

Irish Classrooms and British Empire

IMPERIAL CONTEXTS IN THE
ORIGINS OF MODERN EDUCATION

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Education, imperial careers and the Irish Catholic elite in the nineteenth century

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It seems strange to me, stranger perhaps than for you – for you have often been inside the old walls since, to think of the long, long half days we trudged around the field ... It is strange to contrast these old times with present times in Peking, where the sun shines on as many days as there are rainy days in Dublin, where dust abounds instead of mud, and long stretches of desert sand take the place of the grand green fields of Ireland.¹

Alfred John Flaherty, a Blackrock College old boy with literary pretensions, wrote several such letters to a Dublin school-chum E.J. Kenny from his desk in Peking, where he whiled away his days as a second class assistant at the British legation at the turn of the century.² Had Flaherty substituted London for Dublin in his correspondence, we could categorize it neatly as the sort of empty sentimental waffle written by so many nostalgic Old Etonians in the same period. Blackrock College was no Eton, however, a fact that is reflected perhaps by the low status of Flaherty's posting at Peking. Old boys were no more equal in the empire than they were in the domestic society that created them, and something of the complex hierarchy of Irish Catholic education is revealed to us in its relationship to empire. Blackrock specialized in providing its graduates with solidly middle-class positions in the professions and the civil service, but the diversity of social background in its typical catchment meant that it was in effect boycotted by those families who considered themselves the highest class of Irish Catholic. Such families sent their sons and daughters overseas in search of an identifiably elite education, one beyond the financial reach of most Irish families in the period and one that typically produced a higher-status career than that of second assistant at the British legation in Peking.

¹ Alfred John Flaherty to E.J. Kenny, 18 Nov. 1899: Blackrock College Archives. ² Flaherty won a medal in the 1895 intermediate examinations in modern languages. For a brief mention of his subsequent career, see Lo Hui-Min, *The correspondence of G.E. Morrison*, I (Cambridge, 1978), p. 256.

An education in England or on the Continent was not uncommon for Irish Catholics from landed and wealthy backgrounds in the nineteenth century. In fact, the tradition was a long-established one, and it had originally developed in response to the lack of domestic choice for reasonably wealthy families in the matter of a high-quality education for their sons and daughters. Irish priests had been educated at the various Irish colleges on the Continent throughout the post-Reformation era. Forced to look outside their own country to isolated seminaries and Catholic colleges on the Continent, Irish, Scottish and English Catholic elites had built up a tradition of boarding their adolescent sons abroad as early as the 1590s.³ The French Revolution and resulting decades of turbulence in northern Europe forced many of the schools to return to England in a process that was facilitated by the relaxation of the penal laws in 1793. The greater religious tolerance also allowed fee-paying Catholic boarding schools such as Clongowes Wood (founded in 1814) to develop slowly in Ireland throughout the first half of the nineteenth century. For Catholics it was a period of uncertainty and flux, and this allowed the tradition of Irish boys boarding at overseas schools to continue. Some of the most famous Catholics of this period, such as Richard Lalor Sheil, Thomas Wyse and Daniel O'Connell were all partly educated outside Ireland.⁴ As the Continental options narrowed after 1814, English Catholic colleges became increasingly central to Irish Catholic elite culture, and for the rest of the nineteenth century and for much of the twentieth an education at a school such as Stonyhurst in Lancashire, Downside near Bath, or Ampleforth in Yorkshire remained a popular draw. It has been conventionally assumed that this group was particularly enthusiastic about the career possibilities offered by the British Empire and its supposed potential for social advancement not available for high-status Catholics remaining at home in Ireland.

The practice of overseas education was widely commented upon in contemporary newspaper debates, and there was a perceptible increase in the circulation of pamphlets on the issue towards the end of the nineteenth century.⁵ According

³ See R. Po-Chia Hsia, *The world of Catholic renewal, 1540–1770* (2nd ed., Cambridge, 2005), p. 89. ⁴ Sir Thomas Wyse (1791–1862) attended Stonyhurst College from 1802 to 1808, then TCD, and became an MP, an educationalist, a diplomat and a writer. Richard Lalor Sheil (1791–1851) attended Stonyhurst from 1805 to 1807, then TCD, and became an MP, a diplomat, a dramatist and an orator of renown. He was co-founder of the Catholic Association, which Daniel O'Connell would later dominate. O'Connell's foreign education was received at the prestigious secular College of St Omer (formerly run by the Jesuits, then en route to settle at Stonyhurst) and the Benedictine school at Douai. ⁵ For examples of such essays, see Maurice C. Hime, *Efficiency of Irish schools and their superiority to English schools as places of education for Irish boys* (Dublin, 1889); Frederick R. Falkner, 'The Irish schoolboy exodus', *Dublin University Review*, 2 (Dec. 1885), 334.

to the census commissioners, the number of children in 'superior schools' between 1834 and 1861 amounted to a tiny fraction of the population – roughly 1.1 per cent of Anglicans were receiving a high-quality intermediate education in Ireland, 0.4 per cent of Presbyterians and just 0.2 per cent of Catholics.⁶ With domestic education in such a sorry state, we can forgive the exasperation of contemporary practitioners as they observed the flow of children to England. Maurice Hime, sometime headmaster of a modest grammar school in Derry, Foyle College, complained that the boys that had left his school to finish their education in England had returned 'with vile, swaggering manners and a complex mongrel accent'.⁷ That English education was in demand for wealthy Irish families in the second half of the nineteenth century is no longer in dispute, though quite what the wealthiest Catholics hoped to gain from it remains a point of contention.

II

In the nineteenth century, there were four main boarding schools for boys in Ireland that charged prohibitive fees and deliberately targeted the wealthiest Irish Catholic families. These were Clongowes Wood, Castleknock College, Blackrock College and Tullabeg (which closed in 1886). The allure of empire for the pupils of those schools is explored below by Timothy McMahon (pp 111–23). The focus here is on those boys attending English Catholic schools, roughly 250–300 per annum. In England, as many as ten schools can be identified as having had a considerable percentage of Irish-born boarders, accounting for as much as 30 per cent of their student body in some cases, and over 20 per cent in almost all. Though drawn from roughly the same class of people (the Catholic elite and upper-middle class), it is safe to assume that, as a general rule of thumb, those attending the English schools were better off than those attending fee-paying Irish ones. The most important schools in England, from an Irish Catholic perspective, were Downside, Stonyhurst, Beaumont (Old Windsor) and Oscott (Birmingham) – all of which charged fees that exceeded those at Irish schools and involved what until the 1880s was an expensive four-day journey from any Irish rural location.

Senia Pařeta, John Hutchinson and more recently, Fergus Campbell have all referenced the importance of empire in relation to elite education in Ireland. It has been inferred that much of Irish elite education was geared towards securing lucrative posts in the Indian civil service.⁸ This vexed matter of employment

6 Kieran Flanagan, 'The rise and fall of the Celtic ineligible: competitive examinations for the Irish and Indian civil services in relation to the educational and occupational structure of Ireland, 1853–1921' (DPhil, U. Sussex, 1977), p. 62. 7 Maurice C. Hime, *Home education; or, Irish versus English grammar schools for Irish boys* (Dublin, 1887), p. 525. 8 Marianne Elliott, *When*



8.1 Captain MacCarthy-Morrogh (centre, behind gun) with WAFF in West Africa (photograph reproduced by permission of the MacCarthy-Morrogh family).

strategy, so central to the goals of any school in the modern era, has thus far eluded those who have looked at Irish education in the nineteenth century. Here, we will examine a group of Irish boys attending English Catholic schools across the period 1850–1900. Where recent work has focused on the proliferation of references to empire in newspapers and popular print, we will concentrate on the actual careers of such boys, perhaps providing a more concrete indicator of the impact of empire.⁹ In this period, English public schools were keen to emphasize their connections to the empire, preferring to highlight the potentially exotic ahead of the predictable, mundane and much more likely career path taken by most of their graduates. Catholic schools were no different, and if they were being used by Irish Catholics as a springboard to a life in imperial service, then it should become apparent from an analysis of the occupations of the boys that attended them.

God took sides: religion and identity in Ireland – unfinished history (Oxford, 2009), p. 212.

9 Examples of such work include Simon J. Potter (ed.), *Newspapers and empire in Ireland and Britain: reporting the British Empire, c.1857–1921* (Dublin, 2004); Jennifer M. Regan, '“We could be of service to other suffering people”: representations of India in the Irish nationalist press, c.1857–1887', *Victorian Periodicals Review*, 41:1 (spring 2008), 61–77; Jeff Dann, 'The representation of British sports in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century elite Irish school publications', *Media History*, 17:2 (2011), 133–46.

III

The pursuit of a privileged or 'choice' education strongly suggests a high degree of class-consciousness among elite Catholic families. Their burgeoning social aspirations did not always endear them to less wealthy co-religionists – who could count the majority of the secular clergy among their number: most of the Irish bishops were drawn from the rural middle class, and they of course spent much of the nineteenth century demanding state-supported denominational education, at the expense of both the Queen's Colleges and Trinity College, institutions that were, as a result, technically off-limits for Catholics for the period discussed here, though never in practice. The critical gap between the professional needs of the laity and the pastoral concerns of the secular clergy was to remain problematic for the remainder of the century. This was accentuated by the fact that the secular hierarchy had no real control over the education being provided at the most prestigious schools in either England or Ireland since they were administered by independent religious orders, which effectively meant that elite education was something that took place effectively outside episcopal control. The hierarchy's insistence on state-funded denominational education at all levels was therefore a potential barrier to the professional advancement of the Irish Catholic laity at a time when social mobility was relatively fluid at middle-class and upper middle-class levels. The significant expansion of middle-class clerical or 'white-collar' occupations was signalled by Trevelyan's decision to open up the Indian civil service to open examinations as early as 1855, with the home service following suit in 1870. Ireland was an increasingly urbanized society, one that had begun to consecrate the salaried as archetypal 'solid citizens'. Opportunities for those lower down the social scale were suddenly greatly increased, and with their rise in society came the anxiety caused by the blurring of clearly reified class lines. With a perhaps justifiable fear of *déclassement* by association with these upwardly mobile groups, the age-old problem of what to do with a second or third son may have contributed to the attractiveness of a colonial post to many of Ireland's creaking Protestant gentry.

Those Irish boys attending elite Catholic schools in England represent a mix of the established landed gentry and the rising merchant and professional classes of the major towns and cities in southern Ireland. Drawing on a database of over a thousand Irish-born boarders who attended three of the largest English Catholic public schools (Beaumont, Stonyhurst and Downside), we can see that the overwhelming majority of them actually returned to Ireland after their education and became involved in occupations that were of either local or national significance and that conferred considerable social prestige. Those who did come into contact with the empire principally did so in an indirect way – through military service – and only a tiny percentage of them settled in the colonies or spent the major part of their career outside Ireland. Of the Irish boys

at such schools, almost a quarter became either large or middle-sized landowners, with estates ranging between 500 and 12,000 acres. About 10 to 15 per cent became barristers, solicitors or doctors. Many served as justices of the peace, deputy lieutenants or high sheriffs of their county, and were also masters of the hounds and so on, all ceremonial but prestigious roles, and more usually the type of responsibility taken on by members of the Protestant landowning cohort.¹⁰ A third to a half of the boys served as officers in the military at some point, and about ten per cent entered the religious life. Out of the group of boys identified, only a very small percentage went on to have a directly imperial career, although those who entered military service were frequently involved in the business of empire indirectly.

Imperial attitudes certainly suffused the whole group, and it is possible to trace the place that empire held in their imagination by analysing the various ways in which some of them interacted with it. There were four main imperial careers associated with the Irish Catholics emerging from an English education, which can be further categorized as formal/informal. They might be settler colonists, in Australia or South Africa; or colonial administrators, working as government officials for the Indian civil service; or diplomats based in several different locations over the course of their career. But the largest category was involvement in the informal empire, which covers short-term speculators, brief military service (usually in India or Africa), engineers and religious missionaries who spent varying periods of time working in the colonies.

Irish recruitment to the Indian civil service (ICS) and Indian medical service (IMS) hit its peak between the 1850s to the 1880s. At its highest point, the Irish accounted for a third of all recruits, before shrinking down to between 5 and 10 per cent in the years up to 1914. In the period of highest recruitment, only one in ten recruits was Catholic, a near-total reverse of the denominational demography of the island. But as the overall number of Irish in the service declined towards the end of the nineteenth century, roughly a quarter of the Irish recruits were Catholic.¹¹ The typical Irish recruit to the ICS over the period as a whole was therefore Protestant and emerging from a family with a solid financial base but one very far from independent wealth or gentry status. For this reason, very few of the Irish boys attending the English schools entered into colonial administration (less than 3 per cent overall).

Those boys who did choose a career in the empire led interesting and varied lives. At Downside, John Nicholas Nugent entered the ICS and became a member of the council of governors of Bombay in 1896. Another Downside boy, J.D.D. La Touche, was a successful ornithologist for the imperial maritime

10. These figures are taken from Ciaran O'Neill, 'Rule Etonia: educating the Irish Catholic elite, 1850–1900' (PhD, U. Liverpool, 2010). 11. These figures are taken from S.B. Cook, "'The Irish Raj': social origins and careers of Irishmen in the Indian civil service, 1855–1914', *Journal of Social History*, 20:3 (spring 1987), 507–29.

customs service in China between 1882 and 1922. So successful was he that La Touche's Free-Tailed Bat was named after him, as was a legless lizard that he discovered in south-east China.¹² La Touche's career was of interest to boys and old boys alike, and he wrote an account of it for his school journal in 1885, entitled 'A Gregorian in Foochow', about the time he spent working near Peking:

Foochow is a very different place. We don't live in the city, but outside the suburbs. Most of the foreign houses are on the hill, and perfectly free from Chinese houses. We have a very good club, with library, billiard room &c. With all these advantages, joined to a fairly good climate, Foochow is not a pleasant place for me. We all live in great luxury, with abundance of servants &c. In our own house we have over two dozen servants for four of us. Each has his own private servant and two or three chair-bearers; cooks, house servants, or out-door servants make up the rest.¹³

A few became diplomats, such as Sir Nicholas O'Connor, at Stonyhurst in 1856, who became envoy to Russia and Constantinople, and John Frederick Whyte, at the school in 1874 and from Loughbrickland in Co. Down, who became consul to Persia in 1902, having served for a time in India. Most, however, became humble magistrates. Very few became engineers, and those that did tended to stay at home, although James Joseph O'Reilly, an Irish old boy of Beaumont and Oscott, was engineer-in-chief of the world-famous Cochin Harbour in south-west India.¹⁴ Settler colonials, rare as they were, tended to send their children back to either Ireland or Britain for their education. Thus we find names such as James Percy Fitzpatrick, son of an O'Connellite barrister who settled in South Africa, in the registers at Downside, or the sons of Sir Charles Gavan Duffy, premier of Victoria, at Stonyhurst College.¹⁵

The relative lack of imperial service careers in the cohort is quite striking, although we should note that the Irish-born population in India as a proportion of the 'foreign' element had declined from a high of 20 per cent in 1817 to just 5 per cent in the 1880s, and much of the enthusiasm for ICS jobs was confined to families lower down the social scale than those typically sending their boys to

¹² See Fa-Ti Fan, 'Victorian naturalists in China: science and informal empire', *British Journal for the History of Science*, 36:1 (Mar. 2003), 13; C. Francis & K. Maeda, *Tadarida latouchet*, in IUCN 2010: IUCN red list of threatened species: www.iucnredlist.org. ¹³ John La Touche, 'A Gregorian in Foochow', *Downside Review*, 7 (1885), 77–8. ¹⁴ Cochin has been renamed Kochi. O'Reilly was born in Booterstown and received his BA and BE from TCD. He was also a member of the St Stephen's Green Club in Dublin. See obituary in the *Irish Times*, 28 Dec. 1942. ¹⁵ James Percy Fitzpatrick, KCMG (1862–1933) was a son of the barrister James Fitzpatrick. In later life, he became an author of the bestselling book *The Transvaal from within* (1899), took part in the Jameson Raid and was a politician, mining financier and a pioneer of the fruit industry. He was knighted in 1902.

England. Irish recruits to the ICS between 1855 and 1914 were, as we have seen, overwhelmingly drawn from the Protestant middle class, with just 13 per cent from a gentry background or of equivalent independent wealth. Scott Cook has argued that by the later nineteenth century the ICS was increasingly derided by the national press and within the elite itself, being characterized as full of men who had 'failed in England'.¹⁶ The Protestant tone and declining social cachet of the ICS are likely to have deterred wealthier Irish Catholic families from trying to enter; they had already shown themselves quite sensitive to the prevailing fashions of the day by virtue of their choice of education.

The most immediate way in which the growth of empire affected Irish Catholic boys educated in England was in the enhanced appeal of a military career. The families of those sent to English schools were generally politically neutral, rather than overtly nationalist or unionist, and this resulted in a skewing of their pattern of occupations: they were much less likely to have political ambitions than upper-class Protestant Irish boys sent to English public schools such as Eton or Harrow, but it appears that they were much more likely to secure commissions in the British Army. Biographical information is available for 230 out of the 295 Irish boys (78 per cent) who attended Beaumont College between its foundation in 1861 and 1900. One-hundred-and-eight of these (47 per cent) later served as officers in the British Army at some point in their lives, usually reaching a mid-level or high rank. This pattern seems to be confirmed in the cases of Stonyhurst and Downside, reflecting the fact that these boys were from predominantly wealthy and influential backgrounds. Only one boy out of all three schools, Anthony Fox, the son of a Dublin wine merchant, who entered Downside in 1864, enlisted as a mere private – but his story was quite atypical: aged 64, he volunteered to join the Home Guard in 1915, only to be tragically run over by an express train at Hayward's Heath in west Sussex several weeks later.¹⁷

Donal Florence MacCarthy-Morrogh, of Inisbeg, Co. Cork, an old boy of Stonyhurst, provides a striking example of involvement in British Africa: Donal was the fourth son of James MacCarthy-Morrogh and began his military career as a militia officer with the Royal Munster Fusiliers before spending the period from 1899 to 1906 serving as a captain with the newly created West African Frontier Force (WAFF). Returning from Africa in 1906, he served as a major with the Royal Munster Fusiliers, before taking command of the 8th Manchester Regiment during the First World War, retiring in 1918. While in Africa, he found himself under the command of the mercurial Frederick Lugard, and operated in contested space between French, British and German

¹⁶ He also argues that the secretary of state sought to systematically limit the number of successful Irish candidates at examination stage, and largely succeeded in doing so: Cook, 'The Irish Raj', 516. ¹⁷ This rather unfortunate fact is recorded in Dom Lucius Graham, 'Anthony Fox' in *Downside and the War, 1914–1919* (London, 1925), p. 103.

colonies. The WAFF relied heavily on local recruitment, with each of its battalions consisting of 1,200 men, 29 commissioned officers and 44 non-commissioned officers, with the men mostly made up of Hausa recruits.¹⁸ MacCarthy-Morrogh's diary reveals a rather combustible character with more interest in shooting game 'which would look well on the wall at Inishbeg' than anything else that surrounded him.¹⁹ His pride at being Irish was mostly gestural, and despite naming his African ponies 'Skibbereen' and 'Innishbeg', his use of language was distinctly Anglophile, as was his world view. His entry the day after a brief battle in a village near Yola is indicative of his breezily patriotic attitude and enthusiastic disposition:

8th September 1901

We had a ceremonial parade to make a new emir of Yola. It was a most tedious game. We were under arms for some hours in the blazing sun. In the afternoon, as the mess was short of 'chop', I went out and shot 11 pigeons, 3 widgeon and 2 ibis. The latter devilish good eating.²⁰

In 1902, MacCarthy-Morrogh sent home an account of the taking of Yola to the *Stonyhurst Magazine*, which was anxious to publish such material both for its exotic detail and for its promotional value. Empire-themed articles were commonplace in school magazines of the period. Percy Kilkelly, an Irish athlete and surgeon, published a similar piece entitled 'Buffalo shooting in India' in the *Downside Review* in 1895, in which his career as a surgeon in the Indian medical service was only briefly alluded to.²¹ As MacCarthy-Morrogh's period in Africa extended beyond several months, he became noticeably weary, the excitement on his return to either west Cork or to London standing in contrast to his extended stays in colonial West Africa. His frustration was echoed by another old boy in India at around the same time. In 1904, Henry Mansfield, later a corporal, wrote home to his mother after serving for five years in India: 'I am very glad to get out of India, it was an awful place and I hated it.'²² MacCarthy-Morrogh's diary provides a daily record of an Irishman in West Africa over a four-year period, which tends to reinforce the view that, sentimental patriotism aside, there was little to distinguish the Irish from their English, Welsh or Scottish counterparts in either deed or thought when engaged at the sharp end of imperialism.

¹⁸ For more on the force, see A.H.W. Haywood & F.A.S. Clarke, *The history of the Royal West African Frontier Force* (Aldershot, 1964). ¹⁹ I am greatly indebted to Dr Mike MacCarthy-Morrogh for providing me with a typescript of this diary, which covers the period May 1901 to Jan. 1904 and is recorded in six separate ledgers containing carbon copies of pages sent to Donal's father at Inishbeg (often spelt Innishbeg or Inishbeg) in Co. Cork from his post West Africa. The originals are held privately. ²⁰ 8 Sept. 1901, private diaries of Donal MacCarthy-Morrogh, Book Two, 7 July–27 Nov. 1901. ²¹ P.P. Kilkelly, 'Buffalo Shooting in India', *Downside Review*, 14 (Mar.–Dec. 1895), 114. ²² Henry Lattin Mansfield, near Suez, Red Sea, to Pauline Lattin Mansfield, 22 Apr. n.d. [1906]: NLI Mansfield papers, MS 38.418/8.

Quite unwittingly, the MacCarthy-Morrogh diaries reveal another aspect of Irish Catholic imperialism in West Africa – the religious missionary. Arriving at Onitsha in January 1903, he chanced upon two Irish priests connected to the 'French Fathers'.²³ he engaged with a Fr MacDermott from Clonmel in Co. Tipperary, who traded some oranges for a bag of potatoes, and later the same day he recorded that Irish priests such as these had 'evidently been sent out by the home authorities to direct affairs, as the government were suspicious about the French designs'.²⁴ The priests were almost certainly connected to the Holy Ghost Fathers, based in Rockwell in Tipperary and Blackrock in south Dublin. The order had been working in the area since 1885, and had initially been regarded with suspicion within the British sphere of influence as being in effect French agents. This had evidently changed by 1903. That the British state would rely on Irish priests to further its interests in an imperial context is not perhaps as far-fetched as it seems. Their status as religious outsiders within the British Empire made them important and useful intermediaries. Oliver Rafferty has recognized the *modus vivendi* that existed between the Catholic Church and the British Empire in the nineteenth century, arguing that the evident cooperation of the two in the colonies was a pragmatic alliance that furthered the interests of both.²⁵

About 9 to 10 per cent of the Irish boys at the English Catholic schools joined a religious order, generally the Benedictines or the Jesuits, both of which had active missions abroad in the nineteenth century. Some of these boys, such as Ignatius Gartlan, at Stonyhurst in 1866, were later attached to their foreign missions; he served as a Jesuit priest on the Zambesi mission in Rhodesia.²⁶ Another Stonyhurst boy, Nicholas Thomas Carolan, became a Marist Father and served on their New Zealand mission. The Benedictines were reined in by papal order at the turn of the century, which meant that, of those orders specializing in the education of the privileged, only the Jesuits remained active on the missions into the twentieth century. Overall, this lessened the impact of empire on those who joined these particular religious communities: primary evangelization was a rough type of work, taken on more often by lower-status religious

²³ Though the bulk of the Irish Holy Ghost Fathers' nineteenth-century missions were based in East Africa around Mombasa, near Zanzibar, the Onitsha mission was significant as it offered the only competition to Protestant missions in the area prior to 1900. For more on the Onitsha mission, see Kevin Kenny, 'The Irish in the empire' in Kevin Kenny (ed.), *Ireland and the British Empire* (Oxford, 2006), p. 117; F.K. Ekechi, 'The Holy Ghost Fathers in eastern Nigeria, 1885–1920: observations on missionary strategy', *African Studies Review*, 15:2 (Sept. 1972), 217–23. ²⁴ 11 Jan. 1902, private diaries of Donal MacCarthy-Morrogh, book iii, Nov. 1901–Sept. 1902. ²⁵ Oliver P. Rafferty, 'The Catholic Church, Ireland and the British Empire, 1880–1921', *Historical Research*, 84:224 (2011), 288–309. ²⁶ Gartlan attended a lower-status Jesuit school at Mount St Mary's in Derbyshire for five years before attending Stonyhurst. He later taught at Stonyhurst, then served in Preston before embarking on the 'Zambesia' mission: obituary, *Letters and Notices*, 1927.

orders that rarely recruited postulants from the wealthier Catholic families in Ireland.

IV

Overall, the impression from an analysis of this social group is one of imperial wariness, and a pattern of career that was quite comparable with that of old boys from the major English public schools. In a study of imperial careers of old boys from Harrow and Winchester, Frances Jones has shown that in 1880 only 37 out of 142 old boys from Harrow had any connection to empire, and for most of these it was a brief military career.²⁷ At Winchester, this pattern was replicated. Their parents, like the families at the Catholic elite schools, preferred to direct their sons into military, legal or medical professions, or to prepare them for their responsibilities as heirs to their great estates; in some cases, old boys pursued financial or entrepreneurial careers. It was in this last group of speculators that the possibilities of empire spring out at us. One such Irish boy that can certainly be said to have embraced imperialist ideas in a creative manner was John A. Sweetman, who attended both Downside and Beaumont in the 1850s and 1860s and much later was to become the second president of Sinn Féin, following the defection of another Beaumont old boy, the playwright Edward Martyn, who had served briefly as the first president.²⁸

Sweetman, for a time MP for Wicklow East, held a relatively small but high-quality estate of 549 acres in Drumbaragh, Co. Meath, but his interests were global. In 1880, he established a colony for Irish workers in Currie, Minnesota, several hours west of Chicago. The plantation, of about 20,000 acres, was not an entirely successful one, but not for the lack of commitment on Sweetman's part.²⁹ His motive for the setting up such a colony at Currie was to tackle unemployment in his home district, or so he claimed in a magazine article that he wrote for the *Downside Review*:

I had been several years in the County Meath, farming much and hunting a little; then for several years I hunted much and farmed a little ... I became ashamed of spending my life in killing time. In the winter of 1879, there were many labourers out of work in my neighbourhood ... We [asked] them why they did not go to America, where labourers were in demand. The reason was soon given us. They would be only too happy to go, but they had no money to take them there.

²⁷ Frances Jones, 'Old boys and empire: public schools and British imperialism, 1880–1914', paper read before the 6th Galway Conference on Colonialism (June 2010). ²⁸ Sweetman's papers have recently been purchased and catalogued by the NLI. ²⁹ Patrick Maume, 'Sweetman, John (1844–1936)' in James McGuire & James Quinn (eds), *DIB* (Cambridge, 2009).

Determined to take the initiative, Sweetman started a company, in association with several other prominent Irish Catholics, 'The Irish American Colonization Company', and he travelled through Manitoba and Dakota before settling on an area near Sioux Falls, in Murray County, Minnesota.³⁰ He purchased some 20,000 acres in two lots at about £1 an acre. As an assisted migration scheme, it was a failure, but Sweetman was careful to present the results in more ambiguous terms in the *Downside Review*; he did complain of the disloyalty and fecklessness of his Catholic Irish colonists, however. At the beginning of the scheme, he had supplied passage-money from Ireland and starting capital for each of the planters; but much to his surprise and dismay, a number of the planters headed straight for nearby cities on their arrival, leaving the Colonization Company quite out of pocket. In language reminiscent of the imperial bluster of a Cecil Rhodes, he explained to the young boys of Downside that 'too much was done for them, there was too much spoon-feeding, and that made them discontented, like spoilt children'.³¹

The Sweetman colony at Currie in Murray County was the last Catholic plantation on the Western frontier. The idea for such colonies had been actively encouraged by Bishop John Ireland (1838–1918) of St Paul, Minnesota. Bishop Ireland, an immigrant from Co. Kilkenny, oversaw the plantation of over 4,000 Catholic families on land purchased from railroad companies in Minnesota between 1876 and 1881, many of them Irish.³² Sweetman's colony eventually paid its way, but only when stern, paternalist control had been exerted over what was characterized as a lively but untrustworthy tenantry. This was very much a case of a Catholic enthusiastically invoking the language of empire, for Sweetman's colony hints at the various ways in which imperial ideas percolated through Irish society and at the apparently anachronistic manner in which they might be put to use.

V

So what, if anything, can be learned from this group of Irish Catholics? First, it is obvious that a stable career in a socially recognized occupation was of paramount importance to the wealthiest Irish Catholic families. Their preference for legal, medical and military careers over largely administrative roles in the farther reaches of empire is ultimately what shines through. Education, far from being a springboard to greater things abroad, was pursued in order to achieve a

³⁰ The seven shareholders were Sweetman, Edmund and Gerald Dease (both educated at Oscott), John V. Cassidy, W.H.F. Cogan, George E. Ryan (educated Stonyhurst) and Lattin Thunder. ³¹ John A. Sweetman, 'The Sweetman Catholic colony in Minnesota', *Downside Review*, 4 (1885), 109–15. ³² J.P. Shannon, *Catholic colonization on the Western frontier* (new ed., New York, 1976), p. 59.

degree of domestic social mobility, or to secure privileges already won by preceding generations. Imperial careers were exotic and exciting, filled with tales from far-away places of Irish men shooting buffalo, collecting rare species and terrifying native populations with their unrelenting belief in an ordained right to govern and civilize. The column inches devoted to such tales in school magazines should not, however, be taken as an indication of the real impact of the British Empire on the lives of the wealthiest Irish Catholics. These boys were far more likely to end up as landowners or professionals within Irish society – tales of imperial adventure remaining just that to the majority of them, nothing much more than real-life exemplars of the game-crazy dullards that peopled the jingoistic fiction of Henty and Ballantyne.

Seeking to explain the swagger adopted by English public school boys, J.M. Barrie wrote to Lady Asquith in 1920 about how he had met a group of them recently and had been struck by their urbanity and self-confidence. 'They had the Eton something or the Harrow something', he wrote, 'I felt I was nearer to grasping what the something is than ever before. The nearest thing to it must be boot polish'.³³ This polish was what Irish Catholic families sought when they sent their children abroad. They were more interested in creating and maintaining Irish Catholic empires at home than they were in administering one elsewhere.

33 Quoted in Raymond Flower, *Oundle and the English public school* (London, 1989), p. 119.

Irish Jesuit education and imperial ideals

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This essay brings together ideas about Irish identity and Irish involvement in what is often called the British Empire. Given the centrality of the multi-form metropolitan culture at the heart of this imperial enterprise, calling the empire 'British' makes sense. The Irish contribution to that enterprise, however – as numerous authors including Cook, Kenny and O'Farrell have demonstrated – was extensive.¹ Indeed, what is most intriguing to me is not that the Irish contributions, in terms of settlement or military and administrative postings, were large and varied, but rather what these contributions meant to the Irish back home. Did they create a counter-narrative to the one of exile and anger that so permeated much of urban Irish-America and also fuelled advanced nationalism within Ireland? How did these narratives mix with the experiences of Irish men and women at home to shape their understanding of Ireland's place in the wider world? And what impact did this mixture have on the politics of the United Kingdom?

These are pertinent questions for Irish historiography, which still tends to portray the age of new imperialism as the Home Rule era. It was both, and that fact is perhaps the central background point for this essay. Such terms, while they serve as analytical categories for researchers, should not be seen as mutually exclusive. Certainly, contemporaries saw the processes as interlinked. One need only consider that conservative and unionist opponents of Home Rule frequently spoke of its impending passage as an attack on the empire. In contrast, as has been well established, John Redmond and at least some elements in his parliamentary party believed that the redefinition of the United Kingdom that they championed would, in fact, strengthen the empire.² Since Home Rule

1 S.B. Cook, "'The Irish Raj': social origins and careers of Irishmen in the Indian civil service, 1855–1919", *Journal of Social History*, 20:3 (spring 1987), 507–29; Kevin Kenny (ed.), *Ireland and the British Empire* (New York and Oxford, 2006); Patrick O'Farrell, *The Irish in Australia* (Notre Dame IN, 1987); Keith Jeffrey (ed.), *An Irish empire? Aspects of Ireland and the British Empire* (Manchester, 1996); Kevin Kenny (ed.), *Ireland and the British Empire* (Oxford, 2004). 2 For a less-than-favourable look at John Redmond's commitment to the empire, see Pat Walsh, *The rise and fall of imperial Ireland: Redmondism in the context of the British conquest of South Africa and its Great War on Germany, 1899–1916* (Belfast, 2003). For a more measured look at Redmond and Home Rule, see, for example, J.P. Finnan, *John Redmond and Irish unity, 1912–1918* (Syracuse NY, 2004). For the relative appeal of imperialism in the Irish provinces during the early years of