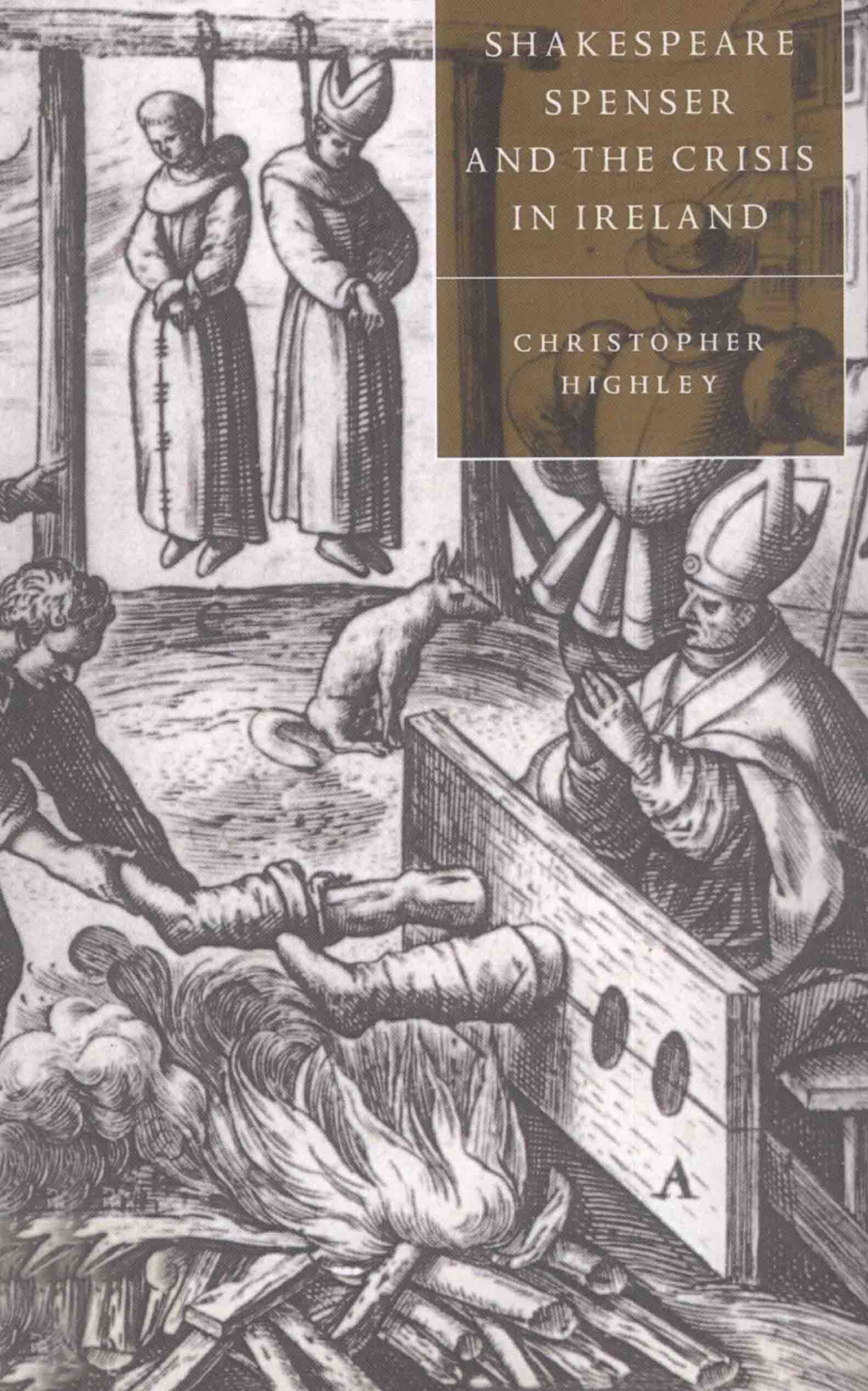


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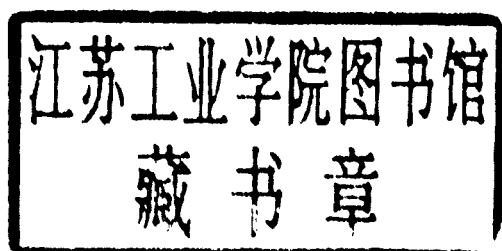
CHRISTOPHER
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Shakespeare, Spenser, and the crisis in Ireland

Christopher Highley

The Ohio State University



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For Susie

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Introduction: Elizabeth's other isle

In the reign of James I, Sir Thomas Wilson, the Keeper of the Records at Whitehall, claimed to have discovered in the State Paper Office, "more ado with Ireland than all the world beside."¹ The massive archive of Irish materials was initially built up in the 1580s and 1590s when English efforts to reform, settle, and reconquer Ireland necessitated an increasing volume of correspondence between the court and the Irish administration. Yet this official collection of letters, manuscript tracts, surveys, and maps – large as it is – constitutes only a fraction of the Elizabethan discourse about Ireland, where intractable conflicts provoked debate in "literary" works, including epic poems, public plays and court masques, as well as in more ephemeral material like ballads, proverbs, jokes, and graffiti. The following study does not attempt a comprehensive survey of these multiple voices but focuses mainly upon the canonical figures of Spenser and Shakespeare, examining how their works both shaped and were in turn shaped by the larger English discourse about Ireland. Writing from, respectively, within and without Ireland, and from distinct cultural and institutional locations, Spenser and Shakespeare take up the vexed issue of English interference in Ireland, elaborating imaginary solutions to what the English continue to think of as the Irish "problem." Because my study is about English representations of Ireland, I inevitably explore English perspectives that see the war as an Irish "crisis" caused by Irish "rebels." English "perception" itself, though, is a large part of the "problem," part of the legerdemain of imperialist enterprises. We must always be aware that within their own culture, the Irish who resisted English domination were not "rebels" but freedom-fighters or "men in Action."² My own descriptive use of English epithets, far from endorsing their Anglocentric assumptions, seeks to understand the prejudices behind them.

The texts I examine belong to a roughly twenty-year period from 1580 to 1603, a period that spans the rebellions of the Earl of Desmond in the south and the Earl of Tyrone in the north of Ireland. Tyrone's rebellion, spreading eventually into a nation-wide war against English rule, finally

elevated Elizabeth's "other isle" to new and urgent prominence in the minds of her government and subjects alike. During the 1580s English foreign and military policy was mainly oriented toward the Low Countries and France, as the Spanish-led Catholic League threatened to extend Philip II's hegemony throughout Europe. But by the early 1590s the escalating crisis to the west diverted ever more attention and resources away from the continental conflict to Ireland.³ At the end of the Nine Years War in Ireland, the Privy Council blamed England's involvement there rather than in Europe for virtually bankrupting the nation.⁴ Elizabeth's troubles in Ireland, moreover, intensified at a time when the site of Anglo-Spanish conflict was shifting from land to sea; while England turned increasingly to sea-borne raids against the Spanish main and Spanish shipping, Spain – now recovered from the defeat of its armada in 1588 – turned again to a strategy of maritime invasion. The renewed Spanish designs on Elizabeth's territory now aimed as much at Ireland as at England.⁵

The fin-de-siècle political and military crisis in Ireland overlay a long-standing and deep-seated English preoccupation with their oldest "colony." Ireland assumed a crucial symbolic place in the formation of emergent English notions of nationhood, empire, and cultural self-understanding – a place that has been inadequately addressed in recent accounts of the ligatures between national self-fashioning and colonial expansion in early modern Britain.⁶ Transcending specific political exigencies, Ireland's importance in the English imagination illustrates the anthropological insight "that what is *socially* peripheral is so frequently *symbolically* central."⁷

But if Ireland's centrality to imaginative formations of Englishness in the sixteenth century was assured, Ireland's constitutional and strategic position within the English/British polity was less certain. The crucial political Act was Henry VIII's declaration of 1541 that he was no longer lord but king of Ireland. Claiming dominion over his new kingdom, Henry denied the counter-claims of popes and Irish high-kings while at the same time initiating efforts to extend English law, land tenure, and custom throughout the whole island, and to transform all the inhabitants into his loyal subjects.⁸ Far from clarifying Ireland's geopolitical status, Henry's bid at reform and incorporation only added to a sense of ambiguity and conceptual indeterminacy. As Karl S. Bottigheimer argues, Ireland had become both a kingdom in its own right – a discrete administrative entity with claims to autonomy – and a colony of England – the site of outside interference, exploitation, and domination.⁹ If Ireland were a colony, how would it be classified: as the vestige of an

ancient British empire, as the edge of a new westward-looking empire, or as the would-be northern outpost of an expanding Spanish empire?

Ireland's geopolitical identity could prove confusing but it was also essential in defining and authorizing English self-perceptions.¹⁰ Thus, accounts of Ireland's violence-torn and decentralized polity – a land of “more than 60 countries, called regions . . . where reigneth more than 60 chief captains, whereof some calleth themselves kings” – highlighted the imagined internal unification of England under a single sovereign power.¹¹ Henry VIII's willingness to acknowledge all the inhabitants of Ireland as his liege subjects with the same rights as his English ones, did not, however, prevent the construction of the “meer” or “wild” Irish in strongly pejorative terms. Negative images of the Gaelic inhabitants of Ireland as idle, libidinous, violent, and godless – in short, as uncivilized “barbarians” – begin in late Medieval works by writers like Gerald of Wales.¹² These perceptions of the Irish varied in intensity until the sixteenth century when, as part of the expansion of English rule and the attempted transformation of the indigenous culture, such prejudices were articulated with renewed vigor. In the Medieval period, the Irish (whatever their diverse regional or dynastic affiliations) were viewed by outsiders (and often viewed themselves) as a single *gens* or people, just as the English, Welsh, Scottish, or Normans were perceived as *gentes* or “communities of common descent . . . identifiable by origin, blood, descent and character.”¹³ But in the Renaissance's emergent discourses of race and ethnicity, the inhabitants of Ireland were reconceptualized as “a race apart.” As a genealogically integrated group, occupying a bounded space, and displaying common linguistic and cultural traits, the Irish were not only constructed as different from but also as socially inferior to the English.¹⁴

Stereotypical and derogatory images of the Irish were certainly the products of “the ignorant prejudice of metropolitan Englishmen,” but they were also fabricated in Ireland from within the Old English colonial community.¹⁵ “Old English” was the sixteenth-century appellation for the descendants of the Anglo-Norman families who had conquered and settled Ireland in the twelfth century.¹⁶ As the representatives of the English crown and the guardians of English law, institutions, and “civility,” “the English born in Ireland” – as they called themselves throughout the Medieval period – had continuously and vigorously asserted their English identity and their superiority to the “meer” Irish.¹⁷ But assimilation into the native culture through intermarriage and fostering so mixed the groups that, by the mid-sixteenth century, many Old English families had virtually merged with their Gaelic neighbors.¹⁸ On the other hand, the Old English who resisted Gaelicization (a group

mainly confined to the “civil” Pale and port towns) molded a communal identity that felt closely linked to England but that was also inflected by its roots in Ireland. Partly motivating this process of collective self-fashioning was the effort to retain the confidence of the crown – a confidence essential to Old English maintenance of their historic position as Ireland’s governing elite.¹⁹

The supremacy of the Old English was challenged by newcomers from England – the cadre of administrators, churchmen, soldiers, planters, and settlers – who arrived in increasing numbers during the sixteenth century and who became known collectively as the “New English.”²⁰ Disillusioned with traditional attempts at reform and embracing a more radical vision of social transformation, many of the newcomers saw the Old English as the major impediment to the crown’s goals in Ireland; beginning in the 1570s with the appointment of militant Protestant governors, the New English increasingly excluded the Old English from positions of influence – treatment that could be justified on the grounds of the Catholic sympathies of many in the Pale community.

As a New English émigré, Edmund Spenser was personally invested both in discrediting the Old English and in shaping perceptions of Ireland’s various ethnic groups and alignments. As I shall argue, his work insists upon the complexities and interconnections, slippery and palpably constructed, of the collective identities of the Gaelic Irish, and the Old, and New, English. In delineating Spenser’s own project of cultural self-fashioning in Ireland, I envisage him as more detached from and critical of the dominant power structures in Elizabethan society than is usually acknowledged. Recent attempts to revise Spenser’s reputation as “Elizabeth’s arse-kissing poet” – while helpful in demystifying the cult of the “prince of poets” – do not adequately relate the countercurrents in Spenser’s work to his complex material and cultural circumstances in Ireland.²¹ In paying renewed attention to the Irish underpinnings of the conflicted and sometimes oppositional modality of Spenser’s social and political analysis, I adopt “a model of Elizabethan culture that recognizes the room for artistic maneuver between the two extremes of total affirmation of royal mythology and all-out, open subversion.”²²

Chapter 1 argues that Spenser’s experiences in Ireland – a place seen as a wild backwater by sixteenth-century observers and modern critics alike – represents less an exile from the centers of power, than an opportunity for a man of modest beginnings to fashion more flexibly his social and cultural identity. Spenser negotiates the handicap of distance by cultivating substitute networks of patronage in Ireland from English centers of influence and by fabricating in his poetry alternative Irish courts that place him at the center of his own structures of power. In the other

chapter devoted to Spenser (5), I develop the notion that Ireland gave him a critical distance upon England and especially upon the queen's contested role in Irish affairs. As a reaction to the deepening crisis of the 1590s, Spenser's agenda increasingly conflicts with the queen's, as he comes to imagine Ireland as a female-free zone, the site of a New English homosocial community.

II

Whereas the two installments of *The Faerie Queene* (1590, 1595) and other poems by Spenser (his prose dialogue on Ireland was not published until 1633) offered English audiences a diffuse and often cryptic perspective on Ireland, there was little else published in the crisis decade of the 1590s that directly confronted the Irish "problem." Yet these were years when public interest in Ireland was at its height and when *manuscript* descriptions, plans, and other materials about the colony were produced in abundance. Public discussion about Ireland was, if not officially prohibited, extremely sensitive; the subject of Ireland represented a marginal, "grey," area included under the rubric of "matters of later yeeres that concern the State," and an area which writers in the public domain approached with extreme caution.²³ The simultaneous paucity of printed materials dealing openly with Ireland in the 1590s, as well as the dearth of evidence that works were ever censored or suppressed, suggest a situation in which writers and authorities observed a tacit code that broadly determined which subjects required more tactful and indirect means of communication.²⁴ The one major treatise about Ireland published in the 1590s, Richard Beacon's *Solon his Follie, or A Politique Discourse, Touching the Reformation of common-weales conquered, declined or corrupted* (1594), may well have owed its appearance in print to its non-provocative (and non-specific) title, and to the fact that it was printed at Oxford where the writ of the London Stationers and the ecclesiastical licensing authorities did not run.

I would suggest that a growing fascination with England's troubles in Ireland was satisfied less by printed materials than by the public stage. As recent New Historicist work has shown, the Elizabethan theater, as an institution of indeterminate ideological complexion, was continually negotiating its role and power with the authorities of court, church, and city. Enjoying a peculiar license within the cultural world of early modern London, the stage had greater latitude than the printing press, in part because dramatic performance was more difficult to police than the printed word.²⁵ Although new playscripts were supposedly scrutinized by

the Master of the Revels, such oversight could not restrict subsequent public performances to what had originally been licensed. The "fixed" texts of Renaissance plays constructed by modern scholarship provide little sense of the "open," adaptable nature of the script in performance.

Shakespeare critic Peter Thomson sums up received opinion when he expresses his surprise, "that no one wrote about the Irish troubles for the English stage – for so long has Ireland been a blind spot for English playwrights."²⁶ The blindness, though, is less the dramatists' than many critics'. In fact, as J. O. Bartley observes, Irish characters appeared in masques for Edward VI; in 1553 William Baldwin's (lost) *Irishhe Playe of the State of Ireland* entertained the court; in 1577 the Earl of Warwick's men staged a court performance of the *Irish Knight* (also lost); at the Rose amphitheater in the 1590s, playgoers could see a daringly uncamouflaged rendering of Shane O'Neill's rebellion and death.²⁷ In discussing Ireland explicitly, the anonymous *Captain Thomas Stukeley*, as I argue in chapter 4, was an anomaly among Elizabethan plays; most plays deployed strategies that disguised their engagement with Ireland. My understanding of these enabling strategies, or "strategies of indirection" as Annabel Patterson calls them, owes much to recently reinvigorated approaches to topical meaning in Renaissance drama and, especially, to Leah Marcus's version of "local reading."²⁸ For Marcus, "local reading" does not involve recreating the idiosyncratic perspective of particular Renaissance spectators or readers, but of registering the unstable and changing range of topical meanings that theatrical performances and dramatic texts could suggest. Renaissance drama speaks about and to its historical moment in elusive, equivocal, and highly mediated ways. Because public discussion had to be elliptical, Renaissance discourse turns into "combat," an elaborate game of engagement and "cover-up."

When describing, let alone challenging, the controversial subject of English involvement in Ireland, Shakespeare and other writers both in and out of the theater worked out strategies of temporal displacement and spatial transcoding.²⁹ The slide in signification which allowed other "dark corners" of the British Isles to refer to Ireland was made possible by the fact that the English discourse about Ireland was part of a broader discursive ensemble about the nation's boundaries and borderlands. In the public imagination, Ireland, Scotland, and Wales were inextricably intertwined and could even be constructed as a single territorial and economic zone, with a common linguistic and cultural heritage. Stereotypes and prejudices about the Irish had a certain cross-cultural currency making them readily transferrable to the Welsh and Scots. In chapters 3 and 4 I argue that England's nearer western neighbor, its history, people, and landscape, provided writers with a screen for obliquely registering

and imaginatively negotiating the current crisis in Ireland. Writers turned to present-day Wales as an ideal submissive colony, an image of their hopes for Ireland, and therefore they also looked to England's past subjugation of Wales as a precedent for the re-conquest of Ireland. Scotland too could be imaginatively aligned with Ireland and Wales; but Scotland, having emerged as an independent kingdom within the British Isles, represented in political terms a different case from Wales and was thus not as useful to English observers in thinking about Ireland. With the transformation in 1603 of the Scot, James VI, into the British James I, and with the prospect of union between the two kingdoms, writers and public alike became as preoccupied with Scotland as they had earlier been with Ireland. Xenophobic English Protestants had long raised misgivings about a Stuart succession, but the collective attention of the nation was not turned decisively northwards until the death of Elizabeth and the accession of James – events that coincided with the nominal end of the Irish crisis and that are therefore beyond the scope of this study.³⁰

My attention to the British dimension of Anglo-Irish relations counteracts a tendency among critics to invoke English activities in the New World as the primary explanatory context for the English presence in Ireland. Drawing upon a few contemporary comparisons, critics have been quick to liken Irishmen to Indians and to assimilate English discourse on Ireland to an over-totalized and speciously unified "discourse of colonialism" that functioned mainly in the domain of America.³¹ As Meredith Anne Skura argues, such approaches are anachronistic in their assumptions about the formation and evolution of "colonialist discourse." Even at the time of *The Tempest* in 1611–12, England had barely established its first overseas colonies; earlier attempts at "western planting" like Raleigh's Roanoke enterprise in the 1580s had failed. Moreover, in the early seventeenth century, "colonialist discourse" was neither uniform nor coherent, but a diverse array of images and texts, including eclectic collections of travel narratives and exotic wonders.³² In the 1580s and 1590s, British adventurers like Humphrey Gilbert and intellectuals like John Dee dreamed of recreating the ancient British Empire of a legendary Arthurian past, but in reality only Spain could boast of huge and wealthy overseas dominions.³³ In practical terms, the English were restricted to disrupting and exploiting Spain's imperial ambitions by plundering Spanish treasure ships or, as Richard Hakluyt proposed, by arming Spain's Indian enemies and thus "troubl[ing] the kinge of Spaine more in those partes [Nova hispania], then he hath or can trouble us in Ireland."³⁴

Given the embryonic and uncertain nature of England's aspirations in the New World between 1580 and 1602, public conversation about

Ireland took its bearings predominantly from the history of English expansionism and conquest within not without the British Isles. Yet, while I explore the English "problem" with Ireland in terms of a dynamic of "internal colonialism," I do not claim that the centrifugal momentum carrying English domination from the nation's core to its semi-periphery, or the accompanying consolidation of state power, were in any way linear or uncontested processes. On the contrary, I see the period in question as one of intense English anxiety about the security of the nation as well as the loyalties of supposedly friendly neighbors in Wales and Scotland.³⁵

III

The attention given to the work of Shakespeare in this study is not meant to suggest that he achieved a privileged or transcendent perspective on Irish affairs; indeed, my discussion of George Peele's *Edward I* in chapter 3, and my examination of plays by other dramatists throughout, demonstrate how Shakespeare's interest in Ireland was not unique. Present-day cultural politics demand that Shakespeare be foregrounded in a study that raises still-crucial issues of national myth-making, Othering, and the arts of resistance. In spite of calls for a decentering of Shakespeare that would allow us to extend the canon of early modern writing, Shakespeare's works continue to be a highly charged locus in current struggles over the meaning of the past, the relation of cultural production to structures of authority, and the role of culture in the formation of personal and collective identities. Nevertheless, the "Bard" (a moniker that, ironically, appropriates Celtic resonances for an artist who has become a veritable icon of Englishness) merits a central place in this study because of the remarkably sustained and provocative tenor of his analysis of Anglo-Irish affairs, an analysis that spans nearly a decade and provides a bridge between his first and second cycles of English histories.

The Shakespeare plays that I study – *2 Henry VI*, *1 Henry IV*, and *Henry V* – continually illustrate one of my guiding themes: that discourse about Ireland in the late sixteenth century was not only far from monolithic or ideologically coherent, but also unpredictably challenging. Even texts lacking the dialogic and interrogative impulses of Shakespeare's plays – texts that are usually seen as constructing Ireland in official or normative ways – can be made to disclose ideological faultlines and moments of dissidence. I approach all texts not as stable and unified inscriptions of ideology but as sites of possible conflict between various and competing meanings and agendas. Accordingly, part of my project is

to push back "the limits of what was 'thinkable'" during the later sixteenth century about the "problems" of Ireland and English expansionism.³⁶ My position is thus opposed to a dominant "common sense" belief about early modern English perceptions of Ireland and its peoples. As Philip Edwards writes, "Elizabethan intellectuals" showed an "inability to contemplate, even as a thesis to be disproved, that the Irish might have a case for resistance, an inability, even as a dialectical exercise, to put themselves in the Irishman's position and look at the conflict from his point of view."³⁷ Edwards's homogeneous category of "Elizabethan intellectuals," in eliding the range of geographic, institutional, and ideological positions from which Shakespeare, Spenser, Peele, Raleigh, and others spoke, flattens out the multiplicity of discourse on Ireland. I contend that among the available perspectives on Ireland were indeed angles that could foster, however tentatively, an imaginative empathy with the Irish victims of English power, and that could also destabilize prejudicial constructions of Ireland and its "wild" inhabitants.

IV

The veiled dispute about Ireland that engaged Spenser, Shakespeare, and their contemporaries, had its formative stage during the twelfth-century Anglo-Norman conquest of Ireland. The most detailed and influential account of that conquest is the *Expugnatio Hibernica* by Gerald of Wales, who, as the blood-relation of some of the major settler families, visited Ireland four times.³⁸ The *Expugnatio*, which dates from around 1189, was widely available during Medieval times in Latin manuscript copies, but did not appear in a complete English translation until 1587, when it was published as part of the expanded second edition of Holinshed's *Chronicles*.³⁹

The *Expugnatio* serves this study as a foundational text in the sixteenth-century discourse about Ireland; according to the Old English writer Geoffrey Keating, Gerald was "the bull of the herd for" all later writers of "the false history of Ireland."⁴⁰ But the *Expugnatio* is also crucial because, along with the other texts that comprised Holinshed's *Irish Chronicle*, it offered Spenser, Shakespeare, and their contemporaries an unrivaled aperture onto Ireland, its history, peoples, and present condition. Moreover, the 1587 edition of Holinshed's Irish volume is a singular textual intersection of the conflicting perspectives of late Elizabethan representations of Ireland. Annabel Patterson's claim that Holinshed's *Chronicles* as a whole is no "tool of hegemony" but a deeply provocative work, grounded upon principles of multivocality and

inclusiveness, is especially true of the section on Ireland.⁴¹ In addition to John Hooker's translation of the *Expugnatio*, the Irish section also includes: Richard Stanihurst's "A Plaine and Perfect Description of Ireland"; Stanihurst's history of the country from its mythical origins to the death of Henry VIII; and Hooker's own continuation of this history (the "Supplie of this Irish Chronicle") up to the deputyship of Sir John Perrot in 1584.

In the early seventeenth century, the militant New English author, Barnabe Rich, clearly had Holinshed's compilation in mind when he invoked the names of Gerald and Stanihurst to complain that Ireland was "in nothing more unfortunate than in this: that the history of the country was never undertaken to be truly set forth but by papists."⁴² Stanihurst, a member of an influential Catholic family of the Pale, had in fact fled Ireland before the second edition of the *Chronicles* appeared. His "Description," moreover, was based largely upon the manuscripts and published history of his mentor, the Jesuit Edmund Campion, who – as Rich also observes – suffered a traitor's death at Tyburn in 1582.⁴³ In terms of their religious and cultural backgrounds, Gerald, Stanihurst, and Campion were strange textual bedfellows for the staunchly Protestant Hooker, who, in addition to writing Protestant propaganda, had served in Ireland as an outspoken member of parliament.⁴⁴

Holinshed's compilation of these diverse voices must have made it difficult for readers to envision Ireland as a unified and homogeneous entity. Stanihurst's "Description," which revolves around the integrity and loyalty to the crown of the Old English community, showcases Ireland as a land of abundant resources and natural wonders with a rich intellectual heritage. Although Stanihurst omits Gaelic learning from praise and censures the "meere Irish" as a "rude people," he ultimately sees the Gaelic population as redeemable through education and religious reform: "they lacke universities," he argues, "they want instructors, they are destitute of teachers, they are without preachers." To expect civility in a people lacking these sources of enlightenment is the same as expecting "a créeple that lacketh both his legs to run, or one to pipe or whistle a galiard that wanteth his upper lip."⁴⁵

John Hooker's contributions to Holinshed's Irish volume form an often jarring counter-vision to Stanihurst's. Hooker struggles in his "Supplie" with the very possibility of writing a history of Ireland according to humanist principles. The edifying function of humanist historiography seems drastically at odds with the spectacle of "actions of bloud, murther, and lothsome outrages; which to anie good reader are greevous and irkesome to be read and considered, much more for anie man to pen and set downe in writing."⁴⁶ Faced with this contradiction,