



# LANGUAGE AND CONQUEST IN EARLY MODERN IRELAND

English Renaissance Literature and Elizabethan Imperial Expansion

PATRICIA PALMER

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The Elizabethan conquest of Ireland sparked off two linguistic events of enduring importance: it initiated the language shift from Irish to English, which constitutes the great drama of Irish cultural history, and it marks the beginnings of English linguistic expansion. The Elizabethan colonisers in Ireland included some of the leading poets and translators of the day. In *Language and Conquest in Early Modern Ireland*, Patricia Palmer uses their writings, as well as material from the State Papers, to explore the part which language played in shaping colonial ideology and English national identity. Palmer shows how manoeuvres of linguistic expansion rehearsed in Ireland shaped Englishmen's encounters with the languages of the New World, and frames that analysis within a comparison between English linguistic colonisation and Spanish practice in the New World. This is an ambitious comparative study which will interest literary and political historians.

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IRELAND

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To my parents, William and Catherine Palmer, *le grá*.



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Conversation of one kind or another is central to this work. A book which explores the origins of the troubled conversation between Irish and English – both speakers and languages – is itself the outcome of conversations of far less troubled kinds that have criss-crossed these islands. This work grows out of an Oxford doctoral thesis, ‘The Grafted Tongue: Linguistic Colonisation and the Native Response in Sixteenth-Century Ireland’, and I am eternally grateful to my supervisor, Bernard O’Donoghue, for his enthusiasm, kindness and wisdom and for supervisions that flowed with laughter and good talk. Professors David Norbrook and Clare Carroll, my examiners, have given generously of their time and encouragement over the years. I am also beholden to Richard MacCabe for giving me the benefit of his insightful reading of the work at a vital stage. I’ve been fortunate to have Deana Rankin as a reader and critic, friend and neighbour. We talked early modern Ireland until it seemed almost as real as *fin-de-siècle* Oxford. I owe a particular debt to Wes Williams for his exceptionally perceptive reading of this work at different stages and for the energy and stimulation of the discussions that followed. I am grateful to Gillian Wright for her careful reading of part of the final draft.

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## Abbreviations

- ALC* *Annals of Loch Cé: A Chronicle of Irish Affairs, 1014–1590*, ed. and trans. William M. Hennessy, vol. 2, Dublin: Irish Manuscripts Commission, 1939
- ARÉ* *Annála Ríoghachta Éireann / Annals of the Kingdom of Ireland by the Four Masters from the Earliest Period to the Year 1616*, ed. and trans. John O'Donovan., 3 vols. Dublin: Hodges and Smith, 1848.
- CBC* *The Compossicion Booke of Conought*, trans. Alexander M. Freeman, Dublin: Irish Manuscripts Commission, 1936
- CCCHA* 'Colin Clouts Come Home Again'
- CCM* *Calendar of the Carew Manuscripts*, vols. 1–5, ed. J. S. Brewer and William Bullen, London: Longmans, Green, 1867–71
- CPR* *Calendar of the Patent and Close Rolls of Chancery of Ireland*, vol. 1, ed. James Morrin, Dublin: Thom, 1861–2
- CSPDom.* *Calendar of State Papers preserved in the Public Records Office, Domestic Series, 1581–90*, ed. Robert Lemon, London: Longmans, Green, 1865  
1598–1601, ed. M. A. Everett Green, London, 1869
- CSPI* *Calendar of State Papers, Ireland, 1509–1573*, 13 vols., London: His Majesty's Stationary Office, 1860–1912
- DIL* *Dictionary of the Irish Language, based mainly on Old and Middle Irish materials*, ed. E. G. Quin *et al.*, Dublin: Royal Irish Academy, 1913–76
- Egmont* *Report on the Manuscripts of the Earl of Egmont*, vol. 1, pt. 1, London: Historical Manuscripts Commission, 1905
- FQ* Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, ed. Thomas P. Roche, Penguin, 1978
- JRHAAI* *Journal of the Royal Historical and Archaeological Association of Ireland*, 4th series. vol. 1

- PRO SP Irish State Papers, Public Record Office, Kew  
*Salis* *Calendar of the Manuscripts of the Marquis of Salisbury*, vols. 1–XIII, London: Historical Manuscripts Commission, 1883–1915
- SPH8* *State Papers, King Henry VIII*, vols II & III, London, 1834  
*Stats* *The Statutes at Large from the First Year of King Edward the Fourth to the end of the Reign of Queen Elizabeth*, ed. Danby Pickering, London, 1763
- Stats. Irl.* *The Statutes at Large Passed in the Parliaments held in Ireland*, vol. 1, Dublin, 1786
- UJA* *Ulster Journal of Archaeology*, vols. 2–6, 1854–8

## *Introduction*

We traffic with time in the arts of language, and with history and its events.

Robert Welch, *Changing States*, p. 4

The Elizabethan conquest of Ireland is that point in history where the fortunes of two languages briefly intersect, then spectacularly diverge. For one, the conquest marks the inaugural episode of its imperialist expansion. For the other, it is the originary moment of a language shift that constitutes the great drama of Irish cultural history. The present book, written from the perspective of an Irish anglophone awkwardly aware that those troubled origins continue to shadow Irish speech, explores how far that moment of encounter throws light on an enduring paradox: that Irish literature in English – a literature rooted in the silencing of Irish and animated by that rupture – itself participates in that most Elizabethan of concepts, ‘the triumph of English’.

A sense of discontinuity, self-estrangement, of living beyond the faultline of a fractured tradition haunts Irish writing. Anglophone Ireland, cut off from its Irish-speaking antecedents, is ‘adrift among the accidents of translation’ (Thomas Davis, quoted in Lloyd, ‘Translator as Refractor’, p. 145). The ‘semantics of remembrance’ are impaired; cultural amnesia is inescapable: ‘there no longer exists any inherited reservoir of meaning’ (Steiner, *After Babel*, p. 494; Kearney, *Transitions*, p. 13). The past is available only in translation and not everything – not much – can jump the gap. In a context where ‘mother tongue’ and ‘native language’ do not necessarily seem synonymous, language is made strange. Declan Kiberd’s *Idir Dhá Chultúr* captures in its title – ‘Between Two Cultures’ – the displacement of modern Irish literature which, he argues, sprouts in the cracks between the two languages. When an Irish writer like Samuel

Beckett takes up his pen, argues David Wheatley, ‘titeann scáth teanga trasna a shaothair’ (the shadow of language falls across his work<sup>1</sup>) (‘Beckett’, p. 17). A sense of being exiled from ‘another tradition, encoded in the lost language of a nation’ complicates Irish writers’ relationship with their medium (Boland, *Object Lessons*, pp. 80–1).

The most complete expression of the predicament comes in the final chapter of James Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, a chapter threaded through with fragmentary allusions to ‘the age of Dowland and Byrd and Nash’ (p. 210). When the English Dean queries his use of ‘tundish’, Stephen feels ‘with a smart of dejection that the man to whom he was speaking was a countryman of Ben Jonson’. His sense of holding imperfect title to the language he speaks, of never being fully at home in it, is the simultaneously uncomfortable and enabling perspective of Irish writing in English:

The language in which we are speaking is his before it is mine . . . His language, so familiar and so foreign, will always be for me an acquired speech. I have not made or accepted its words. My voice holds them at bay. My soul frets in the shadow of his language. (p. 172)

Dowland, Byrd, Nash, Jonson . . . Tell-tale flashes of historical consciousness return us time and again to the Elizabethan source of the quandary. Seamus Heaney, ‘a wood-kerne / Escaped from the massacre’ (‘Exposure’), seeks to ‘re-enter memory’ (‘Bone Dreams’) but hears only the ‘Soft voices of the dead’: ‘I cock my ear / at an absence’ (‘Gifts of Rain’). His laconically ambivalent formula, ‘We are to be proud / Of our Elizabethan English’, marks out the distance separating ‘us’ from the Elizabethans who ‘tell of us’ – and it explains his recoil from the ‘whinging’ MacMorris, ‘gallivanting / round the Globe’ (‘Traditions’). In ‘Ocean’s love to Ireland’, he reconfigures the sixteenth-century conquest as a linguistic rape: Raleigh ‘Speaking broad Devonshire . . . drives inland’; ‘The ruined maid complains in Irish’. After her spoliation, ‘Iambic drums / Of English beat the woods.’

John Montague’s *The Rough Field*, too, meditates on the legacy of a colonialism that was, to a striking degree, linguistic. Montague feels keenly the ‘harsh . . . humiliation’ of growing ‘a second tongue’ (p. 39); ‘A Severed Head’, interleaved with woodcuts of conquest from John Derricke’s *The Image of Irelande*, provides an oblique and halting commentary on the long legacy of the Elizabethan campaign:

Dumb  
 bloodied, the severed  
 head now chokes to  
 speak another tongue.

(p. 39)

These fleeting apparitions of the Elizabethan moment are doubly revealing. Historical intuition draws writers to this pivotal episode in the encounter between Irish and English; scholars' commensurate inattention to the linguistic face of the conquest, however, reduces their access to a fuller engagement with it. The problem is illustrated by Frank McGuinness's *Mutabilitie*, set in Kilcolman during the Nine Years War. Theatrically, the stage is shared among the English characters, 'Edmund' the poet and 'William' the playwright, and an Irish woman poet, 'File', a dispossessed chieftain, Sweney, and his queen, Maeve. Linguistically, however, no alterity is recognised; the play reproduces the colonial texts' effacement of Irish. In the world of *Mutabilitie*, the triumph of English is already accomplished. McGuinness's elision of Irish goes beyond the conventions necessary for mediating a diglossic world to an English-speaking audience.<sup>2</sup> His alterations to his source text, *A View of the Present State of Ireland*, erase Spenser's acknowledgement of the potency of Irish. Whereas Spenser writes 'the speech being Irish, the heart must needs be so, for out of the abundance of the heart, the tongue speaketh', 'Edmund' says 'Out of the abundance of the heart, the tongue speaks, and here it speaks of Rome' (*View*, p. 68; *Mutabilitie*, p. 48). By substituting 'Rome' for 'Irish', McGuinness is anachronistically privileging religious over linguistic nationalism. Hugh, the chieftain's son, refuses William's request to 'speak to me in your own language' with the retort 'You are hearing my own language' (p. 68). The effect of representing sixteenth-century Munster as uncomplicatedly anglophone is deeply problematic. Edmund speaks commanding Spenserian prose;<sup>3</sup> William descants Shakespearean sonnets (p. 23); the natives, culturally unhoused neophytes astray in a richly textured world of English, have access only to howls, hobbling rhymes (p. 43) and inarticulate violence: 'Revenge, beautiful word. Say it' (p. 28). Almost inevitably, given the natives' linguistic disadvantage, *Mutabilitie*, with its pastiche *hommage* to *King Lear* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, links their empowerment to English. This leads McGuinness into ascribing anachronistic sentiments of cultural dependency – 'I require your eloquence' (p. 23) – to a sixteenth-century *file* who is made to prophesy improbably that an English poet 'shall give us

the gift of tongues' (p. 2).<sup>4</sup> McGuinness's engagement with the seminal moment of linguistic encounter is circumscribed precisely because its perspective is that of most literary critics on 'Elizabethan Ireland', that give-away term. Like such critics, it is positioned on the far side of the break, deep inside an anglophone universe of discourse. It is in dialogue only with the canonical English texts and so it replicates their elision of Irish and of its worldview.

Such exiguous attention as the language encounter has so far attracted has focused on the nineteenth century, the century of 'silence', and on the subsequent demographics of decline (Kinsella, 'Divided Mind', p. 209; cf. Welch, *Changing States*; Hindley, *Death of the Irish Language*); the originary moment of the encounter, the sixteenth century, is ignored almost completely. This is to write history as autopsy. To focus on the silence as it settles rather than on the intensity and engagement of its sixteenth-century prelude is intellectually confining: we lose the chance to understand how power intersects with language and to study the patterns of resistance and accommodation as they are set down. But it is also impoverishing at a simpler, human level: to concentrate only on the silent prevents us from listening in to the urgent volubility of their sixteenth-century antecedents. 'Elizabethan' Ireland is the last moment when a confident Irish-speaking world confronts its English nemesis and, as its moment slips away, records its loss and makes its adjustments. The Elizabethan tracts of conquest defused Irish-speakers' insistent contestation by suppressing their expression textually; not to attempt now to reconstruct the polyphony and incipient hybridity of the encounter is to repeat that effacement. It is to truncate our understanding of the past by tuning in to one set of voices only and to elide our perspective with those with whom we share – or have come to share – a common language. 'The Elizabethan mind', Foster tells us, 'found the native Irish . . . incomprehensible' (*Modern Ireland*, p. 9). That incomprehension was, at its simplest level, linguistic; it is all too easy to replay that lack of understanding and to collapse our horizon of interpretation with that of the Elizabethan texts – as Foster himself does by remarking that 'the English colonial presence in Ireland remained superimposed upon an ancient identity, *alien and bizarre*' (p. 3; my emphasis).

'Maireann lorg an phinn, ach ní mhaireann an béal a chan' (The trace of the pen lives on, but not the mouth that sang). The proverb captures an imbalance, pronounced in colonial contexts, which this

work is concerned with addressing – an imbalance which critical practice has often been more successful in replicating than in challenging. New Historicism with its ‘reciprocal concern with the historicity of texts and the textuality of history’ (Montrose, ‘Professing the Renaissance’, p. 20) is useful in sanctioning my own recourse to non-literary texts of conquest – State Papers, account books, campaign journals, statutes, depositions, trial reports – in seeking to reconstruct the linguistic corollary of the conquest. But less enabling is its paradoxical mesmerism with the colonial canon: Christopher Highley, for instance, spectacularly consigns Irish-language writers of the period to a footnote: they ‘remain outside the discourse of Ireland as I define it’ (*Crisis*, p. 164, fn. 2). Nor does mainstream postcolonial practice greatly advance matters. As well as being strangely ill-adapted to the early modern period (Adorno, ‘Colonial Discourse’), its inclination to think in polarities such as European/Other tends to ‘make Ireland invisible’ (Miller, *Invested with Meaning*, p. 18). When writing about early modern Ireland, postcolonialists’ fixation on English literary texts – once more unto the breach with *Henry V* – quite unintentionally ends up representing colonial discourse as triumphantly omnipotent. Said salutes writers like Friel who ‘can truly read the great colonial masterpieces’ and write back (*Culture and Imperialism*, p. 35). But it is not enough just to read the ‘colonial masterpieces’: the ‘minorpieces’ of the colonised also must be read. The ‘trace of the pen’ left by sixteenth-century Irish is faint: fewer than a hundred manuscripts from the period survive (Ó Cuív, ‘Irish Language’, p. 513); fewer still – bardic poems and annals – have a place in our story; as the endpieces of a broken tradition, they have not travelled as well in time as the ‘colonial masterpieces’. Yet, they represent an essential counterpoint to the voluminous colonial record. Equally, one must read with an eye for what did not get written. Though the colonial texts systematically exclude ‘the mouth that sings’ in Irish, critical approaches such as feminism help us to recover the voices of the silenced or, failing that, alert us to the strategies that silenced them.

To escape the temporal and theoretical impediments that block our engagement with the sixteenth-century encounter, I have found it necessary to escape a spatial one as well. Seán Ó Tuama muses that the Tudors’ ‘subjugation of Ireland may well have been unique in the attention they paid to cultural as well as territorial conquest’ (‘Gaelic Culture’, p. 28). That conviction, which holds up poorly

against comparisons with French and Spanish colonial practice, results in the kind of insular and, at times, rancorous victimhood that marks De Fréine's *The Great Silence* and which is never far from the surface in Kinsella's *The Dual Tradition*. But the Irish case, though often portrayed as a unique misfortune (Lee, *Ireland*, p. 663), and while unusual in a European context, is by no means singular. The Tudor (re)conquest of Ireland is part of a much larger pattern of sixteenth-century colonial expansion. It comes sandwiched between the massive Spanish *empresa* in the New World and England's first colonial ventures in the Americas. To view linguistic colonisation in Ireland from that broader spatial perspective, in a manner prepared for by historians like Nicholas Canny, but never followed up by those studying language, allows us to situate events in Ireland in their wider historical context. The great advantage of the broader spatial perspective is that it expands our theoretical framework as well. It opens up the possibility of transferring to the study of linguistic colonisation in Ireland the methodologies and discursive practices which have uncovered the philosophical underpinnings and practical procedures of Spanish linguistic colonisation.

This book seeks to understand the nature of the encounter between Irish and English under the press of the Elizabethan conquest and to reinsert Irish interlocutors into the discussion in a way that avoids replacing a colonial imbalance with a postcolonial one – one that turns the colonists into the critic's 'Other'. In doing so I am indebted, imaginatively and procedurally, to the 'New World' scholarship. I draw on writers like Francis Affergan, whose analysis of colonial and anthropological strategies of silencing also explores how the voice of the other can be brought back into dialogue; or like Le Clézio, who finds a way to let 'le silence . . . immense, terrifiant' that followed the *conquista* resonate (*Rêve mexicain*, p. 231).

This work analyses the engagement between Irish and English from, roughly, Elizabeth I's accession in 1558 to the flight of the earls in 1607. Chapter 1 draws on the 'Spanish-American' model to establish a methodological framework for exploring how language and power move into alignment in the context of conquest. Chapters 2, 3 and 4 uncover the pattern of Elizabethan linguistic colonisation in its paired guises of denigrating Irish and promoting English. Chapters 2 and 3 examine how the Elizabethans' textual elision of Irish and their negative evaluations of it prepared for their strategy of silencing. Chapter 4 explores how far the Elizabethans' adventure