

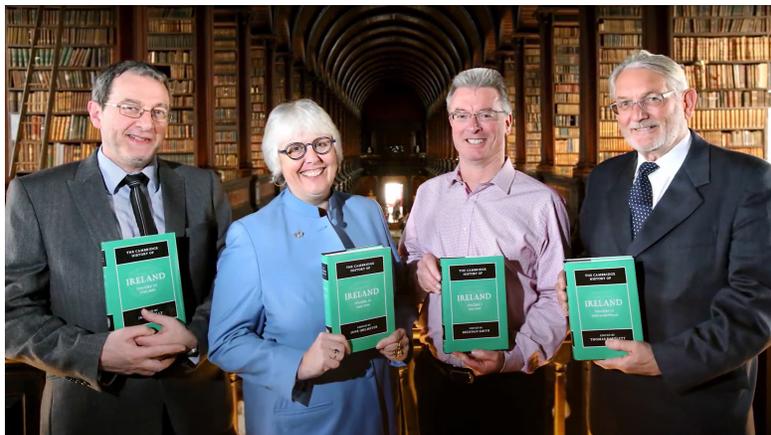
WRITING IRISH HISTORY

The Cambridge History of Ireland
4 volumes, Cambridge University Press, 2018



By Maureen E. Mulvihill

Princeton Research Forum, Princeton, New Jersey
Guest Writer, Rare Book Hub, San Francisco
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Volume Editors, The Cambridge History of Ireland

Left: Brendan Smith (University of Bristol), Volume I

Jane Ohlmeyer (Trinity College Dublin), Volume II

James Kelly (Dublin City University), Volume III

Thomas Bartlett (University of Aberdeen), Volume IV

General Editor: Thomas Bartlett

Video

< <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XQJmX6Xyk7A> >

“At a time when the importance of scholastic endeavor in the Humanities is under pressure, or even disdained, these four volumes of Irish history stand as an intellectual riposte to those who doubt the vital importance of the study of history in our universities and in our society.”

Michael D. Higgins, President Of Ireland

Official Launch Ceremony, Dublin Castle, April 30th, 2018

HISTORIANS OF A PARTICULAR NATION face serious challenges. Their primary task is to set down, as objectively and completely as possible, a reliable record of important events, dates, principal figures, institutions, the ethnic and moral character of a people, and so on. Secondly, however, they must work through a completely different set of ‘truths’, being a dense accretion of lore, rumor, myth, tradition – the remains of cultural memory, from random jottings to popular song (a populist, vernacular historiography, from the bottom up). These ‘leavings’, too, have an authority. Historians thus operate at the fragile intersection of evidence-based fact and undocumented belief: what is known for certain, what has been accepted as truth over time.

Published histories of a particular nation serve us handily, and such reference works are essential to scholarly research: they respond to immediate and long-term needs, of course, but they also *validate* the very importance of a particular subject. Given the sheer turbulence of its history, Ireland, until just recently, has somewhat lagged behind in this regard, notwithstanding some recent one-volume historical surveys.¹

And then ... BIG TECH happened. With the dramatic prominence in recent years of Information Technology and the Internet, scholarly methodologies suddenly became modernized, making possible deep delving into specialized subjects, as well as critical (and speedy) data collection, statistical analyses, and online digital conversion of much early material. Researchers now had webpages, blogs, listservs, digital scans of early material (books, broadsheets, pamphlets, newspapers), digital editions, podcasts, and specialized databases (watermarks, woodcuts, coats-of-arm, selected manuscripts, book ownership, printers & booksellers, etc.). With this bountiful new access, scholars on the Irish Studies network produced a dazzling harvest of important work in just under a single decade: and this, mind you, was only in the print medium. Consider:

- ◆ Pollard, *Dictionary...Dublin Book Trade* (2000; 2000+ entries; 675 pages)
- ◆ Mac Curtain *et al.*, *Irish Women Writers* (2002; 2 vols.; 3201 pages)
- ◆ Lalor, *Encyclopedia of Ireland* (2003; 1218 pages)
- ◆ Martin, Byrne, Vaughan’s, *New History of Ireland* (Oxford UP, 1976-2006; 11 vols.)
- ◆ Coleman, Byrne, and King, *Ireland & the Americas* (2008; 3 vols.; 966 pages)
- ◆ McGuire & Quinn, *Dictionary of Irish Biography* (2009; 9 vols.; 9700 lives)²

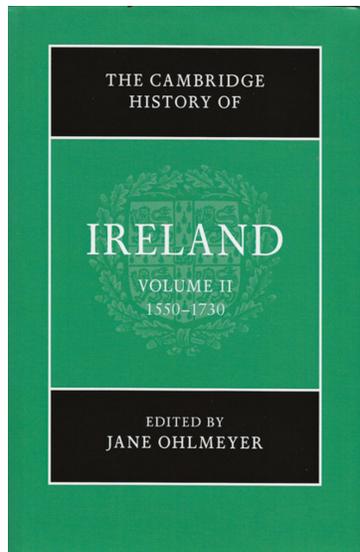
But Irish scholars were only warming to the task. As Thomas Bartlett and Jane Ohlmeyer explained in *The Irish Times* (May 5, 2018), a new and updated history of Ireland was needed and justified. The *New History of Ireland* from Oxford University Press (11 vols., 1976-2006), organized in the 1960s, was certainly an impressive achievement, but the recent explosion in Irish scholarship, owing to new methodologies, needed synthesis and recent contexts. The Oxford Irish Histories, as useful as they were for a time, were already out of date by the early 21st century.

And lo! new Irish histories soon arrived in 2018, with Cambridge University Press’s four-volume set, under the general stewardship of the redoubtable Thomas Bartlett.³ The project’s obvious success began just there: with Bartlett at the helm. His selection of the projects’ four volume editors -- Brendan Smith, Jane Ohlmeyer, James Kelly, and Bartlett himself – steered the entire enterprise.⁴ After finalizing project goals and timeframes, Bartlett and his editorial team evidently agreed to one abiding principle: *the new Irish histories would be written in readable, accessible prose.* We imagine Bartlett addressing his project team with this stern directive: ‘We must have *readable sentences*, sentences to last over time. We’re creating *reference volumes* here, not dense, fussy monographs. Non-specialists will be paging through these volumes for information they can access quickly and *understand* quickly. Let’s be sharp about that.’ Yes and Amen, Mr Bartlett!

THE NEW CAMBRIDGE HISTORY OF IRELAND is a monumental, four-volume survey, AD 600 to the present (i.e., *circa* 2016-2017). And this is very much an Irish product. Its impressive cast of players (editors, writers) is mostly Irish grain, with a welcome diversity of global voices. The new Irish histories summoned a rich variety of contributing writers (nearly 100) from the towers of academia to youthful communities of independent scholars, and postdoctoral associates. The project's four volumes (some 1500 years of Irish history in over 3000 pages) offer a comprehensive history of Ireland, a history situating that troubled (and troublesome) isle within broader British, European, and Imperial contexts. *And, remarkably, this grand enterprise, from concept to publication, spanned about five years.*⁵

Accounting for such unusual speed were (1) strength and clarity of project management; (2) direct access to a broad range of Irish talent, both established authorities and ambitious up-and-comers; and (3) the sheer speed of online research and data collection. In the early years of the current century, Irish Studies greeted a new generation of vivid faces: early careerists with different approaches and a natural fluency in the new technology.⁶ The time was ripe to get serious about Ireland as a separate historical subject, a subject to be studied apart from British history (as much as that is possible). The entire project went fast. And at its back was the inspiring example of several large, achieved projects, referenced briefly above, directed by such luminaries as Mary Pollard, Brian Lalor, James Quinn & James McGuire, Margaret Mac Curtain, *et al.* So all was in place, success was imminent: there was precedent, leadership, talent, the support of a distinguished publisher, and the benefits of Big Tech.

All four volumes are entirely impressive, with essential content, close sourcing, and useful illustrations. Volume II, which maps the collapse of Ireland's old Gaelic Order (the original organization of the entire island), is my favorite, as it speaks to my interests these many years:



The Cambridge History of Ireland. Volume II, 1550-1730

Jane Ohlmeyer, Editor. Cambridge University Press, 2018. 6" x 9" x 1.5". 25 essays. 33 b/w illustrations. 10 tables. 5 maps. 787 pp. \$130, cloth. \$39.99, soft cover (2020). Adobe eBook (2018), \$32. Afterword, Nicholas Canny.

VOLUME II OF THE NEW CAMBRIDGE HISTORY OF IRELAND sets out the history of Ireland from 1550 to 1730, focusing mainly on Ireland’s intersection with Tudor and Stuart politics. Volume II is arguably the strongest volume of the entire series and certainly the saddest, as it surveys the decline and eventual loss of the ‘original’ Ireland (the old order) to a violently invasive foreign power: England. The Tudor and the Stuarts coveted Irish land; they were also eager to expand the controlling presence of the Church of England: thus, the agenda to decatholicize Ireland.

Capably (and creatively) edited by distinguished scholar, Jane Ohlmeyer,⁷ Volume II offers a range of new departures, and its many essays represent the research of a generation of scholars who, as Ohlmeyer explains in her Introduction (1-19), “search ceaselessly after fresh knowledge, sophisticated methods, and new perspectives that will aid the understanding of *how and why people acted as they did* in the transformative and tumultuous years between 1550 to 1730” (19; emphasis added).⁸

Over nearly 800 pages and 25 essays, Volume II engages 180 years of Irish history explored by a variety of career historians; and the volume’s content is sensibly organized into five large subject categories, or “parts”:

- ◆ Politics (6 essays),
- ◆ Religion And War (4 essays),
- ◆ Society (5 essays),
- ◆ Culture (5 essays),
- ◆ Economy And Environment (5 essays).

In a masterstroke of editorial intelligence, Ohlmeyer sequences the essays in each of the five parts of Volume II chronologically, thus enabling the reader of each part to move through the timeframe of the entire volume (1550-1730). This organization of content, within each of the five parts of the volume, lends a propulsive, forward movement to the heavy density of the volume’s expositions. Additional editorial oversight from Ohlmeyer ensured a detailed apparatus: a bibliography of 84 pages; an index of 36 pages; and a rich offering of visual text (50 images: portraits, manuscripts, tapestries, maps, castles, estates, forts, hospitals, graphs, tables).

Of Volume II’s five parts, the section on **POLITICS** (six essays) is arguably the most absorbing, and it suitably takes pride of place. The section’s six contributing writers drill down to roots and foundations, supplying close documentation from primary sources and complementary illustrations. This section is something far more than a victim narrative of enforced transition, however; its several essays, incisive and unsentimental, show us an oppressor’s *method* through a variety of measures: (1) official policies (e.g., Penal Laws); (2) land confiscations and ‘plantations’ of English overseers (landlords) on Irish soil; and (3) horrific atrocities, such as Oliver Cromwell’s siege of Drogheda, 1649. But not without a mighty fight.⁹

When William Butler Yeats famously wrote,

“Romantic Ireland’s dead and gone, / It’s with O’Leary in the grave,”

Yeats was thinking and writing as an historian; he was lamenting Ireland’s enforced transition from an island of dynastic clan chieftains, with their own leadership, language, land, and culture, to a bloody and fractured place, fighting back *“the filthy modern tide.”*¹⁰

HERE ARE SOME HIGHLIGHTS FROM THE *POLITICS* SECTION OF VOLUME II:

Briefly: **Ciaran Brady** opens this important subject with a close look at the intersections of politics, policy, and power in late Tudor Ireland, 1550-1603, with special attention to the first of many (enforced) ‘plantations’ throughout Ireland of English landlords (a huge ‘land-grab’), beginning in Munster after the Desmond Rebellions (1569-1573, 1579-1583). The English plantations in Ireland involved vast confiscations of Irish land with unspeakable loss to human life, property, and personal identity.¹¹ **David Edwards** considers political change and social transformation in early Stuart Ireland, 1603-1641, during the reigns of James I and Charles I. As Edwards shows, Ireland in the early years of the seventeenth century was not entirely under the English boot (not yet). And in an impressive interdisciplinary spirit, he presents two attractive (monetary) graphics (pp. 53-54) which lend fresh context to his commentary.¹² With **John Cunningham’s** essay, Volume II pivots to politics in Ireland, 1641-1660. Cunningham investigates the closing years of Charles I’s reign and its impact on the English ‘solution’ for Ireland, followed by a detailed reconstruction of Cromwellian Ireland. Cromwell ordered violent measures against the Irish; and Irish Catholics holding political power and leadership were a chief target. During Cromwellian Ireland, as some recent research has shown, Ireland lost nearly half of its entire population; and the ‘system’ of English land ‘plantations’ in the north of Ireland (Ulster) resulted in the loss of millions of acres of Irish land (and the Irish love their land!). The 1641 Irish Rebellion and resulting casualties further destabilized any semblance of order and independent governance among the Irish. Of special interest is **Ted McCormick** on Restoration Ireland and Jacobite Ireland, 1660-1691. The Restoration of the Stuart monarchy, he reminds us, “began and ended in Ireland” (p.96); and by the 1690s, McCormick concludes, Ireland looked very much like a shabby, new colony of the English crown. **Charles Ivar McGrath** looks at the Irish political climate during 1692-1730, especially Whig and Tory party politics during 1700-1714. **D.W. Hayton** completes the “Politics” section with a detailed essay on the emergence of an imposed Protestant society in Ireland, 1691-1730: a ‘Protestant Ascendancy’ to ‘improve’ Ireland through pragmatic, peaceful measures, no matter its insult to the character and identity of the Irish people whose new neighbors were not at all Irish, but English. The ‘new Irish’ had arrived: unwelcome then, unwelcome now.



OTHER PARTS OF VOLUME II merit high praise, as well, most especially the section on **Culture** (1550-1730), with essays by Marc Caball, Bernadette Cunningham, Deana Rankin, Brendan Kane, and Ian Campbell. Likewise the section on **Religion and War**, interrogated by Tadhg Ó hannracháin, Colm Lennon, Robert Armstrong, and a fine collaborative piece by John Jeremiah Cronin and Pdraig Lenihan. Other informative parts in Volume II include the **Society** section, with essays by Clodagh Tait, Mary O’Dowd, Susan Flavin, Janet Fenlon, and William O’Reilly; likewise, the **Economy And Environment** section, perhaps the most original gatherings in the Volume II, with much new information and perspectives delivered by Raymond Gillespie, Annaleigh Margey, and two sets of collaborative essays by Micheál Ó Siochrú and David Brown, and Francis Ludlow and Arlene Crampsie.

Volume II concludes with an **Afterword by Nicholas Canny**, “Interpreting the History of Early Modern Ireland: From the Sixteenth Century to the Present” (638-663). Canny’s afterword, paired with Ohlmeyer’s introduction, offers specialists and newcomers to Irish history a reliable overview of the material. The two essays are essential reading on “how and why people acted as they did” (Ohlmeyer 19; Canny 663).

AND NOW THE QUESTION: To what extent will Volume II succeed in resetting received interpretations of early-modern Irish history? This is a matter for present and future debate over a variety of platforms and settings. And we say, *Let The Conversation Begin.* ♦

This essay honors the memory of Tyrone Guthrie, Sam McCready, Siobhán Kilfeather, and a favorite cousin: Daniel Jones Conway



NOTES

1. One-volume histories of Ireland include Margaret Mac Curtain, *Tudor and Stuart Ireland* (Gill & Macmillan, 1972); R.F. Foster, *Modern Ireland, 1600-1972* (Penguin, 1988); Thomas Bartlett, *Ireland: A History* (Cambridge UP, 2010); *et al.* Earlier sources by Irish historians – e.g., William Lecky’s classic *History of Ireland in the Eighteenth-Century* (1808; see Google Books) and Mary Frances Cusack’s *Illustrated History of Ireland* (1868) -- are useful examples of earlier historiography.

2. Other essential work: Guy Beiner, *Forgetful Remembrance... Vernacular Historiography of a Rebellion in Ulster* (Oxford UP, 2018), an important book on a failed rising, 1798, No. Ireland, and its recollections. Also, John McCavitt, *Sir Arthur Chichester* (Institute of Irish Studies, Queen’s University, Belfast, 1998), and McCavitt’s *Flight of the Earls* (Gill & Macmillan, 2002; [illustrated review](#), Mulvihill, *Seventeenth-Century News*, online). And a special issue of *Eighteenth-Century Studies* (Spring, 2012), “Ireland and the Enlightenment,” edited by Sean D. Moore; essays by Moore, Máire Kennedy, David Berman, Michael Brown, Olga A. Tsapina, Jim Smyth. Other indispensables: *Irish Literary Supplement*, ed. Robert G. Lowery (Boston College, Irish Studies Program / American Conference for Irish Studies); and Tudor and Stuart Ireland Conference podcasts <historyhub.ie>; also Jason McElligott, early modern female book ownership (ongoing project, Marsh’s Library, Dublin) <soundcloud.com>.

3. Thomas Bartlett (Member, Royal Irish Academy; professor emeritus, University of Aberdeen), General Editor, *The Cambridge History of Ireland*; also author, *Ireland: A History* (Cambridge UP, 2010; 625 pp.; rev., B. Girvin, *EHR* [April, 2011], 397-399; online); etc. His contribution is broad and deep.

4. See Cambridge University Press’s webpage for its new four-volume *History of Ireland*, with publication particulars and images; see also the direct “Video” link, page 1, to the publisher’s project video.

5. For information on the timeframe of the entire project, see Ohlmeyer, Acknowledgments, Volume II, xvi (“In November 2014, we held a workshop in the Trinity Long Room Hub in Dublin ... and discussed our vision”, etc.). For reliable reviews, see “The Cambridge Histories,” *Irish Literary Supplement*, online, Fall, 2019; also Diarmaid Ferriter, *The Irish Times*, online, June 2, 2018.

6. A milestone in Irish Studies is the recent digitization of the important **1641 Rebellion Depositions** archive, Trinity College Dublin; see website, with images, being transcriptions (testimonials) of over 8000 deposed witnesses to this important rising: <<https://1641.tcd.ie/>>.

7. Jane Ohlmeyer is Erasmus Smith's Professor of Modern History, Trinity College Dublin; Director, Trinity Long Room Hub; and Chair, Irish Research Council. For details on her contributions and interests, view TCD's faculty webpage: < <https://www.tcd.ie/history/staff/ohlmeyerj.php> >; also < https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jane_Ohlmeyer >.

8. Ohlmeyer, in her explanation of the overall goal of the project (p. 19), is deferring to the words of Nicholas Canny who contributed the important Afterword in Volume II, pp. 638-663: "...how and why people acted as they did", page 663.

9. Heroic resistance to the English goal of subjugating and also decatholicizing Ireland is praised by English poet, Sir Edmund Spenser, who held several official posts in Ireland (Reign of Elizabeth I): "The Irish are one of the most ancient nations that I know of at this end of the world [and come of] as mighty a race as the world ever brought forth" (*View of the State of Ireland Written by Edmund Spenser, Esq., in the Yeare 1596* [Dublin, 1633, p.26]; as referenced in J.P. Prendergast, *The Cromwellian Settlement of Ireland* [London: Longman, 1865; rpt., London: Constable, 1996], xxix). See also Raymond Jenkins, "Spenser and Ireland," *ELH* (June, 1952), 131-142.

10. Yeats's famous lines on Fenian hero, John O'Leary, and the death of "romantic Ireland," are the refrain in Yeats's poem, "September 1913"; the lines appear four times in the poem, at the close of each of the four stanzas (*The Collected Poems Of W.B. Yeats* [NY; Macmillan, 1903; 15th ed., 1968], 106-107). For a splendid color photograph of John Butler Yeats's portrait of O'Leary (1904), see Sam McCready's *The Great Yeats! Remarkable Father of a Remarkable Family* (Belfast: Lagan Press, 2010). The Mulvihill Collection of Rare & Special Books includes a first-edition copy of John Butler Yeats's *Memories* published by his daughters, Elizabeth and Lily, Cuala Press (Churchtown, Dundrum [Dublin], 1923), with lovely title-page logo of Lady Emer.

11. Scholarship on the English 'plantation' of Ireland, as well as the appalling Penal Laws, is quite extensive; an early source, especially on the plantation 'system', or practice, is Prendergast's *Cromwell Settlement*; see note 9, above.

12. We thank David Edwards for including in his essay two graphics (statistical tables), being, "Financing Irish Government, 1603-1625" and "The Irish Army On The Establishment" (pp. 53-54); both graphics originate in Joseph M. McLaughlin, "The Making of the Irish Leviathan" (TCD Ms 672).

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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AUTHOR NOTE

Maureen E. Mulvihill (Princeton Research Forum, NJ; formerly, Associate Fellow, Institute for Research in History, NY) is an established scholar and rare book collector. She studied at Wisconsin (PhD,'82); Columbia University Rare Book School; Yale Center for British Art; and, as NEH Fellow, The Johns Hopkins University. Book Credits: Advisory Editor, *Ireland And The Americas*, 3 vols. (ABC-Clio, 2008); *Poems of Mary Shackleton Leadbeater* (2008); 'Ephelia' (Ashgate UK, 2003); a multimedia monograph, *Thumbprints of Ephelia: Text, Image, Sound* (2002); and *Poems By Ephelia* (NY, 1992, 1993). Her essays on Irish subjects appear in the *Dictionary of Irish Biography*, *Oxford DNB*, *Irish Literary Supplement*, *Eighteenth Century Studies*, *Seventeenth-Century News*, *Encyclopedia of British Women Writers*, etc. The Mulvihill Collection includes Swift, Lady Morgan, Mary Tighe, Oscar Wilde, Wilfrid Scawen Blunt, Mary Shackleton Leadbeater, *The Charter And Statutes of the Royal Irish Academy* (Dublin, 1786), and John Butler Yeats; other authors are mentioned in her [collection profile](#), *Fine Books & Collections* (Autumn, 2016). Collection conservator: David H. Barry, Griffin Bookbinding, St Petersburg, Florida, formerly of Wales UK. Her present interest is Irishwomen's political writings and response, c1603-1801. ♦
