 1500 they are referring to the 'degenerate English' in Ireland, while later they refer to them simply as the 'English-Irish.' In Gaelic parlance, the 'Anglo-Gael' were referred to as *Gaill*, a term which originally meant 'stranger' or 'foreigner', but by 1500 had come to refer exclusively to the Irish descendants of the 'high' medieval migration/invasion (in contrast to the later English arrivals who were referred to as *Sasanaigh*). From as early as 1418, the Gaelic annals refer to the *Gaill* alongside *Gaedhil* (Gaelic Irish) as *Érennaigh* (people of Ireland). [Nicholls, 1982]

Historians have their own problems trying to tie them down. Some have spoken of a 'Middle-Nation'; others refer to them as 'Hiberno-Norman' and others again as 'Anglo-Irish'. This last characterisation can be confusing because it does not take into account their historical distinctiveness and conflates them with those descended from later (Tudor, Stuart and Cromwellian) settlements. 'Hiberno-Norman' preserves the myth that the feudal conquerors of England and Ireland in the eleventh and twelfth centuries were not really French, while neglecting the significance of the English connection. Using the term 'Anglo-Gaelic' runs the risk, as does 'Middle-Nation', of implying that this stratum possessed a stable ethnic identity, but it does have the merit of stressing the political and cultural co-ordinates within which they functioned.

### **The Pale**

Only in the 'Pale', the lowland region around Dublin, does a substantial English-style gentry appear to have emerged. Only here was the English government strong enough to guarantee the operation of royal law. But even the Pale gentry felt themselves threatened by the power of the Earl of Kildare. In terms of its social structure the Pale also diverged from the English model. In the late Middle Ages there does not appear to have been any equivalent of the English yeomanry – a prosperous peasant stratum – in the Pale, acting as a social buffer between the landowners and the rest of the peasantry. It was, however, the only region in Ireland where arable farming was dominant throughout the late Middle Ages. The intensive labour that arable farming demanded, led to the Pale peasantry being contemptuously referred to as *coloni* by their neighbours. [Canny, 1975]

Ethnic divisions within the peasantry would certainly have made it more difficult for the English peasants to consolidate their social position, while the exclusion of the Gaelic peasants from English law would have prevented them acquiring legal security of tenure. Without the protection of the law, the Gaelic peasants' strongest card would surely have been to maintain durable kinship networks and attempt to retain whatever customary practices most benefited them. Failing this, they could always flee to Gaelic areas. The persistence of strong kinship ties and customary practice would together have inhibited social differentiation within the peasantry.

By 1500 what contemporaries called the 'English Pale' had shrunk to the relatively small region to the north of Dublin city, where tillage continued to predominate. The local landowners were English-speaking and saw themselves as upholders of a civilised order, resisting both the 'barbarous Irish' and the 'degenerate English'. Most of them, however, were bilingual; a knowledge of Irish was essential for communicating with their peasants. [Canny, 1975]

The position of the Pale by the beginning of the sixteenth century was paradoxical. The upper echelons modelled themselves on English society and upheld English law; the lower orders operated by different rules. The written codes, and the codes of writing, did not flow downwards.

### **Literacy and the Feudal Order: Summary and Implications**

As explored in the previous chapter, the social context in Gaelic Ireland was not conducive to the development of a pragmatic literacy. Collective landownership, a mainly pastoralist economy and a lack of administrative structures meant that there was less need for written documentation and thus a wider diffusion of a pragmatic literacy did not occur.

In Anglo-French Ireland by contrast a socio-political order was created which used literate practices extensively for law and government. Written records of landholding and taxation were central to the functioning of the new order. The new rulers also encouraged urban growth and commercial expansion both of which helped promote writing and record keeping. All these developments furthered the use of literacy. Despite this, the development of literacy in Anglo-French Ireland took a very different path to other regions of western Europe.

This difference seems to come down to two key points: the social consequences of the fourteenth century crisis and, linked to it, the complex language issue in late medieval Ireland.

Certain distinctive features of the Anglo-French colony's historical development help explain why literacy seems to have spread less here than in England. The expansion of political administration, law and commerce are seen as crucial in

mediating the mass diffusion of literacy in England over the course of the High Middle Ages. Their more limited scope in the Irish colony during the later medieval period is clearly of significance.

While the Irish colony adopted a very similar system of law, politics and social organisation to that prevalent in England, it did so in a very different environment. Once the general crisis of the fourteenth century struck, these differences became magnified. The radically different trajectories that the two societies followed in response to this general crisis established divergent practices of literacy.

In the Irish colony, the general crisis resulted in the effective disintegration of the manorial economy. Neither the lords nor the state possessed the capacity to prevent peasant flight and uphold serfdom. The medieval colony in Ireland was always something of a frontier region. Even the capital city of Dublin was only a short distance from the Wicklow Mountains, a Gaelic citadel, where a distinctive social order persisted.

The collapse of the manorial economy undermined commerce and the urban settlements and led to a substantial decline in the revenues available for the central state. Public administration persisted but in a decayed state in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Its geographical scope was greatly reduced, and its operations were less intensive. The weakness of the royal government forced the colonial aristocracy to rely on its own resources, and to retain its own military capacity. This survival of the land/military nexus diminished the significance of written title in an environment where the sword was mightier than the pen.

The continued exclusion of the Irish from English law further reduced the significance of written law while encouraging the survival of oral-based custom. The absence of legal security would have done little to encourage the peasantry to develop a market orientation. Rather than promoting the anglicisation of the Gaelic population, this situation encouraged the gaelicisation of the colony.

The language issue was clearly of importance in these developments. Four languages were present in the Anglo-French colony: English, French, Latin and Gaelic. Like in the Gaelic territories, Latin was used solely for writing and



religious ritual. However, the other three languages were spoken: English by the plebeian elements among the colonial settlers; French by the aristocratic and clerical elites; and Gaelic by the native peasantry and many of the urban poor. French was the first to decline as a spoken language, being replaced by English as the colony's vernacular in the thirteenth century, though it continued to be used as a written language until the late fifteenth century. In the fourteenth century the use of spoken English declined across the colony to a point where, by 1500, it was only spoken in the towns and a few small rural areas. Elsewhere, the colonial settlers, both plebeian and aristocratic came to speak Irish. A standardised form of written English emerged via the royal bureaucracy at the very time that the English State in Ireland was at its weakest and the English language had virtually disappeared *as a spoken language* from the Irish countryside.

Latin, accessible to the learned laity and clergy alike, remained the lingua franca of educated Ireland, linking the 'pure' Gaelic, the Anglo-Gaelic and anglicised areas. It seems likely that Latin learning increased in the fifteenth century, at least in Gaelic areas, and this would seem to indicate that a 'clerical estate' existed which spanned both parts of Ireland.

The divergence of literacy practices between England and the anglicised regions of Ireland flowed from their different responses to the fourteenth century crisis. As the social structures of England and Anglo-French Ireland diverged, so too did their literate practices. This would seem to suggest that literacy practices were responding to other social changes, rather than driving them.

## **Literacy and the Reformation that went wrong**

### **Introduction**

The previous two chapters explored the role of literacy in Gaelic and Anglo-French Ireland in the mid-to-late medieval period; this chapter will look at literacy practices in Ireland as a whole in the Reformation era.

Religious reformation and political centralisation across Europe were closely associated with the diffusion of literacy. In Ireland, the two developments failed spectacularly culminating in catastrophic wars of conquest.

This chapter will explore why religious Reformation and political centralisation did not take hold in either Gaelic or Anglicised regions of Ireland and will examine what role literacy played in this failure.

### **The Renaissance in Northern Europe**

The sixteenth century was a turning point in the diffusion of literacy throughout Europe. The spirit of the Renaissance had made its way across the Alps and over the course of the century enthusiasm for classical learning 'mutated' to encourage a new interest in vernacular literature. An appreciation of written culture was becoming a badge of social status.

A pattern of state centralisation – the Renaissance monarchies – developed across Europe, which heavily promoted literate forms. Being able to read, and to a lesser extent to write, became vital for anyone seeking to engage with the new institutions of power. The newly strengthened state institutions came to play a key role in standardising vernacular literacies. The growth of these bureaucracies also offered new opportunities for the children of the nobility, especially the lower nobility. Schooling increased and literacy became virtually mandatory for the upper stratum of society across Europe. [Nauert, 1995]

The development of printing pushed this process further. Printing made 'books' significantly cheaper. Printing production was also strongest in commercial – rather than university or ecclesiastical – towns. Books and pamphlets were becoming accessible to a wider segment of society, and enabled the written word to increasingly escape the clutches of ecclesiastical power. [Febvre & Martin, 1976]

The translation of the Bible into the vernacular languages had a dramatic impact on literacy levels. Huge numbers of people across the European continent, especially in the north, learnt to read in order to have direct access to the divine word. This trend was greatly reinforced by the missionary drives of both the Reformation and Counter-Reformation, with their competing catechisms. [Houston, 1988]

Each of these factors was present in sixteenth century Ireland. While these four elements – state centralisation, cultural renaissance, printing and religious reformation – can be analytically separated, in practice they were interwoven. In particular, state centralisation and religious reform were not only concurrent, but were seen as part of the same process: the 'reform' of Ireland.

### **The Tudor Reform Programme for Ireland**

The driving force behind the new patterns of literacy in Ireland was the Tudor reform programme, a planned reconstruction of government, religion, and society. But these new literate practices, it will be argued, did not simply broaden the scope of writing; they had a tremendous transformative impact on Irish society as a whole. In the event, this transformation inverted. Rather than achieving reform, they created a massive reaction, which came to have catastrophic consequences for the Irish population. This outcome, however, is not a testimony to the insignificance of the new modes of literacy, but rather to their extraordinary power.

At the heart of the reform programme was the attempted extension of English law to the whole Irish population. Tudor strategy was not simply a continuation of the original Anglo-French conquest; it was a significantly different project. It involved not only granting access to royal law – ending the earlier system of legal exclusion – to all the inhabitants of the colonised region, but also sought to bring the autonomous Gaelic communities into the English legal network. In part this was a pragmatic reaction to the actual social situation in sixteenth century Ireland. Serfdom was finished in Ireland, as it was in England, and to continue to exclude the native Irish from royal law, was merely to strengthen the hands of local magnates and urban monopoly groups. Likewise the policy of seeking to assimilate the Gaelic elite, rather than simply dispossessing them, involved recognition of the political reality that a policy of military conquest had hitherto failed. [Bradshaw, 1979]

More than pragmatism was involved. The Tudor reformers in sixteenth century Ireland were influenced by the humanist philosophy prevailing across Europe. The humanists believed that through cultural reform the ‘civilised ethos’ of ancient Greece and Rome could be recreated. The key to cultural reform and the advance of civility was the education of the elite. If difficulties were encountered bringing Ireland to civility, they were not likely to be qualitatively different to those experienced elsewhere. [Bradshaw, 1979]

The programme for extending English law across Ireland was accompanied by a series of treaties between Irish chiefs and the Lord Deputy in the early 1540s. As part of the ‘surrender and re-grant’ policy, Gaelic chiefs surrendered their lands and had them ‘re-granted’ by the King. They would henceforth agree to the operation of English law in their territories. They also agreed to accept Henry as head of the Irish church and to go along with the Henrican Reformation programme. [Bradshaw, 1978]

Half a century later the country was convulsed in rebellion and war. Instead of being assimilated, the Gaelic social order would be extirpated, while the traditionally loyal cities and their hinterlands would end up committed to the Counter-Reformation cause. What went wrong and what role did the new patterns of communication play in the debacle?

## **Social Implications of Reform**

The extension of the English centralised state system across Ireland had significant structural implications for Gaelic, and gaelicised, society. Writing came to be used as an instrument of power in a manner very different from the earlier Gaelic system. It did so primarily through the medium of law.

Through writing, the newly centralised states of the Renaissance era established their boundaries. Most obviously this involved their 'external' boundaries, which were far from fixed by 1500: the English, for example, were only finally driven out of Calais in the seventeenth century. Every bit as important for these states was the consolidation of their 'internal' space, or the elimination of internal boundaries. Adherence to royal law was the acid test here. [P. Anderson, 1974b]

Reforming Ireland meant ensuring that wrongdoers appear before English courts and submit to English law. It involved not only supplanting Gaelic law but also bringing to heel the powerful Anglo-French feudal magnates. The formal adherence of Gaelic chiefs to English law was gained easily enough. Its implementation on the ground proved more difficult. For the English administration the core of the problem was the practice of *eraic*: the system whereby no real distinction was made between civil and criminal law. Members of a kinship group paid compensation – money or cattle – for any theft or injury (including killings) perpetrated by one of their own. For defenders of this custom it was the only sensible way to avoid bloody and protracted feuds, especially given that other members of the kinship group would be held responsible if compensation was not paid. For its detractors, *eraic* only encouraged theft and crime. Furthermore it violated the emerging principle of individual responsibility for one's actions. Not least its continuance represented a challenge to the authority of the Crown. [Ellis, 1985; Lennon, 1994]

Throughout the sixteenth century this differing approach to basic law would lead to bitter disputes between the government and various Gaelic communities. This confrontation between English common law and Gaelic tradition was not confined to the criminal sphere; differences in civil law were equally wide.

Few areas of law were more contentious, and few more important, than the issue of land-ownership. In Gaelic law land was owned not by the individual but by the sept; the individual only had the use of it. In many areas land was periodically re-distributed within the sept or kinship grouping. The sons of individual landholders had no automatic right of inheritance. What they did have, as members of a kinship grouping, was the right to a *share* of the collective inheritance. [Nicholls, 1972; O'Dowd, 1986]

The introduction of individual ownership of land and of the practice of primogeniture in land inheritance was not only at variance with Gaelic customary law it was also threatening to those within the sept who were likely to lose out by the new arrangement. The codification of marriage laws accentuated the problem. Integral to the imposition of the Common Law was the regulation of marriage. Marriage records were not kept in the Gaelic system, nor was there much concern about marriage rules. Divorce was common, so too were extra-marital sexual unions. Illegitimacy was no disgrace; more specifically it was no bar to inheritance. Most pernicious of all, from the point of view of the Tudor reformers, was the practice of 'naming', whereby a mother could 'name' the father of her child, and the father, if he was in a position to do so, would accept the child as his own. [Nicholls, 1972; Lennon, 1994]

The sexual laxity of the Gaelic order was linked to its general patterns of power and its landholding customs. Because land was not divided up but worked collectively, there was less pressure to limit the number of sons. A large number of close kinsmen was always an advantage in this society: the more sons the better. The use of written records to standardise marriage not only flew against custom, it also threatened those born outside these standards. [Nicholls, 1976]

The creation of a new form of land-ownership transformed, or threatened to transform, the class structure of Gaelic society. It did not only affect 'younger sons' but the outer sectors of the clan whose support could be called on in internecine disputes, and for whom kinship connections were an important factor. For these outer kin layers, distant from the centre of power, kin still remained crucially important.

The extension of state literacy across Ireland involved a very clear attempt to establish control over space, but it went much further than that. The expansion of the authority of the English state across the island necessitated the *reorganisation* of space. Not only was space to be transformed, so too was time, because the organisation of space and time were closely related. The Renaissance perception of time and space was very different from that of the Gaelic tradition. For the most part the Gaelic order had adapted itself to the natural environment. Defensive fortifications were located on hills or in lakes, rather than having man-made structures dominating the landscape. The patterns of landholding express this adaptation. Land units were not constructed from a map but from the seasonal rhythms of herding; each unit traditionally included winter and summer holdings, often at a considerable distance from each other. Following the military conquest, English administrators would find that the units of land division were literally incommensurable. [Duffy, 2001; Nicholls, 1972, 1987; Palmer, 2001]

It is not that the Gaelic literate tradition was indifferent to space. The classical Gaelic sagas and the lives of the saints occurred in real space (though not in real time). Not only are real places mentioned in these stories, but in virtually every Gaelic locality there were places named after these narrative heroes, each with its own story. The effect of this was to localise tradition, as with the Greek legends, and create a spatial identity, but not to control space. In many respects the practice of writing in the Gaelic order was not so different from the older tradition of oral learning, rather it perpetuated and strengthened that tradition.

The Tudor reorganisation of the spatial also undermined the Gaelic sense of time. If Gaelic landholding and inheritance patterns were to be abolished, it would be difficult to maintain a sense of continuity with the past. In consequence the social and political transformations implicit in the Tudor reform programme represented a deep breach within Gaelic culture. Implicit in the establishment of a centralised state in Ireland was the overturning and abandonment of a wide range of social customs and perceptions. This is not to suggest that the reform programme was an impossible project. Similar transformations could and did occur across Europe, in different places and different times, though always involving considerable strains within these societies.

In fact Gaelic society was already showing signs of wear and tear before 'surrender and re-grant'; the new Tudor order seems to have exacerbated these tensions, and created a deep social crisis which would have long-term consequences.

The close links between Gael and 'Gail', especially in the fifteenth century, led the Gaelic elite to adapt many of the practices of the latter. Trade increased between the Gaelic areas and the coastal towns, much of it long-distance trade with French, Spanish, and English ports. The clan elites began to develop a taste for wine and other luxury items unavailable in Ireland. They also began to build stone fortifications and stone houses, with some Gaelic chiefs attempting to impose labour services on their communities for their construction. The building of stone fortifications seems to have increased significantly in the Elizabethan era. Alongside stone fortifications, Gaelic chiefs began to employ, following the Anglo-French pattern, professional soldiers, who were billeted on the population of their districts. These 'mercenaries' seem to have been paid in kind, rather than in money. [Nicholls, 1976; Simms, 1987]

All of these changes had the effect of increasing the power of the chiefs in relation to the community they ruled over, and in relation to their own extended kin network, their own 'clan'. Gaelic society then was already changing *before* the Tudor state began to take charge. Quite how far these changes went is not clear. It is clear enough though that despite the presence of stone fortifications and 'mercenaries' the Gaelic chiefs remained politically dependent upon the broader network of support from their own clans and auxiliary clans. [O'Dowd, 1986]

### **Practical Impediments to Reform**

The Tudor reform programme was not pre-determined to fail. A process of political centralisation and social differentiation was already occurring within Gaelic Ireland before Elizabeth ever came to power. The Tudor conquest of Ireland was not inevitable. But it did happen, and why it happened needs explanation.



While the idea of social engineering, introducing the Irish to ‘civility’, was attractive to the early reformers, there were certain practical obstacles along the way. First and foremost the English state did not have actual control of much of Ireland. To establish control they needed the co-operation of the local elite.

Consolidating royal power in Ireland did not only involve anglicising the Gaelic elite. It also necessitated bringing the ‘bastard feudal’ magnates to book, chief among them the Earl of Kildare, head of the Geraldine lineage, who controlled two of the richest agricultural regions in Ireland, the area east of Dublin and central Munster. The execution of the key members of the lineage on grounds of treason in 1536 captured the attention of the Irish political elite and convinced them of the seriousness of the Tudor project. In the years following, the crown made treaties with individual chiefs, and sought to establish garrisons to uphold English law. [Ellis, 1985; Lennon, 1994]

This initiative brought its own problems. Chiefs used English support to buttress their position against other septs within the *tuath* and against rival contenders within their own sept. The effect of these changes was to disturb the traditional balance of power in Gaelic society, increasing the power of chiefs. The chiefs used their new power within the *tuath* to increase their military strength, relying ever more on mercenaries, and building more castles. [Edwards, 2001]

This development accentuated the problems of the Gaelic order. Chiefs laying claim to ownership of ‘their land’ breached customary conceptions of land rights. As owners they felt entitled to impose new ‘exactions’ on their territories. These demands were of course often resisted and the sixteenth century witnessed a significant rise in internecine conflict and nomadic movement of septs with their cattle across Ireland. The Gaelic chiefs and the English government interpreted their new alliance in different ways. For the chiefs it provided an opportunity to increase their power within their territories, not to cede it to the English government. [Edwards, 2001; Nicholls, 1976; Simms, 1986]

In order to counter the power of the chiefs, and to build a broader support for their programme of structural transformation, the Government later attempted, in Connaught and elsewhere, to secure property rights for sub-chiefs and other leading clan members. [Lennon, 1994] This objective of consolidating a class of

'lower aristocracy', corresponding to the English gentry, encountered similar problems to the original 'surrender and re-grant' strategy. The social engineering envisaged by English government reformers was not easily implemented because there was no clear line of demarcation between elite and mass or nobility and commoner. The Gaelic social order went all the way down. In Gaelic Ireland the number of people claiming noble origins was so great that they may well have outnumbered those without noble blood. A policy of extending landownership to create a more substantial gentry simultaneously created a broader range of 'excluded' and in the process deepened the social crisis of sixteenth century Gaelic Ireland.

Government efforts to resolve these issues seem to have made matters worse. Confronted by the seemingly chaotic state of Gaelic Ireland, they attempted in the 1570s to impose, what was in effect, legal servitude. "The inhabitants of each territory are to be summoned; the name of each one is to be recorded on a parchment roll, and every man is to acknowledge as his lord some chief who will take responsibility for him. Those without a chief to protect them are to be put to death summarily." [Quoted in Breatnach, 1990, p. 28]

Whether or not a new 'more advanced' Gaelic socio-political organisation was in the process of coming into being is a moot point, but a hypothetical one. The actual consequence of the Tudor state enlargement was not to stabilise a new social order, but to unleash centrifugal forces within it. By the second half of the sixteenth century a Gaelic social 'disorder' had been created, that would ultimately engulf the whole island.

### **Literate Practice and the Crisis of the Gaelic Order**

The structural impediments to the expansion of the English state in Ireland have already been spelt out, but there are grounds for doubting that these, on their own, would have provided an adequate basis for any sustained resistance to the process. Political fragmentation was endogenous to Gaelic society. Not only was there no central authority, but in so far as there was any coherence at all to Gaelic politics it was based upon patterns of enmity and alliance with neighbouring septa. The Arabic adage – "my enemy's enemy is my friend, my enemy's friend is my enemy" – fitted the Irish context well.

Literacy, or more specifically, the two key strata of Gaelic society who were literate, appears to have played a central role in developing resistance, thus ensuring that the incorporation of Ireland into the English state would take the form of full-scale conquest, rather than piecemeal assimilation.

The *fili* played a pivotal role in the Gaelic order. They were powerful because they could mobilise support for political leaders through their poetry and could equally well use satire to damage them. Because they were part of a broader, national network they were in a position of relative independence. This autonomy was limited though because they were dependent upon chiefs for patronage. [Watt, 1987]

The Renaissance era changes in Gaelic society tended to weaken the position of the *fili* in relation to the chiefs. The increased power of the chiefs – their use of professional warriors and castles – would have had the effect of making the poets' traditional role of securing legitimacy and of mobilising support for chiefs less significant. The more military power one has, the less legitimacy one needs, or so the chiefs may have calculated.

The prestige of the *fili* would have been further weakened by the rise of literacy among the clan elite in the decades following surrender and re-grant. Their more general role of upholding the Gaelic cultural tradition, the *seanchas*, was becoming obsolete, now that the chiefs were attempting to break with customary practice. The pattern of patronage changed too. Whereas in earlier centuries the position of chief's poet was a lifetime one, by the late sixteenth century poets composed work for many patrons. The *fili* found themselves in a contradictory position torn between their quest for patronage and their traditional role of upholding Gaelic custom, upon which their power had ultimately rested. As the sixteenth century progressed, their hostility to anglicisation became increasingly pronounced. The difficulties created by the *fili* were accentuated by the religious changes of the era. [Caball, 1998]

## Church Organisation in Late Medieval Ireland

In the late Middle Ages the organisation of the Church in Gaelic Ireland was in a state of serious decay. The priesthood had become a family affair, church lands had become clan lands and the holders of clerical office were often related to the dominant family in a region. Many clerics became involved in inter-clan warfare and the traditional exemption from attack which the clergy and their property once enjoyed, had become a thing of the past. Contemporary observers agreed that the only people preaching the Gospel in Ireland by the time of the Henrican Reformation were the mendicants, the poor friars. [Mooney, 1969]

The mendicant orders or poor friars, as they were known – Franciscans, Dominicans, Augustinians – were a group of religious orders which emerged in response to the decadence of the high medieval church. Within these orders an ‘observant’ movement had developed in the sixteenth century which insisted upon ‘observing’ the rules of poverty and chastity. The observant branches of the order grew rapidly in Gaelic Ireland in the late fifteenth century and by the early sixteenth century had spread to the cities and anglicised areas. Part of the attraction may have been that the ‘observant’ branches of the orders, unlike their ‘conventual’ branches, were not under the authority of an English superior. All the evidence suggests that they came to occupy a highly influential position within Gaelic society. [Bradshaw, 1998; Meigs, 1997]

This prestige appears, at first glance, to be somewhat paradoxical. They denounced the decadence of the regular clergy (parish priests, bishops, etc.) and indeed of society in general. By observing the strict rules of their orders they placed themselves at odds with Gaelic social custom, whereas the regular clergy were barely distinguishable from the society around them. Yet it was precisely because the observants distanced themselves from the kinship networks of the Gaelic order through living out their vows of poverty and chastity, that they were able to operate so effectively. They were seen to be saintly. The Protestant goal of a saintly society was quite at odds with this notion of saintliness: the ‘holy men’ of Gaelic Ireland were esteemed because they were out of the ordinary. In a world of sinners, they stood apart. And because of their holiness they possessed great spiritual power. The friars were not, however, isolated ‘holy men’; their orders were part of a broader literate community, extending across Europe and based on Latin. While elsewhere in Europe the friars were often in the vanguard of the Reformation – Martin Luther himself was an Augustinian – in Ireland they were resolute in resisting it. [Bradshaw, 1998]

## **Gaelic Society and the Reformation**

In 1542, two English Jesuits who visited Ireland in the hope of spreading the gospel of the Counter-Reformation concluded that their cause was lost. While the faith of the 'simple people' was strong enough, the leading Gaelic chiefs were committed to the Reformation and had refused to even meet them. [Bradshaw, 1998; Meigs, 1997]

If the defeat of the Reformation in Gaelic Ireland was not a forgone conclusion, there were quite significant obstacles to its progress. Not the least important was the spiritual message of the Reformation itself. A common thread of Reformation thought from Luther to Calvin was the yearning for a more direct relationship to God, unmediated by ritual, image or intercession. Personal access to the Holy Word was crucial to this achievement and consequently the appearance of a vernacular Bible spurred on the demand for literacy. [Cameron, 1991; Scribner et al, 1994]

However, this need for a more 'personal God' was not a universal one. [Gellner, 1981] It seems likely that the success of the Protestant Reformation in early modern Europe was at least partially due to its ability to address a deep spiritual crisis of the era, a crisis which was itself arguably a response to the collapse of traditional kinship networks and customary values. These traditional networks not only provided medieval people with a very clear sense of identity, they also operated as systems of communal control. The decline of these external networks, especially – though not exclusively – in the cities, made the internalisation of order all the more necessary. It is certainly the case that order and discipline as well as a renewed personal spirituality were heavily promoted by the mainstream of the Protestant Reformation, as later they would be by the Counter-Reformation. [Bossy, 1985; Cameron, 1991; Scribner et al, 1994]

Such a spiritual message would seem to have had fairly little appeal in Gaelic Ireland. Custom and kinship dominated people's lives, fashioning a very definite sense of identity and their own codes of control. Moreover the iconoclastic practices of Reformation zealots affronted their traditional religious custom. If the citizens of many North European towns needed a more direct relationship to God, the Gaelic population was happy enough to work through intermediaries. Saints were ubiquitous in Ireland and devotion to them played a central role in

the people's spiritual life. In the Gaelic regions most of the saints were local and tales of their lives and marvellous deeds were woven into the very landscape; they were remembered in both oral and written tradition. A major – perhaps the major – form of popular piety was visits to places associated with the saints: holy wells, sacred mountains and islands, saints' graves and old monastic sites. The saints did not only concern themselves with the afterlife and questions of high moral tone, but also with the more mundane issues of this life: illness, protection and crop failure. For the Protestant reformers such devotion to saints was anathema, but dealing with it raised serious problems. If they confronted the saints directly they risked alienating the lay population, but if they tolerated or overlooked these practices they diluted their whole message. In the event the message never got through: it was delivered in the wrong language. [Meigs, 1997]

### **The Pale: Vanguard of Tudor Reform**

The Tudor reform programme was strongly supported by the Pale gentry, some of whom played a prominent role in formulating the new approach. The elimination of Kildare magnate power caused few of them grief. A government commission into the state of the colony showed that most small-to-medium sized landowners regarded Kildare and the other magnates as tyrants and were pleased to see the back of them. The Pale gentry saw themselves as the vanguard of 'civility' in Ireland, a model for the rest of the country. They responded ardently to the new humanist culture, and encouraged the development of education and the building of schools. Some Pale gentry families went as far as offering to sponsor the children of Gaelic elite families, so that they could learn the English language, civilised values and good manners. [Bradshaw, 1979; Canny, 1975]

The Pale gentry's enthusiasm for a conciliatory reform programme was based upon their own collective experience over an extended period. If they were used to conflict with Gaelic clansmen, they were also used to trading and negotiating with them. A significant section of the Pale peasantry, probably the majority, was Gaelic speaking and the Pale landlords tended to be bilingual themselves. Gaelic Ireland may have been very different from the Pale, but it was not entirely a foreign country. [Canny, 1975]

The Pale gentry were also, for the most part, supportive of religious reform. The idea of having better trained English-speaking ministers made eminent sense. The monasteries in the anglicised regions of Ireland had long been corrupt and few shed tears at their closure by the government in 1537. Some of the Pale and English-Irish landed families resented the fact that the Crown monopolised too much of the seized land, but that hardly constituted a basis for serious resistance to the process. Under the leadership of St. Leger, an astute and liberal-minded Lord Deputy, it seemed that the island of Ireland might be peacefully incorporated into an expanded English state, with the Pale gentry playing a central role in the proceedings. [Bradshaw, 1979] Half a century later the Pale gentry had thrown their lot in with the forces of the Counter-Reformation. Something had clearly gone wrong.

### **The Social Position of the Pale Gentry**

After removing the feudal magnates from their control of the Dublin administration, the Tudors were anxious to prevent it becoming too closely linked to local interests in Ireland and increasingly placed only English-born officials in senior government posts. Their gradual exclusion from high office rankled with the Pale English, but it was the policy implications of their exclusion that had the deeper effect. Beyond these specific areas of resentment, there seems to have been deeper socio-cultural factors at work, which came to express themselves as religious difference, and which in turn came to justify the exclusion of the 'Old English' community – as they began to describe themselves – from government posts and initiatives.

As their programme for reforming Gaelic Ireland stalled, the administration came to rely increasingly on coercion, and began nourishing dreams of conquest. This coercive approach had a number of aspects: increased levels of militarisation, 'plantation' projects, i.e. establishing colonies of English settlers in Gaelic areas, and a more aggressive drive to implement the religious Reformation. [Lennon, 1994] The adoption of a coercive approach towards Gaelic (and gaelicised) Ireland could not but have important implications for the more anglicised regions.

There were in fact significant differences between the social structure of the Pale and a typical English region in the sixteenth century. One of the most striking differences was the very limited development of a 'yeoman' stratum among the peasantry of the Pale. The slow emergence of this prosperous yeoman stratum in England seems to have been associated with the development of market relations and the consolidation of peasant holdings through stable tenure, itself closely linked to the spread of written legal documentation. In the Irish colony by contrast the same level of social differentiation within the peasantry does not appear to have occurred. Likewise the enclosing of land was not commonly practised. [Canny, 1975]

The majority of the peasantry in the Pale was Irish-speaking by the sixteenth century, with custom rather than written law regulating relations between the peasantry and the landowners. Among the peasants themselves, custom and kinship continued to play a significant role while fixed rents for plots of land gave way to share-cropping, a system whereby the landlords took a share of the crop. With the effective collapse of serfdom in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the gentry in the Pale and Anglo-Gaelic lords elsewhere seem to have increasingly resorted to a system of patronage to secure their social position. Unable to prevent peasant flight, securing adequate returns on land necessitated greater compromise. [O'Brien, 1993]

The very insecurity of the Irish context would surely have instilled in the Pale gentry the necessity of social cohesion as a cardinal virtue. The Pale was not just a frontier zone: the Gael were inside the Pale. Surviving in this environment had induced in the Pale gentry a very different mindset from the gentry of the southern English shires. They had long experience of military conflicts with their Gaelic neighbours, but they had also learnt the need for negotiation and compromise. It was this very vantage-point that put them increasingly at odds with the English government and the culture of the 'New English' elite who came to dominate the government in Ireland.

That the break with the government should come around the religious question was both symptomatic and paradoxical. It was paradoxical because initially the Pale gentry had little or no difficulties with the Henrican Reformation, and many were very supportive of it; religious reform being seen to parallel socio-political reform. The religious divide was, however, symptomatic of a deeper cultural disparity which reflected the differing socio-cultural experiences of the two elites.



English historians speak about a reformation from both ‘above’ and ‘below’; it was the congruence of the two movements that guaranteed its success. Neither in anglicised Ireland nor in Gaelic Ireland did a movement from below emerge. This was not because the institutions of the church were highly revered, but rather because popular religious practices had only a tangential relationship to the organised church. For a popular anti-clericalism to take a doctrinal form, a tradition of ‘dissident literacy’ would have needed to exist. [Haigh, 2001]

The Reformation aimed to ‘bring religion back to the people’ and a common feature of the movement, or movements, across Europe was its strong emphasis on the use of the vernacular, both in prayer and through scriptures. This created difficulties for the ‘Old English’ elite. English was the main language of the Pale gentry and the urban patriciate, but it was not the language of the peasantry or, it would seem, of the urban poor. The elite wished to anglicise and civilise Ireland, but they had no desire to deepen the gap between themselves and the Gaelic speaking communities by excluding them from religious services, much less to engage in a full-scale confrontation with their traditional practices. Moreover many clerics did not speak English, so any attempt to impose English language services was doomed to failure. [Bradshaw, 1998]

Some zealous reformers did seek to launch a missionary campaign using the Irish language to win over the population to the cause of the Reformation. Both the Book of Common Prayer and the New Testament were translated into Irish and printed in Dublin. Yet neither the ‘Old English’ elite nor the ‘New English’ elite showed much enthusiasm for the project. As Gaelic resistance to anglicisation increased, the ‘New English’ elite came to view Gaelic society as incorrigible, and to identify Gaelic customs and language as fundamental obstacles to the civilisation of Ireland. [Ford, 1985]

These issues became more clearly focused following Elizabeth’s accession to the throne. The Act of Supremacy of 1560 directed that English be the language of church services, and that in the event of the minister not being an English speaker, Latin be used instead. The use of Latin seems to have appealed to the ‘Old English’ elite; from the 1540s onwards grammar schools teaching Latin

began to flourish in the towns of Ireland. Latin was the language of European culture and of cultured Europeans, and a knowledge of it enabled educated members of the elite to communicate with others across Europe. It also crossed barriers within Ireland, establishing a common language between many if not most of the educated stratum of Gaelic Ireland and their counterparts in anglicised regions. Moreover as the traditional language of religion, it would have appealed to the instinctive caution of the English elite. It was of course incomprehensible to the great majority of the population of any part of Ireland, and as such anathema to the whole spirit of Reformation, but this itself was hardly a concern for the 'Old English' elite. [Ford, 1985]

Anglicanism as a whole, of course, attempted to straddle the great religious divide of early modern Europe, combining elements of Catholicism and Protestantism within a single *national* church. In England itself the mixture proved to be difficult to sustain. In the Irish context, it had even less chance of enduring.

While there were some Catholic and Protestant zealots within the 'Old English' community, the majority conformed to the established Church while displaying no great interest in doctrinal change. By the late sixteenth century this position had become less and less tenable. [Bradshaw, 1998]

If towns across Europe came to play a crucial role in the Reformation, in Ireland they played a corresponding role in ensuring adherence to the Counter-Reformation. For centuries the towns in Ireland had been loyal English enclaves, ever vigilant against Gaelic raids. In the second half of the fifteenth century they had increasingly to rely on their own resources, becoming in effect little 'city republics'. Economically they functioned as conduits between the Gaelic-speaking countryside and continental ports. Culturally, though still jealously guarding their autonomy, they became more flexible about permitting the Irish to live within their walls, and even to acquire burger status. By the beginning of the seventeenth century they had very clearly come to identify with the Counter-Reformation. [Bradshaw, 1998]

## From Conciliation to Conquest

The path of English State policy over the course of the sixteenth century, from conciliation to conquest, was uneven but none the less cumulative. This unevenness reflected the fragmented character of the Irish polity. From the earliest period of the reform programme, conciliatory moves had been accompanied by force. Half a dozen members of the leading 'Old English' lineage, the Geraldines, had been executed in London while a major Gaelic sept in the Midlands, the O'Moores, were wiped out and their lands settled by an English colony. Both were intended as exemplary moves, designed to encourage others to acquiesce with government policy. As resistance to the new social practices intensified within Gaelic (and Anglo-Gaelic) Ireland, the coercive side of state policy became more pronounced. More troops were called for, most of them stationed in the south-east of the island, where the burden for their upkeep fell upon the local population. Their presence seems to have increased the sense of distance between the government and the local population, while establishing closer bonds between the people and the 'Old English' elite. The peasantry had no one else to rely on, while the elite itself suffered from the arbitrary actions of an unruly soldiery. [Brady, 1986; Lennon, 1994]

The heart of the problem lay in the inability of the royal government to incorporate the Gaelic areas. The structural changes of the Renaissance era coupled with the centralising effects of Tudor policy had augmented the power of the chiefs, without substantially altering the social relations of production in the Gaelic areas. However, despite their increased military power the Gaelic chiefs never enjoyed absolute control over their own territories. If they were to attempt to impose a full-scale policy of anglicisation on their territories, they ran the risk of being overthrown by a coalition of disgruntled clan members backed by the *fili* and the friars. Most chose instead to maintain some balance between tradition and loyalty to the government.

It seems likely that the frustration experienced by government officials (and the 'New English' elite who emerged around them) at the pace of reform encouraged them to seek alternative solutions to conciliation. More than that, in order to explain why there was so much resistance to the policies they proposed, they came to rely on a simple binary opposition – civility versus barbarity – to

explain all their problems, an approach best exemplified by the work of Edmund Spencer. The insistence of the 'Old English' elite that the issues involved were a little more complex could be taken as further evidence that this elite had become so corrupted by their long stay in Ireland that they had become part of the problem. [Bradshaw, 1998]

As this colonial mindset became more accentuated in the last decades of the sixteenth century it came to influence the way in which the religious issue was perceived. If the Irish were barbarous so too was their language, and it would not only be futile, but blasphemous to seek to spread the Holy Word through a barbaric tongue. The isolation of the 'New English' elite encouraged them to emphasise the distinctiveness of their religious beliefs, and the Calvinist notion of a saved elect, surrounded by heathens, seemed an attractive doctrine. From the accession of Elizabeth the government began to pursue a policy of penalising dissenters and excluding them from public office. The strategy of coercion widened the scope of opposition, turning neutrality and indifference into enmity.

The international conflict between Protestant and Catholic Europe, and the hardening of 'New English' attitudes, placed the Gaelic chiefs in a precarious position. Their balancing act between upholding Gaelic custom and giving allegiance to English authority was becoming unsustainable. The rising power of Counter-Reformation Spain – their armies dwarfed Elizabethan England's – did however offer new opportunities and a way of escaping the trap they were in. The Nine Years War (1594-1603) was the culmination of decades of Gaelic resistance to Elizabethan policy. Triggered by a revolt of the leading northern chieftains, it rapidly became an island-wide insurrection against Tudor rule. The unification of the perennially fragmented Gaelic forces was only one index of the changed context. The scale of the confrontation was another. The northern chiefs mobilised the largest armies ever fielded by Gaelic insurgents, while the English forces which ultimately defeated them were also the largest of Elizabeth's reign. [P. Anderson, 1974b; Lennon, 1994]

If the Nine Years War occurred against a background of a more general European conflict, it also showed the extent to which Ireland had itself become drawn into this wider European political theatre. Not only were continental (Spanish) troops involved in the Irish fighting, the themes of the European

conflict fused with the native ones. One of the demands of the northern chiefs was for freedom of conscience, the same demand raised by the Dutch rebels against Spain. [Morgan, 1993] These new motifs enabled the Gael to transcend their narrow clan perspectives. The two key purveyors of literacy in Gaelic Ireland – the poets and the friars – appear to have played a crucial role in the mobilisation of Gaelic Ireland against the new order.

One of the most striking features of the Nine Years War was the role played by the towns. Traditionally the English state's most loyal allies, during this period they sold arms to the Gaelic insurgents, and on the news of Elizabeth's death in 1603, they rose in celebration. While this revolt was easily suppressed, the damage was done; the 'Old English' community would never again be the loyal ally of the English state.

### **Literacy and Conquest: Summary and Implications**

This chapter argued that new forms of literacy, closely associated with the spread of English law, had the effect of increasing social and political instability across Ireland. These social tensions in turn impeded the assimilation of Ireland into the wider archipelago system.

The role of literacy in Tudor Ireland also throws an interesting light on the debate within Literacy Studies between the 'socially embedded' theorists and those characterised as 'autonomous model' theorists.

The emergence of a centralised state organisation, especially the widespread use of written law, has been identified as a crucially important feature in the spread of literacy beyond the bounds of a body of professional scribes. Two later, and linked, developments, the invention of printing and the Reformation have been seen as playing a central role in the coming of mass literacy. In Ireland, state centralisation, printing and reformation were contemporaneous. While the Irish evidence does not dispute that state centralisation, printing and reformation encouraged more writing, it does very clearly suggest that the picture of how mass literacy came into being is much more complicated and contradictory than the general explanation given.

In terms of our understanding of the role of literacy in socio-historical development the case of sixteenth century Ireland can be seen to both confirm the arguments of the 'autonomous model' theorists and to refute them. Jack Goody's discussion of the significance of writing for legal practice is directly relevant to sixteenth century Ireland. Writing was important as a way of storing information because it enabled people to surmount the "homeostatic adjustment that holding it in memory often involves. There is a consequent loss of flexibility which creates problems in a changing situation. On one hand fixity is advantageous for contractual relations of many kinds, although the very process of setting up a contract (or registering lands) tends to lead to the neglect of wider networks of rights and responsibilities, pinning these down to the individual rather than recognising the participation of the wider kinship group." [Goody, 1986, p. 174] This describes very well the tensions which the application of written law introduced into the Irish context.

State centralisation in the Renaissance era, and subsequently, has involved the systematic use of literacy to control space. The effects of the new uses of writing in civil law are paralleled in the arena of criminal law. In both, one finds a clear contrast between the English emphasis on the centrality of the crown/individual-subject nexus and the Gaelic stress on a collective-kinship approach. The shift from one to the other had a strongly disruptive effect on the old social order. Instead of consolidating a social hierarchy, it led to chaos.

What the 'autonomous model' does not really address, let alone explain, is why the application of such writing practices can have so transformative an impact in some contexts, while dramatically failing to work such miracles in others.

A similar problem is encountered in exploring the progress of the Reformation. The Reformation very clearly involved a radical expansion in the use of literacy. In the case of Ireland the Reformation could not break through the language barrier, the fact that the population spoke a different language to that of the reformed faith. But this language barrier was not really linguistic at all, but more cultural and political. It was not that the reformers were unable to learn the Irish language, rather that they were, on the whole, unwilling to do so. The rise of mass literacy then cannot be separated from the rise of vernacular literacy: the questions of language and literacy are intimately linked, but these links are never really explored by the theorists of the 'autonomous model'.

The singular stance taken by the Gaelic poetic stratum and by the friars confirms the importance of examining *literacies*, as distinctive practices, in attempting to understand the influence of writing. It is evident that both groups possessed distinctive practices, albeit occasionally overlapping, and both were immersed in wider social structures. It is interesting to note though that in a situation of a general socio-political crisis both groups transcended their traditional social roles to become political actors in their own right.

None of this takes away from the fact that in the late-Renaissance era writing came to acquire a much greater prominence than it had at any time previously, and this had huge repercussions. The spread of literate practices transformed Ireland, though not quite in the way 'autonomous' theories might have predicted. It is this gap between the actual transformations, and what might have been predicted to happen, that needs theorising. A comparison with developments elsewhere in the archipelago should help to clarify these issues.

## **The Diffusion of Literacy in a Comparative Perspective: Wales, Scotland and England**

### **Introduction**

The previous three chapters explored the role of literacy in Ireland in the medieval and Reformation eras. This chapter examines the changing role of literacy and its relationship to socio-economic and belief systems in Wales, Scotland and England in the same period, focusing on those factors which encouraged the wider diffusion of literacy. From this it attempts to draw some conclusions concerning the role of literate communication in historical development.

The uneven spread of literacy throughout the Atlantic Isles provides a useful vantage point for exploring the role of literacy in historical change. The most straightforward approach to doing this, and the one adopted here, is to compare the patterns of literacy in the four 'nations' or 'countries' of the archipelago: Scotland, Wales, England and Ireland.

England as the pioneer of industrial capitalism, and so much else besides, tends to be seen as the model for viewing others' variations. One of the difficulties with this approach is that the specific determinants of how literacy developed in England itself tend to fade from view and appear instead as a natural process. A sharper contrast with the other parts of the archipelago ought to highlight the distinctive features which enabled England to play such a pioneering role and to assess how important literacy was in that process.

The contrast here is not a simple one between the English 'core' and the Celtic 'periphery'. While elements of a core/periphery spatial dichotomy undoubtedly existed within the archipelago, such dichotomies also existed within the four countries. Even more crucially, there was no uniformity of experience binding Scotland, Wales and Ireland. Conflicts and contrasts certainly existed within each, but they shaped up very differently. Moreover, they shaped up in such a



way that no alliance of sentiment or politics between the peripheral nations emerged in the early modern period. More often than not, they found themselves in opposite camps.

This chapter will examine how literacy came to be diffused in England, Scotland, and Wales in the late medieval and reformation periods and explore what role language differences played in the process. It is divided into four main sections: the first section will look at Wales, the second at Scotland, the third at England and the fourth will summarise the developments in these countries and consider their implications.

## [1] Wales

While Welsh and Gaelic are part of the same Celtic linguistic family, the differences between them were much too great to permit mutual comprehension. Indeed until modern linguists discovered their common roots, there was no collective memory of a shared heritage.

Despite the language gap, there were significant similarities between the two societies. In the words of one scholar, in both one finds “predominantly (though not exclusively) pastoral societies, a pattern of non-nucleated settlements, low populations, extensive lordship (royal and/or seigniorial according to our designations), intensive kinship rights in land and in law, small scale and unstable patterns of political power and loyalties and very limited opportunities for the wealth accumulation, economic mobility and social differentiation already characteristic of lowland England.” [Rees Davies, 2001, p.174]

Just as important, from the perspective of this thesis, were the similarities between the forms of literate practice in Wales and Ireland. The Welsh literate tradition, like the Irish, originated in the Christian Church. From the early Middle Ages there were close connections between the Churches in Ireland and western Britain. Alongside the Christian clerics, there was an educated lay stratum who upheld an indigenous tradition of learning, in the Gaelic world the *seanchas*, in Wales the *cyfarwydyd*. The poets and lawyers of Wales, like their Irish counterparts, enjoyed high social prestige. In both cultures, learning ran in families. [Pryce, 1998]

There are far fewer texts in Welsh from the early medieval period than in Irish. From the seventh century a substantial body of Gaelic vernacular writing has survived, while Welsh texts are available in considerable numbers only from the twelfth century. Wales, unlike Ireland, had been part of the Roman Empire; perhaps because of this the vernacular may have been held in lower regard by the Christian scholars who introduced both societies to literacy. [Pryce, 1998]

Wales, like Ireland, was subject to colonisation attempts by Anglo-French knights in the 'high' Middle Ages. Colonisation began earlier in Wales, from the end of the eleventh century; the conquest of Ireland began in 1169. As in Ireland, colonisation was a piecemeal process, meeting considerable resistance and only being secured in the late thirteenth century by the armies of Edward I. The Edwardian conquest did not, however, eliminate the Welsh literate tradition. On the contrary in the fourteenth century Wales experienced something of a cultural renaissance. [R. R. Davies, 1987]

Like in Ireland, law occupied a central role in the Welsh literate tradition. The most comprehensive collections of Welsh law date from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. The persistence of a living Welsh legal tradition *after* the Edwardian conquest points to one of the most striking contrasts between late-medieval Wales and Ireland, and one which arguably had momentous consequences for both societies.

From the point of view of the English conquerors, Welsh law was every bit as objectionable as Irish law; indeed their objections to both were very similar. Notions of kinship pervaded both Welsh and Gaelic legal systems. In both systems, the emphasis was on compensation for victims or their relatives, rather than on punishment for wrongdoers; the extended families of wrongdoers were obliged to compensate the injured parties. Arbitration between the conflicting parties rather than top-down judgements was the order of the day. From the point of view of the English administration, such laws were a recipe for endless disorder because miscreants would never be properly punished, nor royal authority hold full sway. [R. R. Davies, 1987]

In the Statute for Wales promulgated in 1284, shortly after the conquest, Edward I prohibited the use of compensatory payments for theft, robbery or violent crime. These were felonies and must be tried by English criminal law, with the appropriate punishment of death or mutilation being meted out to those convicted. However, the Statute for Wales did not proscribe the use of Welsh civil law. Traditional procedures could still be used in cases relating to land inheritance and pleas concerning movables. Land would be divided between all the legitimate sons, not passed on through primogeniture. Post-conquest Wales then came to have a composite legal system, with English criminal law and Welsh civil law functioning alongside one another. This hybrid legal order was replicated across other areas of post-conquest Welsh life. [R. R. Davies, 1987]

The native Welsh, unlike the native Irish, were not excluded from the benefits and privileges of royal law. Nor were they excluded from participating in government service, though the higher government posts in Wales were reserved for English officials. Within Wales, a wide gulf separated the Welsh and the English settler communities. They were often treated differently for administrative purposes, paid different forms of tribute or rent, and were treated separately for legal purposes, often in separate courts. The Welsh Church was brought under the control of Canterbury, and while Welsh churchmen were usually excluded from high office, there was no formal segregation of Welsh and Anglo-French clerics. The Edwardian conquest of Wales was not accompanied by any systematic programme of disinheritance. While the princely lineages and their allies had their properties seized, many Welsh noble families kept their land. [Williams, 1989]

The fourteenth century has gone down in history, across Europe if not beyond, as a calamitous century characterised by plague, wars and insurrection. In Wales, peculiarly, it was a century of peace. In this Welsh century of peace, a new social configuration emerged. Prior to the Act of Union in 1536 Wales, though ruled by the English monarch, was administered separately from England. Most of Wales was fragmented into forty or so 'Marcher' lordships. Within each of these lordships the power of the lord was unqualified, but that power did not extend beyond the boundary of the lordship. Wales had no common jurisdictional authority, no unified legal code, and no Parliament. Within the different lordships, different mixtures of English and Welsh law operated. [R. R. Davies, 1987]

In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries many, if not most, of these lords were absentee. Though profiting handsomely from their Welsh possessions, they were not present to exercise their power as lords. That role increasingly fell to Welsh intermediaries. "It is not easy to control the Welsh, except through one of their own members....There was no alternative, for in the ordering of relationships between a distant lord and a local community, a due distribution of patronage to the leaders of native society was essential. It worked to the mutual advantage of both parties." [Quoted in R. R. Davies, 1987, p. 409] This intermediary stratum, descended from old Welsh lineages, came to play a central role in the political and social life of post-Conquest Wales. Each of these 'barons' or 'squires' had their own *plaid* (armed retinue of followers) to impose their lord's authority upon their area.

This buffer role played by the Welsh elite was all the more important in the fourteenth century as the generalised demographic collapse that followed the Black Death weakened the bargaining power of the lords across the archipelago. Unable to prevent peasant flight, the manorial system in the South Wales lowlands fell apart and with it the institution of serfdom or villeinage. The Welsh from the hills began to reclaim the lowlands, bringing with them their cattle and their customs. With their understanding of Welsh traditions, the native elite was in a much better position to maintain social peace in the Welsh countryside. [R. R. Davies, 1987]

The Welsh elite did not act merely as social and political intermediaries between English power and the Welsh community, but also as cultural intermediaries. It has been argued that "the two and a half centuries which spanned the period between the Edwardian conquest and the Union with England in 1536 did constitute a crucial and distinctive period in the development of a literate mentality in Wales: a process which may be compared in some ways with the twelfth and thirteenth centuries in England, when as Michael Clanchy has convincingly argued, literate modes spread both territorially and socially, and when a pronounced shift from memory to written record, from sacred script to practical literacy was witnessed." [Smith, 1998, p. 203] Whatever about a 'literate mentality', it is quite clear that these centuries saw a significant expansion in the use of writing and in basic literacy within Wales. The elite as a whole, rather than specialised sections of it, began to read and write.

To fulfil their function as managers of the English – whether royal or seigniorial – lordships, the Welsh elite needed to acquire knowledge of reading and writing for legal and administrative purposes. After 1282 a “spectacular proliferation of written records is evidenced.” [Smith, 1998, p. 210] Titles, charters, privileges, and agreements of all sorts came to be recorded in writing. These affected not only the upper layers of society, but also the population as a whole. Free peasants might have their letters of manumission. While reading skills (and writing skills even more so) would have been highly circumscribed, a familiarity with writing was becoming widespread, and with it a new appreciation for literary pursuits. [R. R. Davies, 1987; Smith, 1998]

Though the old bardic order was silenced in the years directly following the Edwardian conquest, the fourteenth century saw a resurgence of Welsh writing. New rules of Welsh poetic practice were laid down, and a rich body of poetry produced, freed from the narrow concerns and regulations of the bardic schools. Among Welsh scholars, the fourteenth century is regarded as the great age of Welsh poetry. Important developments also occurred in Welsh prose. The old tradition of Welsh sagas was replaced by translations from Latin, French and English, not only of narrative but also of religious, legal and technical works. [R. R. Davies, 1987]

Essential to the Welsh literary renaissance was the patronage of the new Welsh elite. They were in a position to give material support to the nascent intelligentsia and in return won the praise of the poets for their generosity and for their commitment to the traditions of Welsh culture. However, even as they encouraged the writing down of Welsh legal and other traditions, the Welsh squirarchy was discovering the value of English law to the consolidation of their class position. [John Davies, 1993]

Over the course of the late Middle Ages there was increasing intermarriage between elite families of English and Welsh origins. Each began to borrow the others’ customs and legal practice though “it would appear that the anglicisation of the Welsh was greater than the cymricisation of the English.” [John Davies, 1993, p. 209] English legal practice encouraged the consolidation of individual land holdings and facilitated the alienation and sale of land. Having acquired their estates by the Welsh practice of *pride* the Welsh elite then secured them by switching to English land tenure, backed up by charters and written records. “When the Act of Union of 1536 eventually formally imposed English law on

the whole of Wales, it was but completing a process which had already been well underway for generations.” [R. R. Davies, 1987, p. 423] What was happening was not merely the anglicisation of the Welsh elite, but its ‘gentrification’, to use the word in its literal sense. Alongside the adoption of English legal practices of land holding, the Welsh gentry began to dwell in a new style of housing. [Smith, 1998]

These developments greatly influenced their response to the Tudor re-organisation of government, and flowing from that, their response to the Reformation. “It is not difficult to understand the approval of the gentry. What they sought was the opportunity to build up their estates unhindered, to be free from the interference of English officials, to become masters of local government in Wales and to be assured that the Penal Code was a dead letter...they were all achieved under the Tudors. When that dynasty came to an end in 1603, the Welsh gentry were firmly in place as the ruling class of Wales...It was not a matter of the Tudors identifying themselves with the Welsh, but rather of the Welsh identifying themselves with the Tudors.” [John Davies, 1993, p. 219]

While the initial response to the Reformation was tepid – and fairly hostile during Edward’s reign – over the course of the Elizabethan era Wales came to adopt the Reformation as its own. Welsh religious reformers stressed that the Reformation involved a reversion to the pristine Christian spirit which existed in Wales before the Anglo-French invasion. Roman domination represented a breach with this tradition, which could now be restored under the stewardship of a Welsh dynasty. The Welsh poets played a significant role in this ‘cymricisation’ of the Reformation. Welsh translations of the Prayer books and the New Testament were produced in the 1560s and a complete Welsh translation of the Bible was produced later in the century. [Bradshaw, 1998; Williams, 1989]

The translation of the Bible into Welsh had a long-term significance for the survival of the Welsh language. It was the only non-state language in the Europe of its time into which the Bible was translated. [Janet Davies, 2000] While the gentry in Wales would become increasingly anglicised over the next two centuries, the central role of the Bible in Welsh culture would ensure that a tradition of Welsh literacy would develop which was significantly broader than that prevailing with either Irish or Scottish Gaelic. This tradition of popular

literacy would in turn consolidate the position of the Welsh language down into the modern era. [Janet Davies, 2000]

Wales entered the modern era then with two languages of mass literacy. In the Welsh language there existed a popular – largely poetic and religious – literate tradition, while English was the language of both official and elite literacy. In the centuries following the Union two languages and two associated patterns of literacy would co-exist in Wales: an ‘official’ one associated with commerce and power and a ‘popular’ one associated with religion, poetry and song. The former would of course be dominant but it would be delimited by the demotic tradition. Together they would define the manner of Wales’ incorporation into the British polity: subaltern but forever recalcitrant.

## **[2] Scotland**

In the age of ‘high’ feudalism – the twelfth and thirteenth centuries – the picture of literacy in Ireland and Scotland, and its relation to social organisation, shows some remarkable similarities. A mainly lowland region characterised by a manorial economy and a seigniorial social order co-existed somewhat uneasily with a mainly upland Gaelic-speaking region where a clannic social order and a pastoralist economy survived. Literacy in both countries, and in both regions of the two countries, was very much a restricted affair.

A few centuries later the contrast between Ireland and Scotland could hardly have been greater. In Scotland a wide level of literacy would provide a social and intellectual context within which the Reformation could flourish. Moreover it would do so primarily through the medium of the English language. Whereas in Ireland resistance to both Reformation and anglicisation resulted in calamitous warfare, in Scotland opposition was muted and the Gaelic region was largely absorbed into the new order. The three issues here, the early development of a wider literacy, the success of the English language, and the relatively easy absorption of the Gaelic order into the anglicised Scottish realm, might seem quite separate. This chapter will argue that they were in fact closely related.

The contrast between a seigniorial/manorial core and a clannic/pastoralist periphery was certainly a defining social characteristic of both Scotland and Ireland in the high Middle Ages. Crucially though the relationship between core and periphery was very different in the two countries. Scotland had its own monarchy, based in the Lowland region, which could lay claim not merely to *kingship over* the Highlands and Islands, but to *kinship with* their Gaelic speaking population. [Barrow, 1981]

Scotland, like Ireland and Wales, was largely transformed by the arrival of the Anglo-French warrior aristocracy in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. In Scotland, the Anglo-French knights were invited in by the Scottish king; they did not invade. Strictly speaking, the Anglo-French knights were also invited into Ireland by the king of Leinster to assist him in an inter-dynastic dispute. However, the power of the Anglo-French compared to the Leinster Gaelic forces was such that they quickly assumed control. In Scotland, powerful though the Anglo-French knights might be, they were always subordinate to the Scottish king. The Scottish Gaelic rulers' prescience in seeking to assimilate the Anglo-French to their interests may have been due to their closer proximity to England. The first Scottish king to develop this alliance, David I, had been fostered in England and was able to see for himself the material benefits of the seigniorial system. [Barrow, 1981; Whyte, 1995a]

Whatever the reasons for this difference, the Scottish kings were able to use the power of the Anglo-French knights to construct a monarchical state. As crucial as their arms were their organisational abilities. The arrival of feudal knights into Scotland was accompanied by a greatly increased use of 'pragmatic' documents – charters, diplomas and brieves – issuing instructions to the king's subjects and recording information on inheritance and disposal of property. By the middle of the twelfth century, the Scottish crown had come to use writing routinely for recording significant information and communications. Over the following century the pragmatic use of writing had become commonplace among the higher Scottish nobility. By 1300 writing was found further down the social hierarchy, beginning with grants of land, and followed later by 'bonds', contracts between individuals and groups. [Barrow, 1997]



The language of this new pragmatic literacy was, overwhelmingly, Latin. As the language of the Church, and all professional writers in this period were recruited from the ranks of the clergy, Latin was the obvious script. The use of Latin for official writing had another positive function here: it provided a *lingua franca* to overcome the linguistic fragmentation of medieval Scotland. [Barrow, 1997]

Northern Scotland was part of the kingdom of Norway for much of the medieval era, and Norse continued to be spoken in the Shetland and Orkney Islands until the late Middle Ages. Gaelic was the language not only of the Highlands and western Isles but was also spoken across much of Lowland Scotland in the thirteenth century and later. Two other Celtic languages were also spoken in medieval Scotland, Pictish and, in the south-west of Scotland, a language akin to Welsh. [Forsyth, 1998; Price, 2000] In Lothian, in the east Lowlands of Scotland, a Germanic dialect similar to English was spoken. Added to this linguistic mixture was French, which by the twelfth century had become the principal vernacular among the Lowland aristocracy. [Muirson, 1974]

Two centuries later, the linguistic picture in Scotland had simplified itself. French, which had never been widely used as a written language, was also disappearing as a spoken one. A contemporary observer noted: “The manners and customs of the Scots vary with the diversity of their speech, for two languages are spoken among them, the Scottish and the Teutonic, the later of which is the language of those who occupy the seaboard and the plains, while the race of Scottish speech inhabits the highlands and the outlying islands.” [Quoted in Muirson, 1974, p.76]

This Highlands/Lowlands dichotomy already evident in the late fourteenth century would become much more pronounced by the sixteenth. Yet while the Gaelic regions would be overwhelmed in the early modern era, in medieval times no such radical opposition existed. The Gaelic language did not have specific words for either ‘Highlands’ or ‘Lowlands’. Gaelic continued to be one of the languages spoken at court in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Multilingualism seems to have been common in medieval Scotland, at least among the elite. [Dawson, 1998; Muirson, 1974]

Most important of all perhaps, and in sharp contrast to Ireland, there was no *legal* discrimination against the Gaelic language or people of Gaelic descent in medieval Scotland. People could shift from one to the other and be comfortable in both. The Celtic elite of the Lowlands was not eliminated – except for those opposing the Crown – rather they fused with the newcomers into a unified aristocracy. The Scottish monarchy could assert its Gaelic ancestry while in practice tilting towards first French and then ‘Inglis’, as Scots-English was referred to. [Grant & Stringer, 1995]

The towns or ‘burghs’ appear to have played a central role in the rise of ‘Inglis’. Most of the early burghs were “on land belonging to the Crown, enjoyed royal protection and had certainly or probably been founded by kings”. [Barrow, 1981, p. 87] The patronage offered by the monarchy to the towns was based primarily on the resources they could make available. Urban development could, through trade, increase the value of the agricultural surplus or perhaps more importantly ‘monetise’ it and in the process magnify royal power. Writing came to be used to keep records of surplus extraction and trade in these centres. [Barrow, 1981]

As the feudal order spread across lowland and eastern Scotland, towns came to proliferate, encouraged not only by the Crown but also by local seigniorial lords, conscious themselves of their economic value. Given the Gaelic aversion to urban life, Scottish towns drew on the ‘Inglis’ speakers of Lothian for their population, and with the spread of urban centres, the language of Lothian spread too. [Muirson, 1974]

A Scottish legal system grew up alongside the Scottish Crown. Scottish law was heavily influenced by the Anglo-French influx and by a more general borrowing from English law. It was developed, like its English counterpart, from the practice of the court. In the thirteenth century Scottish jurists regarded themselves as sharing a common law with the English. Yet the two legal systems were not identical. “The reception of Anglo-Norman law in Scotland did not take place in a legal vacuum. There was no outright rejection of the Celtic legal inheritance....it is clear that many distinctive features of Celtic law survived for centuries, and that legal harmonisation rather than outright assimilation was the order of the day.” [Quoted in Sellar, 1989, p.87] On the key issue of land inheritance, however, primogeniture had become the norm in Scotland by the late thirteenth century.

The royal government had encouraged the 'stabilisation of norms' regarding land use precisely because it helped to secure the status quo and minimise disorder. This involved interventions within lordships to uphold law. One effect of this was to establish relations between the local community (of landholders) and the royal government, bypassing the local lords. Written legal documents came to be considered as better witnesses because they had a longer purchase, while the idea of 'ownership' encouraged the notion that land could be a commodity. [MacQueen, 1995] The Scottish monarchy, however, lacked the resources of their English counterparts. In England, a distinct legal profession had come into existence before the end of the thirteenth century; there are no signs of this happening in Scotland before the fifteenth century. Correspondingly, there were few legal records in Scotland before this time. [Sellar, 1988]

In Wales, the Edwardian conquest inaugurated a legal order where English criminal law was imposed, but the Welsh were allowed maintain their own civil law. In Scotland, the reverse seems to have occurred. English or Anglo-French civil law was introduced by a Gaelic monarchy, but older traditions of criminal law persisted for centuries. The principles of 'blood feud' and compensation for criminal injury continued not only in the Highlands but also in Lowland Scotland up until the late sixteenth century. These were not merely local customs but were clearly written down in a fourteenth century legal treatise compiled in Lowland Scotland. [Wormald, 1980]

The survival of a system of private justice might be viewed as an implicit challenge to the system of royal justice, but the Crown's response was not to prohibit it, but rather to take its share of the compensatory payment. It certainly reflected the administrative and financial weakness of the Crown, and the enduring strength of kinship ties. Kinship was not the only element cementing the countryside or its upper strata. A novel feature of the fifteenth and sixteenth century Scottish historical record is the survival of hundreds of documents recording a contract known as 'bonds of manrent' whereby nobles, lairds and others lower down the social hierarchy swore to support and protect each other in the event of a feud. These documents reveal Lowland society in this era to combine what might seem like very divergent features. Kinship was still significant, but perhaps not powerful enough to provide adequate protection

against feuding. Nor were these bonds mere feudal survivals: implicit in them were freely chosen alliances, not acts of submission. Above all perhaps they reveal the extent to which literacy and the idea of a written contract had come to permeate Lowland Scotland. [Wormald, 1980, 1985]

The weakness of the Scottish state was not simply the product of aristocratic hostility to royal power. The Scottish magnates were not seeking to subvert the Scottish monarchy; rather they viewed the kingship as a focal point holding Scotland together. They resorted to systems of private justice because royal justice was unable to provide them with protection. [Wormald, 1985]

The weakness of the Scottish Crown in the late medieval period was in large measure due to the effects of the fourteenth century warfare. If the fourteenth century gave Wales its long era of peace, and Ireland its Gaelic revival, it gave Scotland its 'Wars of Independence'. The generalised crisis of the feudal order in the fourteenth century took its toll on Scotland, but it tends to be overshadowed by these wars. From another perspective though, the 'Wars of Independence' can be seen to be an aspect of the general crisis. The English monarchy, its home resources depleted by the agrarian crisis, needed to expand its territorial base to make up the shortfall. The Scottish feudal aristocracy, closely allied to France, proved capable of successfully resisting the English kingdom's efforts at expansion.

### **Literacy and the Scottish Reformation**

Religious division and war dominated Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The religious movements of the period, the Reformation and the Counter-Reformation, were to have a huge impact on the spread of literacy, and on much else besides. In Lowland Scotland, like in the Irish Pale, the initial reception given to the Reformation was less than decisive. Protestant zealots while more numerous in Scotland than in Ireland, were very much a minority; so too were upholders of the Roman Church. But by the turn of the seventeenth century the population of Scotland was firmly on the side of the Reformation and the population of Ireland firmly against it. How can this difference be accounted for?

If the Reformation is seen as a decisive contributor to the diffusion of literacy, it is also the case that the Reformation itself would have been inconceivable without an earlier base of a literate laity. It is not necessary to exaggerate here. It is true that visual imagery played an important part in the spread of Reformation propaganda in Germany; it is also true that the Counter-Reformation drive significantly increased levels of literacy in Catholic countries and regions. Nonetheless, it was the phenomenon of huge numbers of lay people reading the sacred scriptures for themselves that truly transformed the Western Christian Church.

Here we see a decisive difference between Lowland Scotland and the Irish Pale. Despite the weaknesses of the Scottish state, written contracts had become quite widespread. A significant section of the peasantry – albeit a minority – had written leases for their landholdings and it seems reasonable to conclude that a certain level of basic literacy would have become important for them. Among the lairds, the lower landowners, literacy seems to have been widespread at least since the fifteenth century. [Whyte, 1995a]

The post of ‘notary public’, associated with ecclesiastical issues, existed in Scotland from the thirteenth century, but acquired much larger significance from the fifteenth century, from which time are found large numbers of legal documents. Especially prominent are documents relating to ‘sasine’, a legal instrument for transferring land. They indicate a growing commercialisation of Scottish society. Through ‘feu farming’, land exchange was circumventing feudal restraints and becoming a matter for commerce; written records of these transactions needed to be preserved. The lairds, as main beneficiaries of these transactions, needed at least to be able to read. In the Irish Pale by contrast, landholding tended to be on a customary basis, and there is little to indicate that literacy had permeated downwards in the late medieval era. [Robertson, 1977; Whyte, 1997]

This process of commercialisation had become more pronounced by the sixteenth century when Scottish society “becoming more literate, better educated, began to turn its attention away from the amateur to the professional. The so-called ‘Education Act’ of 1496 which directed eldest sons of landowners to learn ‘perfyte Latyne’ and then study law was an early attempt to provide the

local courts with judges with a training which enabled them to do more than apply common-sense rules. A century later there was a clear distinction between the school- and university-educated lairds who rose in government, administration and the law, and those who remained in the relative isolation of their estates.” [Wormald, 1980, p. 90-91]

No less important than a level of literacy was the language in which literacy was delivered. The Reformation sought to bring the spirit of religion back into the lives of the people. To do this the Christian message had to be delivered in a language the people understood. Latin could not do that. Luther’s decisive achievement in Germany was the publication of printed German translations of the Bible. For a long period after, Luther’s Bible was the best selling book in Germany. The effect of Luther’s Bible was not merely to consolidate Protestantism in Germany; it was also crucial in establishing a standard written German. [Scribner et al, 1994]

In Scotland, the message came in ‘standard English’, not in ‘Scots’. The differences between ‘standard English’ and ‘Scots’ were probably not much greater than those between the various dialects of sixteenth century German. They were certainly sufficiently close to enable Lowland Scots readers to understand what they were reading. By contrast, to a monoglot Gaelic speaker in Ireland or Scotland, English (or Scots) would have been wholly incomprehensible.

Wherever the Reformation was successful, it would seem that cities – the centres of commerce and administration – played a leading role. The cities were not, however, in a position to impose the Reformation on a hostile countryside. To do so would have been to court isolation and defeat. The demographic weight of pre-modern Europe was overwhelmingly rural. For the Reformation to succeed it needed allies in the countryside, preferably among the elite. The Scottish nobility for the most part supported the Reformation. Concerns they might have had about disturbing traditional religious practices were no doubt eased by the sharing out of monastic lands among them (unlike in Ireland, where the government gave most of the monastic lands to English settlers.) [Goodcare, 1994; Whyte, 1997]

There was no question of Protestantism being imposed from the outside on Scotland. On the contrary, the Reformers were able to use resentment towards French dominance at court to buttress their case. Moreover while the Reformers relied on English religious scripts and on English military aid to secure their victory, they were certainly not imposing English religious orthodoxy on the Scottish population. Quite the contrary. The Scottish Reformation took its message from the French world. Geneva, Calvin's base, while politically part of the Swiss Confederation, was linguistically and culturally part of France. It was in France that Calvin's adherents would fight and lose one of the great battles of the Reformation. Despite its use of 'standard English', the Scottish Reformation was unquestionably Scottish, and once it achieved dominance, it was immeasurably strengthened by patriotic sentiment. [Goodcare, 1994; Whyte, 1997]

It is generally accepted that the Reformation expressed a more individualistic approach to religious belief. The individual's direct relationship to God, unmediated by cleric, saint, ritual or imagery was central to the Protestant message, or at least to its Calvinist variant that Scotland embraced. It seems paradoxical then that this individualist message should have had such an impact in a society where urban development and a money economy were still quite limited and where kinship and lordship were still quite powerful. This paradox may have been the secret of Calvinism's success in Scotland. The Reformation in Scotland involved a good deal more than the elimination of one Church and its replacement by another. Rather these events themselves initiated a cultural and social process which transformed Scotland. The very extremism of Calvinism may have been its attraction.

The strongest support for the Reformation in Scotland came from the lairds, Scotland's equivalent to the English gentry. Already largely literate by the fifteenth century, they were open to influences coming through the towns. The lairds played a major role in the new church assemblies – the kirks – which sought to impose a collective puritanical discipline on their local communities. As leading literate laymen, the lairds' opinion carried great weight and the kirks gave them considerable power over their local communities. [Goodcare, 1994; Whyte, 1997] "Calvinist emphasis on discipline, imposed in Scotland by a

hierarchy of church courts, from the kirk session at parish level to the general assembly at national level, did cut across the traditional social hierarchy; for it was the lairds and burgesses, not the nobles, who sat on local church courts, so that the nobility was now at least in theory, subject to discipline by their social inferiors". [Wormald, 1980, p.94] The Scottish Reformation appears to have compensated for the weakness of the Scottish state by introducing a locally imposed culture of restraint, and empowering a social agency with the power to enforce it: the lairds and the burgesses. Despite its individualistic theology, Scottish Calvinism did not seek to undermine social authority or cohesion but rather to impose a more powerful form than that offered by the traditional nexus of lordship and kinship. [Wormald, 1980]

Education was to play a key role in this process. Towards the end of the fifteenth century parliament had passed an act encouraging the education of the nobility. A century later the educational ambitions of the Scottish state had expanded sufficiently to include a project for the provision of education in every parish, though the full implementation of this programme would take a good deal longer. The driving force behind the educational programme was religious in motivation: the scriptures should be accessible to all. Saving one's soul had social repercussions, of course: the God-fearing lived orderly lives. [Whyte, 1997]

Whatever difficulties Calvinism faced in the Lowlands, these were minor compared to the barriers that confronted it in the Gaelic-speaking Highlands and Islands. Literacy levels were very low in the Gaelic areas, and the language obstacle further widened the gulf between the Lowland reformers and their potential audience. Settlement patterns increased the difficulties. There were no towns worth speaking of and most of the churches had been built, quite deliberately, in the most remote of places. Kinship was pervasive. Gaelic spiritual beliefs bordered on the polytheistic; spirits abounded, some good, some bad, and their strongest orthodox religious attachment was to their saints. Traditional customs were also at variance with the austerity of the Calvinist ethos; the Gaelic communities extolled generosity and largesse and despised frugality. [Dawson, 1994]



The scale of these obstacles makes the success of Calvinism in the Scottish Gaidhealtachd all the more impressive. By the 1620s when Irish Franciscan friars arrived in the 'Highland and Island' region of Scotland on a mission to win over Gaelic Scotland to the Catholic cause, they discovered Protestantism to be so entrenched that the battle was in effect already lost. [Bradshaw, 1998]

Behind the contrasting fates of the Reformation in Gaelic Scotland and Gaelic Ireland lay the wider political context of their societies. There had been no *legal* discrimination against the Gaelic community in Scotland. Much of the Scottish Gaelic elite seems to have been at home in both worlds. In the fractious world of Scottish Gaeldom, it suited many of the Gaelic elite to maintain close relations with the monarchy and with the commerce and society of Edinburgh. "There is no sense that the Highlanders were outside the national community." [Grant, 1988, p.120] Scottish Gaeldom combined cultural unity with the Irish Gaelic world and political allegiance to the Scottish monarchy. Likewise there seems to have been no discrimination against the Gael within the medieval Scottish Church, as a result there was not the same need for the Observant orders of friars in Gaelic Scotland, as there had been in Ireland. Finally, the process of social transformation from a clannic society occurred more gradually in Scotland than in Ireland. It seems to have begun earlier under the influence of the Scottish monarchy, and was not finally completed until the eighteenth century.

The Gaelic vernaculars of Scotland and Ireland were diverging in the late medieval period though both shared a learned 'Classical Common Gaelic' utilised by the poets and the literate stratum of Gaelic society. Close connections between the Gaelic areas of Scotland and Ireland, especially Ulster, would continue until the defeat of the Gaelic uprising in Ireland at the beginning of the seventeenth century. [Dawson, 1998]

The most powerful Gaelic sept in the late medieval period were the McDonalds, who dominated the Hebrides, but it was the Campbells, controlling Argyll, who occupied the most strategically important area at the border between the Highlands and Lowlands in the west of Scotland. Their politics and culture mirrored their frontier position: the earls of Argyll were careful to maintain the institutions of Gaelic literacy, not least the loyalty of the poets, while also retaining strong links to the Scottish monarchy. [Dawson, 1994; MacCraith, 1995]

The support of the Duke of Argyll, head of clan Campbell, was essential for the success of the Protestant cause. Argyll encouraged the publication in 1567 of the *Foirm na n-Urruidheadh*, a Gaelic translation of the *Book of Common Order*, the first printed work in Gaelic. Its use of 'Classical Common Gaelic' rather than the 'Scottish Vernacular' would suggest that it was intended for dissemination not only in Scotland but also in Ireland. In the event, Calvinism made little headway in Gaelic Ireland, and it would be another century before a Gaelic translation of the full Bible was published. A Scottish Gaelic translation was not produced until 1801. [Dawson, 1994; MacCraith, 1995]

In the Middle Ages, Latin had been the language of government in the Highlands, but by the sixteenth century it was being displaced by Scots-English. Being literate in the three languages became imperative for members of the Gaelic learned stratum. It was these traditional learned orders who played the crucial role in the dissemination of Protestantism in the Scottish Gaidhealtachd. Studies of Church records in seventeenth century Argyll show that most of the clerics came from the traditional learned families. As well as their multi-lingual skills, they were also able to combine the vernacular and the literary variants of Gaelic to memorise and orally transmit Calvinist beliefs. Poetry and song were widely employed. The parish was not regarded as the primary unit of church organisation, rather churchmen tailored their approach to local practices. Many services were held, as was customary, in the open air, and ministers travelled considerable distances to reach their flocks. [Bannerman, 1983; Dawson, 1994; McCaughey, 1989]

Gaelic Calvinism did not only adopt traditional modes of communication, it also adapted its message to its local environment. Popular belief in supernatural activity was tolerated, though Catholic reverence for saints was repudiated. Likewise traditional funeral practices, including wakes, were acceptable to the Gaelic ministers, though the funeral service itself was altered. In the event, a distinctively Gaelic Calvinism proved short-lived. The social and cultural transformation of the Scottish Lowlands, occasioned by the Reformation, also radically changed the relationship between the regions of Scotland: in effect it created the 'Highlands' as a distinct entity. [Dawson, 1994]

## Divergence between Highlands and Lowlands

In late medieval Scotland social practices in the different regions shaded into one another, rather than contrasted in black and white terms. However, by the sixteenth century social changes in 'Lowland' Scotland were sufficiently rapid to create an intensified sense of difference between it and Gaelic Scotland. It seems clear enough that the new structures of social control which emerged from the Reformation had the effect of accentuating the geographical and linguistic disparities. Jenny Wormald noted that "with the decline of the bloodfeud in the lowlands went an increase of suspicion and hatred of the highlander." [Wormald, 1980, p. 97]

It may be significant that the Reformation in the Lowlands (but not in the Highlands) was accompanied by a hysterical fear of 'witches' and an extensive persecution of likely suspects. [Dawson, 1994] Witch-hunts were widespread in early modern (but contrary to modern prejudice, not in medieval) Europe. The paradox of a deepening fear of magic in an era when the power of magic was being denied is powerfully expressed within the sphere of communications itself. While the reformers denounced superstitious and magical practices, their own elevation of the Bible as the source of all epistemic authority represented a transference of magical power to the written word.

The *Statutes of Iona* drawn up in 1609 stipulated that the eldest child of every 'gentleman or yeoman' on the islands be sent to school in the Lowlands. Seven years later the state decreed "that the vulgar Inglishe toung be universallie plantit, and the Irishe language, whilk is one of the cheif and principall causis of the continewance of barbaritie and incivilitie amongis the inhabitantis of the Ilis and Heylandis, may be abolisheit and removit." [Quoted in Bannerman, 1983, p. 216]

Another writer noted that "at the beginning of the sixteenth century the Lowlands 'discovered' ideologically speaking the wildness of the north at the moment of its own attempts at consolidation." [Louise Frandenbug quoted in Dawson, 1998, p. 287] The demons within came to be projected outwards. The Scottish Highlanders came to be seen as wild and barbaric in contrast to the orderly, God fearing and civilised Lowlanders. Endorsing the Reformation was not sufficient to ensure the Highlanders' place in the emerging national community. [Dawson, 1998]

From the point of view of this thesis, the main significance of the changed perspective concerns its impact on language use and literacy. In a cultural landscape where the 'Highlands' came to be seen as a bastion of barbarism, the experiment of transmitting the Reformed doctrines and liturgy through Gaelic, had to be abandoned. A Scottish Gaelic Bible could not play the role of its Welsh equivalent as a harbinger of a popular literacy in the community's vernacular.

### [3] England

While historians in England are able to show evidence of writing being used and understood by a significant section of the lay population from the thirteenth century, it is not until the sixteenth century that it seems to be possible to begin to quantify levels of literacy and illiteracy there, and even then the quantifications have to be treated with caution. Nonetheless they throw some light on the social patterns of literacy at the end of the medieval era, and allow one to explore possible links between these patterns and earlier developments.

By the Tudor and Stuart decades, the great majority of the gentry were literate, though a section, perhaps as many as one in five in some counties, were still unable to write. Among yeoman farmers, more than two in three were literate while among husbandmen and labourers the literacy rate was closer to one in five. Figures for tradesmen and craftsmen were slightly lower than yeomen, except for London where literacy rates were higher. In general, literacy rates were higher in urban than in rural areas; among the urban trades and businesses the wealthier the business or trade, the higher the rate for reading and writing. Levels of illiteracy were especially high among women, though here too there were huge variations according to social class. [Cressy, 1980]

These figures, it must be borne in mind, come *after* the Reformation encouraged greater numbers to take up reading, and long after Latin had been superseded as the dominant language of script. Yet while these literacy rates are surely much higher than in the thirteenth, fourteenth or fifteenth centuries, the overall pattern is very much in line with what one might expect from reading accounts of the

use of writing in the later medieval era. While there were certainly situations where urban artisans or the children of peasants were more learned than nobles, in broad terms it seems clear enough that the upper classes became literate before the lower. The 'literisation' of the elite and the wider society may at times have occurred simultaneously, for analytical purposes it is worth distinguishing them. What exactly was it that encouraged people to learn to read, and later perhaps, to write?

While some pragmatic literacy existed in Anglo-Saxon England, such usage became more widespread following the Norman-French invasion in the eleventh century. [Magennis, 2001] The invaders brought with them a tight administrative system which had already been developed in the French kingdom. The new administrative cadre was recruited from the ranks of the clergy, and the language they wrote in was Latin. The first major fruits of this system were to be found in the *Domesday Book*, where the conquerors set out a detailed account of their new kingdom's resources. For William the Conqueror this served a double function: to assess the total social surplus available for distribution within the elite and the amount available to the monarchy. [Britnell, 1996] This use of writing for recording wealth or tribute was not new; on the contrary the first writing known to historians, in ancient Mesopotamia, did the same. [Mann, 1986]

Literacy was of course central to religious practice and beliefs. It was from the ranks of the Church that the monarchy drew its administrative officials, while canon law heavily influenced the development of the wider legal system. Outside of the clergy, literacy was very limited indeed and literacy skills were not considered necessary for normal life, even by the nobility, very few of whom could read or write. To understand why this changed, we need to look at how writing was used in the centuries following the conquest, and examine to what extent an ability to read and write became more and more necessary for more and more people.

Religion aside, three key areas of social practice have been identified as being associated with the use of writing in this era: law, administration and commerce. While apparently distinct, the three overlapped in a variety of ways. The 'commercial revolution' of the twelfth century, as it is sometimes called, was closely linked to changes in the social organisation of agriculture. Landlords

began to manage their estates directly and to sell surplus produce in towns, which as well as acting as market centres, also became centres of craft production. With the development of manorial administration and urban commerce, the keeping of written records became much more widespread. [Clanchy, 1993]

There were legal implications to these changes. Codes and regulations had to be drawn up: "Estate management and the common law evolved in parallel: they came together here..." [Hatcher, 1981, p.30] As the thirteenth century progressed, tenants' obligations came to be defined more tightly by manorial officials drawing up tenants' rentals and customals. [Hatcher, 1981]

The problem with customary agreements, and custom in general, was its tendency to freeze rents. The landlords were well aware that in an era of expanding population and production, and of rising prices, it made sense to abandon custom and increase their income by transferring land from villeinage into more profitable leaseholds or competitive tenancies at will. Many tenancies were converted from labour rents to monetary rents. The tenants for their part regarded this process as enfranchisement, though at least half the English peasantry remained unfree. [Hatcher, 1981]

The demographic collapse of the mid-fourteenth century transformed the balance of power between landlords and peasants in England as elsewhere in Europe. It led to a sharp rise in the land/labour ratio with tenants in a position to force down rents and increasingly resist other forms of seigniorial exactions. Attempts by lords to retain unfree peasants on their manors by force proved ineffective. The Peasants Revolt of 1381, though a failure, was followed by a massive flight of peasants in England from conditions of unfreedom. Landlords were no longer in a position to preserve traditional patterns of authority: labour services were becoming difficult to impose. More and more, landlords' relations to their subordinates became governed by contract. "The need to keep a written record of new contracts, in circumstances where long memory was no longer a guide to current terms of tenure was the main reason for the development of hereditary copyhold which developed in parallel with copyhold leases... On some manors the issuing of copies to customary tenants became the normal procedure. This practice carried even further the modification of customary relationships by record keeping." [Britnell, 1996, p. 222]

The diffusion of money and writing were closely linked because once customary traditions were broken – to be replaced by money rent – a written security of tenure became more necessary. By the same token the development of written contracts extinguished the social relationships of custom. While there were significant parallels between the process of ‘literisation’ and commercialisation, it would be mistaken to see one as simply a by-product of the other. In the century following the Black Death, there was a significant decline in the level of ‘commercialisation’ as measured by a number of key indices. Agriculture seems to have become less market-orientated, wage labour on the land reduced and the units of production had become smaller. Yet this period which saw a decline in the levels of ‘commercialisation’ (as usually computed) also saw a crucial – arguably *the* crucial – expansion in the use of literacy. Land came to be rented out by means of *written contract*. [Britnell, 1996; Hatcher, 1994]

The gradual diffusion of literacy was accompanied by a transformation in the patterns of social power. The weakened social power of landlords in relation to tenants in the period of demographic collapse following the Black Death was countered by the increasing centralisation of justice. With the collapse of serfdom, the English elite found themselves in a much weaker position in relation to the broader population; they needed to integrate them into a law-based system if the social order was to survive. The second half of the fourteenth century saw an enhanced power of local royal officials – the Justices of the Peace – and the increasing use of royal courts. While the Justices of the Peace were not paid officials, they were the local representatives of an increasingly professionalised legal system: it was in this period that a centrally organised legal profession emerged. [Coss, 1995]

### **Language and Literacy**

In the context of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, being literate primarily meant to be able to read or write Latin. Writing was distinct from, and rarer than, reading because of the difficulties involved in the use of parchment and quill. Because of the major role played by the Church in medieval life, some oral knowledge of Latin liturgy would have been quite widespread; and most likely some basic reading knowledge of Latin would also have been in existence, even among the peasantry. [Clanchy, 1993]

Prior to 1300, neither (Middle) English nor French was sufficiently standardised or developed as a written language to be suitable for basic instruction in reading and writing. As the vernacular languages came to be written down more, English and French were in competition with each other for ascendancy, French being initially more popular with lawyers and government officials, English being used more for 'literary' purposes. French remained the language of court until the early fifteenth century but its decline is evident from a much earlier period. [Baugh & Cable, 1993; McCrum et al, 1986; Price, 2000; Wolff, 1971]

Two crucial factors worked against French: the demographic weakness of the French speaking community and the persistent conflict between the English and French monarchies. The Norman-French conquest of England was essentially an aristocratic affair, involving military and clerical elites, but not – for the most part – any larger plebeian settlement. A manorial type economy already existed in much of Anglo-Saxon England; the Norman-French conquerors only needed to take control, not to establish it. The conquerors found themselves surrounded by English speakers, with whom many intermarried. While the wars against France encouraged a greater tolerance towards the use of the English language, French remained the language of prestige in late medieval England, as indeed it was across much of the rest of Europe. Even where English was becoming the 'mother' tongue, the children of the nobility were being instructed in French, and some of the Oxford colleges included in their statutes (in 1326 and 1340) a requirement that under-graduates converse in French and Latin. [Baugh & Cable, 1993; McCrum et al, 1986; Price, 2000]

Despite these elitist measures the functional requirement that the rulers be able to effectively communicate with those they ruled pressed home the case for English. In 1356 it was decided to hold the proceedings of the sheriffs court in London and Middlesex in English rather than in French because "it is often shewed to the king by the prelates, dukes, earls, barons, and all of the commonalty, of the great mischiefs which have happened to divers of the realm because the laws, customs and statutes of the realm be not commonly known in the same realm." [Quoted in Baugh & Cable, 1993, p.145]



There is considerable debate among historians as to the extent of popular literacy in late-medieval and early modern England. [Cressy, 1980; Poos, 1991] The wider use of writing certainly created a situation where people would have different degrees of exposure to writing, and in consequence one finds shades of literacy and illiteracy. [Goody & Watt, 1968] Despite the arguments about the *rate* of increase in levels of literacy (themselves reflecting problems with limited data and methodological issues about defining literacy) there seems little dispute that as the vernacular came to be more widely used for writing purposes, so literacy came to be more generalised among the population.

The crucial turning point here occurred in the 1430s when from being an exception among written documents, the great bulk of which had been in Latin or French, English came to be widely used for official documents. The crucial institution in promoting this development was the Chancery, “which alongside the closely allied Exchequer” comprised “virtually all the national bureaucracy of England.” [Price, 2000, p.149] Because the Chancery was producing the greatest quantity of English texts, and because of its central position within the royal administration, it came to establish a *standard* written English. The establishment of England’s first printing press in 1476 by William Caxton in Westminster greatly reinforced this standard, and contributed immeasurably to the spread of reading and writing. [Price, 2000; Starkey, 1992]

Alongside the changed social and political landscape of late medieval England, English began to emerge as a literary language though Latin remained the prestigious language of scholarship into the era of the ‘scientific revolution’ in the seventeenth century. It is doubtful if Newton’s path-breaking work in physics would have had the same impact if it had not been written in Latin.

The development of printing made texts, especially longer texts, much more widely and cheaply available. The most important of these in England, as in Germany and much of northern Europe, was the Bible. The early impact of Wycliff’s Bible showed not merely the hunger for access to sacred scripture, but also, by implication, the extent to which the written word had acquired such an enormous prestige, even among those, perhaps especially among those, who were themselves unable to read.

The rulers of Renaissance England were acutely aware of the power of the written word, a power that went far beyond the simple transmission of messages. A widening band of literacy created dilemmas for them which could not be easily resolved. This was highlighted by the differences within the elite over the publication of the Bible in English in the early Reformation. The Archbishop of Canterbury stressed, in a preface to the 1540 Great Bible, that the scriptures should be read by all, rich and poor, men and women. Three years later an Act of Parliament sought to prevent the bulk of the population from direct access to the Holy Word. "Reading the Bible was prohibited outright for women, artificers, journeymen, serving-men of the rank of yeoman and under, husbandmen and labourers; noblewomen and gentlewomen could read the Bible silently; only noblemen, gentlemen and merchants were permitted to read it aloud to others." [Quoted in Sanders & Ferguson, 2002, p. 1]

Clearly direct access to the sacred scriptures by the lower orders was considered a threat to the social hierarchy. Such legislation of course proved impossible to police. This caution concerning popular access to the sacred texts proved to be percipient. In the seventeenth century the spread of literacy within the populace encouraged, or at least permitted, a multiplicity of interpretations of Christianity which led some currents of English society to draw upon their religious beliefs to question the legitimacy of all social hierarchies. [Cressy, 1980; Hill, 1972]

### **The Path to Educational Revolution**

If the diffusion of literacy is examined from the point of view of *usage* the outline of a pattern becomes evident, at least in relation to England. Specific phases can be identified.

*The preservation of sacred texts:* It was the Christian Church which transmitted literacy from the embers of the Roman Empire to the formation of a European 'civilisation'. In the course of doing so, it preserved and developed a tradition of written communication.

*The distribution of the social surplus and the regulation of internal relations within the elite:* When the Norman-French arrived in England, the process of diffusion had already moved into this second stage. The *Domesday Book* is the classic example of this process, but it was quickly followed up by written land

grants and other legal texts. Some knowledge of writing became useful to elite members. This process was accentuated by the development of estate management in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries: not only did the keeping of records become important, but textbooks on estate management began to proliferate.

*The management of relations between the ruling elite and the wider population:* The decline of customary relations between lords and peasants in the later Middle Ages spread the practical utility of writing down the social chain. Long before this though changes in estate management were accompanied by the emergence of common law. The written word began to impact on the everyday lives of the peasantry long before the great majority of them had begun to acquire literacy themselves.

*Diffusion of sacred texts:* With the dissemination of the vernacular Bible the diffusion of literacy reached a critical mass across Northern Europe. The wheel had come full circle. It may seem co-incidental that religious texts should play such a crucial role in the survival of literacy in Europe, and in its later mass diffusion, but there is a stronger case for arguing that this 'co-incidence' points to the central role that religious belief played in the pre-modern social orders of Europe, and in the transition to a modern order. Precisely because the human and natural worlds were seen as contingent on the divine or supernatural worlds, so knowledge of this other world was indispensable for coping with this one. Likewise, the law of man derived its validity from the law of God: a challenge to one was a challenge to the other.

The accumulation of these elements formed the essential background to what has been described as the 'educational revolution' of Renaissance England. [Stone, 1964] New schools were created and existing ones enlarged. Literacy was no longer an optional extra for the upper strata, but an essential pre-requisite for social position. The transformation of social relations from ones of personal dependency (or personal inter-dependency) to ones mediated by the written word (and money) had the effect of transforming the very nature of social identity and power.

The integration of the elite into the state network was predicated on the emergence of a new mode of communication. This transformed not only the structure of the ruling class in England – the gentry became much more

prominent – but also its self-conceptions. The shift from a pre-dominantly military aristocracy to a pre-dominantly civil one was accompanied by the formation of a new sense of collective identity.

The re-animation of the classical tradition of learning in Renaissance Europe provided an alternative model of class, one more appropriate to the new environment. Gentlemanly virtue would best display itself through the effective wielding of the pen rather than the sword. Being cultured – being a bearer of civilised values – became a mark of high social position. Literacy not only provided access to this wider learning, but itself became a symbol of social status: hence the double meaning of the word ‘literate’. [Nauert, 1995]

Despite the veneration of ancient Rome and Greece, their social order could not be re-created in the early modern era. The rulers lacked the power to re-impose slavery in Europe, while the cultural model of antiquity needed substantial modification if it was to be imitated. The evolution of a reasonably stable polity in England – and its extension elsewhere – was closely linked to the development of its legal system. Not merely did the state enforce the rules, but the very belief that there were rules to be enforced, that some system of justice existed, provided a powerful vindication for the whole social order. Legitimacy in England came to be derived through the law. But for the law to be respected it needed to be broadly understood, and this could only be achieved through the vernacular language.

What was true of law was likewise true of culture: the audience was enlarged. “The key figure of the English Renaissance in the fifteenth century was the same as that of the sixteenth: the amateur gentleman, who wrote in English, though he was inspired by Latin.” [Quoted in Starkey, 1992, p.153] The newly cultured elite, especially the gentry, saw themselves not merely as rulers, but as cultural leaders of society, a role magnified by the Reformation. However, this post-Renaissance mode of social power, powerful though it proved to be, was in some respects more porous. The greatest writer of the age, William Shakespeare, was of plebeian background with ‘little Latin and less Greek’. Literacy and learning became potentially accessible to the lower classes. Whether this was a strength or a weakness of the new system of class power is debatable. In one definite respect though it possessed a significant limitation: it could not be so easily transferred to other regions where a significantly different vernacular language pre-dominated.

#### **[4] A Comparative Perspective: Summary and Implications**

In the diffusion of literacy across the archipelago, both religious and 'pragmatic' impulses played a significant role, but did so in very different ways in each country. A clear contrast is evident between the 'Germanic' and the 'Celtic' language groups where both of the former group – English and Scots – developed a reasonably widespread use of pragmatic writing prior to the Reformation. This did not happen with Gaelic, in either its Scottish or Irish forms, nor with Welsh. This divergence would seem to be linked to the contrast in social organisation between the pastoralist/clannic order in Welsh and Gaelic regions and the seigniorial/manorial system in England and Lowland Scotland.

The pastoralist/clannic system would seem to have discouraged the emergence of a more regulated system of surplus management; likewise there was greater resistance to individual ownership of land. By contrast the augmented social power exercised by the lords in the seigniorial order facilitated the formation of administered structures of estate management, while the more limited role played by kinship made the introduction of individual landholding less of a problem.

One plausible explanation for the spread of literacy would be to see it as response to the 'rise and rise' of the state. There is a great deal of evidence to support this view. What it leaves out is a sense that the states which emerged in the Renaissance and early modern periods were not simply institutions over and above society but were very much part of the larger social formation. These 'transitional' states developed through constant interaction with the broader society. Neither 'state' nor 'society' were closed objects but were riven with tensions and conflicting interests. In the case of Lowland Scotland it is clear that while the agrarian elites often acted autonomously from the monarchical state, as with bond-rents, this was not done to weaken the monarchy. On the contrary they were aware of a mutual dependence. Likewise in England, it is clear that the power of the monarchy depended on its close relationship with the landed elite, both for the maintenance of internal order and for external relations. By the same token, landlords' involvement with the state apparatus, particularly the administration of justice, greatly increased their own local power.

The evidence shows that through the use of written forms of communication the relationship between monarchy and elite was transformed. It is not simply that literacy permitted the consolidation of the state, it also propelled the creation of a new kind of elite: a class of landowners. *Without written records, ownership of land could not be separated from personal relations of power.* With writing a new type of class emerged, and a new type of state organisation. It is clear moreover that the relationship between the state and the elite was closely bound up with relations between the elite and the masses. Precisely because writing was being used for the *organisation of social relations*, its use reverberated downwards; literacy came to acquire a popular utility.

In the case of England, it is clear that the driving force behind the introduction of written leases came from the lords, who realised that customary practices tended to freeze rents, in a period of rising productivity and prices. However, many of the peasants were able to turn this situation to their own benefit by assuming that written contracts represented an end to servile conditions.

Learning to read, and even more so learning to write, takes time and effort (and often involves other costs). These difficulties are accentuated if the written language to be learnt is greatly at variance with the spoken. For pre-modern elites, language difference could serve as a vehicle of social bonding and exclusion, with one re-enforcing the other. In this situation the diffusion of literacy beyond the elite would most likely involve language change. The adoption of the elite's language by the greater population through a process of osmosis, reinforced by the elite's prestige and social power, might seem an obvious historical path, but this happened neither in England nor in Lowland Scotland. Quite the contrary, the elites there came to adopt the language of more plebeian communities.

The accession of the popular vernaculars to social and political prominence was closely linked with the spread of writing in both societies. The change reflected the rulers' need to communicate to much broader layers of society than would have been possible through aristocratic French. For the rules to be obeyed they had to be understood. By the same token it seems evident that by the late medieval era the rulers of these states needed the consent of the population for their effective functioning.

In both England and Lowland Scotland the spread of writing ran roughly parallel with the development of commodity production. But 'literisation' and 'monetisation' were not mere functions of one another. A money economy could co-exist with high levels of illiteracy while a decline in commerce (in the era following the Black Death when the peasantry could afford to consume more of their own produce) could be accompanied by an extension of literacy. What money and writing had in common is that they both involved the formation of more *mediated* relations between people.

While Welsh, and both Irish and Scottish Gaelic, came to be marginalised in the extended British polity, the traditional literate strata in Wales, Gaelic Ireland and the Scottish Highlands played a central role in determining the long-term developments there. In Wales, and to a lesser but still significant extent, in Scotland, these traditional intellectuals facilitated the absorption of the Reformation and with it the integration of local elites into the British state network, while in Ireland these developments were resisted. This would suggest that even where literacy existed in a very restricted manner, it could be hugely influential among pre-modern communities.

The diffusion of literacy was closely linked to the consolidation of language. Spoken languages tend, if not naturally, at least spontaneously, to diverge, to differentiate. Writing reverses that trend. In England, France, and many other parts of Europe the development of printing and 'official' languages had the effect of creating a strong degree of linguistic homogeneity. While dialectal differences might persist, they tended to decline over time, and speakers of local dialects could switch easily enough to the 'official' language, as with Scots to English or *Langue d'Oc* to French. Where the languages were radically different though, as with Gaelic, Welsh or Basque, the development of an 'official' vernacular literacy tended to accentuate rather than diminish a sense of difference.

While the Reformation certainly encouraged the diffusion of literacy, it is more difficult to assess whether this wider band of literacy encouraged the development of critical thinking within the populace. While radical thought flourished in England in the 1640s upheavals, one cannot assume that the rise of

popular literacy was itself a *causal* factor in the crisis of that decade. Clearly enough, the central determinant in the 1640s conflict was the emergence of major divisions within the English elite, which opened up a space for the development of a radical popular politics. An examination of the role of popular literacy in the English Civil War/Revolution would necessitate a much deeper study of that period than is feasible here. What one can say is that the spread of popular literacy *permitted* the emergence of more radical popular currents once the political cracks opened up within the ruling elite.



## **Literacy and the Genesis of Capitalism in Ireland and Scotland**

### **Introduction**

The previous chapter examined the diffusion of literacy in England, Scotland and Wales, paying particular attention to the role of language difference in the process. This chapter is concerned with the more general role of literacy in the rise of the capitalist social order. It will examine whether differing patterns of literacy in Ireland and Scotland played any role in their divergent socio-economic paths in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

The two centuries following the Elizabethan conquest saw the gradual diffusion of literacy, alongside the increasing commercialisation of the Irish economy, but it was not until the late nineteenth century that mass literacy levels in Ireland reached those of Scotland and England. In broad terms, this can be seen as a key part of the process through which Ireland became integrated into the British political and social order. While England, Scotland, and Wales all experienced capitalist industrialisation in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, in the case of Ireland (excepting the north-east) capitalist industrialisation did not follow the spread of literacy. Quite the contrary: the diffusion of literacy was accompanied by the pauperisation of much of the population culminating in the Great Famine.

This contrast raises the broader issue of the relationship between the expansion of literacy and the rise of modern society. To what extent has the development of systems of communications in general – and the expansion of literacy in particular – contributed to the development of modern capitalism? Was the delayed development of societal literacy in Ireland a significant factor hindering the emergence of capitalist industrialisation in Ireland?

## **The Patterns of Literacy Diffusion**

The first really detailed overall picture of the diffusion of literacy in Ireland comes with the census of 1841. However, because the census organisers were anxious to find out more about the historical development of literacy in Ireland they also examined levels of literacy by age-cohort which enables historians to get a picture of literacy levels going back to the late eighteenth century. Information on the extent of literacy prior to this point is unavoidably patchy and impressionistic, but important nonetheless. Between census figures and these other sources, it is possible to sketch a general picture of the diffusion of literacy in Ireland in the time period when the 'early-modern' shades into the 'modern' era.

Census figures for Scotland are not available until later in the nineteenth century. However, there has been a good deal of research on literacy levels in Scotland (based upon use of signatures) going back to the mid-seventeenth century. At that time it has been estimated that perhaps one adult male in ten in the Highlands was literate and one in four adult males in the Lowlands. A century later the Highland figure had risen to around two-fifths while the Lowland figure was around two-thirds. The figure for women rose from very low in the mid-seventeenth century to nearly a quarter in the mid-eighteenth century. In Scotland as in Ireland, it was only in the nineteenth century that significant levels of illiteracy disappeared. [Houston, 1985; Stephens, 1990]

While there are no precise figures available for literacy levels for Scotland in 1841, a study by Eric Richards on literacy levels among some 20,000 free emigrants from the Atlantic Isles to Australia in 1841 allow for a direct comparison between Irish and Scottish literacy levels. The data is from immigration and shipping lists compiled by officials of the Colonial Land and Emigration Commissioners. The literacy skills of the emigrants were categorised into 'read and write', 'read only' and 'neither' – the same categories which were used in the Irish 1841 census. While the literacy levels of the emigrants to Australia were in general significantly higher than the literacy levels of the corresponding home populations, the data nonetheless allow for a direct comparison between the different countries of the Atlantic Isles. [Richards, 1999] Clearly Ireland had the lowest level of literacy and Scotland the highest as the qualitative historical sources indicate.

*Literacy of assisted migrants to New South Wales in 1841*  
by country of origin and gender

		<b>Males</b>			<b>Females</b>		
	Read and write	Read only	Neither	Read and write	Read only	Neither	
<b>England and Wales</b>	77.9	12.1	10.0	66.1	26.6	7.3	
<b>Ireland</b>	69.0	10.9	20.1	39.8	30.8	29.4	
<b>Scotland</b>	96.6	1.1	2.3	83.2	12.3	4.5	

*Source: Richards, 1999*

The much higher rates of literacy in early modern Scotland than in Ireland were a direct result of the Reformation. The Calvinist orientation of the Scottish Reformation ensured that Bible reading became a priority for Scottish society. The Scottish parliament sought to establish a school in every parish as early as the sixteenth century, though this was more easily legislated for than implemented. The process was particularly slow in the Highlands, not least because Edinburgh was unwilling to countenance the use of Gaelic as an educational medium. It is clear, however, that even in the Lowlands it was only in the eighteenth century that a majority of males became literate. In Scotland, as in England, the pattern of literacy acquisition was roughly correlated to social class. Illiteracy rates were highest among factory workers, miners, and labourers, rural and urban. Around the beginning of the eighteenth century only about a third of tenant farmers were literate. However, this occupational category was a broad one and literacy levels appear to have been highest among the more prosperous 'yeoman' elements. [Houston, 1985; Stephens, 1990]

Much of the pattern of literacy diffusion in Ireland in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries is in line with wider European patterns, but some are more specific to the Irish context and deserve a closer look. The gender imbalance in the acquisition of literacy was consistent with the European pattern. In the 1841 census, males were twice as likely to be literate as females, though in the 1881 census young women had caught up and were now more literate than young men. The 1841 census recorded that 37% of males compared to 18% of females could read and write. However, the figures for *read only*

recorded 23% of females compared to 18% of males. The significance of this disparity will be discussed later. [Census of Ireland, 1841 and 1881]

The 1841 census also shows that levels of literacy were significantly higher in the cities and towns than the countryside. Again this is consistent with the European pattern of an urban/rural dichotomy in literacy diffusion. It was an imbalance though that had an extra significance in the Irish context. The fact that Gaelic Ireland did not produce urban centres ensured that English would remain the dominant language in Irish towns into the Renaissance era. A population influx from the Irish-speaking countryside might have changed this, overwhelming the English speakers; it probably came close in the sixteenth century. However, both Elizabethan and Cromwellian wars of conquest were accompanied by an influx of English settlers – including popular strata, merchants and artisans – which helped reverse any tendency towards the gaelicisation of the towns.

Literacy rates were significantly higher among Irish Protestants than among Catholics. This too was part of a Europe-wide pattern, though there were important exceptions. [Cipolla, 1969; Houston, 1988]. There were a number of factors responsible for this variance. One of them went back to the driving forces of the Reformation itself. Reading the Bible for oneself, in one's own language, was a central tenet of the early Reformers' faith and they went to great lengths to ensure that as many people as possible could read the Bible. However, the Counter-Reformation launched its own educational drive in response and in areas where it was most effective, literacy rates were also high. [Furet & Ozouf, 1982]

Protestant religious practice undoubtedly played a significant role in spreading reading and writing. The state-established Church of Ireland encouraged its lay supporters to read the Bible and the Book of Common Prayer, and even those unable to read came to be acquainted with these key texts. [Gillespie, 2002] Class differences undoubtedly played a role here too. Most of the wealthy were Protestant, and most of the poor were Catholic, and this obviously impacted on literacy rates. Nonetheless most of the Church of Ireland's adherents would have come from lower or middle social strata, and literacy could not be taken for granted. The Church of Ireland's encouragement of reading was in large measure driven by the need to distinguish itself from the wider oral-based traditional religious practices. [Barnard, 1993] The state did make some effort to

encourage 'protestant' education, but it was a fairly limited affair. The 'Charter Schools', established by the government in 1733, acquired an odious reputation, and despite a growing demand for basic education, ended up catering mainly for orphans. [Coleman, 2001]

According to the provisions of the Penal Laws passed in the early years of the eighteenth century, Catholics were prohibited from establishing schools. They were also denied access to Trinity College, the country's only university. In practice, the laws against running schools proved difficult to enforce, though this seems to have varied by region. In 1731 the Church of Ireland Bishop of Derry wrote "There are not any popish schools; sometimes a straggling schoolmaster sets up in some of ye mountainous parts of some parishes, but upon being threatened, as they constantly are, with a warrant, or a presentment by ye churchwardens, they generally think proper to withdraw". [Quoted in Adams, 1987, p.11] The exclusion of Catholics from public office and discriminatory legislation against them regarding ownership and leasing of land had a very significant impact on eighteenth century Ireland and may very well have slowed down the pace of 'literisation' in Ireland.

The counties recording the highest literacy rates in the mid-nineteenth century were Antrim and Down. This was the region where Scottish settlement was most concentrated, with most of the population adhering to Presbyterianism. Presbyterians – or Dissenters as they were more generally called – were in an anomalous position in eighteenth century Ireland. Whereas in Scotland Presbyterianism was recognised by the Act of Union as the state church, their Irish counterparts were subjected to many of the discriminatory measures imposed on Catholics. While unaffected by restrictions relating to landownership and leasing, they were subjected to the same provisions which disbarred Catholics from holding civil or military office. Ulster Presbyterians maintained close links to Scotland throughout the century. Excluded from Trinity College, the University of Glasgow became their main focus for advanced education. [McBride, 1994]

Not much has been written about the Presbyterian education system in this period. [Ó Ciosáin, 1997] Like the Catholic efforts, most of it was probably informal. In the early decades of the eighteenth century, Dissenting schoolmasters were often harassed, though this seems to have declined later. For the Presbyterians, far more than for Anglicans or Catholics, reading the Bible

was of vital spiritual importance and much if not most elementary education was specifically organised as religious education. It is noteworthy that the areas where Presbyterians were most numerous were also the areas which recorded the highest numbers of 'read only' figures. In Antrim 27.6% of males and 43.3% of females and in Down 25.1% of males and 38.6% of females are in this category in the 1851 census. [Census of Ireland, 1851]

The Established Church did make some effort to win over the wider population. One of the difficulties they faced was that up until the eighteenth century most Irish people spoke very little English. Opinions were divided within the Church on how to proceed. Some argued that a proselytising campaign in the Irish language was necessary to win over the wider population and that publishing Irish versions of key religious texts was essential to achieve this end. Some efforts were made to translate and print Irish versions of holy texts including the Bible, but met with little success. Opponents of this strategy argued that it was thoroughly misguided because in the first place very few monolingual speakers of Irish were literate. Moreover, for economic and social reasons more and more Irish people were learning English, and it made much more sense to focus their efforts on establishing a network of schools where English would be taught and where young people might receive religious instruction through the medium of that more civilised language. In the event neither project received whole-hearted support from the Church of Ireland, and the ambition of winning over the native population to the state church never got very far. [Barnard, 1993]

The Catholic Church launched its own propaganda campaign to consolidate its hold on the population, in both organisational and doctrinal terms. This was very much part of the broader Counter-Reformation project of winning the religious battle of ideas. Initially directed towards elite groups, aristocratic and bourgeois, it would later broaden its target audience. The clandestine or semi-clandestine context within which they had to operate in the two centuries following the Elizabethan conquest made this task a good deal more difficult. If the Reformation-through-Gaelic project suffered because its advocates were considered alien, the Counter-Reformation-through-Gaelic project suffered because its advocates were abroad and in no position to launch a missionary campaign on a sufficient scale that might consolidate a mass Gaelic literacy.

The city of Louvain in the Spanish Netherlands became a haven for Irish Catholic émigrés and a centre for a Counter-Reformation drive directed at

maintaining and extending the influence of Catholicism in Ireland. By the seventeenth century literacy had become commonplace among the upper ranks of Irish society, Catholics included. There was also a need for basic educational provision for prospective recruits to the priesthood. Small, more or less clandestine, schools where the children of the Catholic elite could at least receive a basic education, and where prospective clergy could be trained, were numerous. A foundation in the classical languages was provided by many of these schools.

The Catholic Church faced a similar quandary to the Church of Ireland as regards language use: Should they emphasise English or Gaelic in their propaganda efforts? This dilemma partially reflected the different geo-social bases of Irish Catholicism: the Gaelic and the Anglo-French (Old English) regions. Organisationally the Catholic Church was probably stronger in the Old English regions, but there were many more Gaelic speakers across the country. [Whelan, 1990] These disputes within the Irish émigré community – or communities – also overlapped with Continental inter-state rivalry. Much of the Gaelic elite had migrated to Spanish territory while the Old English elite had maintained their traditional links with France. The waning of Spain's star in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries and the rise of France strengthened the hand of the English speakers. It did so at a time when English was already spreading as a vernacular within Ireland, ensuring that English became the major language of Irish Catholicism.

### **Language and the Diffusion of Literacy**

The census figures show a close correlation between the levels of literacy and the dominance of the English language. In part this is due to the patterns of seventeenth century settlement. The settlers tended to be more literate, and in the areas where they were more numerous, English was more widely spoken. The correlation though goes beyond this. Even in areas where descendents of settlers were thin on the ground, the use of English and the level of literacy were closely correlated. The diffusion of literacy was clearly accompanied by language change. County Kilkenny was something of an exception here, with a layer of prosperous farmers continuing to speak Irish into the nineteenth century.

While government administration and the law were both in English language, the example of Wales shows that this in itself should not have prevented the spread of a colloquial literacy or the survival of the indigenous language into the age of print. A vibrant Gaelic literate tradition did persist into the modern era. The fact that it failed to consolidate itself into a *mass* literate practice needs some explanation.

The collapse of the Gaelic social order following the Elizabethan conquest was accompanied by the disappearance of the bardic schools that had maintained the Gaelic literary tradition. These bardic schools had not only educated new generations of poets etc. but had ensured a standard literary language throughout Gaelic Ireland and Scotland. Without the patronage of the clannic system, and facing the wrath of the English state, the bardic schools could not survive. Yet a Gaelic literate tradition did persist, one which kept alive much of the older Gaelic culture, while breaking with it in significant ways.

The post-conquest Gaelic literate tradition was, like its predecessor, a predominantly poetic one, though not exclusively so. Like its predecessor too, it would, for the two centuries following the conquest, be primarily manuscript literacy rather than a printed one. There were, however, printed works in Irish and they are worth noting. Most were religious texts, emanating from both Catholic and Protestant sources. Prose – other than religious works – tended to be traditionalist in orientation. Many folktales and the classic Gaelic sagas were written down, though many of these sagas remained in verse. Writings like the journals of Amlaoibh O Suilleabhain, which provided an account of daily life in the early nineteenth century, were rare in early modern Ireland. [Ó Cuív, 1986]

It was in the field of Gaelic poetry that innovation was most apparent. Writing poetry was no longer a preserve of specialist families; many of the Gaelic poets of the eighteenth century were from labouring backgrounds. The themes addressed by the poets also expanded, while the rigorous metrical structures of bardic poetry gave way to a wide variety of poetic forms. A break with bardic tradition was already evident in the '*contention of the poets*' that took place in the early seventeenth century, where the poets bitterly debated the future of their literary tradition in the wake of the Elizabethan conquest. [Caball, 1998]



If pre-Conquest Gaelic poetry displayed a sense of unbroken continuity with the past, the poetry of the later era reveals an abiding sense of a lost world. Traditional praise poetry was abandoned, and a new poetic genre developed – the *aisling* – which combined religious and millenarian themes. A saviour would come to redeem the land and end the oppression of the faithful. The identity of the saviour changed from the expected return of the Ulster Gaelic clan leaders to the Jacobites, but the song remained the same. Walter Benjamin remarked that nothing is further removed from the spirit of the Counter-Reformation than millenarianism, but in seventeenth and eighteenth century Ireland this melange was precisely what dominated Gaelic poetic practice. By the end of the eighteenth century a new saviour emerged: Napoleon Bonaparte. [Benjamin, 1977; Ó Cuív, 1986]

While Gaelic literacy persisted in a manuscript form, it largely failed to break through the ‘print barrier’. Not that there were no books published in Irish, but they were too few in number to make a significant difference. The role of printed religious texts in the creation of a more widespread Welsh literacy has already been discussed. Niall Ó Ciosáin notes that “the existence of a religious literacy in Breton created the conditions for the growth of a secular literature.” [Ó Ciosáin, 1997, p. 52] The very limited number of religious texts in Gaelic – whether Catholic or Protestant – was certainly a key factor inhibiting the development of a wider Gaelic literacy. There were also significant typographical as well as orthographic problems involved in attempting to print works in Irish. The fact that the urban centres, where printing was based, were predominantly English-speaking, exacerbated the problem. [Cullen, 1990; Ó Ciosáin, 1997]

Political factors acted as further obstacles. The exclusion of Catholics from public service in Ireland encouraged the maintenance of close links with the émigré communities on the continent which in turn helped nourish a more traditionalist approach to literate culture and a political allegiance to Jacobitism. Given the extent of government vigilance and the subversive undertones of much of the Gaelic literary tradition, printing in Gaelic would have been a risky business. [Cullen, 1990]

## Literisation and Commercialisation

Over the course of the eighteenth century it became apparent that there was a rising popular demand for basic education prompted by pragmatic needs. The increased commercialisation of Irish society, not least of Irish agriculture, in the second half of the eighteenth century, was accompanied by the increased use of English and rising levels of literacy. "In 1684 there was an estimated 503 quarterly or twice annual fairs in the country, just under half of them in Leinster. By the 1770s this total had risen to almost 3,000, Leinster's share of which had fallen to just over a quarter." [Smyth, 1992, p.25] There was a significant increase in canal and especially road building. The second half of the eighteenth century also saw the rapid growth of Irish cities, which, with the exception of Kilkenny, were all located on the coast. With the new type of economy came a new type of learning.

In the early part of the eighteenth century Gaelic scholars, poets and scribes were often supported by 'middlemen' of native origins, some of whom employed those scholars as tutors for their children. In the later part of the century this practice largely disappeared. Tutoring was replaced by schooling, still informal but catering for much larger numbers. "By the end of the eighteenth century, it was not so much a case of the continuing decline of old-style patronage as a collapse of it." [Cullen, 1990, p. 22]

There is evidence from the increase in phonetic texts that Gaelic literacy was in decline. The classical languages, while still taught in many schools in the southwest, also came to be marginalised: the language in demand was English. The new English-language based popular education system was concerned with both legal terminology and with mathematics. The abolition of the Penal legislation regarding property and tenurial rights gave a whole new significance to questions of law while the expansion of commerce increased the need for mathematical knowledge. Likewise the ending of prohibitions on Catholics running schools opened up new opportunities for educated Catholics, as well as for Catholic religious teaching orders. [Cullen, 1990]

This development in commerce and the linked rise in the levels of popular literacy did not, however, herald the spread of industrialisation to Ireland.

## **Why was there no Industrial Revolution in Ireland?**

It seems clear enough that the Industrial Revolution in England had a huge knock-on effect on Ireland, as it did on Scotland. So why then did Ireland, unlike Scotland, not experience a wave of general industrialisation?

The question of Ireland's failure to industrialise was one which was widely discussed in the nineteenth century, and the discussion tended to be a highly charged one. For many English commentators the absence of industrialisation could be taken as evidence of the innate backwardness of the population. Others saw it as a symptom of the general adherence to Catholicism, a view given added credence by the fairly successful industrialisation of the northeast where most of the population was Protestant. Radical nationalists argued that Irish economic stagnation was a product of English political rule and pointed to various measures that had been taken to restrict Irish industry in the formative stages of the industrial era.

Later economic historians tended to favour more neutral explanations, avoiding either cultural stereotyping or political judgements. The absence of mineral resources in Ireland, especially coal, was a common explanation. This theory though has its own problems. While there was little coal, there was an abundance of peat. Some capital investment and a little technical innovation could surely have turned this into a ready source of energy. Even without using peat, maritime transport was cheap and easy. If cotton could be shipped across the Atlantic, why could coal not be shipped across the Irish Sea? Besides, the region in England which had the least mineral resources – the southeast – became and remained the most prosperous one. Why did Ireland not develop an industrial base focused on lighter goods, for example the production of food?

Historians have also pointed to other 'internal' factors, especially the absence of capital. However, this explanation is also problematic. In the 1840s and the following decades Ireland experienced a wave of railway building which gave the country one of the most extensive rail networks in the Europe of its time. Joseph Lee has shown that – while most of the initial capital came from England – once the venture proved successful capital flowed in from Ireland to build the remainder. Clearly there were stocks of capital in Ireland, and clearly too those holding them were reluctant to invest in enterprises unless they were sure of a safe return. [Lee, 1969]

More recently, Dennis O'Hearn has taken up the debate again emphasising the importance of external factors in bringing about Irish underdevelopment. Drawing on 'world systems' theory, O'Hearn argues that the Irish economic fate needs to be seen in the context of the Atlantic economy as a whole, which turned some regions into underdeveloped peripheries and others into core areas of growth. O'Hearn enumerates some of the restrictions on trade and manufacturing which the English state imposed on Ireland in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. He particularly emphasises a point rarely noted by economic historians, the long-term effects of the destruction of the old urban mercantile stratum in the Cromwellian era. [O'Hearn, 2001]

There can be little doubt that restrictions imposed on Irish trade had a damaging effect on Irish development; quite how damaging they were is more difficult to assess. There is, however, a problem with O'Hearn's emphasis on 'external' factors in explaining Irish retarded development. Why was Scotland able to industrialise when Ireland was not? While the Industrial Revolution did not originate in Scotland, its knock-on effect there was beneficial whereas in Ireland, the opposite was the case. Moreover, Ireland with its own parliament might seem to have been in a better position to benefit than Scotland. Of course, the Irish Parliament in the eighteenth century only represented a small elite, but the Westminster Parliament itself was hardly a democratic forum. It is also true that the elite in Ireland were mainly descendents of English settlers, but so too were the elite in North America, and such ties did little to inhibit them upholding their own interests. The contrasting trajectories of Ireland and Scotland clearly need some explanation.

### **The Highland/Lowland Ratio**

Chapter 6 noted significant parallels in the history of Scotland and Ireland, despite great differences. In the early modern period the similarities and the contrasts became even more pronounced. Over the past couple of decades there has been an interesting collaboration and debate between Scottish and Irish historians of the early modern period in an attempt to explain why there was such a sharp divergence between the two countries following the Industrial Revolution.

One hypothesis put forward sought to explain the contrast in terms of the balance of highland to lowland regions, with Ireland being more dominated by its highlands than Scotland. [Cullen, Smout & Gibson, 1988] In terms of purely physical geography this explanation is unconvincing; a glance at a map will show that Scotland is the more mountainous of the two countries, while its islands are far more numerous and substantial than Ireland's. It is true that prior to the Elizabethan conquest, the autonomous Gaelic areas of Ireland were much more populous than Gaelic Scotland: a recent estimate puts the population of Gaelic Ireland in the sixteenth century at 800,000, four times that of Gaelic Scotland. [McLeod, 2004] However, Wilson McLeod notes that Gaelic Ireland included more substantial fertile lowland regions than Gaelic Scotland.

Aside from the issue of physical geography, there is another difficulty with this hypothesis. Social developments in Scottish and Irish agriculture diverged radically in *both* 'highland' and 'lowland' regions, as we will see. The Gaelic elite continued to dominate the Scottish 'Highlands and Islands' into the eighteenth century and elements of the clannic order survived at least until the Jacobite uprising in 1745, whereas the Gaelic social order was extirpated in Ireland in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. If it was remnants of the Gaelic order that are supposed to have retarded the growth of capitalism in Ireland, surely such influence would have been greater in Scotland?

Had these historians posed their hypothesis somewhat differently and focused on the relative weight of the Gaelic-speaking and English-speaking regions within their respective societies, then the whole issue would have taken on a very different colour. It certainly was the case by the mid-eighteenth century that Gaelic speakers were more numerous in Ireland, in both relative and absolute terms, than their counterparts in Scotland. The implications though of an approach which focuses on language communities are quite different to one centred on physical geography.

## **Literisation and Uneven Development**

One area that has not been specifically explored has been the role of mass literacy in explaining their divergent paths, though it is of course well known that in early modern Scotland the process of 'literisation' was much more advanced than in Ireland. What makes this factor all the more significant is that there appears to be agreement among some of the most influential Scottish and Irish historians that there was very little of an economic gap between the two countries in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries; some have even suggested that Ireland experienced higher growth rates in this era. [Mitchison, 1983]

Could it be Scotland's precocious literisation that explains their success in the era of the Industrial Revolution in contrast to Ireland's chronic underdevelopment? If this should be the case it would provide significant support for Goody's contention that systems of communications – and in particular the spread of writing – have played a central role in the emergence of the modern world.

## **Divergent Economies**

Literacy levels aside, there was a sharp divergence in demographic patterns between the two countries. Historians do not have exact figures for the eighteenth century but whatever estimates are used, the contrasts between Scotland and Ireland are striking. The most recent estimates suggest that in 1700 both Ireland and Scotland had a similar proportion – 5.3% – of their populations living in towns with over 10,000 inhabitants. A century later these proportions were radically different: a little over 7% for Ireland and over 17% for Scotland. In absolute terms, the urban population of Ireland had continued to grow over the course of the eighteenth century – it was significantly larger than Scotland's – but urban growth could not keep up with the rapidly expanding rural population. [Whyte, 1995b] By 1850 the contrast was even more marked with Scotland having 32% of its population urbanised and Ireland having slightly over 10%. These figures seem to suggest that two key factors need to be taken

into account in any explanation of the divergence between Scotland and Ireland in this era: the contrasting population growth in the countryside and the disparity in urban evolution.

The Scottish historian Tom Devine has recently pinpointed two key differences between Scotland and Ireland in this era: the successful development of agrarian capitalism in Scotland and the profitable involvement of Scottish merchants in colonial trade. This chapter will attempt to explore these issues further and to examine whether the existence of a much wider level of societal literacy in Scotland in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries can account for the contrasting fate of the two societies.

These two issues – the earlier development of agrarian capitalism and the role of global (especially colonial) trade – form a major part of a much wider debate about the origins of industrial capitalism. The work of Immanuel Wallerstein and Robert Brenner has been particularly influential in this debate.

By 1974 when Immanuel Wallerstein published the first volume of his *Modern World System* the picture of the world looked very different to that proposed by development theory in its early days. The most striking feature was not the advances in global development but the persistence of global disparities of income and wealth; if anything it seemed that the world was becoming more unequal. For Wallerstein, the huge inequalities of the contemporary world had their roots in Western domination of global trade. By monopolising the global circuits of trade from the Renaissance era, the West European powers were able to establish an international division of labour which favoured their own economies, and to siphon off surplus profits for their own development. Uneven industrialisation and uneven prosperity were not so much the source of Western power as a product of that power.

For Robert Brenner, this focus on exchange and trade missed the crucial point about what determines social change: the way societies organise the production of goods. [Brenner, 1985] It was changes in this arena, and not control of trading routes, which were really crucial for long-term development. Why was it England, he asked, and not France or Spain, which pioneered industrialisation?

Brenner's answer was that England had already established a capitalist system of agriculture and this in turn fostered the conditions for Industrial Revolution. Agriculture was crucial because it produced the most important goods for human survival: food. The great majority of mankind up until recent times worked in agriculture. Changes in agricultural production, making food cheaper, 'freed up' labour for producing all kinds of other goods. Moreover, given the overwhelming demographic predominance of the countryside in pre-modern societies, fundamental social changes would only catch on throughout a society, if they were deeply rooted in the countryside. Otherwise, like the early flowering of urban capitalism in Renaissance Italy, they would be easily isolated and submerged.

The substantial literature produced by subsequent debate has not settled the issue one way or another but the weight of argument suggests that both 'internal' and 'external' elements need to be taken into account when attempting to understand the patterns of industrialisation and uneven development. A contrast between England and Spain certainly shows that the acquisition of riches from the colonies is no guarantee of economic prosperity for the ruling nation. If anything it seems that the precious metals stripped from its American colonies devastated the Iberian economy through the spread of hyper-inflation. [Vilar, 1971] It also seems undeniable that in the early stages of the Industrial Revolution, and preceding decades, the British state did achieve global dominance in trade, and that profits from this trade did help finance many industries. British colonies, especially India, provided a captive market for British industrial goods, at the expense of colonial handicraft industry. [Arrighi, 1994] Most telling of all, surely, is the role played by 'New World' slavery in supplying, at an attractive price, the primary product for the sector which led the capitalist breakthrough: the cotton industry.

Both 'internal' and 'external' elements would seem to have played a role in shaping the divergent trajectories of Ireland and Scotland. In contrast to Ireland, Scotland shared with England both an agrarian capitalist order and a close involvement in imperial trade networks. This chapter will explore this contrast and assess what role, if any, the earlier pattern of societal literacy in Scotland played in it.



## **The Commercialisation of Agriculture in Scotland and Ireland**

From about 1760 onwards, the agricultural sector in both Scotland and Ireland underwent major change which had profound effects on both societies. In both cases the dynamic for change came from the English Industrial Revolution, and the opportunities for maximising profits which flowed from it. In Scotland the process seems to have encouraged capitalist industrialisation, whereas in Ireland it did not.

In both Ireland and Scotland the commercialisation of agriculture involved the imposition of higher rents and the concentration of land holdings. It also necessarily involved the enclosure of land, and the exclusion of many who previously had access to land usage. In the Scottish Lowlands a social structure similar to England emerged in this period, characterised by a triadic pattern of landowner, capitalist farmer, and landless labourer. In Ireland this pattern did not emerge or if it did, only on the margins.

Why did an agrarian capitalist order develop in Scotland, but not in Ireland? After all, the conquest of Ireland has been described as instituting a capitalist property system and it is quite clear that merchants were heavily involved in the plantations. [Canny, 2001; Wood, 2003] Both Elizabethan and Cromwellian conquerors were steeped in the Puritan ethos, and were reviled by contemporary Irish writers on these very grounds. Yet by the eighteenth century, their descendants were imbued by a thoroughly aristocratic spirit, though many shared with their Scottish counterparts an enthusiasm for the ideas of agricultural improvement which were current at the time. [Barnard, 2003; Dickson, 2005] What factors encouraged the formation in Scotland of a class of capitalist tenant farmers, who co-operated with the landowners to raise the productivity of their holdings and why did a similar process not occur in Ireland?

## The Transition to Agrarian Capitalism in Scotland

By the mid nineteenth century, both the Highlands and the Lowlands had developed a system of capitalist agriculture, though with significant differences between them. In the Lowlands, agricultural production tended to be either arable or mixed arable/pastoral, and a social pattern developed akin to England, with a triadic class structure of landowner, commercial farmers and landless labourers. In the Highlands, sheep raising became predominant with the owners renting large tracts of land to a small layer of tenants, who in turn hired only a very small labour force to tend the sheep. Both transitions involved removal of population from the land, particularly in the Highlands where the 'Clearances' drove most of the population from their ancestral lands.

The Gaelic social order in the Scottish Highlands and Islands had undergone significant changes over the course of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries but substantial elements of earlier clannic practices survived down to the eighteenth century. The major lords of the region had for a long time operated between two cultures and two conceptions of law, being at once Gaelic clan chiefs and anglicised landowners. At the apex of Highland society rents were paid in money form but lower down the social hierarchy rents in kind were commonplace. Traditional agricultural patterns, including joint tenancies, pasturage in common and co-operative working of the land had persisted. Cattle rearing, on a small scale, remained at the heart of the Highland economy. So too had older settlement patterns, with most of the population living in townlands, the *bailie*. In some, though not all parts of the Highlands, landholding remained linked to military commitments. Clansmen were expected to rise up in support of their chiefs. Holding these social practices together was the traditional notion of *duthchas*: the notion that being part of the clan network involved a set of responsibilities and duties, and that the clan leadership had a duty of care for clan members in periods of distress. The key intermediary figures were the *tacksmen*, the tenants of the chief who not only collected rent from sub-tenants, but also acted as political over-seers of their areas. The tacksmen were literate, had written leases and paid their rents in money form. Below them were the mass of the peasantry who were mostly illiterate and who paid much or all of their rent in kind, rather than in cash, and who also performed some labour services. In times of economic distress, usually a consequence of bad winters, the tacksmen provided assistance to those in difficulties and held back from rent demands. [Davidson, 2004b; Devine, 1994]

The first challenge to this Highland order came in the 1730s in Argyll where the landowner, the Duke of Argyll, finding himself burdened by debt, sought to eliminate the tacksmen from the social frame. Labour services were commuted and the peasants were to pay rent directly to the Duke. The peasants themselves were not too enthusiastic about the new dispensation especially as it involved a significant increase in rent. Over the course of the decade, the new regime turned out to be something of a disaster. Bad weather and low prices for cattle left many unable to pay rent, their difficulties exacerbated by absence of relief or credit from the tacksmen. While this particular experiment proved costly for the Duke, it presaged larger changes to come.

The really dramatic transformations in the Highlands came in response to the new urban demands produced by the Industrial Revolution in England. Many of the larger landowners, like Argyll, were resident in England; all were aware of the huge new opportunities for profits to be gained by landowners. Many found the costs of keeping up appearances among their peers to be increasingly onerous, and provided a ready audience for the burgeoning literature on agricultural 'improvement'.

The campaign for agricultural 'improvement' was a key part of a much wider intellectual renaissance: the Scottish Enlightenment. Scotland had for a long time possessed a thriving intellectual culture; even before the Reformation, it had three universities. By the middle decades of the eighteenth century, the intelligentsia of the Scottish Lowlands found themselves in a singular position. The Scottish ports, especially Glasgow, were integrally involved in global trade, exchanging not only goods, but an awareness of the wider world. To their south lay Europe's most vibrant economy, possessed of the most productive agriculture, its cities and industries on the verge of a world-changing Industrial Revolution. To their north, in the Highlands and Islands, one of the last clannic orders in Europe persisted. If this contrast was not stark enough, in 1745 the Highlanders rose up in support of the Stuart contender for the crown, easily overcame the Scottish state, and pushed down into England. Their eventual defeat, and the repression in the Highlands that followed, broke the residual power of Jacobitism, but also concentrated the minds of landowners and intellectuals alike. [Davidson, 2004a; Devine; 2000] The defeat of the Jacobite rebellion enabled the landowners to cleanse the Highlands of most of its population to make way for sheep.

The transformation of the Scottish Lowlands was less dramatic than that of the Highlands, and less catastrophic for its inhabitants, but it was arguably much more critical for the development of industrial capitalism in Scotland. Long before the 'Improvers' campaign, Lowlands agriculture was becoming more commercialised. From the early eighteenth century, written leases were becoming the norm, and there was a gradual shift towards single-occupier tenancy. New systems of crop rotation were also being introduced.

Having said this, the intervention of the 'Improvers' was essential for bringing about the radical changes that did occur in Lowlands rural society in the decades after 1760. The major changes were initiated by the landowners. Believing that there was an optimal size of landholding, they began to systematically reduce the number of tenants on the land. The key to achieving this was rental contracts. These were highly detailed affairs outlining exactly what changes the tenant was supposed to introduce, and in what manner and by what time. Nor were these contracts mere statements of intention. The Scottish courts had no compunction about evicting those who failed to comply with the terms of their contract. [Davidson, 2004b]

Written leases became widespread in Scotland long before the 'age of improvement'. The crucial point about written leases was that they helped bring about an increased differentiation within the peasantry. Differences within the English and Scottish peasantries had long existed but the spread of written legal forms to agrarian social relations both widened these differences and hardened them. It enabled the stabilisation of a more prosperous stratum of peasant farmers. The consolidation of this layer came at a double cost: to those above them and those below them. Landlords were not only prohibited from behaving in an arbitrary manner, but were pressed to engage in longer-term economic calculation to ensure that they did not incur future financial losses through these leases. In this context it made more sense for landlords to switch to a strategy of 'output-maximisation', rather than 'surplus maximisation'.

The poorer tenants in Scotland, like their counterparts in England, found themselves increasingly dependent upon their more prosperous neighbours. Without direct access to land, they had little choice but to work for them. The emergence of a capitalist class in the countryside was not only of great socio-

economic significance, but of socio-political importance too. From the latter half of the seventeenth century in England, and from the eighteenth century in Scotland, there now existed a much larger segment of the rural population that had a vested interest in upholding the rights of property and the existing social order. In the event of threats from abroad or social rebellion from below, the loyalty of the yeomanry was rarely in doubt. In Scotland while “the social gulf between tenant and landowner was often wide, particularly where estates were large, there are indications that in some areas at least the upper ranks of the tenantry were identifying themselves more closely with the interests of landowners than with the lower ranks of the peasantry by the end of the seventeenth century.” [Whyte & Whyte, 1983, p. 39]

In Scotland the commercialisation of agriculture occurred with limited social disruption: “The capacity of Scottish society south of the Highland line to adjust to profound social change without visible internal conflict was in part at least a reflection of the tightness of social control within the affected communities...the old-established governing classes were also enthusiastic innovators and were able to exploit their inherited authority to gain social acceptance for agrarian change”. [Devine, 1988, p.128]

### **The Consequences of Agrarian Capitalism in Scotland**

The emergence of a three-tiered capitalist agricultural system contributed to the development of industrial capitalism in a number of ways. The development of a prosperous layer of capitalist farmers had the effect of providing an enlarged market for manufactured goods, compared to a highly restricted luxury market geared towards the landowning classes. [Devine, 2000]

The social transformation of the countryside, by pushing large numbers of people off the land and into the cities, created a supply of labour willing to work in factories under conditions that a landholding peasant might have been very reluctant to engage in. By lowering the price of food – and consequently of labour – capitalist agriculture created greater opportunities for new industries to emerge. However, the existence of a huge supply of landless labour does not automatically bring about industrialisation, as can be seen from the situation in nineteenth century Ireland, or in much of what is euphemistically called the

‘developing’ world today. In fact an excessive supply of ‘free’ labour can inhibit industrial development because the low wages prevalent in such an economy both limit the domestic market and leave little incentive for employers to engage in technical innovation. Such innovation, however, is the real spur to industrial advance. [Dobb, 1963]

Scottish landowners played a significant role in financing the manufacturing industry and especially mining, which was often seen as an extension of estate improvement. Agrarian capitalism contributed to industrialisation in other ways too, some of the most important of which were political. One of the consequences of this commercial involvement was that the landed elite came to have a vested interest in removing restrictions on trade, commerce, banking etc. as well as providing economic aid to industry. [Devine, 2000]

### **Obstacles to Agrarian Capitalism in Ireland**

In Ireland, by contrast, the commercialisation of agriculture met fierce opposition. From the 1760s agrarian resistance movements spread across the Irish countryside, especially in those areas where commercialisation was most advanced. These loosely knit networks were characterised in the main by ‘conservative’ demands; they did not seek agrarian or political reform, but rather sought to uphold the agrarian ‘status quo’. They operated mainly within their own communities, where they attempted to protect ‘communal’ values over ‘individualistic’ ones. [Donnelly, 1978; Beames, 1983]

To say that the agrarian resistance movements battled for communal values is not to imply that there were no socio-economic differences within the peasantry, or that they sought to achieve social equality. What they did seek was to maintain an order – real or imaginary – where the more prosperous inhabitants looked out for the poorer ones and where everyone in the community was guaranteed a living. To use Edward Thompson’s description of popular consciousness in eighteenth century England, they sought to uphold a ‘moral economy’ in opposition to the emerging commercial one. [Thompson, 1993]

It is debatable how successful this agrarian resistance was. To contemporary observers it certainly seemed a formidable force. "The Whiteboy association may be considered a vast trade union for the protection of the Irish peasantry; the object being not to regulate the rate of wages or the hours of work, but to keep the actual occupant in possession of his land, and in general to regulate the relation of landlord to tenant for the benefit of the latter." [Lewis, 1836, p. 99] A cottier class battled to cling on to a share of the land but the process of consolidating landholdings continued and with it came a much greater social differentiation within the peasantry. Despite this, capitalist social relations never came to dominate the Irish countryside in the same way they did the Scottish Lowlands. In part this was due to the success of the agrarian resistance in maintaining some grip on the land, at least up until the Great Famine. To use a different language, the primary producers could not be fully separated from their means of subsistence. Why were the outcomes of agrarian change in Ireland and Scotland so divergent and what role, if any, did literacy play in the process?

### **The Social Dynamics of Eighteenth Century Ireland**

To all appearances the Anglo-Irish elite possessed a monopoly of power in eighteenth century Ireland. They owned almost all the land. They monopolised parliament and local government. They monopolised the legal system, and they dominated the educational system. Yet this concentration of power did not in itself resolve what had been the basic problem facing the lords in the late medieval era: how to extract an income from the soil. Someone had to work the land, and from the mid seventeenth century at the latest it had become quite clear that there were not going to be enough settlers from England or Scotland to do the labouring, at least not outside of Ulster, and even there, only in parts. [Canny, 2001] It is not that the Anglo-Irish elite lacked a commercial cast of mind. They had no problems clearing forests and selling off the timber or extracting minerals; what they lacked was the numbers on the ground to organise agricultural production. Whatever their original intentions, the new landowners were not in a position to redesign the Irish countryside in their own image. Historical experience demonstrates again and again that military ascendancy does not guarantee regular revenue from a conquered territory. To achieve that, a deeper level of social control is necessary.

The Anglo-Irish elite's problems here were accentuated by demographic constraints. The Elizabethan conquest and the Cromwellian war both took a fearsome toll on the Irish population, with warfare bringing hunger and disease in its wake. It has been estimated that Ireland had a population of 1.4 million in 1600; that this had risen to 2.1 million by 1641 and fallen again to 1.7 million by 1672. [Gillespie, 1991] "Economic factors such as a shortage of suitable tenants acted as constraints on landlords charging the full economic rents for holdings during the seventeenth century....landlord-tenant relations were governed by factors other than economic ones." [Gillespie, 1991 p. 25-26] Throughout the seventeenth century labour was a scarce commodity in Ireland. To secure revenue from their property, landowners needed to make accommodations with those who would work it. They also needed intermediaries to turn the agricultural surplus into money: what became known as middlemen. Problems arose here too.

Most of the middlemen came from the junior branches of landed families. In many cases, especially in the west and southwest, they came from elite Catholic families, both Gaelic and Hiberno-English, who had been dispossessed in the seventeenth century. Excluded from public office, these families maintained close links to the Irish Catholic diaspora on the Continent, providing a steady stream of recruits to the Catholic Church and to the armies of France and Spain. It was these Catholic middlemen who provided a system of patronage within which a Gaelic literary tradition could persist, and Jacobite poetry flourish. [Cullen, 1981; Whelan, 1996]

Whatever their origins, the middlemen faced the same issue of trying to secure an income sufficient to cover the rent and their own needs. This was best achieved by establishing cordial relations with those working the land, whether pastoral or arable, or as was increasingly the case, a combination of both. The demographic advantage that the peasantry possessed in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries enabled them to maintain their traditional way of life to a very considerable extent. Communal decision-making about land use and work sharing remained the norm across much, if not most, of Ireland throughout the 'Penal' era. Most important of all, the belief that every family ought to have some access to land remained deeply rooted.



It was this social context which helps explain the apparent paradox of the Penal era, the combination of draconian laws and social peace. For most of the eighteenth century social conflict was muted in Ireland and rates of criminal prosecution not excessive by the standards of England or Scotland. [Connolly, 1988; Garnham, 1997] A large measure of social tranquillity was achieved precisely because the landowners were effectively excluded from the process of agricultural production, and a traditional way of life persisted little disturbed by the workings of law or government. This is not to suggest that the Penal Laws were without socio-economic effect; indeed, the full scale of their impact only becomes apparent at the moment when the harmonious order begins to break down.

The Penal legislation against buying land and the time restrictions on leasing it clearly inhibited the development of a legally-backed social framework within which a more efficient agricultural system might have emerged. "For much of the eighteenth century, the opportunity for Catholic tenants to participate in the tenurial process was formally limited by purely political legislation in a way which would have limited their incentive to engage in productive agricultural improvement." [Proudfoot, 1993, p. 229-230]

For the most part neither landlords nor middlemen invested capital in their estates, in sharp contrast to the situation in Scotland or England. Middlemen in the southwest did supply many of their sub-tenants with cattle. This could be seen as a more commercialised form of the older Gaelic system of 'lending' cattle. Significantly though it was not dependent on making improvements to the land itself. Some large tenants did farm their own land, but in general it seems that they could make more money by sub-letting it. [Dickson, 1979]

By the late eighteenth century when the key socio-economic restrictions of the Penal Laws were removed, the land/labour balance had drastically changed. The ubiquity of the wonder crop from the western hemisphere – the potato – had encouraged a population explosion. The Irish population rose from an estimated 2.8 million in 1712 to 5 million in 1800 and 8.5 million in 1845. Demography was now on the side of the landlords. The middlemen stratum was gradually squeezed out, eliminating not only the Catholic 'underground gentry' but also the privileged position occupied by substantial Protestant tenants.

The Penal Laws seem to have prevented the development of a social layer within the Irish peasantry that could have established an alliance with the landowners, over and against the labouring stratum. Only in parts of Ulster did a somewhat different picture emerge.

### **Ulster: A Mirror of two Societies?**

One historian has described Ulster as a mirror of the two societies, Ireland and Scotland. While it is certainly true that Ulster combined elements present elsewhere in Ireland and Scotland, the mirror metaphor may not be sufficiently precise to capture the particular configuration of elements that came to determine its future. [Crawford, 1983]

Literacy was more widespread in eighteenth century Ulster, especially in east Ulster, than elsewhere in Ireland. It was the same region which alone in Ireland experienced a significant level of industrialisation in the nineteenth century. Could the two phenomena be linked? The close association between the Presbyterians of northeast Ireland and Scotland has already been noted. However, the two societies were by no means identical. Irish Presbyterians did not possess the civil liberties enjoyed by their Scottish counterparts. Another important factor that distinguished Ulster from either Scotland or the rest of Ireland was the presence of a substantial number of Anglican peasants and artisans, most of whom originated in the north of England rather than Scotland. This community would substantially impact on modern Ulster's political history.

At a socio-economic level too, there were significant differences. Eighteenth century east Ulster did not see the emergence of an agrarian capitalism along the lines of Lowland Scotland or England. Written leases were certainly common enough in eighteenth century Ulster. What is really significant about them is that they were not the sole basis for the tenurial relationship between landlords and peasants. Tenants insisted, and landlords accepted the thrust of their argument, that there also existed an older customary reciprocal relationship between the two. This customary relationship was based upon the existence of a reciprocal understanding – presumably oral – between the ancestors of both tenant and landowner dating back to the plantation era or to acts of loyalty shown at later periods of rebellion or war. By the nineteenth century the practice had become known as the 'Ulster Custom'. [Crawford, 1983; Dowling, 1998]

What distinguished Ulster from both Ireland and Scotland in the eighteenth century, according to one historian, was the “evolution of a society of small tenant farmers.” [Crawford, 1983, p. 62] This evolution would seem to have been a consequence of the Ulster Custom. The Custom permitted some capital to be accumulated by tenants, which could be used to set up relatives in the linen industry. Perhaps equally important the Ulster Custom ensured that a quite distinctive relationship between landlords and tenants existed in the region. Many Ulster landlords encouraged improvements aimed at increasing agricultural productivity and also made more general investments in regional infrastructure. The existence of a more co-operative relationship between landlords and tenants also encouraged the development of the linen industry, though it would be the 1830s before this developed into a mechanised capitalist industry. [Crawford, 1983; Dowling, 1998; Ó Gráda, 1994]

The transition to capitalist industrialisation was not without difficulties. The ending of property restrictions against Catholics enabled them to compete more openly, both in the linen trade and for farming tenancies, upsetting the confessional hierarchy, especially in central Ulster where Anglicans were most numerous. For the lower strata of Anglicans, especially the linen weavers, this breakdown of the confessional hierarchy was deeply disturbing because it removed the only real protection they had, and it appears to have been a significant factor in the rise of communal conflicts, especially in Armagh, culminating in the formation of the Orange Order in the 1790s. [Miller, 1983; Whelan, 1996]

At a more general level, linen in its proto-industrial stage employed far greater numbers than in its more modern industrial stage. Linen always remained something of a luxury textile industry and this impacted upon its potential for expansion. [Cullen, 1972] One agent for a landowning company remarked about the poorer residents of a mid-Ulster region in the 1840s: “In former times they were able to support themselves comfortably by the spinning wheel, but machinery for spinning linen yarn has knocked [out] almost entirely the hand spinning, and although the mill work gives employment to many hands, still it cannot employ the multitude.” [Quoted in Dowling, 1998, p.156]

## **The Anglo-Irish Order: Domination without Hegemony**

Why was it that the Anglo-Irish elite had failed so spectacularly to establish a system of hegemony by the late eighteenth century?

The Gaelic myth of origins is contained in a text called *Leabhar Gallda*, the Book of Invasions, which details the successive waves of invaders to Ireland from pre-historic times. The history of conquest provides its own legitimation. In principle a newly colonising ruling class could insert itself into this narrative and come to be accepted as legitimate rulers in their own right. Had not the Anglo-French invaders of the twelfth century adopted this very course, though it did take a few centuries to accomplish?

One possible explanation for this failure was the short time period involved since the conquest. As Terry Eagleton puts it, they “had simply not been around long enough for their expropriations to have been mercifully eroded by the passage of time.” [Eagleton, 1995, p. 42] Arguably though, the more crucial issue was not the *length of time* involved but the *character of the time* in which the construction of a post-conquest order took place. The Anglo-Irish aristocracy was attempting to establish a stable agrarian order in Ireland at the very time that in England itself a radically new social order was beginning to emerge, one in which writing would occupy a singular role. Moreover, this new social order developing in England would not be characterised by stability, but by incessant change.

Discussing the medieval rise of literacy, Michael Clanchy posited four key areas which encouraged the spread of literacy: religion, law, administration and commerce. Each of these continued to play a critical role in the early modern period. The increased significance of education as an avenue for the diffusion of literacy was itself very much a response to the continuation or expansion of these other four areas.

Across Europe, religious belief and religious battles played a critical role in the spread of reading among the general public. The failure of the Anglo-Irish elite to convert the indigenous population to the reformed faith has already been noted. The unwillingness of the Anglo-Irish elite to cross the linguistic divide

was clearly crucial here, which in turn accentuated the alien character of the new religion, giving credence to the Counter-Reformation claims, just as the Welsh reformers' use of their own language confirmed the Welsh character of Protestantism.

This failure to convert the population did little to boost the authority of the new ruling class, but in itself it was arguably less important than their failure to tolerate religious difference. The purpose of the Penal Laws was not to convert the population but to secure a monopoly of social and political power for the Anglo-Irish. By promoting religion to the post of guardian of the elite's frontier, the Penal Laws greatly consolidated communal divisions. The fact that the Penal Laws were unable to break the hold of Catholicism on the majority of the Irish population is often taken as evidence of their more general failure. In fact they proved highly successful in consolidating the power of the Anglo-Irish elite and in shaping the whole direction of early modern Ireland. The percentage of Irish land owned by Catholics fell from around 30% in the 1690s to less than 10% by the mid eighteenth century. [Foster, 1988]

One major effect of the Penal Laws was to prevent the legal system itself coming to play the central role in early modern Irish society that it did in England or Scotland. In an ironic and surely unintended manner, the Anglo-Irish rulers ended up reproducing a system of legal exclusion in the early modern period analogous to that which the Anglo-French rulers introduced in the medieval period. The medieval system of exclusion was based upon national/racial grounds, the early-modern upon religious ones. In the former case the purpose was to reduce the native population as a whole to servile status (though with some exceptions). In legal terms the status of the native population was the same as that of serfs in England, with the terms *hiberni* and *servi* being used interchangeably. In the early modern scheme, Catholics were permitted to appear before royal courts, and could take cases before them. Two thirds of all cases before the High Courts in Dublin were connected with Penal Law issues concerning land ownership or inheritance. However, Catholics were not only excluded from the legal profession, they were also excluded from sitting on juries in civil law cases; the legal system was stacked against them. [Kenny, 1987; Osborough, 1999]

Religious intolerance was normal enough in early modern Europe, the crucial difference in Ireland being that it was adherents of the majority faith – not a minority one – who were excluded from public office. However, religion was a barrier that was crossable, and many crossed. Initially there was great enthusiasm at the prospect of converts from the incorrigible natives, but this waned when it became apparent that most converts had opportunistic rather than spiritual motives. Given the legal minefield that faced Catholics hoping to inherit land, it made eminent sense to swear allegiance to the state Church, and by the mid eighteenth century there existed a recognisable ‘convert’ community who acted as intermediaries between the Anglo-Irish elite and the Catholic population, not quite trusted by either.

The analogy, which is not to say identity, between the medieval and the early modern pattern of legal exclusion has already been noted. Most ironic of all perhaps is that in both situations there was a similar outcome. Exclusion from the route of the written legal system had the long-term effect of *reinforcing oral customary law*, and the social practices implicit therein. This in turn had crucial socio-economic and political-ideological consequences. The peasants’ best defence against depredatory landlords was to maintain tight networks of solidarity, and the best guarantee of equitable grounds within their own community was upholding tradition. This is how it was always done in the past and so it must be right. In the 1780s Sir Edward Newenham sought to engage the peasants of East Galway: “I explained the whole system of agriculture to them, and promised that their landlord would give them a long lease: I stated to them the comfort of warm clothing and comfortable houses; no answer but that if such things had been possible, their fathers would have done so.” [Quoted in Dickson, 1987, p. 125] For the peasantry it would seem that social relations were considered a zero-sum game: any gain for the landlords would be a loss for them.

In the late medieval colony, the lords were forced to adapt to peasant custom. With labour shortages and an insecure environment, their best policy was to win the loyalty of their peasant communities. It was these conditions that led to the formation of the distinctive ‘Old English’ elite in the Pale: a group which sought to uphold English law and custom among themselves while accommodating peasant tradition, and so the Pale developed a gentry but not a yeomanry.

The early modern context was very different. For one thing, improved systems of communications – in both senses of the word – meant that the Anglo-Irish elite was much more absorbed into mainstream English upper class culture. From the beginning of the Tudor plantations, land was already seen as a commodity, though in practice, matters were a little more complicated. The new landowners, still short of labour, had to accommodate peasant custom, or at least to rent the land to those who would. With the rise of industrial capitalism in England, the whole picture was transformed. The potential profits to be gained from providing food to this newly urbanised population were enormous. Moreover, there was no longer a labour shortage, but thanks to the life-sustaining power of the potato, a growing labour surplus. From the 1760s onwards the landowners attempted to adopt a more commercial orientation. The more prosperous of the peasants for their part were anxious to take advantage of the changed situation to enlarge their holdings, but they were not in a strong negotiating position. The structures of the confessional state hardly gave them confidence in the workings of the law, even if they had a written contract. They also had to exercise caution. Anyone taking advantage of someone else's misfortune fell foul not only of communal ire, but also of a set of cultural values which they themselves would most likely have absorbed.

The situation in Ulster had some parallels, and significant differences, to the rest of Ireland. Throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Ulster had three – not two – denominationally distinct communities. The smallest of these, the Anglicans, dominated landownership, the professions and the institutions of the state. They also included a substantial popular community. The Anglican ruling elite succeeded in establishing a secure basis of hegemony only over their own community. Neither the Presbyterians nor the Catholics gave much in the way of consent. Significantly though, their one solid base of social leadership was secured, to a large extent, on the basis of a pre-modern set of loyalties. It was not the written law and a clear commercially based tenure that established the ground rules for the social order in eighteenth or early nineteenth century Ulster. Rather these overlapped with a much older form of hegemony, based upon direct personal relations. In broad historical terms the social context of eighteenth century Ulster could be seen as one in transition from oral custom and personal dependence to one based on written law and market relations.

The Scottish transition to agrarian and later industrial capitalism was not based simply on favourable economic conditions, but upon a particular socio-political context, the emergence of a three-class bloc combining 'improving' landlords, commercial farmers and urban merchants. While this bloc was never formalised in organisational terms, it was given theoretical shape by the Scottish Enlightenment intellectuals, who sought to imitate in a more or less planned way what had happened earlier in England over a more extended period and in a more *ad hoc* fashion. Within this bloc, the commercial farmers were of course the least prosperous, and they were also the least 'activist', responding to the new situation rather than pioneering it. However, they were the most numerous, and it was their ability to carry through the programme of change that was critical for its success. Literacy would seem to have played an important role in the process.

While Scotland had a high rate of literacy in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, it was far from having a system of universal literacy. Quite apart from the Highland regions, uneven patterns of literacy persisted. For both centuries, a substantial majority of yeoman farmers were literate, while a substantial majority of labourers were illiterate. [Houston, 1988] The literacy/orality divide overlapped with the class one, and placed the Scottish yeomen on the same side as the upper ranks of Scottish society. The singular character of Scottish religion would most likely have contributed to this process. If the kirk enabled the lairds to control wide areas of social life in the Lowlands, the close co-operation with the more prosperous, and industrious, farmers was essential to this achievement. Those who had direct access to the Word of God were of course in a better position to make objective moral judgements.

Tom Devine's description of the 'parish state' captures it very well. The Church of Scotland had important civil and jurisdictional powers into the eighteenth century. Aside from supervising the social and sexual mores of the parishioners, the kirk also supervised the movement of population (and labour): men and women needed a certificate of good behaviour signed by the minister to move parishes. Historians have noted that up until the late eighteenth century, the majority of the Lowlands population seem to have accepted the discipline of the Church. Given the weight of forces stacked against them, it is hard to see how the Lowlands' poor could have done otherwise. [Devine, 2000]



Access to the written word had more temporal advantages too. Technical works on agriculture were consumed avidly. A contemporary wrote: "Of the *Farmers Magazine* 4,200 are sold; of these 300 in Ireland, and about 1,000 in England ... Meanwhile it is singular to remark the different circulation of it in the two parts of this island – not as to numbers sold but the description of the purchasers. In England, the gentlemen alone take it. In Scotland, it is circulated amongst the farmers fully as much as the landlords." [Smout, 1985, p.293]

### **Hegemony, Literacy and Industrialisation**

The divergent socio-political contexts might seem tangential to the question of why Scotland underwent industrialisation, and Ireland largely did not. There are grounds though for suggesting that they are closely linked.

The emergence of a capitalist farming class created a mass market in the Scottish countryside, which in turn stimulated industrial growth in Scottish towns. By contrast the internal market in Ireland was much more limited. Even the farmers with larger holdings appear to have had much less disposable income in Ireland than in Scotland. [Cullen, 1981] Another crucial area of difference was colonial trade, from which Irish merchants were largely excluded in the eighteenth century. Superficially it would seem that the Irish elite were in a much stronger position than their Scottish equivalents to press home their case for establishing a share of colonial trade: they had their own parliament. However, the Irish Parliament was subordinate to Westminster, and was consistently overruled on issues of trade. Irish merchants were excluded by law from participating in the tobacco, sugar and rum trade, all of which proved lucrative for Scots merchants. [Devine, 2003] Scottish entry into colonial commerce had been a key condition which the Scottish elite had insisted upon for the passing of the Act of Union in 1703. Why was the Scottish elite able to impose terms on London that their Irish counterparts could not?

If we consider the issue from the angle of social power, their contrasting destinies become more explicable. The Anglo-Irish elite lacked the *social weight* of their counterparts in Glasgow and Edinburgh. In any confrontation between the Scottish elite and London, the Scots could be reasonably secure in bringing

in the Scottish nation behind them. The Anglo-Irish elite could not. On the contrary, they had reason to fear that the wider population would use the occasion of a divide between Dublin and London to challenge the existing order.

The clearest evidence of the social basis for the Anglo-Irish elite's political dependence on London comes from the great exception to it, the one point where Westminster's domination of the Irish Parliament was seriously challenged. In the 1770s in response to the wars with France, the government encouraged the formation of the Volunteer corps to protect the country in the event of a French landing. Even though the Volunteers officially excluded Catholics (who were still prohibited from bearing arms) it quickly became a political movement demanding reform of government and an end to London's commercial domination of Ireland. The reform current within the Irish Parliament, the 'Patriots', also sought the removal of many of the legal prohibitions against Catholics. In effect, what the Patriots were attempting to do in Ireland was the same as the Scottish Enlightenment current had attempted and succeeded in doing in Scotland: to introduce a modern capitalist order in place of the semi-feudal one. This would have necessitated dismembering communalism and establishing Ireland as a centre of global trade. The effects of these changes, however, instead of stabilising the social hierarchy in Ireland, had the opposite effect of further undermining it and unleashing social forces outside of their control. It culminated in the formation of the United Irish movement which sought to bring about a revolutionary transformation, with Jacobin France as their model.

To make sense of the contrasting responses of Scottish and Irish societies to this double revolution of the late eighteenth century – the English industrial, and the French political – it is necessary to see them in the context of the earlier development of social power in Ireland and Scotland. In seventeenth century Scotland, a modern form of hegemony emerged based upon religious literacy and the written law. This form of hegemony permitted and encouraged the growth of capitalist social relations in the countryside. It also ensured that in any conflict with London, the patricians of Edinburgh and Glasgow could rely upon a wider population base.

It is at this point that the contrast between Scotland and Ireland becomes most vivid, and the role of *the culture of writing* in accentuating that contrast. The process of literisation in Ireland came much later (in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries), spatially it was extremely uneven, and it was largely autonomously acquired. The elite failed to establish a religious-based hegemony in the crucial early modern period or to consolidate a universal system of law. The point about law is that its power comes from the belief that it acts as a *universally* applicable set of rules. In Ireland by contrast the Anglo-Irish elite needed, or thought they needed, to introduce a highly restrictive political/legal code in order to secure their ascendancy. The *social impact* and the *ideological impact* are really just different aspects of the same issue. This code inhibited the development of capitalist social relations in Ireland and acted as an obstacle to the evolution of a more modern form of hegemony. In any conflict with London, the Dublin based elite knew that they could not rely on a secure base of popular consent.

The successful Scottish Reformation established a mode of social control based upon the widespread use of reading and writing which enabled the upper strata of the peasantry to secure larger holdings through written leases, in the process eliminating smaller tenancies. The social control exercised by the Irish landowners was far too weak, and the degree of differentiation within the Irish peasantry too limited, for a similar operation to be successfully concluded in Ireland. The same relative weakness of the Irish elite, compared to their Scots counterparts, ensured that they had more limited bargaining power in dealing with Westminster, and the Irish mercantile elite was unable to carve out a lucrative place for themselves under the sun of colonial trade.

The existence of high levels of literacy in both England and in the Scottish Lowlands in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries seems to have played quite a significant role in promoting a social makeover of the countryside. The development of written leases, in the case of England going back much earlier, appears to have contributed to the consolidation of a class of yeoman farmers who co-operated with the landowners in transforming agriculture. This had the dual effect of making agriculture much more productive, (and food cheaper) and pushing 'surplus' labour off the land, forcing landless labourers, even if they

stayed in villages, to find other ways of making a living, which in turn helped promote a profusion of trades and manufactures. This level of social disruption involved all sorts of risks for the society engaging in it, but Lowland Scotland pulled the feat off without any political cataclysm.

It was not merely that Scottish farmers were in a better position to read leases or improvement manuals, but more fundamentally the spread of a culture of writing had created a more modern mode of hegemony, one based upon the authority of written law and written religious practice. By the same token, this culture of writing had made it easier for the more prosperous Scottish farmers to develop a commercial mentality and to abandon traditional customary obligations. This more advanced form of social control had facilitated, if not encouraged, the development of capitalist social relations in the countryside. The similarities between developments in Scotland and England are striking.

The role of the commercialisation of agriculture in promoting civil war and revolution in seventeenth century England remains a source of contentious debate within English historiography. By the eighteenth century, however, the English upper class, landed or mercantile, had established a firm grip over English society. The clearest test to their power came in the period of the wars with Revolutionary France. While the egalitarian ideals of Jacobinism had some following in both countries, the rulers of Britain never came close to losing their social control of the Scottish or English populations. There seems little doubt that the loyalty of the 'middling' stratum, not least in the countryside, had been won over an extended period of time. Nor was this loyalty simply one of deference to their superiors; this same stratum was quite capable of asserting its own interests if they considered it necessary. Their loyalty was to the social order as a whole, and expressed itself in a robust 'patriotism'. This social layer had sufficient weight, both numerically and in terms of direct influence, to maintain social cohesion, and to marginalise the radical elements that did exist among the artisanate. The genesis of capitalism did not only involve compulsion, it also involved opportunities. Indeed it seems to be unlikely that this new social order could have consolidated itself had it not permitted significant numbers of people to acquire a level of prosperity that would have previously been far beyond their reach.

Emma's musings in Jane Austen's novel capture the distinctive social position of this stratum very well. "The yeomanry are precisely the order of people with whom I feel I can have nothing to do. A degree or two lower, and a creditable appearance might interest me; I might hope to be useful to their families in some way or other. But a farmer can need none of my help, and is therefore as much above my notice as in every other way he is below it." [Austen, 1994, p. 23]

To use a different language, the British ruling elite had established a system of hegemony over the middle ranks of society, but this was a modern form of hegemony, not one based upon personal deference. Literacy was central to it, at a number of levels. Being literate opened up a wider world for many people in the early modern era, and enabled them to move beyond customary practices. How their parents or grandparents had behaved could be seen as but one approach among many. Time and space are both extended. With literacy, the past acquires a greater distance. Far away places can seem much closer and developments elsewhere can have a great influence. The Scottish farmers were avidly reading tracts about improved agricultural techniques. The rise of a religiously inspired mass (but still far from universal) literacy deepened the social gap between the upper layers of the peasantry and artisanate, and the wider labouring population in England and Scotland, while establishing new grounds for engagement with the propertied classes. R. A. Houston had noted that in the early modern period literate people across Europe began to identify with one another. [Houston, 1988] A shared literacy also gave the larger tenant farmers and the landowners greater opportunities to ensure that new written contracts would overrule any lingering customary rights of the poorer peasantry.

### **Literacy and the Genesis of Capitalism: Summary and Implications**

This chapter examined whether the early development of a mass literacy in Scotland, and its delayed development in Ireland, contributed to their differing responses to the Industrial Revolution in England. The chapter pointed to two key differences between Irish and Scottish developments in the eighteenth century – the rise of agrarian capitalism and involvement in colonial trade – which together would seem to explain subsequent divergence.

The weight of the evidence here would suggest that external factors – global trade – and internal ones – agrarian social relations – were both crucially important in determining the responses of Ireland and Scotland to the rise of industrial capitalism. This, however, is not the end of the story. The evidence here also suggests that those interpretations which emphasise trade and production need to be modified, or could at least be enriched, by taking into account related developments in the sphere of communications, above all the spread of literacy, and literate practices, across societies.

The issue for this thesis is whether the different patterns of literacy can be seen as having contributed to either the agrarian or the maritime dissimilarities.

In the case of the contrasting maritime histories of Scotland and Ireland, there is little reason to assume that differing levels of literacy played much of a role, one way or another. The Portuguese after all, established a maritime empire without ever having had high rates of popular literacy. The question of the role of literacy in encouraging the rise of agrarian capitalism is more complex. It was shown that the spread of literate practices went hand in hand with a growing differentiation within the Lowland peasantry in a number of ways, and that this social differentiation was crucial for the formation of a class of capitalist tenant farmers.

The success of the Reformation ensured that Scotland, or at least the Scottish Lowlands, had a relatively high rate of literacy in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. This early spread of literacy can be seen as facilitating the rise of agrarian capitalism in the Scottish Lowlands. It meant that not only were Scottish farmers able to understand clearly their lease agreements, but they were also able to read manuals on agricultural improvement. More importantly perhaps, they entered into a framework of social relations where writing – and money – would play a key mediating role. Most likely, literacy also contributed to the development of a more commercial frame of mind, which made it easier for the upper echelons of the Lowlands peasantry to abandon customary obligations and enter into a strategic alliance with the Scottish landowning class. This solid system of hegemony that the Scottish elite established over the countryside strengthened their hand in any potential conflict with Westminster. It also ensured that the transition to a monetary economy would be fairly peaceful.

It does not follow from this that literacy should be seen as a *causal* element in the industrialisation of Scotland. It does appear though that there was a close *association* between the phenomena of literisation and monetisation. A similar association between literacy and the spread of money can be seen in Ireland, but both processes arrived too late to permit any easy capitalist transformation of social relations in the Irish countryside. The delayed development of societal literacy appears to have contributed to hindering the emergence of capitalist industrialisation in Ireland. The key factor here was not the absolute number of people in Scotland and Ireland who were literate, but rather the extent to which social relations had come to be mediated through writing.

In terms of the wider debate on the role of literacy in socio-historical development, the evidence from Ireland and Scotland does not support the notion that there existed any primary causal relationship between high levels of literacy and industrialisation. It does suggest, however, that there was a close association between these processes. The character of this relationship will be explored further in Chapter Nine.

## The Paradox of Anglicisation

### Introduction

The previous chapter explored the impact of mass literacy on the development of the modern socio-economic system, comparing developments in Ireland and Scotland. This chapter is concerned with the impact of mass literacy on popular consciousness, focusing on Ireland in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Did mass literacy operate as a mechanism for socialisation or did it encourage autonomous cultural development? Specifically how are we to make sense of the fact that in Ireland the process of literisation was accompanied by (linguistic) anglicisation and political defiance?

In *Peasants into Frenchmen*, Eugene Weber showed how the development of state controlled education and a mass communications system in nineteenth century France encouraged the development of linguistic homogeneity and the consolidation of a unitary national identity. [Weber, 1979] In Ireland by contrast the rise of mass literacy was accompanied by a curious combination of linguistic assimilation and political estrangement. This chapter will explore how and why such a paradoxical situation arose.

### The Rise of a Reading Public

While printing had been present in Ireland from the Tudor period, it only became a significant industry in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. As literacy expanded in the later eighteenth century so too did the book trade, with the emergence of an extensive network of booksellers and travelling salesmen across the country. [Gillespie, 2005; Ó Ciosáin, 1997]

The eighteenth century also saw the development of a newspaper industry in Ireland. For most of the century, Irish newspapers carried little political news. Much of what they did carry was reprinted from London newspapers. The



Dublin papers paid little attention to events in the provinces, and by the latter half of the eighteenth century, provincial newspapers became much more numerous. Not only were the papers dependent upon advertisements for their financing, more often than not the advertisements were the news. Merchants would take out advertisements to announce what new stock they had acquired. Much of the advertising revenue came from the Government who could exercise effective control by the simple expedient of withholding advertising. Controversial opinion appeared in pamphlet form rather than in the regular papers. Jonathan Swift's satirical polemics were a case in point; the Government went after the printers of the *Drapiers Letters*.

In Ireland, as in Britain, coverage of parliamentary debates was prohibited for most of the eighteenth century. Only from the 1770s, when the battle had been won in Britain, did a couple of Irish papers begin to cover debates in the Irish Parliament. Their readership was small, and they were very much directed towards the country's elite: "... much of their limited readership consisted of country gentlemen who had very mundane reasons to consult the press and who were content to rely on their occasional visits to Dublin or the return of their cronies for news of the big world and for occasional gossip". [Cullen, 1984, p. 20] In the 1790s it took five days for news from London to be reported in the Dublin newspapers, or longer again if the winds on the Irish Sea were heavy. [Cullen, 1984]

The elitist character of Irish newspapers was accentuated by the introduction in 1774 of a government stamp duty of two pence a copy, placing papers outside the budget of the great majority of the population. The three pence that a daily newspaper cost in the 1790s was equivalent to half the daily wage of a rural labourer. [Cullen, 1984; Crawford, 1979; Nowlan, 1984] Letter writing was becoming more widespread, and as elsewhere in Europe, letter writers included general news from their vicinity, as well as personal news. [Cullen, 1984]

In the final decades of the eighteenth century the character of the reading public changed dramatically. Mass literacy emerged in the context of a world turned upside down. The combined effects of the American and French Revolutions transformed the political situation in Ireland: they created a mass politics. The American Revolution encouraged a growing demand for reform of the Irish Parliament and for greater autonomy from Westminster. Such sentiment had

been widespread enough in Dublin (Protestant) middle class circles since the time of Swift, but now acquired a wider resonance, especially among the Presbyterians of the north-east.

The impact of the French Revolution was even more dramatic. The reform movement had been in two minds about how to approach the ‘Catholic Question’ – the demand for civil equality for Catholics. Given that Catholic states were some of the most autocratic in Europe, and that Catholics were a majority in Ireland, the extension of the franchise to Catholics ran the risk of the new electorate voting for deeper reaction. The French Revolution showed that the Catholic world was far from impervious to the spirit of Enlightenment. “The revolution provided the thrilling spectacle to reform-minded Protestants of French Catholics systematically dismantling the *ancien regime* equation between popery, despotism and political slavery. The Irish implications were obvious: if French Catholics could display such political maturity, so too could Irish Catholics.” [Whelan, 1996, p.100]

In 1791 the United Irish societies were formed in Dublin and Belfast with the aim of uniting people across confessional denominations for parliamentary reform and political independence. Initially middle class in composition, they quickly acquired a popular audience and membership, evolving from reform-orientated debating societies into a mass revolutionary movement. Literacy played a central role in the process. The United Irish newspapers, especially the Belfast-based *Northern Star*, achieved a circulation far larger than any of the established newspapers. Its audience was larger again. It is estimated that every copy of the paper reached an audience of at least ten times more. The movement was also able to draw on an extensive printing and publishing network particularly in the north-east and the Dublin region. Radical books and pamphlets were widely circulated, including thousands of copies of Paine’s *Rights of Man* and Tone’s *Arguments on behalf of the Catholics of Ireland*. In the cities and towns reading societies and book clubs sprang up, composed for the most part of artisans and small traders. Outside the cities republicanism found its core advocates among small time traders – shopkeepers and innkeepers – and among textile artisans who comprised the front ranks of popular literacy. [Whelan, 1996]

It is difficult to overstate the scale of radicalisation that the United Irish movement generated in the 1790s. Across the east coast of Ireland the movement organised and radicalised tens of thousands. As many people died in one year, 1798, in the 'white terror' that suppressed the United Irish rebellion as were sent to the guillotine throughout the whole period of the French Revolution. What is striking is that the areas where the United Irish movement organised its mass support were the same areas where literacy was highest, and areas where the United Irish movement was weakest were the areas – predominantly Irish-speaking – where literacy was lowest: Munster, Connaught, and the west of Ulster.

The rise of mass radicalism and the 1798 rebellion shocked the Irish elite and led many to identify popular literacy with sedition. These events formed the background to the debate which opened up in the nineteenth century about the prospects for mass education and the need to control it.

### **The Spread of Mass Education**

When the first comprehensive census dealing with literacy was taken in 1841, 28% of the population over the age of five could read and write. Four decades later that figure had reached 59%. By this point literacy was virtually universal among young adults.

A government-sponsored commission in the 1820s calculated that half a million children attended school in Ireland. One fifth of these received state aid; most were financed by the parents themselves. Some of these schools were affiliated to the Catholic or Protestant Churches but the majority of the estimated 11,000 schools were not supported by or affiliated to any institution, official or clerical. Most of the children were being educated in what was known, somewhat pejoratively, as 'hedge schools'. The ubiquity of these schools had become a source of concern to the Government, and the elite more generally. The teachers were suspected of having radical sympathies and it was feared that the hedge schools had become nurseries for sedition. [Croker, 1824; Wakefield, 1812]

In the early nineteenth century, in both England and Ireland, there was much debate within the elite about the benefits or otherwise of popular literacy. The pessimists argued that providing education for the lower orders merely resulted in them acquiring ideas above their station, thus encouraging disaffection. The optimists felt confident that the education of the masses, provided it was properly controlled, could have a very beneficial effect, imbuing them with a sense of discipline and responsibility. "Educate the rising generation and the gaols and barracks will not be wanted". [Wakefield, 1812, Vol. 2, p. 418]

This debate had particular resonance in Ireland following the revolutionary upsurge of the 1790s and its suppression. To some, it was the very existence of popular literacy which had been responsible for the upheaval in the first place. Others contrasted Ireland with England and Scotland, pointing out that the much higher rates of literacy in these countries had not led to generalised rebellion; on the contrary the common people had maintained their long standing affection for authority. By the 1820s the debate was becoming somewhat academic, as it became clear that many of the lower orders were acquiring an education for their children, one way or another.

Britain was one of the last states in Europe to introduce a comprehensive system of public education. Across England, Scotland and Wales, the provision of basic education for the masses was organised on a voluntary basis, closely associated with one or other of the Protestant Churches. Reading the Bible was at the core of the curriculum; the skills of reading and writing were best acquired in conjunction with the precepts of faith. This confessional bent of British elementary education created some difficulties when it came to be applied to Ireland.

The events of the 1790s had traumatised the elite in Ireland and worried Westminster, encouraging a much more sustained effort to win the allegiance of the population. The unrest of the period was seen as a symptom of the moral deficiency that afflicted the country, itself a product of the failure of the earlier Reformation. The clear solution to the problem was the moral regeneration of the population, to be achieved through a 'Second Reformation'. [Akenson, 1989]

A number of bodies linked to the Established Church began to establish schools with the specific purpose of converting the lower classes, but despite financial aid from the state, they failed to make much inroads. A more broad-based state-financed body, the Kildare Street Society, did attempt to establish a non-denominational system of elementary education based on the designs of Joseph Lancaster, but despite some limited success they too became drawn into the confessional battles. Some Catholics, including Daniel O'Connell, did participate in the Society, but withdrew once it began to involve itself with proselytising bodies. [Akenson, 1989; Coolahan, 1981]

The Catholic Church lacked the resources, both financial and personnel, to establish a comprehensive network of schools across Ireland. A government report from the 1820s estimated that there were between 40,000 and 50,000 children attending Catholic Church run schools: the religious teaching orders were still at an early stage of their development. They did, however, have sufficient influence to prevent Catholic children attending any schools suspected of having a proselytising mission. The Government faced a dilemma: if they continued with the 'Second Reformation' project the effect would be to permit the children of the nation to be educated in a network of 'hedge schools' whose teachers were suspected of promoting sedition.

In 1831 the Whig administration resolved the problem by introducing a system of 'National Schools' which marginalised the Church of Ireland and undermined the whole 'Second Reformation' project. The Government financed the building of these schools, and paid for their upkeep and the wages of the teachers. Originally it had been intended that the schools be multi-denominational, but confessional discord prevented this, and in practice the national schools, though theoretically non-denominational, were associated with one or other denomination. The school managers, who had the power to hire and fire teachers, were local clerics, Catholic parish priests or Presbyterian ministers. The Established Church, upset by its loss of power, boycotted the national schools system for a few decades. [Coolahan, 1981]

The educational curriculum of these schools was to be secular, to be determined at a national level by a government appointed body: the Commissioners of National Schools. The Commissioners produced a set of reading books which, while containing a high level of factual information, had "a strong moralistic and socialising aura ... urging acceptance of the prevailing social, economic and political value system". [Coolahan, 1981, p.20] The books had very little Irish

content, being geared towards British cultural assimilation. They were so successful in this respect that they came to be used in British colonies around the globe. This educational system was designed not only to inculcate a spirit of order and obedience in the pupils, but in the teachers as well. The teachers' behaviour was to be strictly regulated. Obedience to the law and loyalty to the sovereign was expected. Teachers were prohibited from running public houses, or lodging in them. Nor could they attend markets, fairs, or engage in any political activity. Their governing maxim should be: "A time and a place for everything and everything in its proper time and place." [Quoted in Coolahan, 1981, p. 31]

### **Anglicisation and Cultural Homogenisation**

The national schools have been sometimes blamed for the decline of the Irish language and it is certainly true that in the decades following the creation of this school system, the Irish language did experience huge erosion. It is also true that language change was part of the British Government's project of assimilating the Irish population. However, it seems clear enough that linguistic transformation was not simply a top-down affair. The children's parents wanted them to learn English. Irish might be the mother tongue, but English was the language of power. More than that: it was the language of survival. The Great Famine had shown the peasantry that one could not be guaranteed a living on an acre of potatoes and a few cattle. Engaging with the wider world had become a matter of necessity.

Alongside the decline of the Irish language, the middle decades of the nineteenth century also witnessed the decay of many traditional beliefs and practices. Foreign visitors had long remarked on peculiarities of popular religious beliefs which bordered on the pantheistic, and the persistence of superstitions and magical practices into the nineteenth century. A striking example of this was the 'holy turf' phenomenon during a cholera outbreak in 1832. There were reports from much of the country of strangers arriving in towns with turf or ash, which had been blessed by the Virgin Mary and which if distributed among the population would prevent the spread of disease. Two decades later, William Wilde wrote a book on popular customs and beliefs in 1852 but by this point he was writing about a way of life in terminal decline: "The old forms and customs too are becoming obliterated, the festivals are unobserved, and the rustic festivities neglected or forgotten." [Wilde, 1979, p.14]

The success of the Fr. Matthew's Temperance Crusade in the pre-Famine decades was one indication of changing attitudes. Such campaigns were widespread in Protestant Europe but were new to Ireland; indeed the Catholic hierarchy were initially sceptical towards it because of these associations. The temperance movement, however, made a huge impact, especially in the urban areas of Munster. Frugality was encouraged as well as sobriety, and savings banks were promoted. Temperance reading rooms, including libraries, were established around the country to wean people away from their old habits and to encourage discussion and educational activities.

The post-Famine decades saw a remarkable change in religious practices in Ireland. Perhaps the most striking feature of this 'devotional revolution' was the rise in church going, specifically mass attendance. Prior to the Famine, Sunday mass attendance in Irish-speaking counties was between twenty and forty percent. By the end of the century, church attendance had become the social norm. The number of priests and nuns also rose significantly. In 1840 there was one priest for every 3,000 people, and one nun for every 6,500. By 1871 these figures had changed to one priest for every 1,560 people and one nun for every 1,100. [Larkin, 1984; Foster, 1988]

One of the most striking features of the cultural anglicisation of Ireland in the nineteenth century was the crucial role played by the Catholic Church in the process. It was not only that cultural anglicisation coincided with the consolidation of Irish Catholicism, but that the Church itself played a crucial mediating role in the process. Could this explain why Ireland, unlike Scotland, was propelled towards separation from the United Kingdom?

Scotland, however, had its own confessional quarrels with England. Only a small minority of Scots ever adhered to the Episcopalian tradition; from the Reformation to the present day, Presbyterianism has been closely associated with Scottish national identity. Yet this confessional difference did not drive Scotland towards separatism. If Scotland was to be a Presbyterian-coloured region of Britain, why should Ireland not have become a Catholic-coloured one? For the strength of Catholicism in Ireland to provide an explanation for the rise of national separatism, it would need to be shown that the Church itself played a pro-active role in promoting independence. In fact, it did nothing of the sort.

## The Catholic Church and National Independence

The hostility of the English to the Catholic Church in Ireland in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was in large measure driven by concern regarding its international connections. They were always fearful that Irish Catholicism could be used as a Trojan horse by their continental rivals. The presence of large numbers of Irish *émigrés* in the armies of France and Spain did little to re-assure them. However, these very same international connections provided some protection for the Catholic Church in Ireland. England's most consistent ally in the various struggles for supremacy in Europe was Austria, heart of Catholic Habsburg power. These connections put a brake on any projects for a more severe repression of Irish Catholicism, even during the Penal era. [Wall, 1976]

The French Revolution strengthened the connection between England and the Vatican, giving it an ideological component it had previously lacked – a shared hostility to the rise of radicalism. Westminster came to see the Catholic Church as a potential bulwark against the Jacobin threat. As well as rescinding most of the Penal Laws against Catholics, they funded the building of St. Patrick's College, Maynooth, for the education of Catholic priests. This was designed in part to reduce the flow of young Irish people travelling to the continent for an education, thus limiting the contagion. The Catholic bishops in Ireland shared the Vatican's loathing of radical politics, 'the French disease', and denounced the United Irish rebellion in 1798. When London pressed for the dissolution of the Irish Parliament, and the passing of an Act of Union, in 1801, they did so with the support of the Catholic hierarchy, who were promised in return that full Catholic Emancipation would be introduced in the newly unified kingdom. The Catholic hierarchy clearly conceived of their project as being not the establishment of a separate state, but rather the consolidation of Ireland as a Catholic region within Britain, a parallel project indeed to that of the Scottish elite. [Keogh, 1993]

In the event a change of administration at Westminster put an end to that plan, and it took the development of a mass campaign in the 1820s, and the election of Daniel O'Connell to a parliamentary seat in Clare, before Catholics were permitted to become members of the Houses of Parliament. The same Act which conceded Catholic Emancipation in 1829 also reduced the Irish electorate from a



hundred thousand to ten thousand. This deep reluctance to permit Irish Catholics into the circles of power did little to strengthen support for a Catholic unionist project. [Ó Tuathaigh, 1990]

In the 1840s O'Connell led a campaign for the re-establishment of an Irish parliament – the Repeal movement. In both the Emancipation and Repeal movements, the Catholic clergy played a central organising role. Clerical involvement in the Repeal movement did not signify Catholic Church support for independence from Britain; the movement's demands were much more modest than that. The Repeal movement though had a dynamic of its own, and an articulate separatist current, the Young Ireland group, emerged within it, which threatened to push Repeal further than its original goals. The defeat of the Repeal movement alongside the bitter experience of witnessing the Great Famine had the effect of radicalising much of the younger generation, ensuring that the relationship of the Catholic Church to mass politics would never again be the same. While the Catholic Church continued its close alliance with the British Liberal Party, a new generation was discovering the politics of revolution. [Ó Tuathaigh, 1990; Lee, 1973]

A group of Irish émigrés in Paris, some of whom had been associated with the Young Irelanders, founded a new organisation, the Irish Republican Brotherhood, which provided a more formidable challenge both to British power and to clerical influence in Ireland. Mid-nineteenth-century Paris was a seedbed of revolutionary ideas, and the IRB carried the marks of its origins. While it represented a rejuvenation of the radical politics of the 1790s, in key respects it went further. The IRB sought the establishment of a democratic republic, the liquidation of landed property and the elimination of all forms of colonialism. To achieve its goals, it sought to build a clandestine organisation dedicated to insurrection. [Comerford, 1985; Lyons, 1973]

Neither its goals nor its methods endeared the IRB to the Catholic hierarchy, who from the very beginning approached the Fenians – as the IRB became known – with unrelenting hostility. Yet clerical enmity could not prevent the IRB establishing an underground organisation in Ireland with a membership numbering tens of thousands, with substantial sister bodies in Britain and the United States. The IRB's efforts at insurrection were not very successful, but what they did achieve was to politicise the lower classes, and to contribute

crucially to the formation of a mass peasant movement – the Land League – in the 1870s. The ‘Land War’ launched by the League and its successor bodies, established a level of popular mobilisation that broke the back of landlord power in Ireland, forcing the British Government to introduce what Terry Eagleton has described as a ‘revolution from above’, which instituted peasant proprietorship of the land. [Eagleton, 1995] This was achieved with very limited involvement of the Catholic Church, indeed in the face of hostility from most of the Catholic hierarchy and much of the clergy.

Whatever the Church’s motives for admonishing the Fenians or the Land League, what seems more surprising is their inability to marginalise them. A generation earlier, the Catholic clergy had been the key organisers of the Repeal movement; now they were relegated to a peripheral role. Moreover, this change occurred at a time when the Catholic Church had hugely increased its organisational strength and when the Catholic lay population had become remarkable for their religious devotion. [Lee, 1973]

One feature distinguished Irish Catholicism from virtually every other Catholic Church in Europe: not only its cadre, but its leadership came from predominantly peasant stock. By the mid nineteenth century there was no Catholic aristocratic layer worth speaking about in Ireland, and equally importantly the Catholic Church was not a major landowner; that role was occupied by the Church of Ireland. There were of course significant, and growing, differences within the Irish peasantry in the nineteenth century, and Catholic priests mostly came from more prosperous farming backgrounds. Nonetheless these social differences between the Catholic clergy and the poorer rural population remained as tensions within the peasantry; it did not place them in the ranks of the landowning class.

Antonio Gramsci has written about Catholicism: “Every religion, even the Catholic one (or rather, especially the Catholic one, precisely because of its efforts to remain ‘superficially’ unitary in order not to break up into national churches and social stratifications), is in reality a multiplicity of distinct and often contradictory religions”. [Gramsci, 1967, p. 91] Some features of Catholicism were of course common to all adherents. One characteristic of the Catholic tradition was the sharp distinction made between the office of the cleric, and the person. It was accepted in Catholic teaching that there were many

bad priests, bishops and even popes. However, these human failings did not detract from the sacred functions of the office. It was not uncommon in Ireland in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries for people to be simultaneously committed Catholics and fierce anti-clerics, an attitude captured in the Christmas dinner scene in Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*.

It is not being suggested here that confessional difference played no role at all in the development of the Irish national independence movement, merely that it cannot take the primary role so often accorded it. To establish what role it did play, it needs to be assessed within the wider social and political context.

### **The Parameters of Collective Identity**

The discussion so far has taken for granted the existence of an Irish nation. Yet if nations are not natural species, neither are they timeless entities. How and why an Irish nation emerged in the first place needs some explanation.

There is no consensus among Irish historians as to when an Irish national identity emerged. Some see it already present in the era of Elizabethan conquest, others see it as a product of nineteenth century Romanticism. Certainly nineteenth century historians tended to project the idea of an Irish nation back in time. From this perspective, the eleventh century Gaelic leader, Brian Boru, was seen as fighting for 'Ireland' in his battle with the Vikings at Clontarf in 1014. Historians today would dispute the notion that either group of fighters were motivated by national sentiment. It certainly is the case that distinctive ethnic identities existed in the medieval period and earlier, but these were not necessarily understood as grounds for political allegiance.

Throughout the medieval era, the Scottish and Irish Gael shared a language and cultural identity. This facilitated communication between the two regions, but at no time did they constitute a single political community. Political alliances tended to be localised, with the Scottish Gael giving fealty to the king of Scotland. Ethnic identities within Ireland were hardened by the creation of 'English' and 'Irish' as legal identities within the English colony, which some historians have referred to as 'racial' identities. Gaelic literature likewise made a clear distinction between Gael and Gaill that lasted at least into the Tudor era.

However, as noted in earlier chapters, these identities were beginning to erode too in the late medieval period, with many of the Gaill becoming thoroughly gaelicised. As early as the fifteenth century there are references to the Gael and Gaill as being *Érennaigh* (people of Ireland) which has led some to conclude that an Irish identity was taking shape by this period. [Caball, 1998; McLeod, 2004]

The Tudor State Papers distinguish between 'English-Irish' and 'Irish'; though the former were often referred to as 'degenerate English' and the latter as 'wild Irish' or 'mere Irish'. It seems clear, however, that an 'Old English' identity continued to exist within sections of the elite into the seventeenth century, though it is not clear how far down the social scale this identity went. The end of a legal distinction between 'English' and 'Irish' would surely have gone a long way towards eroding these older identities. Language difference would no doubt continue to be a major point of distinction, but in a context where bilingualism was common, even this demarcation would have become somewhat blurred.

From the beginning of the Stuart era, there are references to 'British' migrants in Ireland in the State Papers, but the term 'British' does not seem to have been widely used in Ireland before the nineteenth century. The terms 'Scotch' and 'English' seemed to have been more widely used to refer to the settler communities in the seventeenth century, though by the eighteenth century, confessional references had become commonplace to distinguish communities within Ireland. The eighteenth century also saw a shift in the use of the word 'Irish'. [Foster, 1988]

As early as the 1730s there were expressions of discontent among Irish Protestants about London's role in Irish politics. For one thing, London had a policy of excluding anyone born in Ireland from achieving high positions in the government's administration of the country. This was the very same policy that did so much to estrange the Old English community from the Tudor monarchy in the sixteenth century, and it was introduced for similar reasons. The English Government was afraid that an administration in Dublin run by Irish-born people, whatever their origins, might develop policies inimical to London's interests. Moreover, members of the local elite could concentrate their power in Ireland in a way that would make them difficult to dislodge in the event of a conflict of interests.

Added to their resentment at exclusion from high office in Dublin, Irish Protestants had to live with many government policies that they strongly objected to. The imposition of a debased currency – Wood’s halfpence – that provoked a riposte from Jonathan Swift was only one of the more famous sources of resentment. Throughout the eighteenth century Protestants in Ireland became more conscious of themselves as being ‘Irish’. This is evident enough in the case of two of the best known of them, Dean Swift and Bishop Berkeley. Berkeley as a student in Trinity College referred to the Irish as ‘natives’; some years later he had come to describe himself as Irish. Swift, though Dublin born, was resentful at being ‘exiled’ in Ireland, but came to write vitriolic denunciations of what he saw as English misgovernment of the country. [Barnard, 2003; Foster, 1988]

In the 1770s opposition to commercial restrictions on Ireland led many Irish Protestants to espouse a ‘Patriotic’ politics, a move sharpened by sympathy for the colonists in North America. The ‘Patriots’ identification with the North American rebellious colonists was understandable. They were both part of the expansion of an Atlantic community and economy. They were English-speaking and Protestant (of one denomination or another) and felt unrepresented, and discriminated against, by Westminster. There were crucial differences though. The colonists in North America had overwhelmed the indigenous population; the colonists in Ireland had not. In many respects, Irish Protestants were in a situation more analogous to that of the colonists of South America, whose descendents remained a minority throughout most of the continent and who likewise felt excluded from power, and increasingly alienated from their Iberian overlords. The long term consequences of their challenge to the Iberian monarchies would prove very different to that launched by the North Americans. [Barnard, 2003; Foster, 1988]

In the late eighteenth century the radical ‘United Irish’ movement consciously sought to develop a national discourse which would replace the communalist one that had dominated the discussion in the previous century. The events of the 1790s showed both their achievements and their limitations.

Most discussion on identity formation tends to focus on the opinions of the elites. This is understandable, in part, because the elites were more literate and left more records of their opinions. However, it would be unwarranted to assume that popular opinion was simply a reflection of elite views; likewise elite interpretations of popular opinion need to be treated with caution. However, even where popular literacy is very limited, one can begin to gauge the opinions of the broader population by examining the actions of popular movements and the kind of demands they raised. Looking at how these movements developed in the transitional era between a highly restricted literacy and a mass literacy can also help to clarify the role played by literacy in the transformation of popular attitudes.

### **Literisation and Popular Consciousness**

The 'long peace' of the early eighteenth century was broken in the 1760s by the rise of agrarian popular movements across much of Ireland. Though geographically dispersed and diffuse in their demands and activities, they had some crucial features in common. They emerged in the more prosperous lowland agricultural regions, both Irish and English speaking, of the south, east and north of Ireland, but not in the less fertile upland areas or the west. They arose in response to changes being introduced by the landlords or other elite groups, like the Established Church. While their grievances appeared localised, they were all reacting to the changed international context occasioned by the rise of industrial capitalism. [Beames, 1983]

The previous chapter explored the contrasting responses to attempts to introduce agrarian capitalism in Ireland and Scotland. In both the Scottish Highlands and the Scottish Lowlands the landowners succeeded in imposing a capitalist agrarian order in the countryside, though it took very different forms in both regions. In Ireland the landowners did attempt to re-organise the lowland regions, though with limited success. In the upland areas or the west, they did not even try. This chapter will attempt to explore the *mentalité* of the peasantry and other popular strata, and how this *mentalité* changed as literacy became generalised.

While some of the agrarian opposition began as public protest movements they were easily enough suppressed and most forms of agrarian resistance survived and grew as clandestine bodies, operating at night. Their demands were defensive, upholding customary tenure and other elements of 'moral economy'. Landowners or even their agents were rarely targeted: to do so would have provoked a state response. Instead the agrarian movements concentrated their activities within the peasantry, insuring that the rules of custom were not transgressed. Ostracism was the most common weapon, but exemplary punishment could be meted out if considered necessary. [Beames, 1983, Donnelly, 1978]

The 'Whiteboys', as the agrarian resistance in the south came to be known, did not have a centralised organisation, nor did they attempt to build one. They did maintain a loose network with bands from neighbouring villages helping each other out. They produced no newspapers or pamphlets outlining a programme or justifying their cause. Their main literate output was threatening letters or posters – often written in legalistic language – warning those who breached the laws of custom. What they did leave, in oral form, was a legacy of songs celebrating their exploits. The United Irish movement did make some efforts to organise the Whiteboys in the 1790s but met with very limited success, and the areas where Whiteboyism was strongest were not centres of rebellion in 1798. [Beames, 1983; Whelan, 1996]

The early decades of the nineteenth century saw the continuing spread of literacy and a gradual change in the forms and goals of popular struggles. Alongside the political agitation for Emancipation and Repeal, the pre-famine decades saw changes in the character of peasant agitation. Whiteboy-type networks persisted and probably spread, but they were now accompanied by more overtly political agitation, the most significant of which was the anti-tithe campaign. The payment of tithes – theoretically one tenth of one's produce – to the Established Church had long been a source of popular discontent. However, in the eighteenth century opposition had focused on the form and amount of payment, not on the principle itself. The switch from payment-in-kind to money payments had been particularly onerous for the poorer peasants who had only a marginal relationship to the commercial economy. Likewise the introduction of tithe-farmers who sought to precisely calculate the amount due, rather than accept the customary donation, had become a source of acrimony. Only in the nineteenth

century, however, did peasant agitation begin to challenge the principle of paying tithes to a Church they did not adhere to. [Beames, 1983; O'Donoghue, 1965]

These decades also saw the increased use of literate forms of communication. The *Nation* newspaper, which was linked to the Repeal movement in the 1840s, came to have a readership larger than any of the established papers and became the focal point for political debate across the country. The Repeal reading rooms, along with the Temperance reading rooms, became focal points for political and cultural activity. [Ó Tuathaigh, 1990]

The emergence of national separatism in Ireland seems to have been closely associated with the process of literisation. This linkage needs explaining. One possible explanation, that the newly literate population were responding to the general direction of written opinion, is untenable because most of the communicative system was controlled by the overwhelmingly unionist elite. The content of the educational curriculum was thoroughly conformist and pro-imperial, while the Catholic Church showed little in the way of political defiance. Yet defiant is what much of the population became. A section of the intelligentsia certainly began to articulate and propagate a separatist programme, but why was it they whom the populace listened to?

### **The Social Consequences of Uneven Development**

To what extent did the divergent socio-economic path of Ireland vis à vis England, Scotland and Wales play a significant role in influencing the rise of a national independence movement there? The question itself raises a more general problem for social theory, and indeed for philosophy: the relationship between forms of discourse and social context. Should discourses be understood as 'expressions' of social situations or do discourses operate in a sphere of their own – the sphere of language – quite distinct from the social world?

It would be surprising if the way we thought about the world was wholly unrelated to our social experiences. Forms of discourse may indeed have a life of their own but whether they can convince large numbers of people of their validity, whether they win an audience, will depend on whether that audience



can relate them to their own social experience, as they understand it. By the same token, we cannot make assumptions about people's thinking from their social situation. The relationship between modes of thought and social context is a problem for interpretation, not an answer.

The absence of a social agency in the Irish countryside for carrying through the capitalist re-organisation of agriculture left the landowners with little option, given their need to maintain English-orientated standards, but to press for the highest possible rent. These rents were actually much lower than they might have been had the owners been able to improve the productivity of agriculture through investment and close co-operation with a sector of the peasantry. But this, for the reasons discussed in the previous chapter, had not happened. As one historian put it, landlords in Europe in the early modern period faced a choice of maximising output or maximising surplus. [Medick, 1981] This choice, if it was that, had its own repercussions. Unable to maximise output, the Irish landowners settled for maximising the surplus.

The Great Famine, which led to an estimated one million people dying and another million emigrating, was a crucial moment in modern Irish history. The exact numbers of death through hunger or hunger-related disease are not known: the resources of the state were too overwhelmed to keep track. It was not the first large-scale famine in Ireland. A century earlier another famine took another million lives. The circumstances surrounding the 1741 famine are less well known, though it would appear to follow a long-standing pattern for Ireland or similar subsistence economies. An exceptionally bad winter killed off much of the livestock and crops, and the population did not have enough to live on. The Famine of the 1840s was different in a number of respects. It was not a bad winter that killed off the animals or crops, but a humid summer that encouraged a fungus which destroyed one crop, the potato. The dependence of a substantial section of the population on a single crop distinguished the 1840s famine. Our information on this famine is also vastly greater than on earlier ones; the expanded systems of communications and state bureaucracy ensured that contemporaries in Europe and North America were also aware of it. [Dickson, 1995]

Much of the generation that followed the Famine would see it as caused by 'landlordism' and British rule, with some seeing it as deliberate genocide. Westminster did in fact provide some financial aid for famine relief, though not enough, and too circumscribed. Government tardiness was partially dictated by the belief that Ireland was overpopulated anyway and that it was unhelpful to interfere with the free workings of the market. Some landlords helped those starving; others took advantage of the famine to clear their estates. An amendment to the Famine Relief Act of 1846 – Gregory's clause – prohibited those holding over a quarter acre of land from receiving relief aid. Many landowners used the famine to drive the poorer cottiers off the land. Over a hundred thousand families were evicted in 1847 alone. [Donnelly, 1995; Kinealy, 1995; Newsinger, 1996]

Despite the catastrophic population loss in the Famine years, small farms continued to dominate the Irish countryside: the great majority were under thirty acres. The Famine would certainly have increased a sense of insecurity among tenants. One consequence was a sharp reduction in the practice of sub-division of holdings. Denied access to land, the rural population increasingly opted for emigration as a mechanism of survival. Emigration in turn encouraged the process of centralisation of farm holdings. It was, however, a very gradual process, and the Irish countryside never became dominated by large labour-employing farms. [Clark, 1979]

In the decade after the Famine, some of the more prosperous farmers established an association, the Tenants League, designed to strengthen their position and, especially, to give them greater security of tenure. The landowners responded by having Parliament enact a statute, the Deasy Act, in 1860, which sought to protect landlords from any customary rights tenants might claim. It explicitly denied any legal status to non-contractual agreements between landlord and tenant, and granted landowners full power over their estates. The 1860 Act shows clearly enough the political difficulties facing the large tenant farmers in Ireland. The landowners showed little inclination to establish a long-term social alliance with them. On their own, without the backing of the state, the large tenant farmers were in a weak position. In the 1860s tenant farmers with holdings of over one hundred acres constituted no more than 5% of the total number of tenant farmers in Ireland. Tenants with between fifty and a hundred acre holdings represented another 10%. If they were to consolidate their social position, they could not afford to put too much distance between themselves and

the greater mass of the peasantry. While Gladstone's Liberal Government did introduce a Land Act in 1870 that sought to give legal status to customary practice, landowners were able to circumvent many of its provisions. [Clark, 1979]

Urban life in Ireland, with the exception of Belfast and surrounding towns, mirrored the economic stagnation of the countryside. Industrial employment actually fell in Ireland over the course of the nineteenth century. Such employment as did exist tended to be in service sectors: transport, commercial activity or domestic labour. A lot of employment tended to be on a casual basis, with unemployment and underemployment ubiquitous. [Cullen, 1972; Ó Gráda, 1994] Poverty was endemic with much of the population of Dublin living in slums. According to historian Emmet Larkin, Victorian Dublin was unique among all the "slumdoms produced in the western world in the nineteenth century ... [because] its slums were not the product of the industrial revolution. Dublin in fact suffered more from the problems of de-industrialisation than industrialisation." [Quoted in Davis, 2004]

The contrast with Victorian Britain could hardly have been more striking. There the second half of the nineteenth century was a period of unparalleled prosperity. Not only was Britain the 'workshop of the world', it had come to dominate global trade and finance while acquiring the largest empire the world had ever known. The chronic instability of the early industrial age had given way to a more mature phase of industrialisation which saw standards of living rise across the board. In this context a powerful labour movement emerged which was able to achieve significant gains for the working class without engaging in any frontal assault on the existing social hierarchy and without engaging in any sustained challenge to the political order. [P. Anderson, 1992]

The very pioneering role of Britain in the industrialisation process had a marked effect on perceptions of economic and social change. Because the great transformations of the eighteenth century seemed to have occurred spontaneously, there was little pressure from any sector of British society to push the state into playing an active role in the economy. The Victorian state was tiny compared to that of France or Germany and was noticeable for its reluctance to engage in the type of developmental strategies pursued by its Continental rivals, not least in the field of communications or education. Likewise, even after the US, Germany, France and other states had introduced

tariffs and British industries had lost their global pre-eminence, free trade remained the order of the day. The propertied classes in Britain could afford to be sanguine about this turn of events because they were increasingly reliant on investments abroad. "After 1870, (British) capital exports regularly surpassed capital formation at home; by the last years before the First World War, their volume was twice as large." [P. Anderson, 1992, p.149] The point here is not to suggest that national separatism emerged as a result of differences over economic strategy, rather that the strategy pursued by London had the effect of intensifying the social differences between Ireland and Britain.

Emigration and the spread of literacy combined to increase awareness of the world outside of Ireland. The post-Famine emigration wave was not a once-off phenomenon; instead it started a chain movement, with the emigrants sending back money so that other family members could join them. They also sent letters describing the new worlds they were encountering. Emigrants rarely wrote accounts of their difficulties, only of their achievements. And so modernity became something of a mirage for nineteenth century Ireland: a marvel, always visible in the distance, but never within reach.

### **Class Conflict in the Countryside**

It took the global agricultural recession in the late 1870s and a series of bad harvests to ignite a major social upheaval in the Irish countryside. Once again the spectre of famine seemed to haunt the land but the popular response this time round was very different from the 1840s. Public meetings were held which created a mass organisation – the Land League – with a programme of 'obtaining the soil of Ireland for the people who cultivate it'. [Curtis & McDowell, 1968, p. 256] Significantly the locus of this revolt was not the more prosperous agricultural regions of the south or east, but Mayo, which was probably the poorest county in Ireland with the greatest number of smallholdings. Mayo was also the county that in the early decades of the century had the lowest levels of literacy. This had now changed thanks to the national school system; being literate was the norm among the younger generation. The League went on to launch the 'land war' that broke the power of the landlord class in Ireland and laid the foundations for the establishment of a mass movement for independence.

The Land League was not a pre-planned movement, devised by some central committee or 'supreme council', though its key organisers and strategists were Fenians or ex-Fenians who had become disillusioned with the IRB's seemingly futile insurrectionary strategy. Neither, however, was it a purely spontaneous movement. Its founding programme, and the broad popular response to it, reveal decades of political organisation, education and debate. While the agrarian crisis itself took everyone by surprise, it did not find a population unprepared. A year after its formation the Land League had over a thousand branches and 200,000 members. A leading government official, William Forster, wrote: "The Land League is supreme .... I am forced to acknowledge that to a great extent the ordinary law is powerless." [Quoted in Foner, 1978, p.16] That the impoverished peasantry of Connaught were capable of launching a national popular organisation that challenged and ultimately defeated the British Government and the dominant class in Ireland was an indication of how much had changed since the 1840s.

An important feature of the new movement was, paradoxically, a strong international perspective. This external component is most evident in the case of Michael Davitt, the Land League's main leader. Though born in Mayo, he had grown up in a working class Irish community in Lancashire, where he had been imprisoned as a result of his involvement in the clandestine IRB. On his release from prison he returned to Mayo to find the county on the edge of famine. The American connection was no less important. The American Fenian organisation, *Clan na Gael*, threw its weight and influence behind the League at a time when the Paris-based leadership of the IRB was reluctant to divert its energies from insurrectionary planning. The presence of substantial Irish communities in Britain and North America instead of weakening any drive towards national independence had strengthened a sense of national consciousness within Ireland. Marx had predicted as much a decade earlier when discussing the effects of land-consolidation and emigration: "Like all good things in the world, this profitable mode of proceedings has its drawbacks. The accumulation of the Irish in America keeps pace with the accumulation of rents in Ireland. The Irishman banished by the sheep and the ox, re-appears on the other side of the ocean as a Fenian. And there a young but gigantic republic arises more and more threateningly to face the old queen of the waves." [Marx, 1976, p. 870]

In both cases these emigrant communities were heavily influenced by the context of their host nations. Eric Hobsbawm has described the Irish in Britain in the post-Famine era: "Their wages were lower than anyone else's, they lived in the worst slums, and the English and Scots despised them as semi-barbarians, distrusted them as Catholics, and hated them as under cutters of their wages." [Hobsbawm, 1968, p. 310] A generation earlier Irish activists had played a significant role in the Chartist movement but in the second half of the nineteenth century there was no mass movement for political and social change that they could identify with. A political culture of imperial self-satisfaction held little appeal to these immigrants; thus their social disaffection deepened their sense of national oppression.

Irish emigrants to the United States in the Famine-era encountered every bit as much hostility as did those to England or Scotland. The 'know-nothing' current who opposed their arrival became a national political force for a brief period. The growth of American capitalism, however, at least in this era, was so rapid that the 'nativists' were overwhelmed, and Irish immigrants were able to consolidate their position in the cities of the northern states. The American notion of a democratic republic, a land without kings or aristocrats, where everyone was born equal, had an obvious attraction. So the Irish immigrant communities in the American cities could simultaneously identify with both their new homeland and their old, and the two became linked in a myriad of ways. [Foner, 1978]

Samuel Clark has summarised the changes in collective action by Irish peasants before and after the Famine: there was a switch from local to national, from reactive to proactive and from communal to associational. However, the crucial shift here was not just temporal. The United Irish movement of the 1790s was proactive, associational, and national, at least in aspiration. As noted earlier it only succeeded in organising in areas where literacy was widespread. It was the post-Famine decades which saw literacy become generalised across Ireland. Within each of the shifts outlined by Clark, the advent of literacy played a critical role. For each of the crisis decades – the 1790s, the 1840s and the 1880s – movements for political change were accompanied by an outpouring of printed material, spearheaded by newspapers which had huge readerships, and even larger audiences. One commentator remarked: "The Irish peasantry still live in hovels often in the same room with animals, they have very few modern

comforts; and yet they are in close communication with those who live at ease in the cities and farms in the US. They are also imbued with all the advanced political notions of the American Republic and are sufficiently educated to read the latest political doctrines in the press which circulates among them. Their social condition at home is a hundred years behind their state of political and mental culture.” [Quoted in Bew, 1978, p. 31]

While the Land League was an agrarian movement, it was not in any sense an ‘agrarianist’ one. There was no anti-urban bias here. On the contrary, many of the Land League organisers were town dwellers. The founding document specifically referred to tenants being forced to pay exorbitant rents “in the absence of manufacturing industry”. [Curtis & McDowell, 1968, p. 257] The founders of the League very self-consciously identified with modernity and appealed to Enlightenment principles. Against landlordism they proposed “the principle upon which enlightened statesmanship aims at following in modern times to meet the growing necessities of that popular intelligence and awakening civilisation which demands the sweeping away of those feudal laws opposed to the social progress and the ideas of the age”. [Curtis & McDowell, 1968, p. 258]

If we contrast political developments in nineteenth century Ireland with Scotland, the general picture seems clear enough. There was a huge socio-economic chasm between them, and this gap created a very different context for political action. The diffusion of literacy helped bring the issue to a head. There is, however, one difficulty with this presentation. Socio-economic cleavages between regions do not in and of themselves induce national separatism. For example Languedoc, a region in France, despite experiencing many of the features of ‘underdevelopment’, including mass emigration, never showed much sign of throwing up an independence movement.

Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie explicitly contrasted the process whereby the French took control of Occitania in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries and the later colonisation of Algeria. For Le Roy Ladurie, a crucial difference was the ‘massive land spoliation’ that occurred in Algeria, but which had not been part of the medieval incorporation of Occitania into the kingdom of France. [Le Roy Ladurie, 1977] Curiously similar language is used in the founding document of the Land League. It quotes John Stuart Mill: “Before the conquest the Irish people knew nothing of absolute property in land. The land virtually belonged to

the entire sept, the chief was little more than the managing member of the association. The feudal idea, which views all rights as emanating from a head landlord, came in with the conquest, was associated with foreign dominion, and has never to this day been recognized by the moral sentiments of the people. Originally the offspring not of industry, but of spoliation, the right has not been allowed to purify itself by protracted possession, but has passed from the original spoliators to others by a series of fresh spoliators so as always to be connected to the latest and most odious oppression of foreign invaders. In the moral feelings of the Irish people, the right to hold the land goes, as it did in the beginning, with the right to till it." [Curtis & McDowell, 1968, p. 257]

The social memory of conquest provided the Land League with a powerful argument with which to challenge the power of the landowners. They were able to use the mobilisation around the land question to construct a mass movement for national independence. Broadening out the movement also brought to the fore crucial social and political tensions within Irish nationalism. While the majority of tenant farmers were smallholders, the course of the nineteenth century had seen more and more land concentrated in the hands of 'graziers' with larger holdings, whose social instincts were considerably more conservative than those of the original base of the Land League. For one, they had a lot more to lose than the Mayo smallholders, and they were wary of the more 'extreme' demands being pushed by radical elements, in particular any suggestion of a more equitable land distribution. Politically, they were more conservative too, and were more naturally inclined to a federal solution to the national question than a separatist one. They did, however, feel seriously threatened by the depression of agricultural prices, and were pushed into more radical positions because of it. [Bew, 1978]

Key to broadening out the movement was the establishment of an alliance, the 'new departure', with the charismatic leader of the constitutional nationalists, Charles Stuart Parnell. The conditions of the agreement included support of peasant proprietorship, full self-government, and complete political independence from Westminster. The details of the later development of the Home Rule movement, and its relationship to the land question are much too complicated to elaborate on here. The main point of this chapter has been to stress the extremely close links between the social question in rural Ireland and the rise of a mass sentiment intent on national independence.



## The Ulster Exception

In Ulster the Land War produced a mixed response. The landlords were of course implacably hostile to the Land League, and its links to the Home Rule movement confirmed their suspicions about the social implications of the national independence movement. The relationship of other social classes to the Land League was more complicated. The Orange Order, which had grown in membership and support over the century, actively aided landlords fighting the League. However, a significant number of Protestants, including some members of the Orange Order, did join the Land League. [Bew, 1978]

In Antrim and Down, where Presbyterians were most numerous, and Catholics were fewer, the tenant farmers supported many of the League's objectives, without endorsing Home Rule. Politically they aligned themselves with Liberalism. Elsewhere, the Land War tended to stoke up the old communal divide, with Land League protests being interpreted as nationalist demonstrations, and provoking Orange counter-demonstrations. Landlord hegemony over the Protestant, even the Anglican, peasantry was shaken by the Land War, but never decisively broken. [Bew, 1978]

The Liberal Prime Minister Gladstone had seen his role in resisting the Land League as "the deadly fight with social revolution" and introduced a series of land reform measures, as well as acceding to home rule, in order to reduce the danger. [Quoted in Bew, 1978, p. 205] Even the Tory leader, Lord Salisbury, who had earlier described any interference with judicial rents as laying the axe at the root of the fabric of civilised society, came to recognise that there was a real danger of Protestant Ulster going nationalist if concessions were not made to the tenant farmers. The set of concessions which were made, resulting in a policy of state aid to tenants to buy out the landlords, proved sufficient to block this development. [Bew, 1978]

In determining Ulster's overall direction, the Belfast region was the decisive factor. The population of Belfast grew from around twenty thousand in 1800 to over a quarter of a million by the 1880s. Belfast was the only Irish city to experience significant industrial growth in the nineteenth century. Initially its industrial expansion was linked to the cotton industry, but this collapsed in the 1830s, unable to compete with the mechanisation of the Lancashire industry.

After this period industrial growth was focused on linen, later consolidated by shipbuilding. Linen had been slower to mechanise than cotton, and the time gap involved had enabled Belfast, with its lower wages, to compete successfully. Despite these achievements Belfast's industrial base remained fragile. Linen was something of a luxury product, and while it enjoyed a great boom during the American Civil War period, it fell back thereafter. The growth of the shipbuilding industry helped to give greater stability to the economy, but even here a similar situation existed. The Belfast shipbuilding industry was centred on the manufacturing of passenger boats, which provided a more limited potential for growth than freight shipping. [Budge & O'Leary, 1973; Cullen, 1972; Ó Gráda, 1994]

The limited character of industrial growth in Belfast had important social consequences. Most importantly it was unable to provide employment for the surplus population of the Ulster region, let alone for Ireland as a whole. Between 1841 and 1911, the population of Ireland halved; that of Ulster fell by a third. So even though the north-east was able to escape the worst excesses of underdevelopment, it remained shaped by this wider context. One of the effects of these high levels of unemployment and emigration was to establish conditions where communal divisions could be re-created in an urban context. Belfast, like many of the cities of England, Scotland, and North America saw a huge population influx in the Famine years. Not all the refugees from famine were Catholics, but most of them were, and the settled population in Belfast felt threatened by this influx of impoverished refugees. The Anglican labourers from mid Ulster had brought the Orange Order with them to Belfast in the early nineteenth century. From the Famine period onwards, Orangism began to broaden its support, socially and denominationally. Significantly, after the mid-nineteenth century the Catholic proportion of Belfast's population, which had grown from very small numbers in 1800, stabilised and even fell. [Budge & O'Leary, 1973; Cullen, 1972; Ó Gráda, 1994; Patterson, 1980; Rowthorn & Wayne, 1988]

The Belfast middle classes, especially the merchants, had been traditionally liberal in their politics but under the impact of the Land War and the rise of the Home Rule movement they began to shift ground. They worried about the social radicalism evident in the Land War and clearly visible in sectors of the Fenian movement and also the economic implications that might follow moves towards

national independence. The key Ulster industries were reliant on international markets, including imperial ones. However, it seems unlikely that opposition to Home Rule was motivated solely by narrow socio-economic considerations. Populations of prosperous regions tend to see their good fortune as a product of their own special qualities, rather than the result of some objective set of circumstances. The fact that the north-east was the most economically advanced part of Ireland was a product of the industrious character of its inhabitants in contrast to the rest of the population. Increasingly they came to identify with British industrial advance, and with its empire, which was likewise understood as a symbol of their collective character and achievements. Once the Gladstonian Liberals opted for Home Rule as the best hope of preventing social revolution, the Belfast liberal bourgeoisie threw their lot in with their traditional Conservative rivals to establish Unionism. The shift was facilitated by the earlier disestablishment of the Church of Ireland in 1869, which removed the Presbyterians' remaining bone of contention with the Anglican establishment. [Miller, 1978; Patterson, 1980]

David Miller has put forward an influential theory of Ulster Unionism that helps explain its exaggerated – by English, Scottish or Welsh standards – insistence on Britishness and loyalty to the Crown, alongside its threats of rebellion in the event of ‘disloyalty’ by the British Government. Ulster Unionism, although it had many characteristics of nationalism, never conceived of itself as such. For Miller, Ulster Unionism is better understood in terms of a pre-modern sense of contract between rulers and ruled. He sees the roots of Unionism’s ‘contractarian’ beliefs in the practices designated as ‘Ulster custom’, whereby landowners gave preferential treatment to Protestant tenants. This older ideology was re-born, initially in Mid-Ulster, in the late eighteenth century as a response to the stresses of modernisation and proto-industrialisation, before migrating to the Belfast region, where its re-animation encouraged a new system of preferential treatment for working class Protestants, especially in relation to employment. [Miller, 1978]

While this stress on the importance of a sense of continuity with the pre-modern past – or more precisely the early-modern past – is undoubtedly justified, it is only part of the picture. The insistence on imperial identity might be better understood if one considers the historical context of Ulster Unionism’s formation. It emerged not as a movement seeking greater autonomy for Ulster

but as part of a wider current seeking to block Irish nationalism, specifically campaigning against Home Rule for Ireland. It was unlike the Scottish or Welsh sense of nationality in that it was not focused around a *spatially defined* collective identity. In so far as Ulster had a spatial identity it was based on nine counties, not on six. Ulster unionism began to differentiate itself from Irish unionism once it became clear that it could not prevent Home Rule being introduced. It settled for six counties because the demographic balance within a nine county Ulster was too precarious to risk. Ulster Unionists were always intensely conscious of their historical roots as *settlers*, which furthered their identification with the imperial order. Historians have noted that while the Scots had a clearly utilitarian approach to Empire – as a context for social advancement – Ulster Unionists tended to view it as a heritage. [Walker, 1994]

The other problematic aspect of Ulster Unionist British identity flowed from the peculiar multi-national character of British identity, a question made more complex in that Ulster Unionism was itself a merging of two older identities, one Scottish, and predominantly Presbyterian, the other English, and predominantly Anglican. It has been argued that the development of a British identity was primarily the work of Scots rather than English opinion makers or statesmen. While this may well be the case, it is also true that the Scots asserted (or reasserted) a Scottish identity in the modern era. Moreover, the Scots were insistent that theirs was no mere regional identity: Scotland was a nation. This paradoxical situation, of ‘inventing’ Britishness while insisting on Scottish identity, would seem to find its source outside of Scotland, in the deep rooted attachment of the population of England to an English national identity. It was not to ‘freeborn Britons’ that the pamphleteers appealed, but to ‘freeborn Englishmen’. [Colley, 1992; Smout, 1989]

The point about English identity was that it was much older than the British one and it emerged in a period when literacy was beginning to become more widespread in England, roughly speaking in the age of Shakespeare. Indeed it could reasonably be argued that much of Shakespeare’s drama was both an expression of this newly emerging patriotic sentiment, and an active contribution towards it. Moreover, while the state encouraged such patriotism, it did not create it. English nationality emerged more or less spontaneously and did so at a time when English society was becoming increasingly commercialised. In England, a British identity came to be grafted, largely from above, onto the older

one, but never replaced it. While the two terms were often used interchangeably, an important distinction remained: British referred to institutions, English to population. It was this persistent English popular identification that made a Scottish national identity so necessary.

This background ambivalence made British identity both uniquely accessible to Unionists in Ireland and singularly problematic. A British identity could both be shared and permit difference. It had, moreover, its own hierarchy. One of Gladstone's officials commented in a memo during the Land War period: "The active support of Orangemen and Protestants is the ultimate resource of English rule in Ireland, but ought to be kept until every other card has been played". [Quoted in Bew, 1978, p. 214] So while the official national identity of the state was 'British', the deeper collective identities were different and, in the case of English at least, much older. This was certainly one of the reasons why socio-economic tensions and differences could, unlike in France, so easily slip into national conflicts.

### **National Identity and the Transition to Mass Literacy**

Why was the 'cultural anglicisation' of Ireland not accompanied by political assimilation? Ireland's uneven development was clearly a crucial factor. However, the case of Languedoc in France shows uneven development in and of itself does not necessarily lead to the development of national separatism. Religious difference was certainly another factor, but once again it did not drive Scotland out of the Union. More fundamentally, the country in Europe which had been most plagued by religious difference and religious war in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Germany, set these differences aside to establish national unification in the nineteenth century. Class conflict in the countryside certainly played a role, however, this cannot fully explain why national separatism should arise. In the nineteenth century, the landlords in Ireland tended to refer to themselves as 'Irish'; the term 'Anglo-Irish' only came to be widely used in the twentieth century. While the Land League might have condemned 'landlordism' as alien, it did not describe Irish-born landlords as outsiders. The fact that Charles Stuart Parnell, the leader of the Home Rule movement, was himself a landlord, a Protestant, and an Irish patriot, is itself an index of the complexity of national identity in nineteenth century Ireland.

Nonetheless, it seems likely that the class struggle in the countryside would never have been so intense without the presence of nationalism. Which came first: class conflict or national separatism? Even in terms of simple chronology, it is difficult to answer this question. They came together.

A brief summary of the Irish case indicates why the whole issue of nationality has proved such a thorny question for social scientists. All searches for an explanatory essence have proved fruitless. If we examine the Irish case from the point of view of the spread of literacy, a somewhat clearer picture emerges. The rise of national separatism was closely associated with the spread of literacy and with the commercialisation of the economy. The development of a new collective identity would seem to have been a response to the transformations brought about by the disruption of older ways of life, and the altered perceptions of time and space.

It has often been noted that while nationalities are fairly modern phenomena, they tend to envisage themselves as being timeless, or at least as stretching far back into the past. This in itself provides a valuable clue to the nature of nationality. The creation of a new sense of collective identity clearly needs to locate itself in time, and establish a collective narrative that can accomplish this. The educational system attempted to create one such collective narrative, one that saw the incorporation of Ireland into the British Empire not as conquest, but as an emancipation from backwardness. Why did this narrative prove unacceptable to most of the Irish population? A couple of points are worth noting here. Firstly it was an attempted imposition of a collective British identity *from above*. English and Scottish national identities were not superimposed from above, rather they evolved slowly through the interaction of state institutions and society, both from above and below. People *felt* English or Scottish, whereas Britishness has always been associated with state institutions, monarchy and empire. Another difficulty that faced the promoters of a British identity in Ireland was that the collective narrative they proposed was at variance with the mainstream of 'social memory'.

Some historians speak of 'social memory', referring to a type of collective memory that is found primarily in oral societies, but can also be found in literate ones. [Fentress, 1992] Among North American Blacks, for example, there is a 'social memory' of slavery, part of which might be based on direct memories

handed down through the generations, and part might be based on what people have read or heard, but which together gives them a sense of a collective past, and a basis for evaluating 'official' histories. In the case of Ireland in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, there is a huge amount of, admittedly impressionistic, evidence to suggest that a social memory of the conquest was widespread. Given the scale of death and destruction involved – historians have estimated that around a third of the population lost their lives in the Cromwellian era alone – it would be surprising if an oral memory of the period had not survived. Social memories, like individual ones, can be selective, but they are more likely to be preserved if they retain a social relevance. Historical events leave their impact not only on memory but also on social organisation. In the case of Ireland, the specific patterns of agrarian relations and the persistence of communalism were both legacies of conquest. Because the conquest of Ireland was itself uneven, oral-based memories would no doubt have been likewise. What mass literacy did was to encourage the articulation of a collective past, in which the incorporation of Ireland into the British state system appeared in a rather different light to the official version.

Identities necessarily involve distinctions, the creation of boundaries. In the case of modern national identities, it is not only communities which are imagined, but these communities are felt to be spatially bounded. The development of mass literacy assisted this process by giving people a greater sense of 'abroad', the 'outside' world. The uneven development of capitalism encouraged this, as people came to identify their way of life with a particular territory. By the same token, the emergence of collective identities based upon a sense of exclusion, can come to be associated with the exclusion of a particular space from developments elsewhere. A sense of Irish national identity seems to have emerged in large measure as a product of a sense of exclusion. The character of this exclusion varied greatly, and so did the sense of national identity. National identity meant different things to different people. The process whereby the excluded came to identify themselves with a place seems to have been closely linked to the process whereby the place itself became a source of exclusion. Both spatial and temporal elements are involved in the creation of national identities, with one re-enforcing the other.

## **Literacy and Rebellion: Summary and Implications**

Unlike in England, Scotland and Wales, the spread of mass literacy in Ireland was accompanied by agrarian revolt, political defiance and the emergence of a movement for national independence. While these developments cannot be attributed to the spread of literacy – they had their roots in the chronic underdevelopment of the Irish economy and in a perception of political exclusion and national difference – the literisation of Irish society impacted on the forms that these protest movements took. As the populace became more literate, so popular movements became better organised and more ambitious in their projects. Local networks upholding tradition gave way to national organisations challenging the agrarian social order and seeking political independence.

Inspired by the French Revolution, a major radicalisation occurred in Ireland in the 1790s culminating in the 1798 rebellion. The fact that the 1798 rebellion was essentially confined to the country's east coast, which had fairly high rates of literacy, and had very little impact in western regions, where the Irish language predominated and literacy levels were low, would suggest that written forms of agitation, and thus literacy, played an important role in radicalising the population.

Mass literacy emerged in Ireland in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It was driven primarily by socio-economic factors linked to the rise of a money economy. The push for acquiring literacy came from below, and until the third or fourth decade of the nineteenth century the demand for learning was largely met by “unofficial” hedge schools. Prior to the 1830s neither the state nor the various Churches played a central role in establishing a system of mass education. The development of a state-funded-and-controlled system of education – the National Schools – was in direct response to elite fears that the growing system of popular education would encourage sedition within the populace.



The introduction of state schools was accompanied by linguistic anglicisation. However, while the new state-controlled educational system was successful in spreading the English language – which was perceived as the language of power and especially after the Famine experience as the language of survival – it did not succeed in winning the political allegiance of the population. While the language in which the message was delivered was adopted, the message itself did not get through: the incorporation of Ireland into the British political order was not perceived as advantageous and beneficial. The “official message” was at odds with social memory and collective experience.

However, the introduction of a state controlled education system contributed to the advance of literacy, which was accompanied by political radicalisation. While popular oppositional movements had preceded the emergence of mass literacy, these had tended to be localised and defensive in character. The spread of mass literacy, however, brought with it new forms of communications. Radical newspapers, books and pamphlets were widely circulated and unlike the “official message”, the “revolutionary message” struck a cord with broad sections of the population, because it reflected their experience and corresponded with their social memory.

The evidence from Ireland in the late eighteenth and nineteenth century would seem to challenge those theories that see the emergence of mass literacy as functioning primarily to reproduce the existing social order, literisation as the handmaid of socialisation. In fact in Ireland the primary effect of the emergence of mass literacy was an emancipatory one, despite the best efforts of the state to use the schooling system to inculcate a conformist culture. It does not follow from this case that the coming of mass literacy is always associated with a current of emancipation, but that such a potential certainly exists.

## **Writing and Historical Change: Implications of the Irish Case**

### **Introduction**

Previous chapters have looked at the interaction between literacy and social structures in a variety of contexts in Ireland and Britain. This chapter will try to draw together these findings and consider their implications for the more general question of the relationship between literacy and historical change. The chapter is divided into three parts. The first section will summarise the findings of the earlier chapters. The second section will consider how these fit into the wider Literacy Studies debate on the relationship between literacy and historical change. The third section will suggest a theoretical approach which should help clarify the role played by literacy in long-term historical development.

### **[1] Summary of Findings**

Chapter Three looked at literacy practices in Gaelic Ireland. While Gaelic literacy was much older than English or French literacy, Gaelic Ireland did not experience the same type of development in the Middle Ages as England or France. This was not because of its isolation from these developments; in fact Gaelic Ireland was in close touch with other parts of the Latin Christian world, especially England.

In the late medieval period, Gaelic literacy did not 'expand' beyond the bounds of the traditional literate caste or its traditional concerns. It borrowed from other literary genres and translated literary and medical works from other languages but it did not adopt the 'pragmatic' literacy practiced in Anglo-French Ireland, a set of literate practices that appear to have been crucial for the socio-political formation of Europe. Literate practices in Gaelic Ireland were focused on maintaining its cultural and social traditions. This tradition upheld a set of values

that was seen as providing coherence to the Gaelic world. Given the weakness of central power in Gaelic Ireland, the normative power of the learned tradition was considered essential for maintaining the social order and preventing a descent into chaos.

The same social context that gave significance to the Gaelic learned tradition acted as an obstacle to the development of feudal-style 'pragmatic' literacy. The Gaelic chiefs were unable to develop a literate-based administrative or a written legal system because they did not possess full control over 'their' territories, at least not of the sort exercised by feudal lords. The weakness of Gaelic rulers flowed from their very limited ability to control space: herders could depart from the *tuath* with their wealth (cattle). For the Gaelic chiefs to pronounce against such flight carried little weight, because they lacked the power to enforce it. The difficulties that Gaelic chiefs had in controlling the population of their own territories in turn militated against the formation of any central power controlling Gaelic Ireland.

Chapter Four examined the role of literacy in Anglo-French Ireland where a system of pragmatic literacy was introduced modelled on that of England. Anglo-French literacy was focused on control of territory. The chief lords or kings issued charters of land to their followers, which in turn provided the basis for tribute/revenue or military support or both. They needed people to work the land of course, but once an agricultural system was in place, the lords had the upper hand because if peasants left their plots of land, they could not easily bring the crops with them. This pattern of power at the micro level of society established the contours within which a concentration of power at a higher and wider level could develop. Selling on the agricultural surplus became an important form of revenue, and this encouraged the growth of towns, which developed their own commercial practices of literacy.

If control of territory was the starting point for this pattern of pragmatic literacy, the control of time was also important. Land inheritance issues were a major source of disorder, and of potential aggrandisement, in feudal societies. The feudal monarchies, encouraged by the Church, sought to contain this disorder by imposing clear sets of rules regarding marriage and land inheritance, which in turn gradually promoted notions of landownership. Keeping records of these transactions and insuring that the law was implemented became vital for the

power of these monarchies. While individual lords might object to particular rulings, they all recognised that some centralisation of power was necessary as an alternative to chaos. And so the centralisation of power and the spread of 'pragmatic' literacy went hand in hand.

The early literate practices of Anglo-French Ireland were very similar to those of England. Latin was the major language of literacy, followed by French. While English was widely spoken in thirteenth century Ireland, it was rarely written. By the time English came to be used as the official written language of government, it was hardly spoken at all in Ireland outside of the towns, and even there it seems that the poorer inhabitants were Irish-speaking. This linguistic transformation was a product of the fourteenth century crisis that saw the English colony decimated. Faced with increased seigniorial exactions, and structural collapse, most of the English-speaking population of the countryside either fled Ireland or became gaelicised. The English-speaking towns also witnessed major demographic decline. The position of the indigenous population was strengthened in the wake of the fourteenth century crisis, but because they were excluded from royal law, they had no need to acquire knowledge of pragmatic literacy; they operated instead within practices of customary law. So at the very time that a vernacular literacy began to spread in England, English itself was little spoken in Ireland, and literacy remained highly restrictive.

Chapter Five examined the role of literacy in the failure of the Reformation project in Ireland. It noted that the low levels of literacy limited the potential indigenous support base for religious reform. The fact that the Reformation was promoted through the English language, spoken by very few people in any part of Ireland, did little to advance its cause. In practice, the religious changes sponsored by the Tudors in Ireland were part of a much wider programme of social and political engineering. At the core of this programme was the introduction of a set of literate practices, above all, the ascendancy of English written law. While this reform project achieved a degree of initial success, English law was at such variance with Gaelic custom and law that its imposition resulted in widespread social disruption and growing opposition. Antipathy to the English government's secular policies encouraged opposition to the religious reforms. Latin remained the 'bridge' language between the literate groups in both Gaelic and Anglo-French regions, and facilitated the Counter-Reformation response. In Gaelic Ireland, the two key traditional literate groups, the poets and

the friars, helped unify the opposition to religious and political changes. Increasingly over the course of the sixteenth century, the English state resorted to coercive measures to maintain control. Intensified coercion in turn alienated the population of the towns, which had been traditionally loyal to the English crown. Unable to secure peaceful incorporation, the English state resorted to full-scale military conquest.

The focus of Chapter Six was the diffusion of literacy across England, Scotland and Wales, and the role of different languages within that process. A clear contrast was identified between patterns of literacy in regions where a clannic-pastoralist order was dominant and those regions where a seigniorial-manorial system prevailed. In the former, patterns of pragmatic literacy were barely present in the 'high' medieval era, while in the latter regions these practices were widespread and continued to expand over the era. This contrast seemed to flow from the relative ease in using written forms to control the social surplus in the manorial regions compared to the pastoralist economies. The more limited role played by kinship in the seigniorial regions ensured also that there was less resistance to the introduction of individual landownership, with its concomitant centrality of written record. Where pragmatic literacy did spread, it enabled new forms of political and social power to emerge. In the later Middle Ages, these practices of literacy *deepened* coming to regulate more and more areas of social life. Written records enabled landownership to be separated from personal relations of power, transforming the relationship between the monarchy and the elite, in effect bringing into being a new form of elite: a class of landowners. As writing came to be more widely used to organise social relations, literacy extended downwards.

A system of social power premised upon pragmatic literacy existed in all four countries in the 'high' Middle Ages but only in England was it uncontested. In Scotland, Wales and Ireland, divergent social orders co-existed, but did so in very different combinations. In Scotland, the two orders were formally unified within a single polity though in actuality they remained quite distinct. These differences were amplified by the tendency of Lowland Scotland to develop along similar lines to England. In Wales, though the English monarchy exercised military and political hegemony, it relied upon the intermediary role of a section of the old Welsh elite to secure its power. This layer, and the territory they dominated, was gradually absorbed into the English power system adopting

pragmatic literacy in the process. The contrast between these three countries became more striking in the later Middle Ages. In Ireland, despite the initial spread of pragmatic literacy from the twelfth century, the social order based upon it largely collapsed in the fourteenth century. The hitherto marginalised Gaelic order re-emerged strongly, without absorbing pragmatic literacy, while even in the areas nominally loyal to the English monarchy, forms of pragmatic literacy were *thinned*.

In neither England nor Lowland Scotland did the language of the elite come to be spoken by the wider population. Instead it was the elite who adopted the popular vernacular. This process was closely linked with the more widespread use of writing. It clearly reflected the elite's need to communicate their rules and regulations from above, and to secure popular consent from below, for the effective functioning of the social order.

While the earlier diffusion of literacy in England was driven by the need to regulate relations between the monarchical elite and the landed elite, by the later Middle Ages it was increasingly important for regulating relations between the elite and – at least the upper stratum of – the peasantry. Once access to land was governed by the written word, then access to the written word became vital to obtain any level of prosperity. It seems clear that this earlier spread of a vernacular literacy in both England and Lowland Scotland contributed to the positive reception accorded to the Reformation which in turn encouraged larger numbers of people to learn to read.

Chapter Seven explored the relationship between the diffusion of literacy and the rise of capitalism, comparing Ireland to Scotland. Scotland had acquired a significantly higher level of popular literacy as a result of the successful Reformation there. Two key differences between Ireland and Scotland were noted: the development of agrarian capitalism and involvement in colonial trade. The combination of these features in Scotland, and their very limited presence in Ireland, goes a long way to explain why Scotland industrialised in the late eighteenth and nineteenth century and Ireland, for the most part, experienced chronic underdevelopment. It was argued that while there was no clear *causal* connection between the spread of mass literacy and the rise of industrial capitalism there were nonetheless significant associations between the two. In particular, the widespread use of written leases in Scotland in the seventeenth

and eighteenth centuries would appear to have contributed to the rise of capitalist social relations in the countryside. While the landowners in both countries sought to emulate the English model, only the Scots succeeded and they did so because of the earlier process of social differentiation within the Scottish peasantry. Literacy was related to this differentiation within the peasantry in a number of ways. Written leases consolidated the position of the more prosperous farmers at the expense of the poorer peasantry who were dependent upon oral-based customary practice. The spread of literacy and the shift to written leases also helped to create a greater degree of understanding, if not to say a class alliance, between these farmers and the landowners.

Chapter Eight examined the political and ideological consequences of the rise of mass literacy in Ireland. The chapter sought to explain the paradox of Ireland's cultural and linguistic incorporation into the British social formation coinciding with the rise of a mass movement for national independence. In terms of the wider Literacy Studies debate the chapter was concerned with examining whether the rise of popular literacy was associated with cognitive changes in the popular mentality and also whether the development of a modern literacy-through-schooling approach should be seen as an effective form of socialisation. The chapter showed that the provision of popular education was a highly contentious issue, especially in the first decades of the nineteenth century. The government created the first state-organised primary school system in the islands in order to establish a firm hegemony over the popular classes, who were in the process of acquiring literacy more or less autonomously. It also showed that despite the success of the state-controlled schooling system in advancing linguistic homogeneity, it failed to win the political allegiance of the newly literate population.

The difficulties involved in assessing the mentality of (predominantly) oral communities were discussed; it was argued that by examining the activities and the demands raised by popular movements one could assess the broad changes in mentality that occurred in the transition from an oral society to a literate one. In Ireland a clear shift is evident in this transitional period. Resistance movements in (predominantly) oral communities tended to be localised, defensive and concerned with upholding traditions. The rise of mass literacy was associated with the development of more organised, more pro-active and more political movements.

The chapter questioned the conventional interpretation that identifies religious difference as the source of the drive for independence. The key to an explanation, it was argued, lay in the contrast between Ireland's economic and cultural development. Economically, nineteenth century Ireland displayed what would become the classic features of underdevelopment: rural over-population and urban stagnation and regression, setting the scene for widespread social and political discontent and intense class struggle in the countryside. This occurred alongside the spread of market relations and rising levels of literacy. The erosion of customary relations and the inrush of a stronger sense of the outside world entailed the emergence of a more abstract sense of identity, personal and collective. In and of itself, the development of a sense of national identity need not have led to a mass movement for independence (as the Scottish case demonstrates). However, the huge socio-economic gap between the two islands, the scale of discontent in Ireland, and the degree of social peace prevalent in Britain in the second half of the nineteenth century, made this outcome more likely.

## **[2] Implications for the Literacy Studies Debate**

The evidence from the Gaelic medieval world demonstrates that it is quite possible to have a flourishing literate culture for an extended period without it showing any tendency to 'develop'. This was not because Gaelic society was closed to the outside world but because, as the 'New Literacy' theorists argue, literacy was clearly embedded in a specific social structure. Not only did this extended tradition of literacy not encourage any scientific or rationalist modes of thought, it did nothing to promote commerce, urban dwelling or political centralisation. From this evidence, to accord literacy the central role in the development of civilisation seems unwarranted. While both Goody and Ong recognise that the persistence of systems of 'restricted literacy' has been common enough throughout history, neither writer explains why literacy should remain so restricted in some contexts and play such a dynamic role in others.



The emergence of pragmatic literacy, especially from the twelfth century onwards, is perhaps more problematic for the Literacy Studies debate. Michael Clanchy's *From Memory to Written Record* is seminal here because it explores in-depth the process whereby the use of writing began to spread in England from the Norman-French conquest to the beginning of the fourteenth century. It is interesting to note that both Street and Goody have sought to enlist Clanchy to support their own paradigm. For Street, Clanchy's close study of how literate practices functioned, and how they were often resisted, provides clear evidence that Clanchy belongs to the 'ecological' school of researchers. For Goody, by contrast, Clanchy's study of how literacy came to be used more widely, and in the process began to shape social relations, is testimony to the critical role that literacy has played in promoting historical change. [Goody, 1986; Street, 1984]

While Michael Clanchy's *From Memory to Written Record* explored the spread of writing from 1066 to 1307, the Irish evidence throws some interesting light on pragmatic literacy from the fourteenth century onwards. Whereas in England a new pattern of literacy practices began to emerge around this time, this did not happen in Ireland; more specifically it did not happen in Anglo-French Ireland, which had acquired a similar system of government to England. In both (Anglo-French) Ireland and England the manorial economy declined and the institution of serfdom became virtually extinct. Yet in England a new agrarian order emerged based upon the spread of literate forms (especially written law), whereas in Ireland a social order founded upon systems of oral-based customary law prevailed. In the case of late-fourteenth century England, literacy practices were not simply embedded in particular structures; they also came to shape these structures.

A number of conclusions can be drawn from this. One is that the literate forms only come to underpin the wider social order in specific social contexts: they have no automatic tendency to do so. The corollary also holds: under certain circumstances written systems do indeed acquire a considerable level of autonomy within a society, shaping the structure of social relations.

The power of specific literacy practices was particularly evident in sixteenth century Ireland where the English state sought to impose a system of English written law across the country. This was shown to have a huge impact upon Irish society, but not quite in the way that its architects intended. Instead of

transforming the social order, it severely disrupted it, producing island-wide chaos. Why the imposition of written law should have a transformative effect in one context, and a disruptive one in another is not a question which the 'autonomous' theorists of literacy have sought to answer.

A similar problem was encountered in exploring the progress of the Reformation. The Reformation very clearly involved a radical expansion in the use of literacy. In the case of Ireland, the Reformation could not break through the language barrier, the fact that the great bulk of the population spoke a different language from that used by the Reformed faith. The success of the Reformation in Wales was shown to be closely linked to the use of the Welsh language by the reformers there. Even in the Scottish Highlands, Gaelic was used by the reformers in the key transitional period. The rise of mass literacy then cannot be separated from the rise of vernacular literacy: the questions of language and literacy are intimately linked, but these links are never really explored by the theorists of the 'autonomous' model.

In their original discussion of ancient Greek literacy, Goody and Watt gave pride of place to the alphabet as the generating force forging a logico-empirical mode of thought. [Goody & Watt, 1968] Yet they appear to have missed some crucial implications of alphabetic literacy. Precisely by linking writing to the *sound* of words the alphabetic system came up against the barrier of the diversity of spoken languages. The great advantage of a Chinese-style writing system is that it has a considerable degree of autonomy from the spoken language. [Chinese Languages, 2008] The newly centralised state organisations emerging in the later Middle Ages were much more spatially confined. Slightly different dialects could be easily enough assimilated to the standard language, but where more comprehensive linguistic differences existed, it was a very different matter. The great benefit of the inclusiveness that flowed from adopting the vernacular languages turned into its opposite: a radical exclusion. The importance of the language in which writing occurs supports the New Literacy Studies argument that it is not sufficient to focus on literacy in general: it is necessary to think in terms of *literacies*.

The concept of literacy practices advanced by the same 'New Literacy' theorists, in drawing attention to the social uses of literacy, is shown here to be a very useful one, not only in relation to Ireland, but also in relation to England,

Scotland and Wales. However, as literacy begins to expand beyond the realm of elite or specialised groups, a number of explanatory difficulties arise for the 'New Literacy' theorists. What causes literacy to spread beyond these earlier very confined circles and can literacy acquire a dynamic role in *transforming* social structures? The difficulty that faces the 'New Literacy Studies' theorists closely parallels that of the 'autonomous' theorists: the former deny the transformative possibilities of literacy, the latter fail to specify the conditions within which literacy can have a transformative impact.

The evidence from across northern Europe shows that the Reformation certainly played a crucial role in encouraging greater numbers of people to read and (to a lesser extent) to write. However, this change needs to be seen in context. The Reformation itself would never have occurred (or more to the point, would never have gained so much influence) without the earlier existence of a considerable level of popular literacy, and closely linked to it, the development of printing. Prior to the development of printing, 'heretical' movements were easily enough suppressed by Rome. Indeed, some have argued that the very notion of heresy in the medieval era resulted in the main from the Vatican's attempt to create a stable religious orthodoxy. Literacy continued to spread across those swathes of eastern and southern Europe where the Reformation's progress was blocked. [Eisenstein, 1983; Febvre & Martin, 1976; Houston, 1988; MacCulloch, 2003; Moore, 1998]

The evidence from the Atlantic Isles suggests that the primary force driving the spread of literacy came from elsewhere. It came from the use of writing to structure social relations. While this began with the efforts of the monarchy to regulate its relations with the aristocracy, it gradually spread downwards until it came to regulate social relations between the elite and the peasantry. Alongside this 'vertical' diffusion of literate forms came the 'horizontal' diffusion through commerce. Both had the effect of making social relations more impersonal.

Discussion on the relationship between literacy and the rise of capitalism has often focused on assumptions about a direct relationship between industrialisation and high levels of popular literacy. This thesis has been more concerned with the role played by the spread of literacy in the *genesis* of capitalism, in particular its role in encouraging agrarian capitalism, which – it was argued – greatly encouraged capitalist industrialisation.

Capitalist development in Scotland and England in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries might appear to support the case argued by Graff and Street that the expansion of mass literacy is best viewed as the creation of a system of socialisation. However, the impact of literacy in the seventeenth century, especially in England, suggests a more complex picture. Without going into the details of the Civil War/Revolution in seventeenth century England, it seems likely enough that the diffusion of literacy encouraged political and religious dissent, and helped empower the 'middling' sections of English society. The evidence from nineteenth century Ireland certainly challenges the 'socialisation-through-literacy' thesis. Despite the best efforts of the state to inculcate social obedience through the educational system, in practice the population became more rebellious – and more dangerous to the rulers – as they became more literate.

In all four countries it was shown that the transition from a system of social relations regulated by oral custom to one regulated by written law was of decisive social importance. More than that: the manner in which this transition occurred had huge long-term significance for the countries concerned. These new literate practices were not merely embedded in social structures: they were actively involved in transforming them. This point alone should be sufficient to emphasise that there are some very important elements worth preserving in the arguments put forward by Jack Goody and others in what has been called the 'autonomous' school.

Does literacy have cognitive implications and can one usefully speak of an 'oral mentality' or a 'literate mentality'? The evidence advanced here cannot answer these questions, one way or another. What it does suggest is that the acquisition of literacy can be associated with a transformation of *mentalité* (understood to mean 'cultural mindset'). This was seen in the changing attitudes of the Irish popular movements from the eighteenth to the nineteenth century. It is not being argued that there exists some distinctive oral mentality or an equally distinctive literate mentality. It was argued rather that the acquisition of literacy was only one element involved in bringing about this changed way of thinking. The concept of 'literate mentality' has been deliberately avoided not only because it

is singular, but also because it suggests that cognitive perceptions occur in some sort of social vacuum. What is being argued here is that changes in people's social perceptions are closely related to changing social structures of power.

The findings here suggest that while literacy practices are always circumscribed by the social structures within which they operate, they can also have a reciprocal influence on these social structures. The final section of this chapter will attempt to outline a framework which can make sense of this 'double' character of literacy – as both shaped and shaper – and also attempt to specify the social contexts within which literacy can acquire a dynamic role in relation to the rest of society.

### **[3] Literacy, Social Structures and Historical Development**

This 'double' character of literacy practices – at once shaped by social structures and shaping them – goes to the heart of writing itself. Writing permits the transmission of messages beyond the boundaries of immediate space and time. It is this essential quality which enables literacy to be not only situated within specific social structures but also to be capable of having a transformative effect upon these same social structures. Because of writing's ability to transcend the boundaries of immediate space and time, literacy became a potentially significant source of social power, disadvantaging those restricted to communicating in real time and space. These qualities of writing and literacy had important consequences for their historical role.

That literacy can be a source of social power is clear enough from the examples discussed in the Atlantic Isles. It need not, however, as the Irish evidence demonstrates, be the major source of power. In much of medieval Europe the nobility were illiterate, as were many kings and princes. The crucial importance of literacy was its role in establishing continuities of culture and power. Nowhere is this more evident than with Christianity and its written traditions.

## Communications, Time and Space

The point of unity between all parts of the Atlantic Isles – and most of the European continent too – was the Latin language. It was not merely the language of the western Church, it was the original language of literacy in the region. It represented a crucial means of contact, despite all the fragmentation and discord that characterised the medieval era. Voltaire famously described the Holy Roman Empire as being neither holy, Roman nor an empire. The self-assumed title does though capture the imaginary world of medieval Europe, and it points to the crucial unifying elements of the feudal order: the Latin language and the Roman Church. Latin was not merely the language of religion and power, it was the glue holding feudal Europe together. Such was the multiplicity of (mostly unwritten) dialects and languages that communication would have been virtually impossible without a common language. Without Latin, there was no Europe.

Medieval Latin, however, had peculiar features. As Walter Ong points out, after 800 AD or so it was always a 'learnt' language, nowhere was Latin a mother tongue. It was also an almost entirely male language. The Latin language enabled the Christian Church to establish the boundaries of Europe, controlling time and space. Unlike the classical sense of time, which was cyclical, Christian time was linear, beginning with the creation of the world as outlined in Genesis, and ending with the Last Judgement. Its linear character encouraged measurement; the panic occasioned by the first millennium indicates how widespread was this sense of time. Shorter lengths of time were also measured by a Christian calendar. The year was divided up by liturgical seasons, and marked off by saints' days. This gave the emerging Europe a sense of a shared past, giving meaning to the present and attempting to give it a sense of order.

It has been argued that it was the presence of a broad popular literacy within the Roman Empire that enabled Christianity to emerge as the dominant religion across the Mediterranean in the first place. [Mann, 1986] The Church was the only institution to survive the collapse of the western Empire, and the Latin language became an essential tool for communicating across Europe. In a fragmented polity, where there was no national sovereignty, and where kings were only leading lords, the Papacy came to play the role of a 'supreme court' for medieval Europe. This role was further enhanced by the renewal of Roman imperial law with its emphasis on the concentration of power, private property and inheritance law. The Papacy's more secular functions as continent-wide

arbitrators of power were given legitimacy by its sacred standing as direct inheritors of the legacy of Christ. [Berman, 1983; Southern, 1970] The Latin language established the boundaries of their world, and gave it both a spatial and a cultural identity. Outside was enemy territory. The one exception was the Greek Christian world, focused on Byzantium, which occupied an anomalous position for the Latin west, situated at once inside and outside its boundaries.

The Christian sense of time and space was not the only one in medieval Europe, but it was always the dominant one. Local identities and local mythologies co-existed with the Christian ones, as local languages co-existed with Latin, and their subordination came precisely from their localised character. More often than not, this dichotomy between the local and the Latin overlapped with the oral/literate dichotomy, indeed the word *illiteratus* in medieval times meant someone who could not read or write Latin.

With the increased use of 'pragmatic' literacy across western Europe from the eleventh century onwards, literacy did not simply frame time and space, but more and more sought greater control of them. The intrusions of this system of power upon the lives of greater number of people encouraged the spread of literacy beyond the confines of the scribal stratum. There were though significant limits to this process. The fact that Latin was nowhere a mother tongue made the acquisition of 'full' literacy that much more difficult, and costly. It also hugely limited the potential *audience* for literate culture. And so in the very period when a Latin-based pragmatic literacy was becoming more widely used, and increasingly important, a vernacular literate culture, originating in France, also began to emerge across Europe. The early works of this vernacular culture, like *Le Chanson de Roland*, are anonymous, but by the fourteenth century vernacular authors like Dante or Boccaccio had become famous individuals. [Auerbach, 1965, 1968]

The fourteenth century saw the beginnings of the use of the vernacular for legal, administrative and political purposes. The need for people to understand the law was the reason given in England for the introduction of English as the language of court cases. A similar pattern is evident across much of western Europe with the written vernacular becoming the official language of state by the fifteenth century, though Latin continued to be used for various official purposes long afterwards. One of the consequences of this linguistic re-orientation was to ensure that a number of standard written languages – English, French, Castilian,

etc. – came to be established across much of the continent. This use of vernacular writing would seem to have been a key element in the re-organisation of social power across western Europe. The institution of serfdom was collapsing, with local lords unable to control their peasant populations. A more centralised system of power based upon writing and an explicit set of rules was necessary to maintain some kind of order. Governmental use of the vernacular was in large measure an indication of the increased role of urban centres – for both administrative and commercial purposes – in the changing social order. Royal power depended heavily upon its ability to tax commercial ventures and this in turn had the effect of diffusing social power beyond the realms of the nobility, and changing its character. In both England and Scotland, the monarchies abandoned aristocratic French to adopt the language of the burgers. A state-centred vernacular literacy helped create a new relationship between rulers and ruled, one in which the rulers had to take much more account of the behaviour and attitudes of those over whom they ruled.

The outcome of the fourteenth century feudal crisis has been taken by a number of historians as representing a crucial turning point in European history, with the region west of the Elbe abandoning serfdom, and the eastern region reconstituting it. [P. Anderson, 1974a, 1974b; Brenner, 1985, 1996] Perry Anderson has argued that the crucial difference between them was the greater weight of the towns in the west, which encouraged peasant freedom, and blocked any return to serfdom. It is certainly the case that the restructured social order in the west became more focused on its urban centres. From this perspective it is worth noting that just as the newly centralised states of the west came to adopt the vernacular languages for most official purposes, those of the east clung on to Latin. Poland retained Latin until the eighteenth century. It was widely used in the Habsburg Empire, with Hungary and Croatia continuing to use Latin for official purposes into the nineteenth century. [Waquet, 2001]

The way in which literacy was used in Ireland significantly impacted upon the development of social structures. In Gaelic Ireland, literacy was used to maintain a cultural continuity over time. In both medieval England and in Anglo-French Ireland, literacy was used primarily to control space, and to maintain this control over time. In neither medieval Ireland nor England was literacy widely used within production.



In England, literate forms were used to regulate property relations within the elite and the distribution of the social surplus: only later did they come to be used to regulate relations between the elite and the wider population. In fourteenth and fifteenth century England, in response to the collapse of serfdom, the central state used literate forms to gain control over wider areas of social life. It was able to do so because it could draw on a wide network of localised power-holders who benefited from this restructured system of social power. Through this process the local network could transform itself from being a warrior aristocracy into being a landowning class. Writing became a way of organising power. It is not so much that writing constituted power in and of itself; rather it became a means through which power operated, a technology of power.

The contrast with fourteenth century Anglo-French Ireland, and, later in the sixteenth century, with Ireland as whole, is striking. In both cases the central state lacked the coercive power to implement this social re-organisation, and the localised networks of power were unable or unwilling to do so. Ireland did not really fit either eastern or western pattern. Unlike the eastern zone, serfdom had petered out and could not be reconstructed. Unlike the western zone, the elimination of serfdom was not the product of an alliance between towns and peasantry, but reflected rather the strength of the Gaelic social order, which had persisted on the country's margins until the fourteenth century crisis, when it acquired a new lease of life. While fifteenth century Ireland did see a new trading relationship between towns and countryside, this was not the product of an alliance between a commercialised peasantry and the burgers of the towns. On the contrary, the towns and the countryside, with very few exceptions, came to be sharply divided by language; while the urban poor might have been increasingly Irish speaking, the towns' burgers and guilds were solidly English-speaking. In this context a new cultural configuration, with the towns leading the countryside through the means of vernacular literacy, was unlikely to develop.

It has been pointed out by a number of scholars that the Reformation could not have happened if a new system of communications, printing, had not already emerged in the cities of Europe, and if literacy had not already escaped the bounds of the clergy. The Reformation involved the thorough re-ordering of time and space in Christian Europe. It brought an end to a unified Latin Christendom. This did not simply mean that Europe was now divided between Protestant and Catholic zones. More fundamentally, by transferring religious practice into the vernacular, the Reformation helped establish and consolidate national languages and led to the genesis of national cultures. [B. Anderson, 1983]

In Germany, and across most of northern Europe, a vernacular literacy, driven by the possibility of direct access to the Word of God, came to be widely diffused. The vernacular Bible led to the intensification of religiosity in Europe, by making the Holy Word accessible to the literate layperson. Yet this very accessibility could create its own problems. Closer acquaintance with the Bible was inclined to increase the sense of distance between Biblical time and contemporary time. Walter Benjamin wrote about the loss of 'aura' that comes with the mechanical reproduction of works of art. The same holds true for books. There is no longer the sense of an intimate connection with the original texts written down by the Apostles all those years ago, and painstakingly and reverently copied by one monk after another. The sense of magic was always likely to be lessened by the spread of literacy. Even in Lowland Scotland, commentators in the eighteenth century noticed that among the prosperous farmers, the Bible no longer held the pride of place it once possessed, but had become one book among many. [Devine, 2000]

The Latin language no longer defined the space of collective identity. This was already beginning to change with the adoption of vernacular writing by many states, but it was pushed much further by the Reformation. The Papacy could no longer act as the 'supreme court' of Christendom. Initially it was only the Protestant states which assumed this autonomy, but the Catholic monarchies soon followed, choosing their own bishops, and establishing supremacy within their own territories. The Papacy was in no position to bring any secular ruler to heel, and was forced to accept that its temporal power, at least outside of Italy, was a phenomenon of the past. This shift transformed the perception of social power. The newly centralising states became the final arbitrators of law. Power came to legitimate itself. The post-Reformation monarchs would all claim to be divine appointees, but the unified system was broken, and it was apparent to all that secular power was in the ascendant. Divine legitimation for secular power was irreparably damaged. Even the theoretical apologists for absolutism inadvertently acknowledged as much by attempting to find secular justifications for such power. Just as power could no longer be legitimated by a sense of continuity with the past, neither could thought. Among the more advanced sectors of European thought, the search began to comprehend the world without recourse to the authority of the past. [Blumenberg, 1985; MacCulloch, 2003]

## Writing and Money

While some social theorists, most notably Max Weber, have emphasised the importance of Reformation theology in encouraging the formation of the capitalist order, they have neglected what is arguably the much more significant role of the spread of mass literacy in the genesis of capitalism, and modernity more generally. While the Reformation – and the Counter-Reformation in its train – undoubtedly promoted popular literacy, even after the religious zeal of the sixteenth and early seventeenth century abated, high levels of literacy remained. The evidence gathered here suggested that these (relatively) high levels contributed to the rise of capitalism in a number of important ways. The point is not that high levels of literacy caused the formation of capitalism. Nor is it simply that reasonably high levels of literacy were indispensable for capitalism. The argument is that there appears to be an organic relationship between capitalism and the diffusion of written communication.

There is abundant evidence from history of the existence of a rough correlation between periods of commercial expansion and the spread of literacy, though the evidence from late-medieval England showed that one was not simply a function of the other. A critical moment in the diffusion of literacy occurred in the century after the Black Death when commercial life declined in absolute terms, but the upper stratum of the peasantry became more literate, and the social relationship between them and the landlords began to be governed by written contracts. It was precisely these written contracts which played such a formative role in the rise of agrarian capitalism.

One approach to understanding capitalism is to see it as a social order where relations of power between people are mediated through *symbolic objects*, in particular money and writing. Money, like writing, transforms the human experience of physical context. Money makes possible the separation of sales and purchases in time and space, just as writing enables the communication of messages beyond the bounds of immediate time and space. In Marx's words "individuals are now ruled by abstractions whereas earlier they depended on one another". [Quoted in Harvey, 1989, p. 167] Marx had money in mind here, but the same point could be made for writing; the two came closely wrapped together.

The focus of most discussion on capitalist social organisation tends to be on money. The contention here is that writing is every bit as crucial to it. This becomes more obvious when it is considered in terms of *social reproduction*. The money economy operates within a framework governed by writing. So even though writing was not much used within production in the first phase of industrial capitalism, once the division of labour deepened and capitalist production became more complex, and questions of distribution more crucial, it was inescapable that literacy would become central to this new social order, and indispensable to anyone living in its shadow. Precisely because capitalism involves endless accumulation, it must not only constantly re-organise relations of time and space, but also establish writing-based structures to deal with the disruptions brought about by the workings of the market economy.

Writing and money have a number of common characteristics. The spread of money undermined the traditional basis for class, with lineage becoming less important than bank balance. The spread of writing undermined the rulers' – and especially the Church's – monopoly of knowledge. Both tended to undermine customary relationships. Both also shared some similar limitations. While money may usefully be regarded as a universal equivalent, currencies – though not precious metals – are specific, more or less, to particular territories. Writing, at least most forms of it, is encased in languages, which are likewise spatially located. There are of course crucial differences between money and writing. Messages or ideas are not merely consumed; they can also be questioned, discussed, modified or rejected.

In practice the processes of literisation and monetisation were closely linked, and together they encouraged the development of new ways of thinking. The erosion of customary practices and values led to a break in continuity with the past. The older sense of space was undermined too. Conceptions of space were no longer dominated by the places where people would normally travel to, and know people from, over the course of their lives. Not only did people read about far away places, but more and more people ended up travelling very long distances. Goods too increasingly came from afar, and locally produced goods were sent far away. Time and space were turned upside down. New collective identities emerged around this more abstract sense of time and space, which were in turn linked to the emergence of a new sense of personal identity, a new sense of self. The clearest example of this was the rise of modern national identity.

## **Literacy, Socialisation and Nationality**

For the German Romantic writers like Herder and Wilhelm von Humboldt, language was the very essence of nationality. [Cassirer, 1953] Yet the Irish experience defied their theories, with nationalist sentiment becoming more assertive as the Irish language waned. The Irish case also raises serious problems for those theories which perceive education as essentially a process of socialisation, a means whereby the younger generation is inculcated into the values of the existing social order and trained to fit into specific roles within that order. There seems little doubt that this was precisely how the rulers of nineteenth century Britain and Ireland perceived the issue. However, this was not quite how matters turned out in Ireland. The more the Irish came to speak English, the more they became literate; and the more they were immersed in the values of Victorian Britain, the more troublesome they became.

Why did the socialisation process not work in Ireland? Elementary education in the Victorian era was focused on the acquisition of literacy and numeracy, as it still is today. This is a testimony to the crucial role that writing and money play in modern societies. However, acquiring literacy and numeracy does not in itself involve absorbing the values of the social order. The Victorian authorities were conscious of this shortfall and hoped to redress it both by the imposition of classroom discipline – which would provide an invaluable training for later life – and by having textbooks that promoted the values appropriate for the lower orders. However, pious homilies extolling the virtues of obedience and prudence are unlikely to have much impact if they are at variance with the wider popular culture. Far from the acquisition of literacy encouraging obedience, in the case of Ireland it appears to have promoted rebellion.

The evidence from Ireland supports elements of some of the more influential theories of nationality while also pointing to some inadequacies in these theories. It suggests that the diffusion of literacy played a key role in the development of a sense of national identity, though not quite in the way proposed by either Ernest Gellner or Benedict Anderson. One of the difficulties the Irish case raises for Gellner's theory of nationality and cultural homogenisation has been outlined. The Irish national independence movement arose in consequence of cultural assimilation. It emerged in the English-speaking east of the country, and only spread to the west once English came to be more

widely used in that region. There is another problem with Gellner's theory that has a more general application. Nationalism emerged in Ireland, as it did in Eastern Europe, *before* these societies directly experienced industrialisation. Gellner gets around this problem by saying that he uses the term 'industrialisation' in a broader sense than other social scientists, but this lack of precision deflects him from examining more closely the features that either preceded industrial capitalism or were the results of industrialisation occurring *elsewhere*. [Gellner, 1996]

While the Irish experience confirms much of Benedict Anderson's narrative, some aspects of the Irish case though are at variance with his historical typology, and some features discussed here may have wider application. Newspapers were certainly vital to the development of popular nationalism, but it was not so much that newspapers *in general* encouraged a sense of nationality, rather that specific highly politicised papers – the *Northern Star*, *The Nation*, *The Irish People*, *The United Irishman*, *The Irish World* – mobilised public opinion against the union and against the empire. The cultural fragility of Irish nationality may have been compensated for by its political vigour. The Irish case also gives greater weight to class struggle, especially in the countryside, than either Gellner or Anderson envisaged.

Anderson's point about the centrality of newspapers in this process is that their very structure encouraged the development of a new sense of time. The importance of a new sense of time and (closely linked to it) a new sense of place, is certainly supported by the research here; however, the source of this disruption of a sense of time and place is largely located elsewhere. The evidence assembled here shows that there was more involved than the rise of 'print capitalism', though that was a crucial part of the process. The wider process is the transition from a social order based upon relations of personal dependence to one where social relations are mediated through symbolic objects: money and writing. This transition involved the erosion of older senses of time and place, based upon direct personal encounters, where the known consisted of what had been seen and heard. In these older worlds the past and the present were at one, there was no sense of the new being qualitatively different from what had gone before. What ought to be done was what had always been done. The disruption of these traditional communities by the generalised use of writing and money to regulate human relations created a need for a new sense of

community, one that had to be imagined. Anderson's focus is on transformations of elite culture in the formation of national identities. While recognising the power of his argument, what is being suggested here is that this needs to be complemented by a perspective on what was happening below: the literisation of the broader population, and the transformation of popular consciousness that flowed from this.

### **Literacy as a Dynamic Force**

The evidence from the Atlantic Isles suggests an explanation for the more general question as to why literacy appears to play a conservative role in some societies and a transformative role in others. The wider the spread of literacy across a society the more it effected changes to that society. Two distinct – though not unrelated – elements seem to have taken primacy in this spread of literacy.

The first element was the introduction of written forms – by the state or other powerful institutions – to secure greater control over space and time, and to organise social relations. The use of literate forms to regulate ownership of, and access to, land was of particular importance in societies where agriculture was the dominant form of production. This in turn created a dynamic which made literacy more and more important for daily life. For such a situation to have developed, the state first of all had to possess sufficient power to ensure that its writ ran across its claimed territory. The examples from the Atlantic Isles demonstrate, however, that coercion alone was not sufficient to ensure that social relations would be regulated by written law. Of crucial importance was the existence of a network of power-holders who could act as intermediaries between the central state and the wider population. Such a stratum existed in England, Wales, and to a considerable degree in Scotland, but not in Ireland.

The second element was the process of monetisation. Literacy spread alongside the increased usage of money in daily life. While the evidence – especially from late-medieval England – shows that the spread of literacy was never simply a function of monetisation, a more general association between these two historical processes seems clear enough. This chapter has argued that literisation and monetisation were structurally linked in that they both involved a re-organisation of time and space.

The commercialisation of society and the state-led restructuring of social relations both entailed disruptions to earlier patterns of social organisation and ways of life. Neither emerged spontaneously but were rather driven by social forces expecting to benefit from these changes. The diffusion of literacy within societies was more often than not associated with social conflict. Literacy practices often played an important role in these conflicts; while the development of mass literacy facilitated the emergence of new forms of social power, it also permitted these forms of power to be challenged in new ways.

A balanced interpretation of the role of literacy in history must attempt to simultaneously view literacy practices in specific social contexts, and assess how these practices can transform the social contexts they find themselves in. This thesis has attempted to demonstrate that the shift from an oral culture to a literate one is central to understanding the shaping of the modern world. This is not to suggest that there is a single transition, that it is everywhere the same, or that it is in any way an even process. On the contrary, everywhere it is different. It is precisely by understanding how and why this transition was so different in the four countries of the Atlantic Isles that enables us to make sense of their formation.

The experience of the Atlantic Isles in all its diversity remains relevant to educational questions in many parts of the 'developing' world today. The archipelago experience has shown that the way in which literate practices are introduced into a society can have an enormous impact on later developments, and while these can be constructive, they can also be disastrous. It shows that the relationship between language and literacy is of crucial importance for educational programmes. It also shows that conceptions of literacy education that focus solely on its socialising role are one-sided. For people who have to deal with the modern social order, being literate is essential to empowerment. The Great Famine of the 1840s showed the Irish poor that ignoring the modern social order is not a viable approach. The same is true for poor people across the 'developing' world today, and becoming literate is an essential pre-requisite for enabling them to deal with the organisation of power in the modern world.



## Conclusion

The evidence from Ireland in the transition from the medieval to the modern era, and the comparison with its neighbours, suggest that both the 'ecological' and the 'autonomous' schools have made valuable contributions to the understanding of the relationship between literacy and historical change, but both approaches leave aspects unexplored.

This study found that many of the key concepts developed by the 'New Literacy' theorists – the concept of literacy practices, the notion of 'literacies' as plural, the emphasis on the language of literacy and the insistence on seeing literacy practices as shaped by their social contexts – are valuable for making sense of literacy in different historical contexts. The evidence from Ireland also confirmed that the presence of literacy in a society does not spontaneously encourage social development or produce structural changes in social organisation.

However, this study also showed that, in certain circumstances, literacy practices have played a crucial role in shaping social structures and encouraging development. It showed that the transition from a system of social relations regulated by oral custom to one regulated by written law was of decisive social importance for long-term historical development. This is not to say that there was a single transition, but that the particular ways in which such transitions occurred have been of crucial importance to the formation of modern societies.

It was argued that the key to understanding the historical role of literacy lies in the essential social character of writing: its capacity to transmit messages beyond the confines of immediate time and space. Starting with this point, important consequences followed. The spread of literacy disadvantaged those who could only communicate in real space and time. Because literacy permitted the development of a continuity of culture and power across time and space, it came to frame the ways in which space and time were structured.

Literacy became widely diffused when it was used to secure greater control over space and across time. In order to cope with more intrusive networks of power, greater numbers of people considered it necessary to become literate. This spread of literate forms across a society in turn transformed the character of social power, making it – and social relations in general – more abstract and impersonal. The processes of literisation and monetisation – while distinct – have often been closely associated because they share important characteristics: just as writing enables the communication of messages beyond the bounds of immediate time and space, so money makes possible the separation of sales and purchases in time and space.

Because writing – or at least alphabetical writing – is premised upon specific languages, the language being used by powerful institutions was of great importance. The adoption of vernacular literacies both ‘democratised’ literacy and paradoxically made it more exclusive because of the spatial specificity of spoken languages.

The rise of mass literacy played a crucial role in the transformation of people’s conceptions of space and time, which in turn encouraged the emergence of new forms of collective identity. Finally it was shown that mass literacy need not simply be a mechanism for socialisation, but can also be an agent for emancipation.

These features of literacy and the literisation process help explain how literacy can be at once embedded and transformative, and they can also help identify the general circumstances in which writing becomes a dynamic element within a society.

## Glossary

- Aisling:** Gaelic allegorical poems in post-conquest Ireland. Ireland (or Gaelic society) is usually represented as a woman awaiting a saviour.
- Aosdana:** Gaelic term for learned strata, including poets, lawyers etc.
- Bailie:** Scottish Gaelic term for townlands, similar in Ireland.
- Betagh:** Term used in Anglo-French areas for serfs.
- Brehon:** Anglicised term for Gaelic lawyer/judge.
- Clan:** Gaelic term for larger family-linked groups, theoretically lineage based.
- Clan na Gael:** American Fenian organisation.
- Cyfarwydyd:** Welsh cultural heritage, equivalent to Gaelic *seanchas*.
- Duthchas:** The notion that being part of the clan network involved a set of responsibilities and duties, and that the clan leadership had a duty of care for clan members in periods of distress.
- Eraic:** Gaelic term used for payment of compensation in lieu of punishment for crime.
- Érennaigh:** Late medieval Gaelic term for people born in Ireland, that included both those of Gaelic and Anglo-French extraction.
- Feu farming:** Commercial usage of land in late medieval Scotland.
- File (s) Filí (p):** Irish for poet/poets. Used also to refer to the literate caste as a whole.
- Fíne:** Medieval Gaelic term used for 'inner' lineage group, later replaced by *slíocht*.
- Foirm na n-Urruidheadh:** Scottish Gaelic translation of the *Book of Common Order*.
- Gaedhil:** Late medieval Gaelic for indigenous Irish.
- Gaidhealtachd:** Scottish Gaelic speaking region(s).

- Gaill:** Gaelic term originally used for foreigners in general, but by the late Middle Ages, came to be used exclusively for the Anglo-French (or Anglo-Gaelic).
- Gallo glaigh:** ‘Mercenaries’ from Gaelic Scotland. Anglicised as ‘gallowglass’.
- Kerne:** Gaelic ‘mercenaries’ originally used by Anglo-French lords and later by Gaelic chiefs.
- Leabhar Gallda:** Book of Invasions.
- Plaid:** Welsh for armed retinue.
- Pride:** Welsh legal practice of collective inheritance.
- Sasanaigh:** Gaelic term used in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries to designate the English government and recent English settlers, as distinct from earlier settlers.
- Sasine:** Legal instrument for transferring land in Scotland.
- Seanchas:** The Gaelic cultural tradition.
- Sept:** English term used for Gaelic clans.
- Sliocht:** Late medieval Gaelic term for ‘inner’ lineage group, similar to *fine*. The *sliocht* was the ‘inner’ family grouping, part of the wider *clan* network.
- Tacksman:** Tenants of the chief who not only collected rent from sub-tenants, but also acted as political over-seers of their areas.
- Táiniste:** Gaelic term for second-in-command to chief. The anglicised term ‘tanistry’ derived from this and was used to designate the political structure of Gaelic clans.
- Tuath:** Basic political unit of territory in Gaelic Ireland, roughly corresponding to the later English baronies.
- Villein:** Term used in medieval England for serfs.

## Historical Time Line

- 5<sup>th</sup> century:** Christianity arrives in Ireland.
- 6<sup>th</sup> - 7<sup>th</sup> centuries:** Flowering of monastic literate culture in Ireland.
- 11<sup>th</sup> century:** Norman-French knights conquer England and most of Wales.
- 1169:** Anglo-French knights arrive in Ireland.
- 12<sup>th</sup> - 13<sup>th</sup> centuries:** Spread of Anglo-French power in Ireland.
- 14<sup>th</sup> century:** General crisis of European feudalism.
- 1366:** Statutes of Kilkenny prohibit use of Gaelic language and customs by settler community.
- 1541-3:** Irish Parliament recognises Henry VIII as head of Church and introduces 'surrender and re-grant' programme.
- 1590s:** Revolt by Ulster Gaelic clan leaders turns into island-wide 'Nine Years War'.
- 1603:** Defeat of Gaelic rebellion; Death of Elizabeth I; England and Scotland united under Stuart monarchy.
- 1640s - 1650s:** Revolt in Ireland; Civil War in England and Scotland; Cromwellian conquest of Ireland.
- 1695:** Introduction of Penal Laws against Catholics.
- 1760s - 1770s:** Industrial Revolution in England; growing commercialisation of agriculture in Ireland and Scotland.
- 1778:** Catholic Relief Acts allow property and inheritance rights.
- 1791:** United Irish movement formed.
- 1798:** United Irish rebellion suppressed.
- 1845-9:** Great Famine in Ireland.
- 1850s:** Irish Republican Brotherhood (Fenians) formed.
- 1879:** Land League formed in alliance with Home Rule movement.
- 1880s:** Land War.

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