

Gaelic Ireland's English frontiers in the late Middle Ages

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Abstract

'Frontiers' or 'borderlands' offer a useful conceptual framework for the exploration of Irish history in the late Middle Ages. Insufficient scholarly attention, however, has been devoted to the study of the Gaelic polity—the 'other side' of the frontiers that existed in late medieval Ireland between regions of Gaelic and English political, social and cultural domination. What follows seeks to begin a broad reconceptualisation of the study of the Gaelic world and its frontiers by approaching these frontiers from a contemporary Gaelic perspective and by scrutinising contemporary Gaelic terminology used to describe borders. In this study, Ireland emerges as the historic and cultural centre of a wider Gaelic world, or *Gaedhealtacht*, which extended to parts of Scotland. The exploration of Gaelic Ireland's English frontiers presents a more complete picture of society in late medieval Ireland and sets Gaelic society in Ireland apart from its counterpart across the North Channel.

Introduction

One might expect that a consequence of the continued existence of an international border on an island as small as Ireland would be the interest of its historians in the study of frontiers or borderlands. That the border separating the Republic of Ireland from Northern Ireland would serve both as a reminder of the divisions—political, linguistic and economic—in Ireland's past and as a starting point for understanding them. Yet the study of Ireland's frontiers has not figured prominently in most accounts of Irish history. This is especially true of nationalist histories, which would seek to underscore the unity of 'Ireland' throughout history so as to show that the modern border is unhistorical and artificial. The approach of historians to the late medieval period, however, represents a partial exception to this tendency to overlook frontiers. This period—standing as it did between the emergence in Ireland of political and cultural frontiers in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries and the steady disappearance of frontiers under the later Tudors—has been approached, more than any other period in Irish history perhaps, through the exploration of its borders. Since Robin Frame's memorable description over 30 years ago of the medieval lordship of Ireland as a land of many marches (as frontiers were then commonly known in

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English), the study of Ireland's medieval frontiers has grown steadily.¹ While Steven Ellis's work underlining the similarities between frontier conditions in the Pale and along the Anglo-Scottish border represents possibly the most striking conceptual advance in the field, a host of mainly individual studies exploring aspects of Ireland's medieval borderlands have done much to add depth and detail to our understanding of these phenomena.²

¹ Robin Frame, 'Power and society in the lordship of Ireland, 1272–1377', *Past & Present* 76 (1977), 3–33 (reprinted in Robin Frame, *Ireland and Britain, 1170–1450* (London, 1998), 191–220).

² S.G. Ellis, *Tudor frontiers and noble power: the making of the British state* (Oxford, 1995); S.G. Ellis, 'The English state and its frontiers in the British Isles, 1300–1600', in Daniel Power and Naomi Standen (eds), *Frontiers in question: Eurasian borderlands, 700–1700* (Basingstoke, 1999), 153–81; S.G. Ellis, 'Centre and periphery in the Tudor state', in Robert Tittler and Norman Jones (eds), *A companion to Tudor Britain* (Oxford, 2004), 133–50; S.G. Ellis, 'Frontiers and identities in the historiography of the British Isles', in Lud'a Klusáková and S.G. Ellis (eds), *Frontiers and identities: exploring the research area* (Pisa, 2006), 67–85; S.G. Ellis, 'Defending English ground: the Tudor frontiers in history and historiography', in S.G. Ellis and Raingard Esser (eds), *Frontiers and the writing of history, 1500–1850* (Hannover-Laatzten, 2006), 73–93; S.G. Ellis, 'Integration, identities and frontiers in the British Isles: a European perspective', in Harald Gustafsson and Hanne Sanders (eds), *Vid gränsen: Integration och identitet i det förnationella Norden* (Gothenburg, 2006), 19–45; P.J. Duffy, 'The nature of the medieval frontier in Ireland', *Studia Hibernica* 22 (1982), 21–38; Harold O'Sullivan, 'The march of south-east Ulster in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, a period of change', in Raymond Gillespie and Harold O'Sullivan (eds), *The borderlands: essays on the history of the Ulster-Leinster border* (Belfast, 1989), 55–74; Harold O'Sullivan, 'Dynamics of regional development: processes of assimilation and division in the marchland of south-east Ulster', in Ciaran Brady and Jane Ohlmeyer (eds), *British interventions in early modern Ireland* (Cambridge, 2005), 49–72; Helen Perros, 'Crossing the Shannon Frontier: Connacht and the Anglo-Normans, 1170–1240', in James F. Lydon, Terence B. Barry, Robin Frame, Katharine Simms (eds), *Colony and frontier in medieval Ireland* (London, 1995), 117–38; Ciarán Parker, 'The internal frontier: the Irish in County Waterford in the later Middle Ages', in Lydon *et al.*, *Colony and frontier in medieval Ireland*, 139–54; Katharine Simms, 'Frontiers in the Irish Church—regional and cultural', in Lydon *et al.*, *Colony and frontier in medieval Ireland*, 177–200; T.B. Barry, 'The last frontier: the settlement history of late medieval Ireland', in Lydon *et al.*, *Colony and frontier in medieval Ireland*, 217–28; Rees Davies, 'Frontier arrangements in fragmented societies: Ireland and Wales', in Robert Bartlett and Angus MacKay (eds), *Medieval frontier societies* (Oxford, 1989), 77–100; Robin Frame, 'Military service in the lordship of Ireland, 1290–1360: institutions and society on the Anglo-Gaelic frontier', in Bartlett and MacKay, *Medieval frontier societies*, 101–26; Ciarán Parker, 'Cavan: a medieval border area', in Raymond Gillespie (ed.), *Cavan: essays on the history of an Irish county* (Dublin, 2004), 37–50; Emmett O'Byrne, 'A much disputed land: Carrickmines and the Dublin marches', in Seán Duffy (ed.), *Medieval Dublin IV* (Dublin, 2003), 229–52; Emmett O'Byrne, 'Cultures in contact in the Leinster and Dublin marches, 1170–1400', in Seán Duffy (ed.), *Medieval Dublin V* (Dublin, 2004), 111–48; Emmett O'Byrne, 'The MacMurroughs and the marches of Leinster, 1170–1340', in Linda Doran and James Lyttleton (eds), *Lordship in*

Historians are generally in agreement that the 'frontier' is especially useful as a conceptual framework for the study of Irish history in the late Middle Ages. At the heart of this framework, however, there is disagreement as to how the socio-political changes that occurred in those communities, which lived (and died) along the frontier, should be interpreted. This disagreement is most clearly seen in the terminology employed by historians to describe the descendants of the population that settled in Ireland in the century or so after 1170. Variouslly dubbed 'Anglo-Irish', 'Anglo-Norman', 'Anglo-French', 'Hiberno-Norman' or 'English', the use of any one of these terms has become something of a written shibboleth. Kenneth Nicholls' spirited reply to an article by Steven Ellis on 'English' identity in late medieval Ireland was perhaps a turning point; in it, he criticised the latter's approach to the period, dismissing it as what he referred to as 'two-nation theory'.³ Since then, the use of hyphenated terminology to describe the settler population has come to denote an historical approach, which highlights either this group's supposed 'Irishness'—in which the regularity of their interaction with the Gaelic polity is stressed⁴—or their duality—in which they are depicted as belonging to a 'middle nation' whose interaction with two polities had rendered them neither wholly English nor wholly Irish.⁵ By contrast, use of the term 'English'—the word actually employed by this population to describe themselves—has come to betoken an approach which emphasises the settler population's continued links to (and inclusion in) the English cultural and political world.⁶ In many respects, this disagreement over choice of words represents a sharpening of an older argument concerning the extent to which the settler population in Ireland adopted the customs and culture of the native 'Irish' population—a phenomenon now generally referred to as 'gaelicisation', but once

medieval Ireland: image and reality (Dublin, 2007), 160–92; Linzi Simpson, 'Dublin's southern frontier under siege: Kindlestown castle, Delgany, County Wicklow', in Duffy, *Medieval Dublin IV*, 279–368; James Muldoon, *Identity on the medieval Irish frontier: degenerate Englishmen, wild Irishmen, middle nations* (Gainesville, 2003); Brock Holden, 'Feudal frontiers? Colonial societies in Wales and Ireland, 1170–1330', *Studia Hibernica* 33 (2004–05), 61–80; Christopher Maginn, 'The English marcher lineages in Co. Dublin in the later Middle Ages', *Irish Historical Studies* xxxiv (2004), 113–36.

³ S.G. Ellis, 'The Anglo-Irish in Tudor Ireland: "more Irish than the Irish themselves"?', *History Ireland* 7(1) (1999), 22–6; K.W. Nicholls, 'Worlds apart? The Ellis two-nation theory on late medieval Ireland', *History Ireland* 7(2) (1999), 22–6.

⁴ Fiona Fitzsimons, 'Wolsey, the native affinities, and the failure of reform in Henrician Ireland', in David Edwards (ed.), *Regions and rulers in Ireland, 1100–1650* (Dublin, 2004), 78–121.

⁵ J.F. Lydon, 'The middle nation', in J.F. Lydon (ed.), *The English in medieval Ireland* (Dublin, 1984), 1–26; Muldoon, *Identity on the medieval Irish frontier*, 103–26.

⁶ Robin Frame, "'Les Engleys nées en Irlande": the English political identity in medieval Ireland', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 6th series, 3 (1993), 83–104; Brendan Smith, *Colonisation conquest in medieval Ireland: the English in Louth, 1170–1330* (Cambridge, 1999).

described as a transformation whereby the settlers became ‘more Irish than the Irish themselves’.⁷

It is not the intention of the present work to rehash the debate concerning the existence in Ireland of ‘one’ or ‘two’ nations. Nor does it seek to assess whether ‘gaelicisation’ is an accurate term to describe the phenomenon of acculturation. Disagreement over these matters, to my mind, will never be entirely resolved because so much of the debate turns on one’s reading of the (often slender) primary evidence. Consider, for a moment, the example of the Walshes (Breathnaigh or ‘Welshmen’) of southern County Dublin. That this lineage, in terms of culture and social organisation, was virtually indistinguishable from their Gaelic neighbours, with whom they regularly interacted and intermarried, is beyond dispute.⁸ But whether historians should regard the Walshes as English marchers or as part of a ‘gaelicised’ or ‘middle’ nation is another matter. Tudor officials bemoaned the fact that the Walshes, and other lineages living in the southern Dublin march whom they deemed to be English, were ‘sworne to the Yrish borders’, accusing the Walshes in Queen Elizabeth I’s reign of having provided safe conduct to Hugh MacShane O’Byrne when the feared chief entered the Pale.⁹ This might be understood as evidence that the Walshes had by the sixteenth century become indistinguishable from the Irish living beyond the boundaries of the Pale. It may also be argued, however, that O’Byrne’s access to the Pale necessitated the ‘Englishness’ of the Walshes—if we are to regard the O’Byrnes and the Walshes as being no different what purpose then did the Walshes serve in O’Byrne’s movement in English areas? Not unlike judging whether a glass filled midway with water is half-full or half-empty, the ‘Englishness’, ‘Irishness’ or indeed the ‘hybridity’ of the Walshes, and many other lineages like them, is entirely dependent on one’s point of view.

In an effort to open up a new dimension on frontier studies in Ireland, and move away from a debate that is never likely to produce a consensus of opinion, what follows seeks to begin a broad reconceptualisation of the study of the Gaelic world and Ireland’s frontiers by approaching frontiers from a contemporary Gaelic perspective, rather than from the Pale-centred view, which now dominates our understanding of the subject. This essay will also employ, where possible, the contemporary Irish terms used in prose sources and bardic poetry to describe the Gaelic polity and its frontiers with the region known as the *Galltacht*. It is hoped that a study of this type will contribute to a fuller understanding of the Gaelic world and its relationship with England and Scotland at the outset of the early modern period.

⁷ Art Cosgrove, ‘*Hiberniores ipsis Hibernis*’, in Art Cosgrove and Dónal McCartney (eds), *Studies in Irish history: presented to R. Dudley Edwards* (Dublin, 1979), 1–14. The case for ‘gaelicisation’ is made in K.W. Nicholls, *Gaelic and Gaelicised Ireland in the Middle Ages* (Dublin, 1972, 2nd edn, 2003); K.W. Nicholls, ‘Gaelic society and economy’, in Art Cosgrove (ed.), *A new history of Ireland: medieval Ireland, 1169–1534* (Oxford, 1986), vol. 2, 397–438. Hereafter this book = NHI.

⁸ O’Byrne, ‘A much disputed land’, 250.

⁹ National Library of Ireland (NLI), MS. 5358, Lane-Poole Papers, fol. 111.

The *Gaedhealtacht*
and the *Galltacht*

The late medieval Gaelic polity stretched from the south-western tip of Ireland in an arc that took in parts of the Irish Midlands, nearly all of the province of Ulster, continued through to the Western Isles and extended to (and in some areas reached below) the Highland line in Scotland; non-contiguous parts of the region lay in the Dublin and Wicklow mountains in Leinster and in the south-west of Munster. Politically, the *Gaedhil*, as this population collectively described itself, were broken into dozens of independent clan (lineage-based) lordships, ranging in size and power from the relatively weak O'Shaughnessy clan in Connacht to the powerful O'Neills in Ulster and the MacDonnell Lords of the Western Isles whose influence straddled the North Channel.¹⁰ The decentralised nature of politics and power in the region should not blind us to the common language, legal practices, culture and sense of history which lent it a cohesion greater than that shared by, say, the German territories of the Holy Roman Empire in the same period. Its borders were defined (and sense of identity reinforced) against the emptiness of the Atlantic Ocean to the west and the two kingdoms in the south and east—controlled by the king of Scots and the king of England whose power was rooted in the lowlands of Scotland and England respectively.

The word *Gaedhealtacht*, or Gaeldom, has been used to describe the late medieval and early modern Gaelic polity.¹¹ This is an accurate term in so far as it fits both the modern definition of the Gaelic word for an Irish-speaking region and the contemporary English usage of the word 'Irishry', that is an area inhabited (and under the political control) of the Irish, or *Gaedhil*. The word *Gaedhealtacht*, however, is used on only one occasion in contemporary Irish Gaelic sources and not at all in a Scottish context.¹² This fact is significant, for it indicates something about how the *Gaedhil* viewed themselves. In 1169, for instance, the year that Robert FitzStephen, the leader of the vanguard of Strongbow's invasion force made his first appearance among the *Gaedhil* he is described by the Irish annalists as having come into '*Erinn*' ('Ireland') rather than entering into any *Gaedhealtacht*.¹³ In a society which accorded

¹⁰ Liam Price, 'Armed forces of Irish chiefs in the early sixteenth century', *Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland*, 4th series 62 (1932–3), 202–07.

¹¹ S.G. Ellis, *Ireland in the age of the Tudors: English expansion and the end of Gaelic rule, 1447–1603* (London, 1998), 243–64; S.G. Ellis, 'Religion and national identity in early modern Ireland', in Ausma Cimdina (ed.), *Religion and political change in Europe: past and present* (Pisa, 2003), 21–35; Jane Dawson, 'Calvinism and the Gaidhealtachd in Scotland', in A. Pettegree, A. Duke and G. Lewis (eds), *Calvinism in Europe, 1540–1620* (Cambridge, 1994), 231–53; Jane Dawson, 'The Gaidhealtachd and the emergence of the Scottish Highlands', in Brendan Bradshaw and Peter Roberts (eds), *British consciousness and identity: the making of Britain, 1533–1707* (Cambridge, 2003), 259–300.

¹² The only use of the term *Gaedhealtacht* that I have discovered is in 1488, when the annalists described Henry Ó Sealbaigh as 'canntaire dob' fherr a n-Gaidheltacht Leithe Cuinn': *Annála Uladh, Annals of Ulster*, eds W.M. Hennessy and B. MacCarthy (4 vols, Dublin, 1887–1901) s.a. 1488. Hereafter this book = AU. Wilson McLeod, 'Galldachd, Gàidhealtachd, Garbhchriochan', *Scottish Gaelic Studies* XIX (1999), 4.

¹³ AU, s.a. 1169.

Ireland primacy of place, it is understandable that a separate terminology to describe the boundaries of the Gaelic polity did not develop. It has also been argued that the *Gaedhil* regarded the neighbouring kingdoms of Scotland and England as different parts of a single *Galltacht*, or English-speaking region.¹⁴ The Irish annalists, however, employ *Galltacht* infrequently.¹⁵ When the term was used it was reserved to describe those parts of Ireland settled or controlled by *Gaill* ('foreigners')—the descendants of those people who had settled in Ireland in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries in the wake of the English conquest. Thus, in 1432, it was recorded that MacMurrough ravaged '*na Galldacht*', a reference to those English-speaking parts of Leinster, and in 1433 O'Donnell and MacQuillan '*do dhul ar Galltacht na Midhe*' ('went to the foreign settlement of Meath') and concluded a pact with the *Gaill* against O'Neil;¹⁶ O'Donnell was described as going to the *Galltacht* when in 1499 he met (somewhere in the Pale) the earl of Kildare, 'deputy of the king of England' in Ireland.¹⁷ Gaelic conceptions of England and Scotland required separate terminology. In 1170 Dermot MacMurrough was reported to have returned to Ireland with men '*anoir*' ('from the east') in retaliation for his prior expulsion '*tar muir*' ('beyond the sea').¹⁸ In the centuries that followed, however, the words '*Saxoibh*' and '*Saxaibh*' were most often employed to describe England and English-born men respectively—Englishmen, after all, were not foreigners in their own country and the England-born soldiers and administrators who came to Ireland (and for whom the term '*Saxaibh*' was usually reserved) tended to make impermanent stays.¹⁹ The annalistic references to the inhabitants of Scotland were more ambiguous: the term '*Albanaich*' might be broadly employed to describe the population of Scotland,²⁰ but in 1540 the Irish annalists recorded that:

The King of Scotland, convoked the nobles of the Scottish race, and they came to the harbour and went aboard the vessel in which the King was and were all by him made prisoners, both Gall and Gael. The Galls were

¹⁴ Ellis, *Ireland in the age of the Tudors*, 250–4; Ellis, 'Religion and national identity in early modern Ireland', 21–35. See also Brendan Smith's criticism of Ellis's view that the Gaelic polity saw itself as surrounded by a single '*Galltacht*' in his review of *Ireland in the age of the Tudors* in *History* 85 (2000), 508–09.

¹⁵ McLeod, 'Galldachd, Gàidhealtachd, Garbhchriochan', 1–4, in which the author traces the earliest use of the term '*Galltacht*' to a later fourteenth-century poem dedicated to Niall Mag Shamhradháin (d.1362).

¹⁶ *Annála rioghachta Éireann: annals of the kingdom of Ireland by the Four Masters*, ed. J. O'Donovan (7 vols, Dublin, 1851), *s.a.* 1432, hereafter this book = AFM; AU, *s.a.* 1433.

¹⁷ AU, *s.a.* 1499; AFM, *s.a.* 1499. For other examples of the use of the term *Galltacht*, see AU, *s.a.* 1433, 1442, 1475, 1485, 1486 and 1496.

¹⁸ *The Annals of Loch Cé*, ed. W.M. Hennessy (2 vols, London, 1871) *s.a.* 1170. Hereafter this book = ALC.

¹⁹ In 1394—the year that Richard II made his first military expedition to Ireland—the Four Masters record the following entries one after the other: 'Hugh O'Dempsey, while in pursuit of a prey, was slain by *Gallaibh*'; 'Thomas O'Dempsey, heir to the lordship of Clann-Maoilughra, was slain by *Saxanchaibh*': AFM, *s.a.* 1394 (my italics). I have added italics because both words were misleadingly translated in the nineteenth century as 'English'.

²⁰ See, for example, AFM, *s.a.* 1494; AU, *s.a.* 1522.

released after a while, but the King kept James, the son of Mac Domhnaill, in custody, as well as such of his family and of his followers as he found to be serviceable, and afterwards he banished all of them who were at liberty.²¹

Ireland: the
heart of the
Gaedhealtacht

Ireland was very much the historic and cultural centre of the *Gaedhealtacht*. According to the *Gaedhil*'s (correct) understanding, it was *Gaedhil* from Ireland who had centuries earlier colonised western parts of Scotland;²² it was to the concept of Ireland—often referred to as *Fódla*, *Banbha* or *Inis Fáil*—that the Gaelic *literati* so often turned, composing poetry, which among other things supported the legitimacy of their chiefly patrons' claim (often by wedding) to Ireland, or reminded them of their duty to defend Ireland from *Gaill*;²³ and it was Ireland which the annalists almost invariably referred to as the 'national' territory of the *Gaedhil*. It has been shown that this territory could also include Gaelic parts of Scotland, but Ireland was the focal point of the Gaelic world with Scotland from time to time depicted as an extension of it, though never the other way round.²⁴ In the century after 1400 the *Annals of Ulster* contain nearly 100 individual references to 'Ireland'. These references fall into two categories: geographical and social. The former follow a broadly similar pattern: Desmond's kinsmen expelled the earl from 'Ireland' (1411); wind destroyed cattle throughout 'Ireland' (1478); a great fleet of '*Shaxanachaibh*' came into 'Ireland' (1487) etc.²⁵ The other references to 'Ireland', comprised chiefly of obits, reveal something deeper about Gaelic society and thinking: Henry Mac-Cabe, a gallowglass captain, died and the legend of his goodness abounded in 'Ireland' (1460); Turlough Maguire, who was killed in his own castle by Donnchadh Maguire, was deemed the most intelligent and was the most bought of Irish bardic composition (1481) etc.²⁶ In terms of geographical expression, a clear distinction between Ireland and Scotland is invariably made—the MacDonnell clan, for example, is described in 1490, and again in 1495, as being 'of Scotland';²⁷ but if the Gaelic populations of Ireland and Scotland belonged to a single *Gaedhealtacht* it would be expected that the two geographical entities would be treated as one in the social references. Yet, of the hundred or so references to Ireland in the annals, Scotland is named in conjunction with Ireland as a single societal expression on only thirteen occasions—a typical example of this is Brian O'Higgin's 1476 obit in which the

²¹ *Annála Connacht: the Annals of Connacht*, ed. A.M. Freeman (Dublin, 1944) *s.a.* 1540. Hereafter this book = AC.

²² John Bannerman, *Studies in the history of Dalriada* (Edinburgh, 1974); Dáibhí Ó Cróinín, *Early medieval Ireland, 400–1200* (London, 1995), 18, 50–1.

²³ Marc Caball, *Poets and politics: reaction and continuity in Irish poetry, 1558–1625* (Cork, 1998), 5–6; Ellis, *Ireland in the age of the Tudors*, 250.

²⁴ Ellis, *Ireland in the age of the Tudors*, 252–3; Wilson McLeod, *Divided Gaels: Gaelic cultural identities in Scotland and Ireland c.1200–c.1650* (Oxford, 2004), 220–1.

²⁵ AU, *s.a.* 1411, 1487, 1478.

²⁶ AU, *s.a.* 1460, 1481.

²⁷ AU, *s.a.* 1490, 1495.

annalists describe him as preceptor of schools of ‘Ireland and Scotland’ in poetry.²⁸ Late medieval bardic poetry from Ireland reflects a similar emphasis on that country. In Geoffrey Finn O’Daly’s well-known poem ‘*Filidh Éireann go haointeach*’, composed in 1351 for William O’Kelly, he muses that ‘the bardic companies of pleasant-meadowed Fóla, and the bardic companies of Scotland—a distant journey—will be acquainted with one another after arriving at William’s lofty house’.²⁹

The primacy of Ireland in Gaelic thinking continued even after much of Ireland, including its ancient capital, Tara, had passed in the late Middle Ages into the *Galltacht*.³⁰ In practice, however, the general region of north (lower) Connacht/west Ulster may be identified as the cultural and geographical centre of the *Gaedhealtacht* in the same way that London and Edinburgh served as the political and military centres of the kingdoms of England and Scotland. For it was this part of Ireland which, in the centuries following the conquest, remained most insulated from the culture and political orbit of the *Gaill*, and where a disproportionate amount of contemporary Gaelic literary and historical materials were generated.³¹ Here dozens of tiny Gaelic lordships, such as the MacRannells and MacGoverns, might be found nestled between medium-sized lordships, like the O’Rourkes and the MacDermotts, which existed in the shadow of the great Gaelic powers like O’Neill and O’Donnell.³² Together these lordships comprised an almost purely Gaelic region constructed of layers of sub-lordship, lordship and overlordship in a perpetual struggle with one another for survival, autonomy and control.

In Ireland, beyond the north (lower) Connacht/west Ulster region, the frontiers with the *Galltacht* proved to be much more volatile than the border between *Gaedhil* and *Gaill* in Scotland. This may, in part, be attributed to the physical geography of the Scottish kingdom which dictated that the vast preponderance of *Gaill* had settled in a more clearly defined lowland region while the *Gaedhil* continued to dominate the Western Islands and the Highlands.³³ A broadly similar pattern of settlement can be discerned in Ireland, but, as will be discussed below, many lowland areas reverted to the *Gaedhealtacht* after the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. The political situation in Scotland also contributed to the stability of its frontiers.

²⁸ AU, *s.a.* 1476.

²⁹ ‘*Filidh Éireann go haointeach*’, ed. Eleanor Knott, *Ériu* 5 (1911), 50–69 (quotation, 57).

³⁰ Christopher Maginn, ‘Contesting the sovereignty of early modern Ireland’, *History Ireland* 5(1) (2007), 21–2.

³¹ The information in the two Connacht annals—the *Annals of Loch Cé* and the *Annals of Connacht*—is complemented by the Ulster annals: the *Annals of Ulster* and the *Annals of the Four Masters*: Gearóid Mac Niocaill, *The medieval Irish annals* (Dublin, 1975). No annalsitic compilations centring on Leinster or Munster continue after 1320: Katharine Simms, *From kings to warlords: the changing political structure of Gaelic Ireland in the later Middle Ages* (Woodbridge, 1987), 3.

³² Christopher Maginn, ‘The limitations of Tudor reform: the policy of “surrender and regrant” and the O’Rourkes’, *Bréifne: Journal of Cumann Seanchais Bhréifne* XI (2007), 430–1.

³³ On the extent of medieval ‘English’ settlement and political and cultural influence in Scotland, see Rees Davies, *The first English empire: power and identities in the British Isles, 1093–1343* (Oxford, 2000), 142–71, esp. 150–1, 156–8.

In the late Middle Ages, the kings of Scots, and James IV in particular, were less contemptuous of Gaelic culture and society than their English counterparts.³⁴ With the exception of its successful efforts in the late fifteenth century to undermine the power of the MacDonnell lords of the isles, the comparatively weak Scottish crown had little choice other than to tolerate the Gaelic districts which existed within its kingdom and to ignore the cultural border with the *Gaedhealtacht* until a sustained assertion of royal authority (and Scottish culture) began there in the reign of James VI.³⁵ Constitutionally, moreover, the kings of Scots never had any difficulty in counting the Gaelic population of the Western Isles and the Highlands as subjects. As Rees Davies has argued, from the late twelfth century ‘all the ethnic groups in Scotland were brought under a common umbrella: they were the king’s *probi homines*, “responsible men”’.³⁶ In marked contrast, kings of England, as lords of Ireland, refused to recognise Ireland’s Gaelic population as subjects until Henry VIII was proclaimed king of Ireland in 1541—and even then the English crown maintained an ambiguous constitutional relationship with its Gaelic subjects.³⁷ The result was that the frontier separating *Gaedhil* and *Gaill* in the kingdom of Scotland was cultural rather than political or legal and was, accordingly, much more stable than that which developed in Ireland.

Two frontiers

The Gaelic polity’s English frontier was conceived in entirely different terms than English Ireland conceived its Gaelic frontier. In the sources generated by the latter, the frontier emerges as a clearly defined zone in which customs and political organisation deviated from ‘normal’ society. The English government thus approached the people, land and events in the marches in extraordinary terms: the Irish parliament granted a subsidy in 1456 for the erection of a tower in Kilcullen, Co. Kildare which was situated ‘*en lez frontures del marches del dit counte pres adioynaunt as irrois enemies du roy*’ (‘in the frontiers of the marches of the said county adjoining close to the Irish enemies of the king’);³⁸ in 1495 parliament ordered that marchers build a rampart and ditch, so as to effect a clear delineation between the Pale marches and the *Gaedhealtacht*.³⁹ Gaelic sources, by contrast, are devoid of both zonal and specific references to the border with the *Galltacht*. It is tempting to attribute this lack of specificity wholly to the absence of centralised institutions of government in the *Gaedhealtacht* and the bureaucratic documentation that it would have produced, or (worse) to the inability of the Gaelic mind to perceive borders at all. Gaelic sources,

³⁴ Jenny Wormald, *Court, kirk and community: Scotland, 1470–1625* (Edinburgh, 1981), 40.

³⁵ J.M.W. Bannerman, ‘The lordship of the isles’, in J.M. Brown (ed.), *Scottish society in the fifteenth century* (London, 1977), 209–40.

³⁶ Davies, *The first English empire*, 154.

³⁷ On the constitutional status of Ireland’s Gaelic population under the Tudors, see Maginn, ‘Civilizing’ Gaelic Leinster: the extension of Tudor rule in the O’Byrne and O’Toole lordships (Dublin, 2005), 115–7.

³⁸ Ellis, *Tudor frontiers and noble power*, 114.

³⁹ S.G. Ellis, *Reform and revival: English government in Ireland, 1470–1534* (London, 1986), 51.

however, employed a range of terminology to address physical and political boundaries. ‘*Cocrich*’, or *comhchríoch/comhchríocha* in modern Irish, was the most common term used for a border or borders. In 1482, for example, the annalists heaped praise on Brian O’Neill for the raids he conducted in life on borders (‘*coicrich*’);⁴⁰ later, in 1525, Turlough O’Brien was lauded upon his death for his defence of his country (‘*a tír*’) and his border (‘*a cocrich*’).⁴¹ Another term employed by the annalists to describe a border, ‘*imel*’—*imeall/imill* in modern Irish—seems to have carried a meaning that was little different from ‘*cocrich*’: in 1515 the annalists recorded O’Donnell’s raid on the MacDermotts ‘*a n-imel Coillted Concobuir*’;⁴² and, in a rare reference to a border outside of Ireland, the annalists noted the hosting made into England by the Scots in 1522 ‘*a n-imeal t-Shaxsan*’.⁴³ The closest the annals come to addressing the border that existed with the *Galltacht* was the use of the word ‘*bord*’ to describe events (raids) that took place on the border of Dublin and Leighlinbridge in 1495 and 1587 respectively.⁴⁴ That both places were in the *Galltacht* may account for the use of the English cognate word ‘*bord*’ in these instances. In a society that has been shown to emphasise lordship over men more than lordship over ‘a closed and defined territory’, more elaborate terminology to describe a frontier zone, it would seem, was unnecessary.⁴⁵ Yet this is only part of the explanation. The other part lies in the nature of the frontier between *Gaedhealtacht* and *Galltacht* in the late Middle Ages.

In Ireland *c.*1500 the border with the *Galltacht* existed on two levels. At one level the border was indistinct and porous, and may be described as cultural rather than physical. With the exception of the north Connacht/west Ulster region, areas of *Gaill* settlement interspersed many parts of Ireland’s *Gaedhealtacht*: from the tiny *Galltacht* in (and around) Galway City in the west, to the earldom of Desmond which separated the great lordships of O’Brien and MacCarthy in the south, to the *Gaill* settlements which clung to Ulster’s eastern coast. To judge by the many well-known statutes and by-laws enacted by the Irish parliament and a number of town councils prohibiting, *inter alia*, marriage, ecclesiastical affiliation and trade on the basis of race, interaction with the *Galltacht* must have been a way of life.⁴⁶ Yet the fact that no racial markers existed to distinguish between ‘English’ and ‘Irish’ in Ireland has received little attention from historians. We may now dismiss notions based on the late nineteenth-century ‘science’ of phrenology which held that the ‘Irish and Welsh ... tended to be round-headed and dark-haired, and that the Celtic racial type was similar to Cro-Magnon Man’, but it is worth noting that Professor

⁴⁰ AU, *s.a.* 1482.

⁴¹ AU, *s.a.* 1525.

⁴² ALC, *s.a.* 1515; AU, *s.a.* 1515; *Ann. Conn.*, *s.a.* 1515.

⁴³ AU, *s.a.* 1522.

⁴⁴ AU, *s.a.* 1495; ALC, *s.a.* 1587.

⁴⁵ Nicholls, *Gaelic and Gaelicised Ireland*, 22–7.

⁴⁶ Maginn, *English marcher lineages*, 129; S.G. Ellis, ‘Racial discrimination in late medieval Ireland’, in G. Hálfdanarson (ed.), *Racial discrimination and ethnicity in European history* (Pisa, 2003), 21–35; Gearóid Mac Niocaill, *Na Buirgéisí, XII–XV aois* (2 vols, Dublin, 1964), vol. i, 245.

Stanley Bindoff highlighted the contrast which, he believed, must surely have existed in early Tudor England between 'fair-haired and light-eyed Easterner' and 'the darker man of the Midlands and West'. Centuries earlier, Gaelic sources employed a specific vocabulary to distinguish between dark-haired Danes (*Dubh-Gaill*) and fair-haired Norwegians (*Fionn-Gaill*). In the late Middle Ages, however, Gaelic and English records do not speak of *Gaedhil* or *Gaill* as being of a certain stature or build; nor was either group described as having a common complexion, hair or eye-colour. Indeed, in Ireland, racial difference had to be articulated by statute: in a well-known example from 1447, the Irish parliament enacted that any man wanting to be accounted English was to shave his upper lip. The absence of common physical traits meant that Gaelic people might move with relative ease into the *Galltacht*, bringing with them their language and culture.⁴⁷

What the many thousands of Gaelic peasants who flowed into English areas in the late Middle Ages encountered there was a society that was more agriculturally intensive and more thickly peopled and settled in smaller parishes than the one from whence they came. The highest expression of settlement in the *Galltacht*—and what separated it most clearly from Gaelic areas—was the large towns whose boundaries were marked by walls of hewn stone punctuated by large gates. The towns—comprised of buildings made from brick and mortar and boasting roofs constructed of slate—were centres of commerce where markets and fairs brought urban and rural together in the exchange of goods (conducted through an admixture of barter and trade *in specie* which bore the likeness of the English monarch).⁴⁸ The *Gaill*, whose ancestors had constructed these towns, were subjects of the kings of England who (with the exception of Richard II) had not for centuries set foot in Ireland, but whose laws they obeyed or violated, and upon whose military protection they could ultimately depend. Expressions of loyalty to England, pageants in celebration of England's patron saint for example, were most common in the towns where culture and language most closely resembled that society upon which they were modelled. Whereas the *Gaill* saw no ethnic or constitutional difference between themselves and subjects of the king born in England (and doubtless sought to downplay the cultural and linguistic distinctions that arose between them over time), Gaelic sources, as we have seen, employed the term '*Saxain*' without fail to describe the latter.

For the *Gaedheil*, this society offered opportunities for social mobility that his own did not. Bound by his patrilineal ancestry (or lack thereof—as Nicholls has shown the early seventeenth-century historian Conall Mageoghan spoke sneeringly

⁴⁷ Quoted in Matthew Hammond, 'Ethnicity and the writing of medieval Scottish history', *Scottish Historical Review* 85 (2006), 11. For attempts to discover the racial characteristic of Irishmen through the analysis of skulls, see John Grattan, 'Notes on the human remains discovered within the round towers of Ulster, with some additional contributions towards a "crania hibernica"', *Ulster Journal of Archaeology* VI (1858), 27–39, 221–46. S.T. Bindoff, *Tudor England* (London, 1950), 25–6; *Statute rolls of the parliament of Ireland, reign of Henry VI*, ed. H.F. Berry (Dublin, 1910), 88.

⁴⁸ Howard Clarke, 'Decolonization and the dynamics of urban decline in Ireland, 1300–1550', in T.R. Slater (ed.), *Towns in decline, AD 100–1600* (Aldershot, 2000), 174–5; Colm Lennon, *Sixteenth-century Ireland: the incomplete conquest* (Dublin, 1994), 27–30.

of the common sort, '[not] one of whom knows his own great-grandfather'; though, in keeping with what we know about Gaelic thinking, Mageoghan might more accurately have referred to one who did not know the son of the son of the son he was), a 'low-born' person in the *Gaedhealtacht* could rarely penetrate the professional orders or the ruling or ecclesiastical clans if he were not born into them.⁴⁹ To put it another way, a commoner could rarely aspire to be anything more than a labourer, a tiller of the soil or a tender of cattle. By the same token, the O'Higginses from fifteenth-century Connacht were poets because theirs was a poetic family;⁵⁰ a Maginn, as an *airchinneach*, or 'erenagh', was a hereditary tenant on church-lands in the diocese of Dromore and enjoyed quasi-ecclesiastical status;⁵¹ and an O'Brien in Thomond was a member of the ruling clan there—though there were instances when O'Brien clansmen occupied high clerical office.⁵² All that separated *Gaedhil* from *Gaill* in the *Galltacht*, however, was language, dress and custom, all of which could be changed; and if a *Gaedheal* were to purchase a 'charter of English liberty and freedom from all Irish servitude' or simply disguise his ethnic background then he might be accepted as an Englishman.⁵³ Such was the case with the Uí Ciardhubháin who had by Tudor times become a powerful commercial family in Galway City, reinventing themselves there as the Kirwans.⁵⁴ In Limerick, the Uí Seasnáin had made a similar transformation and re-emerged as the Sextons.⁵⁵ In these urban areas, the dominance of a few families over decades may more accurately be termed oligarchic rather than hereditary.⁵⁶ With the emphasis on agnatic descent in the *Gaedhealtacht* and the absence of a unified political structure to confer belonging, it was nearly impossible for the reverse to occur.⁵⁷ At the same time, however, the *Galltacht* must

⁴⁹ One well-known exception was the phenomenon of 'named' children that is (male) children whose mothers declared an alternative father for the child. It was in this way that Matthew Kelly, reputedly the son of a lowly Dundalk blacksmith, as a teenager became Matthew O'Neill, son of the O'Neill chief Conn Bacach, and later first baron of Dungannon: Nicholls, *Gaelic and gaelicised Ireland*, 10 (quotation), 88–90; Ciaran Brady, *Shane O'Neill* (Dundalk, 1996).

⁵⁰ *The bardic poems of Tadhg Dall O hUiginn*, ed. E. Knott (2 vols, London, 1922), vol. i, xxii–iii. See also ALC, *s.a.* 1476.

⁵¹ Henry Jefferies, 'The diocese of Dromore on the eve of the Tudor Reformation', in Lindsay Proudfoot (ed.), *Down: history and society: interdisciplinary essays on the history of an Irish county* (Dublin, 1997), 127–8.

⁵² See below page 14.

⁵³ S.G. Ellis, *Reform and revival: English government in Ireland, 1470–1534* (Woodbridge, 1986), 129–30; Bryan Murphy, 'The status of the native Irish after 1331', *Irish Jurist* II (1967), 116–38.

⁵⁴ James Hardiman, *The history of the town and county of Galway, from the earliest period to the present time* (Dublin, 1820), 16.

⁵⁵ Colm Lennon, *An Irish prisoner of conscience of the Tudor era: Archbishop Richard Creagh of Armagh, 1523–86* (Dublin, 2000), 19, 23, 25.

⁵⁶ Gearóid Mac Niocaill, 'Socio-economic problems of the medieval Irish town', in David Harkness and Mary O'Dowd (eds), *The town in Ireland* (Belfast, 1981), 7–21.

⁵⁷ For a good example of the continued use of the term *Gaill* in sixteenth-century bardic poetry, see *Poems on marcher lords: from a sixteenth-century Tipperary manuscript*, ed. Anne O'Sullivan (London, 1987).

have in many respects struck the immigrant *Gaedheal* as inhibiting. From the relative pervasiveness of the machinery of royal government and rule of law, to the prevalence and definitiveness of written documents and the airless manner of dress it was an infinitely more restrictive culture and society.⁵⁸ But Gaelic people still came, and their culture had, by *c.* 1500, become a part of English society, reflecting the porous nature of the cultural border with the *Galltacht*.

Yet this cultural border existed parallel with a border consisting of physical manifestations. The wastelands, ditches, dykes, tower-houses and walled towns successively witnessed by a Gaelic person travelling from Leinster's lightly populated, and largely pastoral, uplands into the nucleated settlements of the lowlands or 'champagne ground', known in Irish as the '*machaire*', ('maghery', the innermost region of the Pale) surrounding Dublin City speak to a definite political division.⁵⁹ These barriers made by crown subjects (sometimes with direct assistance from the Irish parliament) were not thrown up to keep the Gaelic population out, rather they were intended primarily to defend English areas and goods from Gaelic clansmen and their affiliates who together constituted definite political and military groupings.⁶⁰ Rarely bent on annexing lands to their authority, by the sixteenth century, clans whose lordships were near to the *Galltacht*, frequently conducted raids on vulnerable lowland settlements or used the threat of violence to extract money, or 'black rents'. This distinction within the Gaelic polity—between clansmen possessed of a political affiliation and Gaelic people without political affiliation—is often overlooked and does much to explain how parts of the *Galltacht*, even areas within the Pale, could be Gaelic-speaking, and made up of people of Gaelic ethnic extraction, but not a part of the Gaelic polity.⁶¹ The clans, moreover, were fiercely independent and harboured centuries-old resentment of the society that most threatened to take that independence away. The lordships that comprised the *Gaedhealtacht* in Ireland were thus also defined by a definite political frontier with areas subject to the authority of a monarch who claimed lordship over the entire island and whose attitude toward the *Gaedhil*, its 'Irish enemies', was generally hostile.⁶²

⁵⁸ Compare, for example, the differences between the societies discussed in Ellis, *Reform and revival* and Simms, *From kings to warlords*. See also the depictions of 'wilde Irish man and woman' on John Speed's 1610 map of Ireland: J.R. Planché, *History of British costume, from the earliest period to the close of the eighteenth century* (London, 1847), 470, 475–6.

⁵⁹ For a description of what it would have been like for an English traveller to journey from Dublin City into the mountains of Leinster, see Ellis, 'Racial discrimination in late medieval Ireland', 22–3.

⁶⁰ Maginn, *English marcher lineages*, 129. For the full definition of a clan, see Nicholls, *Gaelic and Gaelicised Ireland*, 8–10.

⁶¹ Maginn, 'Civilizing' *Gaelic Leinster*, 12–13.

⁶² In addition to the well-known interaction between Richard II and Gaelic chiefs, from time to time English kings adopted a conciliatory stance toward Gaelic chiefs. At the outset of the Wars of the Roses, for instance, a desperate Henry VI sent messages to Gaelic chiefs in the hope that they would assist him in dislodging Richard, duke of York, from Ireland. The O'Neill chiefs of the late Middle Ages, meanwhile, recognised the kings of England as their

Yet those whom one would expect to defend this political border did not always respect it. The absence of a centralised Gaelic government capable of enforcing a consistent political policy allowed most chiefs to make war or to defend themselves (very little separated the two) according to local circumstance. This, in turn, moved English subjects—especially during the extended periods of weak royal government, which were a feature of the late medieval period—to act in a similar manner. A blurred political border with the *Galltacht* was thus quick to emerge; and no example more clearly reflects the degree to which *Gaedhil* and *Gaill* ignored the political border separating their societies than the conflict which arose in the first years of the sixteenth century between Ulick Fionn Burke (MacWilliam Upper) and the citizens of Galway, culminating in August 1504 with the well-known battle of Knockdoe.⁶³ Burke, the dominant lord in the region, was descended from the De Burgh family, which had in the thirteenth century conquered much of the area and founded the town of Galway. In a bold affront to the rights and privileges of Galway (enshrined in its relatively recent royal charter), Burke reasserted his family's control over the city in 1504. Ostensibly, then, this was a struggle beyond the political bounds of the *Gaedhealtacht* between subjects of the king of England. Though the Burkes had over generations adopted many trappings of Gaelic culture—most notably dress, language and socio-political organisation—the memory of the Gaelic polity was too long and its emphasis on a person's agnatic past too great to forget Burke's origins. This perspective is captured when in 1458 the annalists recorded the death of Edmund Burke whom they lauded as the 'lord of the Gaill of Connacht and many its *Gaedhil*, choicest of the *Gaill* of Ireland for form and feature, mercy, good faith and every quality for which a man might be praised'.⁶⁴ To the Gaelic world, Ulick Fionn Burke remained a *Gaill*, if not in the identical sense that the urbanites of Galway behind their walls were also *Gaill*.⁶⁵ But the array of forces that assembled to decide Galway's fate on the hill of Knockdoe showed how little the political border with the *Galltacht* could matter: with Burke stood *Gaedhil*—O'Briens, the MacNamaras, the O'Carrolls and the O'Kennedys—against Henry VII's deputy in Ireland, Gerald Fitzgerald, the eighth earl of Kildare, who

lord and Conn Mor O'Neill was denized as an Englishman: Katharine Simms, 'The king's friend: O'Neill, the crown and the earldom of Ulster', in J. Lydon (ed.), *England and Ireland in the later Middle Ages* (Dublin, 1981), 214–36.

⁶³ The best modern account of the battle remains: G.A. Hayes-McCoy, *Irish battles* (London, 1969), 48–67. But see also my comments in William Henry, *Fields of slaughter: the Battle of Knockdoe, 1504* (Galway, 2004), ix–x. Cf. 'The book of Howth', *Calendar of Carew Manuscripts preserved in the archiepiscopal library at Lambeth, 1515–1624* (6 vols, London, 1867–73); AFM, *s.a.* 1504; AC, *s.a.* 1504; AU, *s.a.* 1504. As Ellis has indicated, a comparison between the accounts of the English chronicler and the Gaelic annalists reveals much about senses of identity in this period: Ellis, *Ireland in the age of the Tudors*, 107. For the enduring importance of the battle in Irish historiography, see Seán Connolly, *Contested island: Ireland, 1460–1630* (Oxford, 2007), 4–9.

⁶⁴ AC, *s.a.* 1458.

⁶⁵ Art Cosgrove, 'The emergence of the Pale, 1399–1447', in Cosgrove, *NHI*, vol. ii, 552.



FIG. 1—Albrecht Durer's 1521 depiction of three Gallowglass and two boys entitled 'Thus go the soldiers of Ireland, beyond England/Thus go the poor (peasants) of Ireland'.

commanded a massive host of *Gaedhil*, including the O'Kellys who had lately seen three of their castles destroyed by Ulick Burke, the Mayo Burkes and the full military muster of the four counties of the English Pale and the towns of Drogheda and Dublin. The backbone of both sides, moreover, was made up of contingents of 'Gall-Gaedheal', or 'gallowglass' so-called because of the Norse blood that centuries earlier had mixed with the blood of the Gaelic population of the Western Isles from whence these powerful warriors came (Fig. 1).⁶⁶ That Kildare was victorious at Knockdoe and upheld Galway's royal charter matters less in this context than the cross-border participation and overlapping political loyalties of *Gaedhil* and *Gaill* in the conflict.

⁶⁶ G.A. Hayes-McCoy, *Scots mercenary forces in Ireland (1565–1603)* (Dublin, 1937), 16–17. See now also Seán Duffy (ed.), *The world of the Gallowglass: kings, warlords and warriors in Ireland and Scotland, 1200–1600* (Dublin, 2007).

Cracks in the frontier

The interrelated phenomena of a Gaelic military and cultural resurgence and the steady weakening of the *Galltacht* had seen large areas of the *Galltacht* in the late Middle Ages returned to the *Gaedhealtacht*.⁶⁷ By the second half of the fifteenth century some two-thirds of the island lay firmly within the latter.⁶⁸ But between this period of Gaelic resurgence and the start of the period of sustained royal intervention in Ireland late in Henry VIII's reign, the borders with the *Galltacht* generally stabilised. The *Gaedhealtacht* was not possessed of a sufficiently large surplus population capable of overwhelming or wholly repopulating the remaining *Galltachtai*; and lacking anything approaching centralised political and military co-ordination (not to mention artillery) Gaelic lords could do little to threaten the integrity of the major walled towns or those areas where *Gaill* settlement was thickest. For the infinitely more powerful English crown, the task of pushing back the *Gaedhealtacht* was as unappealing as it was conceivable.⁶⁹ Yet during this period of stabilising frontiers two regions stand out as exceptions.

Until the early sixteenth century, the most active of the many fault lines between Ireland's *Gaedhealtacht* and *Galltacht* lay in Leinster where successive earls of Kildare were forcefully extending the bounds of the *Galltacht*. The Kildare earldom formed the eastern frontier of the Gaelic lordships in the Midlands—principally the Gaelic lordships of MacGeoghegan, O'Connor, O'Dempsey and O'More—and the northern border of the MacMurrough-Kavanagh lordship. The king's highway connecting the Pale and the southern *Galltacht* in Wexford and Munster ran through Co. Kildare and continued on through the Barrow Valley—situated between the boggy Midlands and the Wicklow Mountains; but by the mid-fifteenth century the Gaelic lords of the Midlands had overrun the area.⁷⁰ In the late 1450s Thomas Fitzgerald, seventh earl of Kildare, together with his allies among the FitzEustaces, inaugurated a period of Geraldine expansion in the area that would continue well into the sixteenth century. The O'Connors were the first victims of the extension of Kildare power. In 1459 Conn O'Connor Faly was defeated and the Geraldines seized the manor of Rathangan, which the O'Connors had conquered decades earlier. Though the O'Connors managed to capture the earl for a brief time in 1466, Kildare had, by the time of his death in 1478, gained the upper hand against the Gaelic lordships in the Midlands. The Geraldines went on under the leadership of the eighth earl in the following decade to expropriate Gaelic clansmen and buy up lands in south Leinster at the expense of the MacMurroughs. But it was not until 1496, when Kildare placed his lineage's interests squarely in line with those of a stable English

⁶⁷ For this in general see J.F. Lydon, *The lordship of Ireland in the Middle Ages* (Dublin, 1972), 150–89; R.F. Frame, *Colonial Ireland, 1169–1369* (Dublin, 1981), 111–35.

⁶⁸ Nicholls, *Gaelic and Gaelicised Ireland*, 14–21.

⁶⁹ Henry VII intended to lead an expedition to Ireland 'for the repress of the wild Irish and redress and sure reduction of all the said land', but upon learning of the cost decided against it; his son later toyed with the idea of conquering Ireland before abandoning the notion for the same reason: Ellis, *Ireland in the age of the Tudors*, 111–12 (quotation), 119–20.

⁷⁰ S.G. Ellis, *Tudor frontiers and noble power: the making of the British state* (Oxford, 1995), 111; Emmett O'Byrne, *War, politics and the Irish of Leinster* (Dublin, 2003), 123–4.

sovereign, that the earls of Kildare began to return large parts of Kildare, Carlow and south Dublin to the *Galltacht*.⁷¹ Precisely how much cultural change the Kildare Ascendancy brought to these areas is difficult to measure, but in political terms there can be little doubt that royal authority was greatly strengthened at the expense of Gaelic power. Upon his death, he was described by the annalists as a man who 'in power, fame and estimation ... exceeded all the Gaill conquered more territory from the Gaedhil, built more castles for the Gaill, raised more castles of the Gaedhil, kept better justice and law, and gave most of his own substance to the men of Ireland'.⁷²

A second major pressure point was in Thomond. Here, the frontier shifted in the opposite direction. Traditionally, the River Shannon marked the eastern boundary of the O'Brien lordship, separating the *Gaedhealtacht* from the *Galltacht* region of the city of Limerick and the surrounding counties of Limerick and Tipperary. In 1466, however, Tadhg O'Brien asserted his clan's dominance on the eastern bank of the Shannon overcoming a branch of the Burkes in the process.⁷³ The target was the wealthy city and county of Limerick, which O'Brien intimidated into paying a fixed 'black rent' to his clan. The increasingly powerful O'Briens—who, according to a late fifteenth-century English estimate, could muster 200 horses, nearly 150 gallowglass and 600 kernes—consolidated their hold on the east bank by constructing with the support of the bishops of Killaloe and Kilfenora (both of whom were O'Briens) at Port-Croisi in 1506 a bridge over the Shannon.⁷⁴ Thought to be 'fifteen score paces' in length with 'two fortresses set at either end', this feat of engineering was a most remarkable development and the lone example in the sixteenth century of a clan establishing control of a great swathe of land in the *Galltacht*.⁷⁵ The king's deputy, the eighth earl of Kildare, was quick to act. In 1510 he brought a strong force to Limerick and destroyed the bridge. But the O'Briens and their allies won a victory over Kildare and forced his retreat. It was in some respects a reprisal of the battle fought five years earlier at Knockdoe but with a different outcome.⁷⁶ Some 25 years later 'O'Brien's bridge' was fully reconstructed and was again a serious worry for the Tudor government. The bridge, with its fortresses, was, in Lord Deputy Grey's estimation, 'the strongest hold that ev[er] I sawe in Ireland' and withstood a barrage of artillery before O'Brien's men abandoned the fortresses to Grey's soldiers.⁷⁷ But, like Kildare, Grey was unable to defeat O'Brien decisively across the Shannon. For Grey, the Shannon represented the *de facto* border with the *Gaedhealtacht*. The O'Briens' expansion into the *Galltacht* was ended finally in the early 1540s not by their military defeat, but by Murrough O'Brien's transformation from Gaelic chief

⁷¹ All of this has been comprehensively shown in Ellis, *Tudor frontiers and noble power*, 107–45.

⁷² AU, *s.a.* 1513.

⁷³ AFM, *s.a.* 1466; Nicholls, *Gaelic and Gaelicised Ireland*, 185.

⁷⁴ AFM, *s.a.* 1506; Price, 'Armed forces of Irish chiefs', 204.

⁷⁵ The National Archives (TNA), S.P. 60/3/59, William Body to Thomas Cromwell, 9 August 1536.

⁷⁶ AFM, *s.a.* 1510.

⁷⁷ TNA, S.P. 60/3/61, Lord Leonard Grey to Henry VIII, 10 August 1536 (quotation); TNA, S.P. 60/3/59, William Body to Thomas Cromwell, 9 August 1536; AFM, *s.a.* 1536.

into the first earl of Thomond as part of the Tudor policy of ‘surrender and regrant’, which sought the peaceful integration of the Gaelic polity into an Irish kingdom without political or cultural borders.

Conclusion

Frontier studies have done much to destroy the old view that Ireland after the early fourteenth century was ‘distinguished by the recrudescence of Celtic tribalism and its spurious imitation by many of Anglo-Norman descent’,⁷⁸ but the *Gaedhealtacht*, the ‘other side’ of the now familiar medieval frontier in Ireland, remains relatively understudied within this otherwise thriving field. Too often historians have been content to employ not only English terminology in their study of these borders, but also an English perspective on them. Through the exploration of Gaelic Ireland’s English frontier a more complete picture of society in late medieval Ireland begins to emerge. It is evident from an investigation of contemporary Gaelic sources that the island of Ireland lay at the heart of a *Gaedhealtacht* region, one that reached into parts of Scotland and whose centre was the north Connacht/west Ulster district. And it was in Ireland where the uneven nature of medieval English settlement and cultural penetration combined with the failure of the extraordinarily centralised English state to embrace (or conquer) the entire population of its ‘lordship’ to ensure the existence of both a great many frontiers and regular interaction between two population groups: *Gaedhil* and *Gaill*; ‘Irish’ and ‘English’. Owing to the absence of a Gaelic state with a centralised apparatus of governing institutions, the border with the *Galltacht* in the late Middle Ages is more difficult to locate than English Ireland’s Gaelic frontiers. That *Gaill* were racially identical to *Gaedhil* blurred these borders still further. Yet, as can be seen in south Leinster and in Thomond, the cultural and political borders with the *Galltacht* were real: the sharp differences between English and Gaelic societal norms and the continued existence in Ireland of institutions of English government made this so.

⁷⁸ G.H. Orpen, *Ireland under the Normans, 1216–1333* (Oxford, 1920; repr., Dublin, 2005), iv, 249.