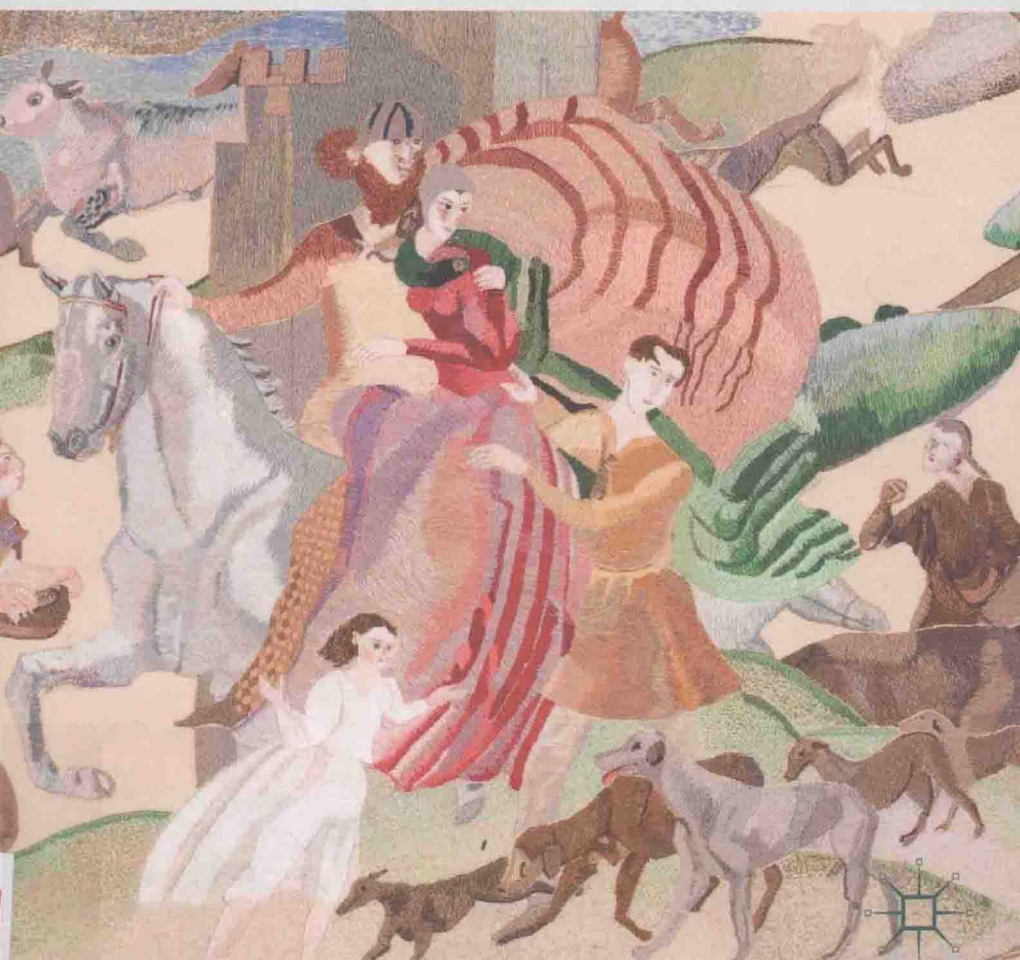




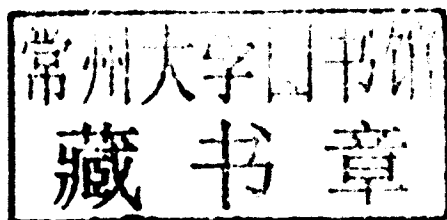
MEDIEVAL INVASIONS IN MODERN IRISH LITERATURE

JULIEANN VERONICA ULIN

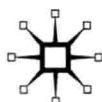


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Julieann Veronica Ulin



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Preface: A Modern Medieval Obituary

"Without Arms or Legs: Belief in the Curse on M'Murrough-Kavanagh"

The death of Mr. Alexander McMurrough-Kavanagh, the fine old Irish gentleman without arms or legs who still managed to write, fish, hunt, and even make speeches in Parliament, has naturally revived in the press all the anecdotes which were familiar a dozen years ago when he was in public life. Some of these have appeared in *The Times*, but the essential point of the man's celebrity in Ireland seems to have been missed in their narration. He would have been a distinct figure in his own country even if he had been born with the customary number and fashion of limbs and had not possessed an intellect superior to the average of country gentlemen, simply because he was The MacMurrough. No title of nobility in the British peerage approaches even by centuries the antiquity of this inherited distinction. To wear that proud definitive article in front of any pure Irish name is to boast a length of established descent, compared with which the Howards and Stanleys are mere modern upstarts. But to have the The in front of the MacMurrough is to occupy a unique position in the list of the ancient Irish sept-nobility. For it was The MacMurrough who brought the Normans into Ireland, and every pious peasant in the Island of Saints knows that there has been a curse on The MacMurroughs ever since. I suppose no belief is more widely distributed and firmly held even in that land of beliefs than that late Alexander McMurrough-Kavanagh owed his fantastic physical calamity to the family curse.

It must have been a very strong and virile curse indeed at the outset to have lasted so long, because it is now more than 720 years since it was first laid on. Like its great prototype launched in the Garden of Eden, this curse of the MacMurroughs had a woman at the bottom of it. The head of the sept, or tribe, then was named Dermot (or Dhiarmid), a name which still curiously survives among modern Irish baptismal favorites as Jeremiah. This Dermot MacMurrough called himself King of Leinster, and in all events was the most powerful chieftain on the whole eastern coast. Although the MacMurroughs

were confined to Waterford and Carlow, their dominion stretched northward to the Danes at Dublin, and came frequently into collision with the claims of the O'Connors on the west. Dermot went up into this Connaught country on one occasion to present his side of the disputed case with the customary arguments of fire and sword and when he returned he brought back as a part of his booty the beautiful wife of Tiernan O'Rourke. This O'Rourke, Lord of Brefny, was a chieftain of importance, and after a lapse of years this grievance of his was finally taken up by his overlord, Rhoderick O'Conner, the last king of Connaught. There was heavy fighting thereafter on Mrs. O'Rourke's account, in which Dermot got the worst of it with increasing steadiness, until at last his own people turned against him. Then Dermot fled to England and drummed up that remarkable little group of recruits, headed by Strongbow, who were to effect such a startling change in Irish history.

They reinstated Dermot by violent force of arms, and Strongbow married Dermot's daughter Eva, the wedding being celebrated amid the smoking ruins of Waterford, which had been taken and sacked for its disloyalty. Dermot died very soon thereafter, and Mrs. O'Rourke also disappears from view, but Strongbow remained. Seven centuries have gone by, and Strongbow is still very much there.

It is perfectly fair to ascribe the blame for the introduction of strangers to Dermot. He alone did it, and upon his head all succeeding generations of Irishmen have heaped the maledictions of the ages. It is not strange that a people so prone to myths and weird fancies should speedily have developed faith in a standing and specific curse for a family which had such a crime on its conscience. "The curse of the McMurroughs" became a byword in Ireland before a hundred years had elapsed. The expression is as familiar today to the Irish peasant's ear as that twin phrase: "The curse of Cromwell." I cannot now find any detailed account of the ways in which this curse worked vengeance upon Dermot's descendants. The popular belief is that in every generation they had a man-child born blind or deformed, but how much of this is fact and how much a mere legendary expression of the fitness of things, I do not know. But it is certain that this gentleman just dead was a lineal descendant of King Dermot, that there has always existed a general popular superstition of a curse laid upon these descendents, and that his astonishing deformity was quite universally regarded by the peasantry of Leinster as the outcome of that curse.

Harold Frederic, *The New York Times* January 26, 1890

The period 1152–1172 in Ireland's history begins with the abduction of an Irish Queen and ends with the presence of the English King on Ireland's shores. Harold Frederic's 1890 obituary for Arthur McMurrough-Kavanagh offers a remarkable illustration of the ability of this period in Ireland's medieval history to explain a modern condition. Largely discounting McMurrough-Kavanagh's life, his extensive travels and his achievements in sport and in Parliament, Frederic instead identifies the "essential point of the man's celebrity" as his descent from the twelfth century Diarmuid Mac Murrough, the Leinster ruler identified in the Irish annals as the man "by whom a trembling sod was made of all Ireland" (O'Donovan 1183). For Frederic, McMurrough-Kavanagh's body becomes a site where the medieval and the modern intersect to create the literal embodiment of a dismembering colonization carried forward from the medieval to the modern age. As Frederic rehearses the "popular" causal narrative that begins with Diarmuid Mac Murrough's abduction of the wife of Tiernan O'Rourke in 1152 and ends with Diarmuid's banishment and his decision to invite foreign forces to Ireland to help him to regain his position, he erroneously refers to McMurrough-Kavanagh as "Alexander" rather than Arthur, indicating how little the contemporary figure matters in what is essentially a medieval obituary. In the entire excerpt quoted above, only the first sentence is devoted entirely to the nineteenth century McMurrough-Kavanagh. For Frederic, the significance of McMurrough-Kavanagh lies in his ability to reflect the unending presentness of Ireland's medieval history. In imposing this inherited medieval past upon McMurrough-Kavanagh, Frederic interprets his "fantastic physical calamity" as a continuation of a causal narrative in which his "astonishing deformity" is the manifestation of the medieval curse upon the modern body.

Medieval Invasions in Modern Irish Literature is the first book-length exploration of how writers from the end of the nineteenth to the start of the twenty-first century have returned to and reimaged the period 1152–1172. The postmedieval narrative that identified these years as the origin for the modern English presence in Ireland circulated in art, music, folklore, political and religious discourse, pageants and performances, historical sources and literature. The increasing accessibility of Irish manuscript sources translated and published for the first time in the mid to late nineteenth century put forth alternative versions of this twelfth century period that allowed modern writers to challenge previous interpretations. The writers explored in this book—ranging from W. B. Yeats, Lady Gregory and James Joyce to Micheál Mac Liammóir, Brendan Behan and Jamie O'Neill—adapted this twenty year period in

twelfth century history in the midst of the tremendous political and social upheaval of the twentieth century. As these transformations and crises occurred, Ireland's modern and contemporary writers repeatedly invoked Ireland's foundational colonial story in order to disrupt the causal relationship between this series of events in twelfth century Ireland and its modern condition, to portray modern Ireland's entrapment within medieval narrative cycles believed to prefigure the present, or to imagine what escape might be possible from the modern legacy of this medieval period. The recurrence of this twelfth century history throughout Ireland's modern literature suggests not only that a confrontation with this medieval past is constituent of modern Irish literature but that this confrontation has been central to imagining alternative national and narrative possibilities.

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Introduction: Medieval Causes



Figure 1 Daniel Maclise, Irish, 1806–1870. *The Marriage of Strongbow and Aoife*, c.1854. Oil on canvas. 315 × 513 cm. Photograph © National Gallery of Ireland, NGI.205

On July 21, 1879, art collector Richard Wallace of London wrote to Henry Doyle, then Director of the National Gallery of Ireland:

It has long been my wish to become the purchaser of Daniel Maclise's picture *The Marriage of Strongbow* with a view of presenting it to the National Gallery of Ireland as I always felt that this masterly painting of our great Irish artist ought to find a permanent home on Irish soil. I am sure that you will be glad to hear

that I have now been able to realize my idea, and the picture is mine, until it is accepted, as I hope it will be, by the Director of the National Gallery in Dublin. (*Minutes of the National Gallery of Ireland* 336)

Wallace's desire that Maclise's nineteenth century painting of a medieval Irish marriage in the midst of a battlefield find "a permanent home on Irish soil" was based not only on its Cork-born painter but on its depiction of a pivotal event in the story of the English presence in Ireland. At 3.15 × 5.13 m, Daniel Maclise's *The Marriage of Strongbow and Aoife* is the largest painting held in the National Gallery, and the canvas hangs as imposingly in the Gallery as its subject does in Ireland's collective memory (Figure 1). The vast canvas depicts the marriage of the Norman warrior Strongbow to Diarmuid Mac Murrough's daughter Aoife as the city of Waterford falls to the Norman invaders in 1170.¹ The painting foregrounds a wailing personification of Ireland throwing her arms up over the dead bodies of the fallen Irish. Beside her, an old man with a broken harp bows his head, forecasting the coming cultural devastation. Smoke rises from a shattered chapel behind Strongbow and Aoife as Diarmuid Mac Murrough pushes his daughter Aoife forward with his hand. Strongbow tramples a stone Celtic cross as the marriage rite is conducted under a raised left hand. Virgin martyrs are surrounded by menacing Norman warriors identified with banners bearing their names. The marriage occurs toward the end of a twenty year period in twelfth century Irish history that begins with the abduction of an Irish Queen in 1152 and ends with the arrival of the English King Henry II to claim dominion over Ireland.² Maclise's nineteenth century depiction of the twelfth century event demonstrates a continuing modern fascination with what becomes known in the literary and historical record as the medieval origin story of Ireland's conflict with England.

The most influential account of the events that culminate in the scene Maclise portrays in *The Marriage of Strongbow and Aoife* comes from Giraldus Cambrensis's twelfth century text, *The History of the Conquest of Ireland*. According to Cambrensis, Diarmuid Mac Murrough, the King of Leinster, took advantage of the absence of Tiernan O'Rourke, the King of Breifne, to abduct O'Rourke's wife Dervorgilla in 1152.³ While in the centuries to come Irish writers and historians would debate Dervorgilla's complicity in her abduction, this influential and near-contemporary account by Cambrensis places the blame firmly upon her. According to Cambrensis, Dervorgilla had "long entertained

a passion" for Diarmuid and she "took advantage of the absence of her husband, and allowed herself to be ravished, not against her will. As the nature of women is fickle and given to change, she thus became the prey of her spoiler by her own contrivance. For as Mark Anthony and Troy are witnesses, almost all the greatest evils in the world have arisen from women" (Cambrensis 184).⁴

In retaliation for this great public and private insult, O'Rourke gathered forces against Diarmuid and recovered Dervorgilla from Diarmuid's holdings the following year (Cambrensis 185). By 1166, some fourteen years after the abduction, Diarmuid's many enemies and a number of his former allies collectively had driven him out of Ireland. In his account, Cambrensis erases the fourteen year gap between Dervorgilla's abduction and Diarmuid's departure from Ireland, thereby crystallizing a causal narrative structure that identifies the abduction of Dervorgilla as the inciting event in the conquest of Ireland. Furious at his banishment, Diarmuid sought aid from the English King Henry II, inviting the monarch to Ireland to help Diarmuid regain his position there. Armed with letters of support from Henry II, Diarmuid traveled widely and formed several key alliances with Norman warriors through the promise of land grants and titles in Ireland. In Bristol, Diarmuid cemented an alliance with Strongbow through the promise of marriage to Diarmuid's daughter Aoife and succession as the King of Leinster (187). Diarmuid then returned to Ireland to await the coming of the Normans. For the subject of *The Marriage of Strongbow and Aoife*, Daniel Maclise takes the August 23, 1170 arrival of Strongbow and the destruction of Waterford which immediately preceded his marriage to Aoife:

[T]he house fell, and carried with it a great piece of the wall, and the assailants entering manfully through the breach, rushed into the town, and slaughtering the citizens in heaps along the streets, gained a very bloody victory.... A garrison was placed in the town, and the daughter of Dermotius, called Eva, having been then given to the earl by her father, and their marriage solemnized, according to, and in confirmation of, the treaty before made, the whole army marched towards Dublin, with banners displayed. (212)

In October 1171, unnerved by the rapid military successes of Strongbow, Henry II landed in Ireland, where he remained until April 1172 (Orpen *Ireland under the Normans 1169–1333* 91–106). Following Cambrensis, both literary and historical texts circulated a causal

narrative of this twenty year period that links Dervorgilla's abduction to Diarmuid's invitation to King Henry II, likewise identifying Dervorgilla as Ireland's Helen of Troy. Such accounts interpreted the initial invited invasion (Dervorgilla inviting her abduction by Diarmuid) as the cause of the national invasion (Diarmuid inviting a foreign presence into Ireland). In Ireland's literary and historical record, this twelfth century history is encapsulated in the trope of the stranger in the house.

Raymond Keaveney, Director of the National Gallery, identifies *The Marriage of Strongbow and Aoife* as a national treasure whose subject is "iconic. It's the coming of the Normans. It's the beginning of modern Irish history" (*Strongbow and Aoife: Saving a National Treasure*).⁵ To view the medieval period as the beginning of modern Irish history requires the construction of a collective narrative out of a series of historical episodes. In *Time Maps: Collective Memory and the Social Shape of the Past* (2003), Eviatar Zerubavel traces the process by which the mind must "mentally transform essentially unstructured series of events into seemingly coherent historical narratives" (Zerubavel 13). To create such narratives successfully, "highly complex event sequences" must be reduced to "inevitably simplistic, one-dimensional visions of the past." An interval of centuries may be "bracketed off as a mere interruption of an essentially congruous national project" (54). In the preface to the first two volumes of *Ireland under the Normans* (1911), Goddard Henry Orpen notes the narrative emphasis placed by historians on the Norman invasion in contrast to the period that follows: "for the next three centuries, with the exception of some few unconnected episodes, the history of Ireland has been left in great obscurity, until in the sixteenth century she once more emerges into the light" (Orpen *Ireland under the Normans 1169–1333* xxxiii). To use Claude Lévi Strauss's image, historical narratives function like a frequency or wave, in which peaks of "eventfulness" are contrasted with low periods of seeming inactivity (Lévi Strauss 259). The historical narrative emphasizes those events consistent with or seen as prefiguring the present while neglecting or omitting those elements seen as incongruous (Zerubavel 53). This process, which Zerubavel terms *emplotment*, produces narratives of "unmistakenly contrived connectedness" that allow the present to appear prefigured or even predestined by the past (13, 50). Though the historical events of 1152–1172 acquire great significance only in retrospect, they solidify into a causal narrative structure that views this period as the foundational story of Ireland's colonization by England.⁶ In Orpen's 1892 translation and edition of *The Song of Dermot and the*

Earl, a twelfth century verse account of the period by Diarmuid Mac Murrugh's *latimer* that Orpen's edition made widely available for the first time,⁷ he acknowledges the human desire to create and sustain such explanatory narratives: "To trace the small beginnings of a movement big with consequences has always had a particular fascination for the human mind. Not since the day when St. Patrick preached his first sermon in Dichu's barn has there been any event of greater importance to Ireland than the coming of the Normans to her shores" (Orpen *The Song of Dermot and the Earl* v). The events of this twenty year period in twelfth century Ireland acquired the status of what Zerubavel calls a "sacred period," a watershed event whose memory persists through "bridges" between the past and present such as commemorations, ruins, relics and historical analogies that preserve a continuously circulating narrative (Zerubavel 28). Both music and art were central to the perpetuation of the twelfth century narrative in the modern Irish cultural memory.

Prior to painting *The Marriage of Strongbow and Aoife*, Daniel Maclise illustrated Thomas Moore's ballad "The Song of O'Ruark" for the 1846 edition of his immensely popular *Irish Melodies*. In *Catholic Emancipations*, Emer Nolan credits Moore for doing "more than any other single figure in the nineteenth century to create an Irish nationalist sensibility" and specifically notes the role played by his ballads (Nolan 3): "the Irish nineteenth century, as a distinct cultural entity, may be said to have begun in 1808 with the publication of the first volume of Moore's *Irish Melodies*" (1). Moore's *Irish Melodies* regularly invoked Ireland's colonial condition, looking backward to locate the cause of Ireland's ruin.⁸ In the preface to the 1846 edition Moore writes, "I deem it most fortunate for this new Edition that the rich imaginative powers of Mr. Maclise have been employed in its adornment; and that, to complete its national character, an Irish pencil has lent its aid to an Irish pen in rendering due honour to our country's ancient harp" (Moore *Moore's Irish Melodies. Illustrated by D. Maclise, R.A.* iv). Moore's "The Song of O'Ruark" relates the return of O'Rourke to discover that his wife Dervorgilla has deserted him and forecasts the national ruin which will follow this domestic rupture.

Thomas Moore epitomizes the battle between history and romance over Ireland's twelfth century narrative as he composed versions in both historical and musical forms. His ballad adheres to the story of Ireland's conquest that he dismissed in his later work, the second volume of his *History of Ireland* (1837).⁹ In *History of Ireland*, Moore attends to the inherent anachronism in historical versions connecting the

abduction of Dervorgilla with the Norman invasion. The abduction, Moore writes,

has, by the majority of our historians, been advanced in date, by no less than thirteen years, for the purpose of connecting it with Dermot's expulsion from his kingdom in A.D. 1166, and his consequent flight, as we shall see, into England, to solicit aid from Henry II. The ready adoption of so gross an anachronism, by not a few even of our own native historians, may be cited as an instance of that strong tendency to prefer showy and agreeable fiction to truth, which has enabled Romance, in almost all countries, to encroach upon, and even sometimes supersede, History. (Moore *History of Ireland* 201)

However much Moore discredits the "gross anachronism" of linking Dervorgilla's abduction to the Norman invasion and objects to the preference for the "showy and agreeable" at the expense of historical fact, his ballad "The Song of O'Ruark" not only readily embraces the narrative of romance but regularly surfaces to stand in for the history of this period. In Moore's own note on the song, he writes that the stanzas "are founded upon an event of most melancholy importance to Ireland; if, as we are told by our Irish historians, it gave England the first opportunity of profiting by our divisions and subduing us" (Moore *Moore's Irish Melodies* 263 note 43). Moore's song explicitly locates the blame for Ireland's conquered status on Dervorgilla, following Cambrensis and others in identifying the events of 1152 as the cause of all that was to follow and contributing to what Joep Leerssen terms the "cultivation of remembrance" (Leerssen 81):

The valley lay smiling before me,
Where lately I left her behind;
Yet I trembled, and something hung o'er me
That sadden'd the joy of my mind.
I look'd for the lamp which, she told me,
Should shine when her pilgrim return'd.
But though darkness began to enfold me,
No lamp from the battlements burn'd.

I flew to her chamber, 'twas lonely
As if the loved tenant lay dead;
Ah, would it were death, and death only!