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Enter Macmorris

Patricia Palmer, David J Baker, Willy Maley
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In September 1599, Red Hugh O’Donnell took Donough O’Connor Sligo prisoner. O’Connor, whose commitment to the Confederate cause during the Nine Years War had been lacklustre at best, asked if he might buy by his freedom with a ransom. “O’Donnell replied he would not take the chamber, wherein they were sitting, full of money” in exchange for his captive, and marched him off to Hugh O’Neill. While in O’Neill’s custody in Dungannon, O’Connor wrote to his wife, the Countess of Desmond, widow of the beheaded 15th Earl. He requested her to seek Lord Lieutenant Essex’s permission “to come to me, whereby I might confer with you of matters that I dare not write, fearing of the way”. (It was precisely O’Donnell’s interception of a letter on its “way” between the governor of Connacht and Lord Deputy Mountjoy – a letter indicating O’Connor’s willingness to do business with the English – that had landed him in this fix in the first place.) He then sent a second messenger, one Mulroney Óg, to the countess, with an even more elliptical letter. As the Dublin administration reported to London, the letter consisted only of “four blank sheets signed with his name, asking her to signify in each of these that he was not allowed to write anything himself unknown to O’Donnell”. “These sheets,” Mulroney Óg explained, “were for the Lord Lieutenant and others.” Baffled by four signed but otherwise wordless sheets, the English officials turned to the messenger for an explanation, but they drew as much of a blank with Mulroney Óg as they had with the letter he delivered. The messenger stayed shtum, fearing that anything he said (in Irish) could be used against him when translated into English. As the officials reported, “Mulroney durst not tell the cause of these blanks, for lack of a trusty interpreter both to the State and O’Connor.” Whatever you say, say nothing – twice over.

Having spent almost two years, on O’Donnell’s say-so, in leg fetters on Lough Esk, O’Connor Sligo finally threw in his lot with Rory O’Donnell and campaigned in Munster in the dying days of the war. By the time he surrendered to Mountjoy in 1602, the Irish had been routed at Kinsale; the Spanish had lifted their storm-torn sails and beat a retreat for A Coruña; Hugh O’Donnell had been poisoned in Simancas; Rory O’Donnell was in exile in Rome; and plantation and a new colonial order were about to transform Ireland.

The elliptical episode of the four-page letter whose only message was the impossibility of committing any message to paper points to a much wider, untold story of blanks and elisions. The wordless letter and Mulroney Óg’s own silence slot into a much larger gap in our national narrative. We may decry the fissures and dispossessions wrought by the Tudor Conquest and the plantations that followed but our sense of what was lost – of what exactly went down – is vague. The pre-conquest past has the unreality, the spectral twitch, of a phantom limb. We may imagine ourselves at an angle to the Anglosphere, basking in our guilt-free positioning as both recovering colony and third richest country in Europe, but we have little countervailing sense of what exactly the absence that haunts our modernity might be.

Maybe the time has come to revisit the backstory … Edmund Spenser wrote much of *The Faerie Queene* in Kilcolman Castle in Co Cork, a castle confiscated from Sir John of Desmond’s which, along with three thousand acres, had come Spenser’s way in the Plantation of Munster. In the allegory of Book 5 of his epic, he transforms the story of Sir John of Desmond’s beheading into the tale of a Saracen knight, Pollente. In the poem, the villainous Pollente gets his comeuppance at the hands of the heroic Sir Artegall who chops off his head. Once the severed head has been staked to a pole in Cork city, Artegall, an allegorical body-double for Spenser’s patron, Lord Deputy Arthur
Grey, sets about destroying all trace of Pollente’s existence:

All that Castle quite he raced [razed],
Even from the sole of his foundation,
And all the hewn stones thereof defaced,
That there mote be no hope of reparation,
Nor memory thereof to any nation.

The colonial imperative is to destroy all memory of what went before; the new order will be founded on amnesia. The defeat of the Irish Confederacy at the end of the Nine Years War reduced the country, in the eyes of the victors, to a clean slate, a tabula rasa. Fynes Morryson, Lord Deputy Mountjoy’s secretary, declared that, after the Flight of the Earls, “Ireland was left as a payre of cleane tables, where in the state might write lawes at pleasure”. What went before was set at naught, and the native elite felt the transformation keenly. Silence is the acoustic equivalent of a blank and, after 1607, the native poets heard that silence fall. In Anocht is uaigneach Éire, “Lonely is Ireland Tonight”, Eóghan Ruadh Mac an Bhaird, hereditary bard of the O’Donnell’s, registers the transformation:

mo thruaighe mar tharla aniodh
labhra uaithe ní héistior;
I grieve for her condition today, not a word is heard from her.

Both music and the Irish language itself are in lockdown: “cosc ar cheol, glas ar Ghaoidheilg”. But into that silence other voices were projecting themselves, in a new language. By the time the Cromwellian plantation was bedding down, Dáibhi Ó Bradaigh could hear nothing but “gliogarnach ghall”, “foreign babbling”. Ireland was being written in a new language “voluble, sharp-tongued and overwhelming”, “béarlach beárrtha bádhach”. The problem is – these are the voices which continue to shape our image of pre-conquest Ireland; at our back lies a past confected from colonial stereotypes.

Woodcuts from John Derrick’s Image of Ireland (1581) continue to colonise our visual imaginings of the period: Irishmen wrapped in rugs talking to wolves (in Latin), natives roistering at an open-air feast, entertained by a disreputable ensemble: a rhymer, a melancholy harpist, and two bare-buttocked braigetóirí (buffoon-farters). Shakespeare’s stage-Irishmen, which gave expression to wartime attitudes in the Globe in the 1590s, continue to license contemporary audiences’ merry condescension. (RSC audiences watching Henry V in 2016 – the Brexit Henry V – could hoot as mirthfully as ever at its stage Irishman, Macmorris; the loudest guffaws, however, were reserved for its Scottish character, Capt Jamy, who reproduced not Shakespeare’s words but the sound-effects of a Scottish accent, saying nothing but some version of “hoo-hoo-hoo” every time he appeared.) In Richard II (1595), the king sets off for “our Irish wars”, execrating the natives in a way that merged Richard’s fourteenth century war with Elizabeth’s sixteenth century one:

We must supplant those rough rug-headed kerns,
Which live like venom where no venom else
But only they have privilege to live.

For Edmund Spenser, the natives were more verminous than venomous. The “good women” of Ireland, he declared,

love to do but little work … to lie in and sleep, or to louse themselves in the sunshine, they that have bene but a while in Ireland, can well witness.

Barnaby Rich, the army captain who moonlighted as a writer of romances who gave plotlines to
Shakespeare, tells his English readers that the Irish are “sluttish and uncleanly”, “naturally inclined to cruelty”, and “nuzled from their Cradles in the very puddle of Popery”. The anonymous writer of “The Dialogue of Silvynne and Peregrynne” didn’t hold back either: the natives were “caterpillors”, the “scvm of canniballes”, and “as daungerous vermin as euer possessed a stoany cave”. Andrew Trollope, a creature of Sir Francis Walsingham, Elizabeth I’s principal secretary and spymaster general, sent his impressions back to his London paymasters in September 1581:

The Irish men, except the walled towns, are not Christians, civil, or human creatures, but heathen, or rather savage, and brute beast ... At night the Mr., Mrs., or dame, men servants, women servants, guests, strangers, and all, lie in one little room not so good or handsome as many a hogs-cot in England, and when they rise in the morning, they shake their ears and go their ways without any serving of God or other making of them a-ready, and their exercises all day, and many times in the night are murder, burning of houses, theft, and mischief. And their feed is flesh if they can steal any, for they have no occupations, or have bene brought up to any labour to earn anything. And if they can get no stolen flesh, they eat … leek blades, and a three-leafed grass which they call shamrocks and, for want thereof, carrion and grass … with such butter as is to loathsome to describe; the best of them have seldom bread and the common sort never look after any.

These fevered dispatches, written by partisan anglophones cut off, linguistically, from engaging with an overwhelmingly Irish-speaking island, continue to be the gateway to early modern Ireland for Renaissance scholars and undergraduates alike. This reliance on the hostile reports of uncomprehending outsiders puts the Irish themselves at the margin of their own story. Ireland is the cockpit of a defining military, political and cultural encounter of early modern Europe. It is on a frontline of the clash between Catholic and Protestant Europe. It is a theatre of experimentation where English overseas expansion first practises its moves. And yet, we take our reports from only one set of voices. The language shift from Irish to English was set in motion by the Elizabethan conquest. But, at the time, English had only a tiny toehold in the country, and so we miss almost everything if we treat sixteenth and early seventeenth century Ireland as if it were, somehow, already English-speaking. So, the great challenge is to find a way of recovering the cultural and linguistic plurality of a period before all that is swept away. So, when we listen in only to English accounts of the period, we treat Ireland as, proleptically, an exclusively Anglophone zone. Can we listen differently?

That is the question taken up by the MACMORRIS, a project that has just received almost one million in funding from the Irish Research Council, with Patricia Palmer of Maynooth University named as the grant’s principal investigator and Advanced Laureate. Its task is to fill in some of the blanks in our knowledge of early modern Ireland, to provide, finally, the full-screen, surround-sound account of a rich and complex culture on the brink of transformation. The historiographical challenge is considerable: how to find a way of recovering the cultural and linguistic plurality that has long since been so overwhelmed by anglicisation and colonisation as to make us forget that it was once completely otherwise? The first step is to assemble, in one easily accessed place, the names of the diverse actors whose voices we want to recover, along with what we know of them. Thus, a larger ambition of the project is to build a database, a repository of names and knowledge. This will, in turn, be made up of two interlocking datasets, each operating at a different historical and geographical scale. The first will contain the name of every political figure and cultural producer active in Ireland between 1541 (the Act for Kingly Title) and 1691 (the Treaty of Limerick) for whom a record exists. This online resource will provide one-stop access to summary information on all of these figures, including both biography and bibliography (if any), with an emphasis on the essential facts. The database will feature poets, pamphleteers, chroniclers, translators, as well as soldiers, administrators, criminals, patrons, merchants, clergy – and a few pirates! In it, we mean to locate every figure that we can find, including many who are left out of existing compilations. As we begin collecting
information on people of early modern Ireland, we’ve been struck, for instance, by how underrepresented women are, both in the records of the period and, consequently, in later archives. But, with some ingenuity, these lives, and the traces they leave scattered throughout early modern texts, can be tracked and restored to some semblance of recognition. (The State Papers have references to female spies, for example; to women, of low and high degree, carried off to gaol for, ominously, “examination”; and there are under-studied women poets and patrons.) Our hope is that this more comprehensive dataset will serve as an engine for research into change, conflict, and innovation in Ireland in this period. The database as a whole will be permanently archived in Maynooth University library and, when the project is complete, will remain open for digital investigation (for instance, by “network analysis”, some of which we’ve begun, with intriguing results). The Folger Shakespeare Library in Washington DC has also expressed an interest in housing the MACMORRIS database on its newly developed Miranda platform.

The second, more particular, dataset will focus on a subset of those figures, the cultural producers who were working in Irish, English and other languages in Munster between 1569 and 1607 (that is, from the Desmond Wars to the Flight of the Earls). Some of these were newcomers to Ireland, but Munster in this period was home to some of the most important bardic families in Ireland – the ramifying branches of the Ó Dálaigh poets, for example – and to important schools of Gaelic learning in law, history, and medicine. MACMORRIS’s second dataset will be a case study, offering a more granular description of this specific place and time. For that reason, the information it will offer on its listed figures will be richly augmented: not just thumbnail biographies, but family connections, patronage relations, geo-locations, and more. Moreover, these figures will be accompanied by their works, some of which can be found online, but some of which will be translated and made available for the first time. If the first dataset is what undergirds MACMORRIS, giving the project both range and heft, the second dataset will be what allows us to illustrate the project – literally. The cultural and political dynamics of Munster in these years will be visualised, and, when possible, mapped. In some cases, physical contiguity will be crucial. Take Edmund Spenser’s tower-house at Kilcolman, near Buttevant, which we’ve already mentioned. Now an isolated ruin by a wetland reserve, it formed part of a rather different – cultural – ecology in Spenser’s day. Just south of Kilcolman, at Castletownroche, Spenser’s unwelcoming neighbour, Lord Maurice Roche, was a significant cultural figure. Skilled in English, Latin and Irish, according to the Annals of the Four Masters, he kept his own ollamh or Gaelic court poet and guarded the Book of Fermoy, the family’s anthology of poems, historical and genealogical tracts, saints’ lives, mythological tales and fragments of medical treatises. Just to the west, Roche’s brother-in-law, David Barry, was a notable patron of bardic poetry and keen follower of contemporary architectural fashion. To the west, on the south bank of the Blackwater, lay the bardic school of Aonghus Fionn Ó Dálaigh, the dazzling ollamh of the Mac Carrthaigh Mór. Sir George Carew, translator of the Spanish epic of the Chilean conquest, Alonso de Ercilla’s La Araucana, was based in Mallow Castle. The hereditary poets of the Desmonds had their school in Sliabh Luachra. And Sir William Herbert had moved an impressive Renaissance library into his planter castle in Castleisland, where he wrote Croftus Sive de Hibernia Liber, on how to “reform” the natives. Here, following almost perfectly the track of the Mallow-Banteer-Millstreet-Rathmore branch line, lies a fascinating but hitherto neglected branch line of the European Renaissance.

On another such map, you’ll follow the routes taken by the Gaelic bards as they traced out an itinerary from patron to patron. Monasteries, scriptoria, schools, places of pilgrimage, the abbeys and castles of the planters, and then the roads, routes, passes that joined them – all of this, represented together for the first time, will make Munster’s cultural geography vivid. But social connectivity will matter, too. Other visualisations will chart the social networks that linked the cultural actors in the province, sometimes across factions and what we now call “communities”, but sometimes not. Who was writing for whom? What do we see in different magnates’ patterns of patronage? And how did these relations change over time? Taken together, these features will make the argument that Munster, perhaps more than any other province, was a crucial site of encounter, a contact zone which, as we
face another time of rupture, has much to tell us about cultural contact and the limits of cultural understanding in a time of crisis.

But the lines we mean to draw do not stop there. Renaissance Ireland, we recognise, was always European. The name of our project, MACMORRIS, is suggestive of these continental links, even as it illustrates the gap that often opens up between reality and misrepresentation – a gap that it means, in part, to fill. MACMORRIS is an acronym (rather a loose one) for “Mapping Actors and Communities: Modelling Research in Renaissance Ireland in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Century”. It borrows its name from the stage-Irishman mentioned above, the choleric Captain MacMorris in Henry V. MacMorris goes, in Heaney’s words, “gallivanting / around the Globe”, where he declares, with enraged but incoherent fervour, that

It is no time to discourse, so Chrish save me: the day is hot, and the weather, and the wars, and the king, and the dukes: it is no time to discourse. The town is beseeched, and the trumpet call us to the breach; and we talk, and, be Chrish, do nothing: ’tis shame for us all: so God sa’ me, ’tis shame to stand still; it is shame, by my hand: and there is throats to be cut, and works to be done; and there ish nothing done, so Chrish sa’ me, la!

The irascible inarticulacy of Shakespeare’s character is good enough for a stage Irishman. But he is a million miles from the three prominent Irishmen of that name whose notoriety (in English eyes) provided Shakespeare with an up-to-the-minute moniker for his blustering but serviceable buffoon. None of his real-life analogues were quite as compliant. Our first FitzMaurice is James FitzMaurice FitzGerald, a cousin of the Earl of Desmond, who spent the three years that followed his first revolt, in 1569, in France, at the court of Philip II, and in Rome, drumming up support for a renewed campaign. He returned to Kerry in 1579 with a contingent of papally backed Italian and Spanish troops, and was a powerful propagandist for a new, “faith-and-fatherland” discourse that would have legs into the twentieth century. Thomas FitzMaurice served with the imperial army in Milan before becoming 16th Lord Kerry and 11th Baron of Lixnaw in 1550. His son, Padraigín, navigated a similarly complex path: he travelled to the court of Elizabeth I with Sir Henry Sidney but joined Desmond’s rebellion on his return and was a stalwart of Hugh O’Neill’s later Confederacy. Both moved seamlessly between the court cultures of their respective sojourns, in Milan and London, and the impressive cast of bardic poets who wrote for them. None of this historical particularity is evident in Shakespeare’s overwrought portrayal of MacMorris and, in fact, it is actively elided there. But the project that takes his name seeks to restore some of it to view.

Early modern Ireland, then, is often something more, or other, than the notions that have since accreted around it, and this is especially true when it comes to the nomenclature we have assigned to its various peoples. Here, MACMORRIS, with its rich density of reference, can make a contribution simply by refusing, or complicating, neat categories. The term “New English”, for instance, used to describe that wave of predominantly Protestant post-Reformation settlers in early modern Ireland, is wholly inadequate, and is bound up with the tendency for an “Anglo-Irish” version of history to airbrush other identities – from the canvas. Part of our project – the mission of MACMORRIS – is to enrich and complicate the Anglo-Irish narrative – and to break out of that binary as well. If we take a closer look we can see continental connections that reveal the extent to which Ireland was a European theatre of culture, conflict and communication. If we take one example, the Italian connection, we find a trio of key Elizabethan figures who served in Ireland: Lodowick Byskett (c1546-1609), John Florio (1553-1625), and Petrucchio Ubaldini (fl1545-1599). Spain often gets all the attention in studies of sixteenth century Ireland, but Italy had longstanding interests and investments there too,
and its earlier sixteenth century interventions in Ireland illustrate its value as a rich resource for literary and religious inspiration. Vicenza-born Francesco Chiericati, appointed nuncio to England in 1515, insisted on a visit to St Patrick’s Purgatory at Lough Derg prior to his recall to Rome in 1517, though he appears not to have submitted himself to the rituals and rigours of other pilgrims. Ludovico Ariosto’s poetic allusions to Lough Derg and the earls of Kildare and Desmond in *Orlando Furioso* (1532), along with Polydore Vergil’s Irish material in his *Anglica Historia* (1555), demonstrate a longstanding interest. But our own preoccupation has been with those Anglo-Italians who participated directly in the Elizabethan reconquest of Ireland and its aftermath. London-born Lodowick Bryskett, son of Antonio Bruschetto of Genoa, is best known for his account of a conversation at his Dublin residence in the early 1580s among a company that included Edmund Spenser, in *A Discourse of Civill Life* (1606). In his dialogue, designed “to frame a gentleman fit for civill conversation”, Bryskett explains: “The occasion of the discourse grew by the visitation of certaine gentlemen comming to … my little cottage … newly built neare unto Dublin”. Those present at Bryskett’s house in addition to Spenser were Robert Dillon (judge), George Dormer (Queen’s solicitor), John Long (archbishop of Armagh), William Pelham (Lord Chief Justice), Christopher Carleill (captain and naval commander), whose *Brief Summary Discourse upon a Voyage Intending to the Uttermost Parts of America* was later included in Hakluyt’s *Voyages*), Thomas Norris (military governor), Warham St Leger (colonial adventurer), Nicholas Dawtrey (captain), and Thomas Smith (apothecary). Bryskett’s gathering is a circle of sorts, with its spokes-persons and wheeler-dealers. This Elizabethan reading group convened in Dublin by an Anglo-Italian secretary and translator is a crucial hub of activity. How many more Italian members of the Elizabethan secretariat served in Ireland?

We have known for some time that John Florio, a crucial cultural figure in the period as translator of Montaigne’s *Essais*, compiler of dictionaries, and Shakespearean source, was present in Munster in the 1580s and was later caught up in the rebellion of Sir Cahir O’Doherty in April 1608. Florio is a central figure in the number of circles which hint at the range and richness of the interconnections which our network analysis will examine. He had links with an Oxford milieu of scientifically oriented literati, with Giacomo Castelvetro (c1546-1616) who dedicated his translation of the *Columbeid* (1585) to Walter Raleigh, and with Richard Hakluyt, whose *Principall Navigations, Voiages, Traffiques and Discoueries of the English Nation* powerfully made the case for overseas conquest.

In his bilingual debut, *Florio his firste fruites* (1578), he lists the attributes of various nations including “the Italians, proude and reuengers: the Frenchmen, crafty & fierce: the Germanes, warriours: the Saxons, dissemblers: those of Sucuia, tatlers: the Britaine, (an Englishman) a busy body: the Irishe man, wylde: the Cimbrian, seditious, and horrible: the Boemian, very discourteous, and desirus of newes: the Scottish man, periured: the Vandal, mutable: the Bauarian, a scoffer. Of other I do not wel remember.” One wonders how much experience Florio went on to have of the “wylde” Irish. How far other Anglo-Italian envoys of the time may also have had some Irish experience remains to be excavated. One who certainly did was Horatio Palavicino (c1540-1600), who “served as the go-between for the survivors of the wreck of the Spanish ship the ‘Valencera’ off the coast of Ireland, and he also intervened in the negotiations to liberate sixty-one Italian and Spanish prisoners held in Ireland”.

Petruccio Ubaldini, an Italian Protestant refugee who claimed Florentine citizenship, is a third figure who is integral to this paradoxical Italianate contribution to an English reorientation away from Europe. Less well known than Florio, Ubaldini is another translator and Shakespeare source known primarily as a commentator on England and on the Armada. His *Discourse Concerning the Spanish Fleet Invading England, in the Year 1588* (1590), is a source for the third act of *Edward III*, while his contribution to the publication of Machiavelli’s works in England also fed in to Shakespeare.
Ubaldini remains an elusive figure and one seldom seen in an Irish context, yet he had first-hand experience of Elizabeth’s Irish wars as his presence at Smerwick alongside Spenser and Ralegh attests, a presence made vital by the fact that he produced an eyewitness account in Italian. This matters when we recall that the forces Lord Grey encountered at Smerwick were commanded by two Italians, Colonel Sebastiano di San Giuseppe and Captain Alessandro Bertoni of Faenza, a “Maestro di Campo” and the individual who parleyed first with Grey. Bertoni is believed to be the author of a short Latin account of Ireland delivered to Madrid on March 11th, 1580.

There is a paradox at the heart of this Italian involvement in the conquest of Ireland. That project, ultimately, contributed to the decline of England’s Italianate culture. The English colonial adventures in Ireland in which these Italians participated contributed, ironically, to England’s post-Reformation Euroscepticism: the nascent British imperial state that would increasingly turn its back on Europe when it wasn’t waging war with its continental neighbours.

Discussing Ireland’s appeal to Italian historians as an example of empire, Eric Haywood pointed out that Petrarch (nicknamed Sylvanus, or Woody), like Ariosto, saw in Ireland the perfect place for poetry: “when Petrarch had read in the Topographia hibernica that Ireland not only was so fortunate as to be free of thunder and lightning [sic] (of which he had a phobia), but could actually offer, in its woods, the possibility of a life of otium and of libertas, in his excitement he had written in the margin of the manuscript: ‘Go there, Woody, what are you waiting for?’” For Gerald [of Wales, c1146-1223], otium had meant laziness, and libertas licence, but for Petrarch they represented that perfect state of non-busyness which was the only guarantee that man could meet his proper destiny: wisdom, peace and beatitude.” By contrast, an historian like Polydore Vergil “wished people to journey there in pursuit of imperium, not of otium”. We are fascinated by the ways in which the views of the various participants in the complex cultural drama of early modern Ireland are entangled in otium, imperium and libertas. We are also interested in the persistence of negative representations and their articulation – often as hearsay – by those whose own experiences should have taught them better.

Concluding the account of his Irish sojourn addressed to Isabella d’Este, a distinguished literary and cultural figure of the time – “I know your enquiring mind and how you like to hear of the smallest details as well as of great things” – Chiericati remarks: “I have heard that in places further north people are more uncivilised, going about nude, living in mountain caves and eating raw meat”. It is against such invocations of incivility that we commit ourselves to exploring in their smallest details the nuances of early modern Ireland, its places and its people.

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David J Baker is Peter G Phialas Professor in the Department of English and Comparative Literature at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He is the author of Between Nations: Shakespeare, Spenser, Marvell, and the Question of Britain and On Demand: Writing for the Market in Early Modern England.

Willy Maley is Professor of Renaissance Studies at the University of Glasgow. He is the author of A Spenser Chronology (1994), Salvaging Spenser: Colonialism, Culture, and Identity (1997), and Nation, State, and Empire in English Renaissance Literature: Shakespeare to Milton (2003).

Pat Palmer is the author of Language and Conquest in Early Modern Ireland: English Renaissance Literature and Elizabeth Imperial Expansion (Cambridge University Press, 2001) and The Severed Head and the Grafted Tongue: Translating Violence in Early Modern Ireland (Cambridge University Press, 2014). She is Professor of Renaissance English in Maynooth University.

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