

The Elephant in the Room: Colonialism, Postcolonialism, and Northern Ireland¹

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ABSTRACT: In this paper I address the position of Northern Irish Protestants within (or without) discourses of colonialism and postcolonialism on the island of Ireland. I contend that this position is a problematic one, which calls into question certain assumptions about the colonial or postcolonial nature of Ireland historically and in the present day. Further, I suggest much theory on the subject neglects the complexities of the relationship between contemporary Northern Irish Protestants and the seventeenth-century colonization of Ulster. This is a pity, because it limits understanding of the historical and ongoing conflict in Northern Ireland, as well as concepts of identity and place. I use an autobiographical methodology as a means of reflecting on the multiplicity of individual stories, and the role they might play in opening out discussion of colonial legacies and postcolonial contexts in Northern Ireland and Ireland today.

In 2010 and 2011, I worked on a project called *Troubling Ireland*. Conceived by Danish curators Kuratorisk Aktion, its aim was to explore the operations of capitalism, colonialism and postcolonialism in contemporary Ireland. The project unfolded through a series of workshops attended by a group of artists and curators and held over the course of a year in Dublin, Manorhamilton in County Leitrim, Belfast and Limerick. The Manorhamilton workshop addressed the reproduction of colonial patterns of thought and behavior within global capitalism. Acknowledging the town's plantation history, artist Anna Macleod shaped the workshop around the town's forgotten histories and contemporary currents of politico-religious conflict. She asked me to speak from my research as a cultural geographer, including work I had done on lived experiences of the Irish border.

Kuratorisk Aktion have undertaken significant work on Nordic colonialism.² Danish colonialism in Greenland, they insist, has affected identity and society in both countries, despite the fact that its "legacy [...] has remained structurally invisible on the map of global postcolonial studies."³ Having extensive knowledge of the operations of colonialism in international contexts, they were interested in its ongoing effects in Ireland and made that a central theme of the project. I had studied postcolonial theory previously in relation to Ireland and found it both illuminating and frustrating. My frustration stemmed from the neglect of the problematic positioning of contemporary Northern Irish Protestants within theories defining Northern Ireland as colonial or postcolonial "depending on how you perceive the implementation of the Belfast Agreement."⁴

In my presentation for *Troubling Ireland*, I suggested—following Stephen Howe's *Ireland and Empire*—that Ireland cannot be spoken of as straightforwardly postcolonial, since there are reasons for denying it was ever a colony at all.⁵ Tone Olaf Nielsen of Kuratorisk Aktion pointed out that colonialism is not and never was one thing only, and that even if Ireland's experience of rule by another nation was unique, it could still be called colonialism, with reason and productively. What I had (wrongly) thought to be a relatively unreflective use of the adjective 'postcolonial' for Ireland in the project documents had raised my academic and emotional hackles, but Nielsen's

response to my arguments stayed with me. I was asked to join Troubling Ireland, and throughout the following year and three further workshops I thought about why talk of Ireland as colonial and postcolonial induced a revisionist impulse in me. As Gerry Kearns notes, revisionism is in itself a postcolonial legacy, revealing anxiety about the colonial past.⁶

In the light of my rethinking process, I am taking this opportunity to look at the issues once more. In the paper I discuss some ways in which Ireland is defined as a former colony, and how postcolonial theory is applied to Ireland and to a lesser extent, to Northern Ireland. Much of this will be familiar ground. Then I look at the position of Northern Irish Protestants in relation to this theory. In what I have read, they—we—appear only sporadically, and when we appear, analysis of our position can be superficial and sketchy.

I use this “we” with caution. The reason I was—am, sometimes—uncomfortable with how “postcolonial” is used to describe Ireland is because I grew up in a Protestant community in Northern Ireland. As I hope to show later, this does not mean one thing, and I am cautious about identifying myself as a Northern Irish Protestant because Protestant and Catholic identities often are perceived in simplistic and sectarian terms in public discourse. Nonetheless, despite my reservations with labelling myself as such, I am shaped in some very meaningful ways as a Protestant, outside of private religious practices, and especially in the context of a still-divided Northern Ireland.⁷ Therefore I am unable to read or talk about postcolonialism in Ireland without placing myself in relation to those theories, which tend to suggest I am a colonist, an ill-defined “problem” or nothing at all.

Because of this personal investment in the academic working out of what postcolonialism means for Northern Irish Protestants, I have chosen to frame the body of the paper through an autobiographical methodology. I believe that acknowledging subjective entanglements with academic theory is important. Within feminism, such tactics are employed to help researchers sidestep the pretence to neutrality, objectivity and separateness from the research subject once so pervasive in a patriarchal and phallogocentric academy. Donna Haraway explains her commitment to personal involvement in research so:

Following an ethical and methodological principle for science studies that I adopted many years ago, I will critically analyze, or “deconstruct”, only that which I love and only that in which I am deeply implicated.⁸

I avail myself of this principle, which underlies everything I write and make, and in this paper plays a major and explicit part. I also believe that stories of individual lives can contribute—at the very least—to complicating dangerously basic perceptions of the “other” in Northern Ireland (and elsewhere). Following from my discussion of colonialism and postcolonialism in Northern Ireland, and what these histories and theories mean for Northern Irish Protestants, I examine the notion of autobiography—its uses, its pitfalls and its application in academic work. I go on to outline my autobiography, including family history, with reference to how that intersects with my earlier arguments.

Colonialism in Ireland

Ireland’s troubled relationship to the neighboring island has—notoriously—some eight hundred years’ pedigree. The Anglo-Normans arrived in Ireland in the twelfth century and established a number of colonies across the island, including one centered on Dublin, later called the Pale, and others in east Ulster. The Anglo-Normans are the people for whom the term “more Irish than the Irish themselves” was coined, and by degrees those who stayed in Ireland assimilated with the surrounding Gaelic population. The English made further organized attempts

at colonization during the sixteenth century, in Counties Monaghan, Armagh, Down and Antrim, but each of these failed in the face of resistance by local Gaelic lords. More successful small-scale plantations were carried out in Laois and Offaly. However, English power took effect principally in the Pale, comprising present-day County Dublin and parts of Counties Kildare, Meath and Louth. Repeatedly over the centuries, the English Crown made the use of Irish dress, customs, social structures and language illegal, but these laws were enforced unevenly and sporadically, and did not succeed in eroding Gaelic culture and society to any great extent.⁹

The plantations of the early seventeenth century constitute a turning point in the relationship between Ireland and England, Wales and Scotland. Generally this is agreed to have been a colonial period, however untidy, partial and ambiguous the colonial nature of that enterprise may seem. In an Ulster socially and economically devastated by the Nine Years' War, having suffered environmental ravages and significant population loss, the impact of settlement was profound and lasting. Plantation attempted the replacement of one social, political, economic and cultural system with another, with variable success. Many Irish were dispossessed, most of whom were probably chiefs and lords and their soldiers. Many others stayed where they were but lost their social structures and status and were made to pay higher rents for their lands than their new English and Scots neighbors. As the century wore on, and particularly after the anti-plantation uprising of 1641, the Irish were further disenfranchised, and their landholdings dwindled. Crucially, as many scholars agree, one of the most divisive factors in this plantation was that it happened during the Reformation. As well as laws penalizing Gaelic language, dress, social customs and land use, laws dictating adherence to the Established Church and directing religious practices were also introduced.¹⁰ Historian A.T.Q. Stewart notes that because of this:

The general opinion is that the Ulster plantation added a new and unassimilable element to the Irish population... [And] from that point on, the population was sharply divided into planters and Gaels.¹¹

The subsequent history of what began as plantation and colonization and developed into a complex colonial relationship between Ireland and Britain can be understood in many different ways. Some facts are clear: Irish resources were decimated for (largely) English and Scots profit during the initial decades of the plantation; Catholics in Ireland (mostly but not exclusively descended from the Gaelic Irish) were discriminated against to greater or lesser extents, formally and informally, from this time until independence was achieved in 1921, and continued to be discriminated against by the state in Northern Ireland until very recently;¹² British attitudes to, and exploitation of, Ireland at the very least exacerbated the Great Famine in the mid-1840s; and land in Ireland was concentrated in the hands of a very few from the eighteenth century until the Land Acts of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. These are just a few examples. Such historical facts alone, of course, do not account for many other important considerations, including the specific extents to which planters and natives were ethnically, culturally and socially different; the varying social and economic positions of Protestant planters within early modern Ireland and down through the centuries; levels of intermarriage and cultural cross-fertilization between planters and Gaels; the common ground perceived between Protestant and Catholic working-class communities at certain points in history; and the participation of Protestants in Irish cultural revivals. Again, just a few examples.

However, Joseph Ruane gives a definition of colonialism that chimes with the précis of plantation and list of historical injustices appearing above:

Colonialism as a process refers to the intrusion into and conquest of an inhabited territory by representatives (formal and informal) of an external power; the displacement of the native inhabitants (elites and/or commoners) from resources and positions of power; the subsequent exercise of economic, political and cultural control over the territory and native population by the intruders and their descendants, in their own interests and in the name and interests of the external power.¹³

Each of these phenomena has been invoked (either to be affirmed or challenged) in the debate among advocates and opponents of postcolonial theory over whether Ireland was a colony at all. From here I move to look at some arguments on both sides.

Postcolonialism in Ireland

Joe Cleary believes that the idea of colonialism as a past event in Ireland was superseded in the late 1970s and early 1980s by postcolonial theory, which suggests that colonialism continues in its effects into the present day.¹⁴ Postcolonial theory attracts argument and debate on varied grounds; Cleary identifies a pervading concern with what is perceived as “an unwelcome politicization of Irish cultural studies.”¹⁵ Some reject the implication that Ireland’s experience is identical, or at least closely comparable, with those of so-called Third World countries like India, because of course the Irish were able to participate as colonists, administrators, missionaries and governors within a British imperial framework, which positioned them at times and in places very differently from other colonized subjects. Others point to specific characteristics of the relationship between England (later Britain) and Ireland that differentiate it from England/Britain’s relationship with every other colony, including the Act of Union in 1801, when Ireland was subsumed into the United Kingdom. Howe indicated in 2000 that many postcolonial analyses of contemporary Ireland related to literature and culture and not to economy or politics.¹⁶ This lack has since been addressed. Cleary, in fact, gives an economic definition of colonialism: it was, he indicates, “an international process through which different parts of the globe were differentially integrated into an emergent world capitalist system.”¹⁷ Howe also criticized the neglect of “settler colonialism” as a distinct category pertaining to a particular historical period. Further objections stem from the desire to have the Irish economy viewed within a European framework rather than, again, a “Third-World” framework; postcolonial theory invoked comparative economic development in Africa and Asia in order to explain Ireland’s recession in the 1980s and 1990s.¹⁸

Counter-arguments to all these objections abound. Clare Carroll argues that to deny Ireland’s contemporary postcolonial status is to deny that early modern Ireland was ever a colony, and there are many reasons for continuing to consider England/Britain’s relationship to Ireland a colonial one even after the Act of Union and up until independence.¹⁹ These include the particular structures of local government and the position of the police, unlike those elsewhere in the United Kingdom, the existence of the Lord Lieutenantcy until independence was gained, the repeated constraints put on the Irish economy to make it subservient to the wider British economy, and British responses to Irish famine.²⁰ Cleary insists that the assumption that “there is such a thing as a standard colonial experience” is “untenable,” and making Ireland exceptional in this regard is both inaccurate and unproductive.²¹ Likewise, Kevin Whelan cautions against “reinserting nationalist exceptionalism under the guise of complexity” in analyses of Ireland’s colonial (or non-colonial) status.²² However, David Lloyd points to the crux of these debates when he states that “to assert that Ireland is and has been a colony is certainly to deny the legitimacy of British government in Northern Ireland.”²³ Howe believes that postcolonial theorists risk intellectual irresponsibility if they ignore “the strong contemporary political consequences which

follow from a belief that Northern Ireland is a settler colonial regime."²⁴ This is a clear echo of the revisionist debate in Irish historiography, in which "a pervasive anxiety not to give historical aid and comfort to the Provisional IRA" is attributed to those revisionists who challenged received (often perceived as nationalist) versions of Irish history.²⁵

Northern Irish Protestants, colonialism and postcolonialism

I do not deny that Ireland once was a colony. Neither do I downplay historical (including recent) injustices and oppressions visited on Irish people by, or in the name of, England and Britain. However, I do not believe that all revisionism, in history or in postcolonial theory, is grounded only (or mainly) in anxiety about the contemporary political repercussions of acknowledging an often-terrible colonial history. Some of it reiterates history's multifaceted and complex nature. I do believe theorists must consider the effect of statements on Northern Ireland's colonial status on its present populations. When Kevin Whelan writes that "Ireland was England's oldest colony, as well as its first postcolony; Northern Ireland was its last colony," this declaration is in some senses simply factual, but in others partial, and (potentially) ideologically loaded.²⁶ Likewise, Terry Eagleton's assessment of the situation in Northern Ireland seems to allow for, yet actually denies, historical change and development:

[S]ettler colonialism... is when they do not only suppress your language and plunder your resources but actually have the impudence to come and live with you. Why is it plausible not to see Northern Ireland as a colony? [... One] reason is the colonial settlers there form the majority, and have been there long enough to feel quite as much at home as Celts in Kerry.²⁷

He thus recognizes that "colonial settlers" have come to feel at home in Northern Ireland, but to call present-day Protestants "colonial settlers" is, I contend, dangerously ahistorical. If (as I presume) he is referring to Protestants, or perhaps unionists, these groups are neither identical nor exclusively the descendants of English, Scots and Welsh colonial settlers in Ireland in the period between the twelfth and seventeenth centuries. With this in mind, and given the four centuries that have elapsed since the plantation, in what sense can either Protestants or unionists in Northern Ireland today as a group be called 'settlers'? Eagleton's statement demonstrates what Sandra Scham terms "a persistent lack of nuanced examination" evident in postcolonial studies.²⁸

Any nuanced examination of colonialism and postcolonialism in Ireland must dwell on its planter communities and their descendants. The notion of "settlers" is given some space in postcolonial theory, but according to Pamela Clayton, not much, and that relatively recently; she contends that "Ulster's position as a settler colony [...] was, for most of the twentieth century, completely overlooked in the academic literature."²⁹ In the twenty-first century, Clare Carroll acknowledges that postcolonial theory can fail "to distinguish between different kinds of colonialism—between that in settler and non-settler countries[, for example]."³⁰ Whelan refers to (but does not expand upon) "the intractable 'settler' problem of the unionist population of the North," again, ignored in much of postcolonial studies.³¹ Lorenzo Veracini traces the history of the concept of "settler colonialism," pointing out that "building settler colonies and the exercise of colonial domination, while different, should be seen as inescapably intertwined."³² He considers settler colonialism to be: "[A]bout turning a place and a specific human material into something else, and, paradoxically and simultaneously, about a specific human material that remains true to itself in a place that is 'other.'"³³ Veracini makes the further point that "where it is most triumphant, settler colonialism effectively covers its tracks."³⁴ Settler colonialism in Ulster has failed, singularly, to cover its tracks, because it never was complete.

Cleary's analysis allows for settlers as a distinct "independent third factor" in the imperial relationship between the "mother-country" and the colonized natives, noting that unlike administrators, settlers' investments in a colony were land- and property-based, therefore rooted, and likely to be vigorously defended when threatened. He also recognizes that the initial distinctions between settlers and natives were not fixed for all time:

It has been suggested [that] neither ethnic descent nor culture but religion became the major index that distinguished between colonizer and colonized in early modern Ireland... Because colonial processes change over time, however, it may also be the case that the indices that distinguished between colonizer and colonized changed also, and that the ways in which religion, culture and ethnicity were articulated with each other to demarcate the divide varied from one conjuncture to the next.³⁵

This, I believe, is a crucial point. At some points in history there have been "settler" populations, as opposed to "native" populations, in Ireland. Certain features made them distinct from each other. These features were not then, and are not now, immutable. From that time to this, broadly speaking, there have been two "distinct" and often at-odds communities in the north of Ireland, one of which has been dominant and more or less oppressive until recently. But the people comprising each community are likely to have a substantial amount in common, socially, economically, even culturally, and certainly ethnically, if not religiously. Archaeologist Audrey Horning proposes that material culture from the early modern period gives the lie to any idea of "a binary opposition between colonizer and colonized," and she advocates "models which [...] allow for the fluid dynamism of identity and interactions precipitated by the colonial experience" as offering "an alternative of real social relevance" in Northern Ireland today; especially important in a place where "perceptions of colonialism remain paramount to the construction of contemporary identities."³⁶

Albert Memmi writes of colonialism "manufactur[ing]" colonists as well as colonized.³⁷ Tadhg O'Keeffe refers to the idea that "both 'natives' and 'colonists' are transformed (and therefore become postcolonial?) at the very moment of contact."³⁸ And Robert Young, touching on the performance of sameness over time characteristic of both nationalist and unionist Ireland, notes that "fixity of identity is only sought in situations of instability and disruption, of conflict and change."³⁹ These formulations all contribute to our "consideration of historical human subjects and their social relations as subjects and objects" within colonial and postcolonial contexts.⁴⁰ However, just as simple models of colonizer/colonized relationships based on absolute and enduring difference are irresponsible and unsustainable, so uncritical notions of interaction and mutual transformation are also problematic, where they deny real operations of power between two groups.

This brings me to my foundational concern with colonial contexts and postcolonial legacies in Northern Ireland and Ireland—is it possible to acknowledge colonialism, and recognize and condemn its injustice, while simultaneously insisting that, in the present, it is inaccurate and inappropriate to define Protestants in Ireland as colonizers? Is it possible, as a Northern Irish Protestant today, to admit to a sense of shame and guilt at ancestral land-grabbing (and possibly numerous other exploitative and oppressive acts), to point to its wrongness, while simultaneously insisting that I am neither a settler nor a colonist, and at this stage in history have as much right to belong where I was born as an Irish Catholic?⁴¹

Autobiographical approaches

In 2000 a publication called *Bear in Mind* appeared, compiled by an organization called An Crann The Tree and published in Belfast. Its purpose was to give some people affected by the Troubles a

platform from which to tell their stories, and Northern Irish poet John Hewitt was quoted in the introduction by way of explanation:

Bear in mind these dead
I can find no plainer words.

The careful words of my injunction
are unrhetorical, as neutral
and unaligned as any I know:
they propose no more than thoughtful response.⁴²

The telling of individual stories is not unproblematic in Northern Ireland, as in any post- or mid-conflict society. Not all stories are considered equal, and indeed some elicit active offence or deep hurt; there is then the question of whose stories are heard, and when, where and by whom. Nonetheless, personal stories can be powerful. Listening to stories from the “other” side, when that is possible, can make what has been unknown and threatening become human and legible, if not shared. John Hewitt’s measured words resonate with Kevin Whelan’s notion of “ethical witness,” achieved when a person establishes a certain distance between what she is born to and what she aspires to, thus enabling her to “address [her]self to [her] culture.”⁴³

I believe this applies to colonial contexts and postcolonial legacies too. The potential political (and human) consequences of continuing to apply provocative labels like “native” and “settler” in Northern Ireland are grave. Individual lives and family histories always offer a more complex story of negotiated identities, interdependence and integration, mixing, exchange and ambiguity, as well as difference, conflict and hostility, than that which is evident in public narratives. Horning points to what she calls “the potentially subversive impact of a deeper historical understanding;” while history may be seen as the cause of contemporary conflict in Northern Ireland, some also see it as mitigating, if used differently.⁴⁴

For this reason, I have chosen to be explicit about my personal position in relation to the issues discussed in this paper, and to make use of autobiographical information in framing them. I aim to tell something of my own story as a contribution to complicating sectarian simplicities, and as an attempt at offering a form of Whelan’s “ethical witness.” I hope that in telling this story I can show movement from that to which I was born towards that to which I aspire, and then a (somewhat uneasy) settling between the two.

Autobiography is—unsurprisingly—not a simple process of using “I” and “me” and recounting one’s life story, or bits of it. Matthew Hollow refers to the use of life history in academic writing as an “autobiographical performance;” this performance can be one of unity, coherence and the inevitability of destiny, or it can be about multiplicity, ambiguity and the stumbling way in which life unfolds.⁴⁵ Hollow acknowledges arguments about whether it is a valid strategy to insert personal stories into academic texts but contends that “the personal” is always already in these texts, whether or not by the explicit intention of the author.⁴⁶ Further, the autobiographical subject may assume a “label” (such as “woman”), and in this case, autobiographical content may position the author as representative of a group. As Hollow suggests, the subjective voice “becomes less about the individual who is performing than on whose behalf the individual is performing.”⁴⁷ Regardless of the motivation for including autobiography, and the purpose to which it is put, Hollow believes that the most successful uses evidence “a self-critical style of self-writing,” admitting ambivalence, memory gaps and other disruptions to personal narratives.⁴⁸ Jaime Aurell too approves “experimental autobiographers” who “narrate within an epistemologically sceptical frame.”⁴⁹

Nancy Miller considers the use of autobiography to have roots in “an earlier feminist critique of universal values.”⁵⁰ She recognizes that openly personal content in academic writing for some is “an occasion to mourn the loss of literary standards, critical objectivity and philosophical rigor.”⁵¹ Miller, however, believes that autobiography—in this case, memoir—is “a democratic form, giving voice to minority experience,” and its unenthusiastic reception in some quarters may be as much to do with women’s “predominance” within the genre as anything else.⁵² Rocío G. Davies indicates that in feminist terms, autobiography can be a political catalyst because “private stories support the articulation of public histories.”⁵³ Telling complex private stories may, therefore, support the complication of crude public narratives.

I appropriate two definitions to frame my own autobiographical experiment here: first is Miller’s idea of memoir as “the record of an experience in search of a community.”⁵⁴ As I have explained, one of my difficulties with postcolonial theory on Ireland is the absence, or one-dimensional presence, of Irish and Northern Irish Protestants. Where “unionists” are dwelt upon, as in F.C. McGrath’s paper on Ulster unionism and postcolonial theory, I generally do not recognize myself (nor all those Protestants I know who are not unionists).⁵⁵ My hope is that one brief but nuanced portrait may elicit recognition (and possibly identification) in others identifying themselves as Protestant, and contribute to disrupting sectarian certainties and simplifications. The second definition is Jaime Aurell’s notion of academic autobiography as “an intentional and creative positioning of oneself in history, geography and culture.”⁵⁶ My academic interests in place and identity are driven by my personal attachment to, and difficulties with, those concepts: the difficulties arise in part from my historical, geographical and cultural position as a Northern Irish Protestant. Therefore, I think of all my work, visual and academic, as ways of engaging with this history, geography and culture; what amounts to an ongoing struggle to unfold, understand, interrogate and critique. In my work for *Troubling Ireland*, and in this paper, I have made the personal nature of that engagement explicit.

My autobiography

I was born in 1978 and brought up in Holywood, in County Down. Both parents’ families had been living in Holywood for a few generations. My mother’s father, Derek Eves, traced his descent from seventeenth-century planters. A John Eves was born to planter parents in Wicklow in 1641, and the Irish branch of the family grew from there, bringing in O’Briens, Caugheys, O’Neills, Webbs, MacGregors, Simmses, Greeveses and Munsters among others. The Eveses were, in the twentieth century, members of the Exclusive Brethren church, a strict sect verging on the cultish; most of the family left in the 1950s.

My grandfather’s family was involved in a number of businesses that had generated substantial wealth through the nineteenth century and continued to do so in the twentieth century. These included a timber import firm, set up in 1810 by a Norwegian-Danish forebear called Paul Løvenørn Munster and, later, linen mills. Derek Eves directed an engineering company called Munster Simms. His work entailed frequent international travel, and I remember my grandparents’ house as being filled with exotic ornaments, books and clothes, and giving the impression of wealth and sophistication.

These factors probably contributed to the Eves family’s location somewhat outside the mainstream of Protestant culture in Northern Ireland. Members of the Exclusive Brethren church separate themselves as rigorously from other Protestants as from Catholics, and in my family their overwhelming preoccupation with religious practices did not leave much room for political engagement. Wealth too can act as a political insulator, at least in terms of politico-religious conflict, if not in terms of class privilege. My grandfather was at least culturally nationalist, according to my mother: in turn she communicated to me some sense of being Irish, or Northern Irish, but as an ambivalent identity, one among many, and not the most important.

My father's grandfather, Henry Reid, came from the Lowlands of Scotland to settle in Belfast in the early twentieth century. He is supposed to have fled an abusive and very religious father, a story invoked in the family to explain their prevalently atheist attitude. He married a Belfast woman, Martha McIntosh, and they had three sons and a daughter. Henry was a cabinet-maker at the Harland and Wolff shipyard, and Martha ran a shop. Their eldest son, Ernest, was my grandfather. He went to university and became a civil engineer.

Ernest had a tumultuous and deeply unhappy family life. His first wife left him and their three children, and he had three more children with his second wife, including my father. He was an alcoholic and a gambler, and when he died of stomach cancer at 42, the family wealth evaporated. Although the Reids were positioned culturally as Protestants in Northern Ireland, they avoided religious practices, and politically were not only outside of, but actively hostile to, the Protestant and unionist mainstream. Ernest put himself forward as an independent (socialist) candidate for Holywood council in the 1950s.

My father grew up in the same social milieu that my sisters and I would occupy thirty years later—in Holywood's Protestant middle class, educated at the local state-funded grammar school. He left school with almost no qualifications, due to undiagnosed dyslexia and the overwhelming dysfunction of his home life, and moved into low-paid work, unlike most of his Holywood peers, who were becoming doctors, solicitors and engineers. My father found stability and belonging through the then-emerging house church movement and was not particularly interested in politics. Nonetheless, having no strong pre-existent sense of himself as a Northern Irish Protestant and/or unionist, he was open to engaging with nationalism. He worked and lived in Derry in the late 1960s, and with Derry friends once visited a Dublin republican who had been involved in the Easter Rising. He told me that he felt then he would have fought for Irish independence in the same circumstances.

By the time I was six, we as a family were attending a so-called charismatic church that had arisen from the house church groups my parents attended in the 1970s. The charismatic movement tended to sidestep the issue of sectarian conflict in Northern Ireland by claiming to be non-denominational, although culturally it was often Protestant in all but name. I went to a state grammar school in Holywood, ostensibly neutral but again effectively Protestant. All of my friends were from Protestant backgrounds and most were middle-class. My own family were middle-class in all respects apart from the crucial matter of income—although my parents' families were wealthy, they were emphatically not. We were able to live in what was considered an exclusive part of Holywood because my grandparents owned the house, but my parents' income was very low. Living in this area, and generally in Holywood, insulated us from some of the horrors of the Northern Irish conflict, and my sisters and I did not directly experience actual violence.

From the perspective of adulthood, and in trying to understand the emotional underpinnings of my academic and art practice, I offer these stories by way of explaining a sense of being always-already outside in Protestant middle-class Holywood. As a family we were culturally and socially Protestant, but historically and contemporarily positioned on the margins of Protestant religious practice. Further, we had a heritage of skepticism about church derived from my mother's family's experience of the Exclusive Brethren, and my father's family's atheism. I fully subscribed to the notion that charismatic Christians were neither Protestant nor Catholic, and would have argued myself not to be Protestant at all until the age of about 20. Further, I had not lost any family members to republican violence. Although by the time I was in my mid-teens I knew that my grandfather and uncle in particular had been in danger from the IRA, I had no visceral sense of being threatened by an "other." And despite the fact that we were middle-class, and on my mother's side upper-middle-class for generations, I had a sense of the precariousness of that status once I became aware of how little money my parents earned.

Also of great importance to me during childhood and adolescence were our family holidays in north Donegal. We visited a particular site each summer, to which we were introduced by family friends from Holywood. We could not afford our own caravan, and my parents always arranged to borrow one or another from their friends. Most caravan owners there when I was a child were from Holywood and members of High Street Presbyterian Church. I developed an intense attachment to this place, for many reasons, one of which was its siting in the “real” Ireland. At a certain point—I cannot remember when, but probably in my early teens—I decided that Holywood and north County Down were too urban, too industrialized, too domesticated, and above all, too unionist and Protestant, to be Irish. I wanted to be Irish, so I identified with this part of Donegal and the west of Ireland in general, and determined that I would move there as soon as I possibly could and distance myself from my roots in north Down. I ignored the fact that my attachment to Donegal was asocial, about my relationship to a landscape, not people, and firmly and romantically identified with nationalists in Irish history and in the contemporary struggles in Northern Ireland.

Conclusion

I consider what I have described up to this point to relate to Kevin Whelan’s notion of filiation and affiliation, and I mentioned earlier that I have since settled somewhere between my filiation and affiliation points, although not comfortably. When I was eighteen or so I realized that urban, middle-class Protestants are neither always accounted for, nor always welcome, in nationalist discourse. Further study in Irish history and cultural studies turned me into something of a revisionist, although greater understanding of revisionism itself leaves me where I am now—attempting to be both skeptical and sensitive towards all identity claims. I have given a necessarily partial version of my family and personal history, and because I have an end in view—demonstrating a few facets of the multiplicity behind the label “Protestant” in Northern Ireland—I may be shaping memories and impressions to suit that end. It is difficult to determine how the sum of all my thinking on identity inflects my current sense of myself as a child and teenager. My idea of what I have inherited from my parents and grandparents is subjective and may be more about what I wanted to receive than what they had to pass on. Nonetheless, that idea is there. I recognize too that I am implicitly claiming to be representative of a group in this paper. My argument is that because I am not simply a Northern Irish Protestant in the public and popular sense (which allows for a few models—middle-class, working-class, moderate, extreme—but not much complexity), therefore nobody is “simply” a Northern Irish Protestant. The same argument applies to Northern Irish Catholics, and indeed, any identity label. I accept that such labels can be necessary and strategic, but sometimes they are put to problematic use, and exploring the individual stories behind them helps to mitigate that.

In relation to colonial contexts and postcolonial legacies, I intend my autobiography to reinforce my argument that “Protestant” in Northern Ireland does not mean “colonist.” As my family history suggests, Protestants in Northern Ireland may or may not be descended from ancestors who were colonists, but certainly will not be exclusively descended from them. That descent, where it applies, does not mean one thing. Further, though I am not certain of the point at which colonists become natives, I am certain that it happens. I am certain too that the continued use of the terms “colonist” and “native” to refer to two religiously, politically and culturally defined groups in Northern Ireland is at best problematic. I hope I am on my way to achieving sufficient distance from my filiation and affiliation points to bear witness in the way described by Whelan. Invoking that concept and Hewitt’s idea of bearing in mind, I suggest that it should be possible to attest to my position as a Northern Irish Protestant at the same time as attesting to the history and legacy of Protestant plantation and domination in the north of Ireland.

NOTES

- 1 I came to this title following Audrey Horning's identification of Northern Ireland as the elephant in the room where Irish postcolonialism is concerned; Audrey Horning, "[Cultures of Contact, Cultures of Conflict? Identity Construction, Colonialist Discourse, and the Ethics of Archaeological Practice in Northern Ireland](#)," *Stanford Journal of Archaeology* 5 (2007).
- 2 See <http://www.rethinking-nordic-colonialism.org> for a survey of one of their major projects.
- 3 Kuratorisk Aktion, *Tupilakosaurus: an Incomplete(able) Survey of Pia Arke's Artistic Work and Practice* (Copenhagen: Kuratorisk Aktion, 2012), 8.
- 4 F.C. McGrath, "[Settler Nationalism: Ulster Unionism and Postcolonial Theory](#)," *Irish Studies Review* 20, no. 4 (2012): 463-485, 464.
- 5 Stephen Howe, *Ireland and Empire: Colonial Legacies in Irish History and Culture* (Oxford UK: Oxford University Press, 2000).
- 6 Gerry Kearns, "[Historical Geographies of Ireland: Colonial Contexts and Postcolonial Legacies](#)," *Historical Geography* 41 (2013): 22-34, 23.
- 7 I use the term "Protestant" rather than "unionist" throughout because they do not mean the same thing, and for me, "Protestant" can be an unsolicited identity, while "unionist" refers to a chosen political identity.
- 8 Donna Haraway, *Modest_Witness@Second_Millennium.FemaleMan@_Meets_OncoMouse™: Feminism and Technoscience* (London: Routledge: 1997), 151.
- 9 James Stevens Curl, *The Londonderry Plantation, 1609-1914: the History, Architecture and Planning of the Estates of the City of London and its Livery Companies in Ulster* (Chichester UK: Phillimore, 1986).
- 10 Curl, *The Honourable the Irish Society and the Plantation of Ulster, 1608-2000: a History and Critique* (Chichester UK: Phillimore, 2000). See also R.J. Hunter, *The Ulster Plantation in Armagh and Cavan, 1608-41* (Belfast: Ulster Historical Foundation, 2012).
- 11 A.T.Q. Stewart, *The Narrow Ground: Aspects of Ulster, 1609-1969* (Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 1997), 23.
- 12 Presbyterians too were subject to discrimination in the seventeenth century in particular, but also in the eighteenth century. They were reluctant to acknowledge the monarch as the head of the church, and therefore to take the Oath of Supremacy. For the state, this called their loyalty into question.
- 13 Quoted in Terrence McDonough, "Introduction," in *Was Ireland a Colony? Economics, Politics and Culture in Nineteenth-Century Ireland*, ed. Terrence McDonough (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2005), vii-xiv, xiv.
- 14 Joe Cleary, "'Misplaced Ideas'? Colonialism, Location and Dislocation in Irish Studies", in *Ireland and Postcolonial Theory*, eds. Clare Carroll and Patricia King (Notre Dame IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2003), 16-45.
- 15 *Ibid.*, 18.
- 16 Howe, *Ireland and Empire*.
- 17 Cleary, "'Misplaced Ideas'?" 43. See also Denis O'Hearn, "Ireland in the Atlantic Economy," in *Was Ireland a Colony*, ed. McDonough, 3-26; and Virginia Crossman, "Local Government in Nineteenth-Century Ireland," in *Was Ireland a Colony*, ed. McDonough, 102-116 for example.
- 18 Cleary, "'Misplaced Ideas'?" 43.
- 19 Clare Carroll, "Barbarous Slaves and Civil Cannibals: Translating Civility in Early Modern Ireland," in *Ireland and Postcolonial Theory*, eds. Carroll and King, 63-80, 63.

- 20 See chapters in Carroll and King, *Ireland and Postcolonial Theory* and McDonough, *Was Ireland a Colony*.
- 21 Cleary, "Misplaced Ideas?" 25.
- 22 Kevin Whelan, "Between Filiation and Affiliation: The Politics of Postcolonial Memory," in *Ireland and Postcolonial Theory*, eds. Carroll and King, 92-108, 97.
- 23 David Lloyd, "After History: Historicism and Irish Postcolonial Studies," in *Ireland and Postcolonial Theory*, eds. Carroll and King, 46-62, 48.
- 24 Howe, *Ireland and Empire*, 140.
- 25 McDonough, "Introduction," viii.
- 26 Whelan, "Between Filiation and Affiliation," 94.
- 27 Terry Eagleton, "Afterword: Ireland and Colonialism." in *Was Ireland a Colony*, ed. McDonough, 326-333, 327.
- 28 Sandra Scham, "Colony or conflict zone?" *Archaeological Dialogues* 13, no. 2 (2006): 205-207, 205.
- 29 Pamela M. Clayton, "Two Kinds of Colony: 'Rebel Ireland' and the 'Imperial Province,'" in *Was Ireland a Colony*, ed. McDonough 235-246, 235.
- 30 Clare Carroll, "Introduction: the Nation and Postcolonial Theory," in *Ireland and Postcolonial Theory*, eds. Carroll and King, 1-15, 8.
- 31 Whelan, "Between Filiation and Affiliation," 94.
- 32 Lorenzo Veracini, "[Settler Colonialism': Career of a Concept](#)," *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 41, no. 2 (2013): 313-333, 314.
- 33 *Loc. cit.*
- 34 *Ibid.*: 325.
- 35 Cleary, "Misplaced Ideas?" 32.
- 36 Horning, "[Archaeology, Conflict and Contemporary Identity](#)," *Archaeological Dialogues* 13, no. 2 (2006): 183-200, 188, 187.
- 37 Albert Memmi, *The Colonizer and the Colonized* (London: Earthscan Publications, 1965), 122.
- 38 Tadhg O'Keefe, "[Starting as We Mean To Go On: Why We Need a Theoretically Informed Historical Archaeology in Ireland](#)," *Archaeological Dialogues* 13, no. 2 (2006): 206-211, 209.
- 39 Robert Young, *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race* (London: Routledge: 1995), 4.
- 40 Lloyd, "After History," 51.
- 41 I ask the question in this way in light of the fact that many Northern Irish Catholics feel out of place too—for generations given to understand themselves as second-class citizens in a Protestant statelet, and both claimed and rejected (and misunderstood) by their co-religionists in the Republic of Ireland.
- 42 Quoted in Cathie McKimm, "Introduction," in *Bear in Mind: Stories of the Troubles*, ed. An Crann *The Tree* (Belfast, Lagan Press: 2000), xi.
- 43 Whelan, "Between Filiation and Affiliation," 108.
- 44 Horning, "Cultures of Contact, Cultures of Conflict," 116.
- 45 Matthew Hollow, "[Introducing the Historian to History: Autobiographical Performances in Historical Texts](#)," *Rethinking History: The Journal of Theory and Practice* 13, no. 1 (2009): 43-52, 43.
- 46 *Ibid.*, 45.
- 47 *Ibid.*, 48.
- 48 *Ibid.*, 51.
- 49 Jaume Aurell, "[Autobiography as Unconventional History: Constructing the Author](#)," *Rethinking History: The Journal of Theory and Practice* 10, no. 3 (2006): 433-449, 435.

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- 50 Nancy K. Miller, "[But Enough About Me, What Do You Think of My Memoir?](#)" *The Yale Journal of Criticism* 13, no. 2 (2000): 421-436, 421.
- 51 Ibid., 422.
- 52 Ibid., 431.
- 53 Rocío G. Davies, "[Academic Autobiography as Women's History: Jill Ker Conway's True North and Leila Ahmed's A Border Passage](#)," *Rethinking History* 13, no. 1 (2009): 109-123, 110.
- 54 Miller, "But enough About Me," 432.
- 55 McGrath, "Settler Nationalism."
- 56 Aurell, "Autobiography as Unconventional History," 439.