

HALLOWED GROUND: CHRISTIANITY AND ECOLOGY IN THE ANGLO-NORMAN CONQUEST OF GAELIC IRELAND

Katie Golla

Wellesley College

The emergence of Christianity in Ireland occurred in the sixth through eighth centuries, with the majority of surviving texts, including saints' lives, hymns, and nature poetry, beginning to emerge in the late seventh to early eighth centuries.¹ Celtic Christian texts demonstrated an acute awareness of nature as a divine gift and the natural world as a network of beings equally created, cherished, and protected by God. Early Irish hagiographies evoked the miraculous connection between Irish saints and nature through popular topoi that diverged from traditional patristic texts. Despite this divergence, the unique miracle stories of Irish saints remained a part of later interpretations of their *vitae*, and were even used as justification for the conquests of Ireland by the Anglo-Normans in the twelfth century. The Welsh bishop and scholar, Gerald of Wales's text, *Topography of Ireland*, is evidence of such justification, dedicated to Norman King Henry II as a resource for understanding the land and people that he conquered.² Despite Gerald's praise of the Irish saints and their effect on Ireland's natural environment, he scorned the contemporary Irish people, casting them off as religiously ignorant and unfit stewards of the land. In contrast, he argued that the Anglo-Norman

¹ Mary Low. "The Natural World in Early Irish Christianity: An Ecological Footnote." in *Celts and Christians*, edited by Mark Atherton (Cardiff 2002), 175.

² Gerald of Wales, *The Topography of Ireland*. Translated by Thomas Forester. In *The Historical Works of Giraldus Cambrensis*. Rev. and ed. Thomas Wright. London: George Bell & Sons, 1905. 9.

conquerors were the proper caretakers of the land, chosen by God to bring prosperity back to the Irish soil.

Since the early twentieth century, the study of Christianity in Ireland has been synonymous with that of “Celtic Christianity,” which has been described in terms of the green hypothesis. In describing the green hypothesis, Mary Low emphasized the theory’s suggestion that Celtic Christianity was defined by a more profound reverence for the natural world than did other forms of Western Christianity.³ Though this theory has been paramount to historical understanding of the development of Christianity in Ireland, it has recently come into question, given that it tends to essentialize the complex and diverse nature of medieval Irish society and culture. The conception of “Celticism” in Ireland, upon which the green hypothesis is contingent, in itself may be considered anachronistic, as the medieval Irish population were only one divergent sect of the Celtic race, which was split between Scotland and Wales. Moreover, Irish people were not consciously identifying themselves as Celts; rather, they identified themselves more often with their clans and familial ties.⁴ With this in mind, Low defined medieval Celtic Christianity as a “Christianity of people whose mother-tongue is or was one of the Celtic languages, and/or who identify with the cultural heritage of one of these traditional language areas in a recognizable way.”⁵ However, further revision in terminology is required when thinking about medieval Irish Christianity, due to the fact that the geographic and ethnic diversity of Celtic people implied that the practices of Celtic Christians were varied.⁶ Thus, in discussing the Christianity of Irish Celtic populations, the term “Gaelic Christianity” may be more tacit, as it is a more geographically and culturally specific term associated with the medieval Irish landscape and clan populations.

Though it has been shown that Gaelic Christianity was not necessarily characterized by a universal set of beliefs and practices, scholarship has demonstrated that Irish society was characterized by a set of shared values reflecting the socio-economic importance of a pastoral culture. The centuries that have been associated with the emergence of Christianity in Ireland, specifically the sixth through eighth centuries, Ireland lacked a fully developed agricultural class structure.⁷ The country was instead composed of different clans and families, in which a class of warrior elite existed, but no class of ruling elite, as was seen in other regions in the Christian West.⁸ The pastoral economy transgressed social classes, with virtually everyone occupying a direct role in agricultural production.⁹ Thus, while there

³ Low. “The Natural World in Early Irish Christianity: An Ecological Footnote.” 170.

⁴ Low. “The Natural World in Early Irish Christianity: An Ecological Footnote.” 175.

⁵ Low. “The Natural World in Early Irish Christianity: An Ecological Footnote.” 175.

⁶ Low. “The Natural World in Early Irish Christianity: An Ecological Footnote.” 179.

⁷ Dominic Alexander. “The Irish Variant.” In *Saints and Animals in the Middle Ages*, 57–84. Boydell & Brewer, 2008. 61.

⁸ Alexander. “The Irish Variant.” 84.

⁹ Alexander. “The Irish Variant.” 62.

may have been an uncentralized cultural identity, the social and economic values of the natural environment were widespread.

While the practices of Gaelic Christians may have been diverse, early Irish Christian literature emphasized the societal importance of the land by imbuing nature with holy significance associated with the saints. Irish hagiographies evoked the synthesis of natural values with the themes of Christian patristic teachings by forging spiritual bonds between saints and animals. The emergence of Irish hagiographies often contained stories that originated from Gaelic folklore, differing from the tradition of Western hagiography through the lack of an inherent social and spiritual boundary between humans and animals.¹⁰ The spiritual importance of nature was evoked through the miracles Irish saints worked, involving the domestication, resurrection, and hospitable treatment of animals.

Saints' connections to domesticated animals emerged in the lives of Kevin of Glendalough and Ciaran of Clonmacnoise. In the life of Kevin of Glendalough, the saint adopted a motherless child, praying to God to tame a lactating doe in his pasture so that she would yield milk for the infant, as well as her fawn.¹¹ The doe obliged him, and "came gently to Kevin," dropping milk into a hollow stone for both the infant and her fawn. The stone later became a pilgrimage site for Irish Christians, who travelled to it in demonstration of their reverence of the doe's service to Kevin.¹² In the life of Ciaran of Clonmacnoise, wild animals who lived on the land around Ciaran's pasture, including a fox, a stag, and a cow, all aided the saint in his study of Christianity by holding onto, transporting, and displaying his psalters and gospels for him as he studied.¹³ Through domestication, the animals acted in service to the saints, demonstrating the fruitful and favorable relationships that could be made through reverence for wild animals.¹⁴

The hagiographies of St. Brigit and St. Columba also exhibited the unique spiritual bond between humanity and animals by extending the patristic themes of hospitality and charity to include animals. In the life of St. Brigit, the author equated the saint's services towards animals with her charity for the poor, stating that, "she tended to the sheep, she satisfied the birds, she fed the poor."¹⁵ In one particular instance, Brigit demonstrated hospitality by feeding a hungry hound who came to her house begging for food.¹⁶ After giving the hound a serving of the bacon meant for her human guests, God approved of her actions by reimbursing her with more bacon for her guests, to make up for that which she gave to the hound. Likewise, in the Life of St. Columba, God authorized the hospitable treatment

¹⁰ Alexander, "The Irish Variant." 62.

¹¹ *Kevin of Glendalough*. In *Celtic Christianity: Ecology and Holiness, An Anthology*. ed. Christopher Bamford and William Parker Marsh, 85. Lindisfarne Books, 1987.

¹² *Kevin of Glendalough*. In *Celtic Christianity*. ed. Bamford and Marsh, 86.

¹³ *Ciaran of Clonmacnoise*. In *Celtic Christianity*. ed. Bamford and Marsh, 92-97.

¹⁴ Alexander, "The Irish Variant." 68.

¹⁵ *Brigit, the Mary of the Gael*. In *Celtic Christianity*. ed. Bamford and Marsh, 63-64.

¹⁶ *Brigit, the Mary of the Gael*. In *Celtic Christianity*. ed. Bamford and Marsh, 64.

of animals by sending the saint a vision of a crane that would come to his monastery. Upon having this vision, Columba instructed his clerical brothers to feed and house the bird, receiving it with tenderness and hospitality for three days.¹⁷ The hospitality and charity shown towards animals extended the patristic theme of hospitality demonstrated in traditional hagiographies, suggesting the outlook that all living creatures should be treated equally.¹⁸

Irish hagiography also demonstrated saints' abilities to perform more supernatural nature miracles, including animal resurrections, which were exercised by St. Ciaran and St. Patrick. In the life of St. Ciaran, when a cow in the saint's childhood pasture was eaten by a wild wolf and reduced to bones, he placed the bones in a pile and resurrected the animal.¹⁹ Similarly, in the *Tripartite Life of St. Patrick*, the saint performed a resurrection miracle in his childhood pasture when a wolf ate one of Patrick's sheep, and by the saint's will, the wolf regurgitated the sheep whole.²⁰ Patrick also resurrected five cows in his pasture when another cow killed them after having gone mad.²¹ In all three of these cases, St. Ciaran and St. Patrick adapted the resurrection topoi typical of Western hagiography, extending the miracle to include animal resurrections.²² Moreover, in all these cases, the resurrections took place in the saints' pastures, demonstrating how the pastoral values of Irish society were woven into Irish hagiography.

Perhaps the most distinctive spiritual bond between animals and saints in Irish hagiography was demonstrated through St. Patrick's ability to physically shapeshift himself and others into an animal form while supplicating to God. In the *Tripartite Life of St. Patrick*, the saint was sent on a journey with eight young clerics to Tara by King Loegaire, who falsely promised their safe passage while truly intending to kill them for their Christian faith.²³ Fearful of the king's intentions, Patrick blessed the clerics and invoked a hymn known as "The Deer's Cry," which he sang along their entire journey.²⁴ In return for his supplications, God transformed the clerics into deer and Patrick into a fawn with a white bird on its shoulder, disguising them from potential threats. Through the miracle of anthropomorphism, the life of St. Patrick demonstrated a profound connection between Irish saints and nature, which transgressed the physical boundaries of nature through formal transformation.

Given the unorthodox hagiographical topoi of the spiritual connections between Irish saints and nature, it is interesting to consider that these stories were not substantially altered during the twelfth-century rewrites of saints' lives in England. In the middle of the twelfth century, the

¹⁷ *Columba and the Crane*. In *Celtic Christianity*. ed. Bamford and Marsh, 106.

¹⁸ Alexander, "The Irish Variant." 71.

¹⁹ *Ciaran of Clonmacnoise*. In *Celtic Christianity*. ed. Bamford and Marsh, 94.

²⁰ Alexander. "The Irish Variant." 66.

²¹ Alexander. "The Irish Variant." 67.

²² Alexander. "The Irish Variant." 67.

²³ *Patrick and the Druids*. In *Celtic Christianity*. ed. Bamford and Marsh, 50.

²⁴ *Patrick and the Druids*. In *Celtic Christianity*. ed. Bamford and Marsh, 51.

Anglo-Norman conquests of Ireland provoked rewrites of Irish hagiography, guided by what Bartlett has described as the need to “vindicate their saints in a new and occasionally hostile climate... in a new environment or for a new audience.”²⁵ One example of the hagiographical revisions was Jocelyn of Furness’s rewrite of the *Life of St. Patrick*, which he justified as being necessary because the previous writer was “unlettered and ignorant of composition and so, although their intentions were pious, their prose style was crude.”²⁶ Though the rewrites included emphases and omissions of certain events, scholarship suggests that there wasn’t a clear pattern of inclusion and redaction, though most, if not all, of the animal stories remained.²⁷ Alexander has attributed the preservation of these stories to the assumption that by the twelfth century, Patrick’s *Life* was already widely known, and thus it would have been difficult to reinterpret the popular stories.²⁸

References to the miracles and lives of Irish saints in Gerald of Wales’s text *Topography of Ireland* (1189) prompt reconsideration of Alexander’s assertion that the retention of animal miracles in English versions of the Irish saints’ lives was purely due to their popularity. A Welsh-born noble, Gerald was a cleric and a scholar of the liberal arts, first trained in the cathedral of St. David’s, and later in the schools of Paris, where he studied rhetoric, law, and theology.²⁹ After travelling to Ireland as a participant in early Anglo-Norman conquests in Ireland in 1183 and 1185, first accompanying his brother Philip and, later, Prince John, he documented his travels between 1186-1187 in his Latin text, *Topographia Hibernica* (Topography of Ireland), which he dedicated to King Henry II.³⁰ The *Topography of Ireland* had two goals: to describe “the site and nature of the country, the origin of the race, their customs, how often, by whom, and in what manner, the island has been subjugated and conquered,” and to remark upon the natural miracles performed there, dignified by Gerald as “new and secret works contrary to her ordinary rules, [which] nature has stored up in these western and extreme borders of the earth.”³¹ Through the combination of these textual elements, Gerald painted an appealing portrait of Ireland as a rich well of natural resources, endowed by God’s grace.

In the *Topography of Ireland*, Gerald of Wales’s stories about the lives and miracles of Irish saints emphasized their unique connection to nature to legitimize his assertion that Ireland’s natural environment was abundant with resources. In the second part of the text, Gerald included a description of an animal refuge in Munster, protected by St. Brendan, in which “birds and wild animals have so long enjoyed tranquility and become almost tame, that they do not flee from the

²⁵ Bartlett. “Rewriting Saint’s Lives: The Case of Gerald of Wales.” 599.

²⁶ Jocelyn of Furness, as quoted in Bartlett. “Rewriting Saints’ Lives: The Case of Gerald of Wales.” 599.

²⁷ Alexander. “The Irish Variant.” 67.

²⁸ Alexander. “The Irish Variant.” 68.

²⁹ Robert Bartlett. “Gerald of Wales.” Oxford Dictionary of National Biography. 1.

³⁰ Bartlett. “Gerald of Wales.” 2.

³¹ Gerald of Wales, *The Topography of Ireland*. 9.

footsteps of man.”³² Besides the refuge, Gerald described a river abundant in fish, which was “granted for the sake of supplying, in the cause of charity, sufficient means for that unwearied hospitality which the saints were in the custom of exhibiting in this place, to the utmost of their power, and beyond it, towards pilgrims and strangers.”³³ Through these stories, Gerald acknowledged that the animals had been protected by the spiritual connection between Irish saints and nature. However, he also underscored his assessment by stressing that nature had been preserved by the saint to be in service to man, particularly the Anglo-Norman conquerors, to whom god had revealed the “manna” that was the fish.³⁴ Gerald thus recontextualized the Gaelic Christian hagiographical theme of the service of domesticated animals to justify the exploitation of Ireland’s natural resources by Anglo-Norman conquerors.³⁵

While Gerald lauded the ancient Irish saints for their environmental contributions, he scorned the contemporary native Irish for their supposed neglect of the saints’ relics, claiming that the English would be the superior caretakers of their sacred bodies. Griggs acknowledged how Gerald’s praise of the saints’ miracles posed a potential contradiction to the righteousness of the Anglo-Norman conquests, given that “the territorial conquest cannot be justified as having a missionary component if the Irish are superior Christians.”³⁶ Gerald evaded this contradiction through his portrayal of the Anglo-Normans as superior caretakers of the Irish saints over the native Irish. He propagated this portrayal by claiming that the translation of St. Columba, St. Brigit, and St. Patrick was carried out by Norman settlers under John de Courcy’s direction.³⁷ De Courcy was the Anglo-Norman governor of Ulster, a territory that was granted to him by Henry II in 1171-2 through the right of conquest.³⁸ By claiming that the saints were translated by the Anglo-Norman conquerors, Gerald meant to justify the conquests through religious means, by portraying the English as taking care of the Irish saints, who were supposedly neglected by the native Irish.³⁹

Not only did Gerald assert that the English were superior caretakers of the Irish saints, but he also went as far to suggest that, unchecked by the English, the native Irish were a threat to their own sacred heritage. As evidence of this, Gerald provided a story about the death of a centuries-old,

³² Gerald of Wales, *The Topography of Ireland*. 101.

³³ Gerald of Wales, *The Topography of Ireland*. 101.

³⁴ Gerald of Wales, *The Topography of Ireland*. 102.

³⁵ Eleanor Griggs. “Foreign Soil: The Ethnography of Landscape and Imperial Imagination in the *Topographia Hibernica*.” *Viator* 54, no. 1 (2023): 177.

³⁶ Griggs. “Foreign Soil: The Ethnography of Landscape and Imperial Imagination in the *Topographia Hibernica*.” 193.

³⁷ Gerald of Wales, *The Topography of Ireland*. 134.

³⁸ Seán Duffy. “Courcy [Courci], John de (d. 1219?), conqueror of Ulster.” *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. 23 Sep. 2004; Accessed 5 May. 2025.

<https://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-6443>.

³⁹ Griggs. “Foreign Soil: The Ethnography of Landscape and Imperial Imagination in the *Topographia Hibernica*.” 193.

venerated falcon known as St. Brigit's bird, which perched itself on the chapel dedicated to the saint.⁴⁰ As Gerald's story went, upon the departure of John de Courcy from his station of Anglo-Norman governance in Ireland, Brigit's Bird, "after existing so many centuries, and affording so much delight, as well as adding glory to St. Brigit's shrine... was killed by the staff of some passing rustic."⁴¹ As was true in the case of the translation of St. Brigit, St. Patrick, and St. Columba, Gerald depicted the Anglo-Norman conqueror John de Courcy as a protector of Ireland's sacred heritage, which was otherwise left neglected by the Irish. In this case, he expressed that the native Irish people were not only neglectful of their sacred heritage but also a threat to it, justifying Anglo-Norman conquerors as the rightful protectors and stewards of Ireland.⁴²

Gerald of Wales employed stories of the Irish saints' anthropomorphic powers to justify the unrighteousness of the native Irish and the salvative properties of Anglo-Norman clergy in Ireland. As evidence, Gerald told a story about a priest who conversed with a wolf.⁴³ The priest was journeying from Ulster to Meath, both territories being those which were held by the Anglo-Norman conquerors, when he came across a pair of talking wolves who had been cursed to be transformed from their human to animal form by St. Natalis. After the wolves had beseeched the priest for help, he blessed the pair and gave them communion, and the wolves were transformed back into their human forms.⁴⁴ By conveying the anthropomorphic power of St. Natalis, Gerald made use of Irish hagiography, though altering the topoi to display the power as a punishment for Irish people. Also of significance was the detail that the priest in the story was travelling between two Anglo-Norman areas, and thus, the priest likely was English himself. Thus, through his conversion and salvation of two wild, native wolves, the story seems to be a metaphor for the Anglo-Norman conqueror's salvation of the native, uncivilized Irish.⁴⁵

Gerald of Wales's *Topography of Ireland* was aimed at justifying the Anglo-Norman conquest of Ireland by suggesting that the English could restore the long-lost environmental consciousness of Gaelic Christianity, while the native Irish could only desecrate it. To support his argument, Gerald referred to Irish hagiographical topoi and contrasted the sanctity of the ancient Irish saints with the alleged ignorance and irreverence of contemporary Irish people. Though the religious purity of some of Gerald's accounts of natural wonders can be debated, a large proportion of these 'wonders' may also be viewed as a form of religious propaganda intended to mask the socio-economic ambitions of the Anglo-Norman conquerors, who viewed Ireland as rich with untapped natural resources. While the idea that Gaelic Christianity had a strong connection to nature, referred to as the "green hypothesis,"

⁴⁰ Gerald of Wales, *The Topography of Ireland*. 98.

⁴¹ Gerald of Wales, *The Topography of Ireland*. 99.

⁴² Griggs, "Foreign Soil: The Ethnography of Landscape and Imperial Imagination in the *Topographia Hibernica*." 181.

⁴³ Gerald of Wales, *The Topography of Ireland*, 79.

⁴⁴ Gerald of Wales, *The Topography of Ireland*, 80.

⁴⁵ Fabienne Schweizer, "Beards and Barbarians: Marginal Illustrations in Gerald of Wales' *Topographia Hibernica*." *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium* 38 (2018): 222.

has recently come under scrutiny, it is clear that this concept has been present in scholarship on Ireland long before the twentieth century. The roots of the green hypothesis may be as deep as Gerald's *Topography of Ireland*, in which the author used the hypothesis as religiously charged propaganda to justify the conquest and reform of Irish society.

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