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The Literatures and Cultures of the Irish Sea

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Draining the Irish Channel: Identity, Sustainability, and the Politics of Water

Navigating the Irish Sea is, like navigating all seas, a navigation of texts.[1] And the first Irish Sea text confirms that 'trying' the waters is essential to discovering Irish identity. The historian Geoffrey Keating claimed that the first person to set foot upon Ireland after the Deluge was one Adhna, the father of poets:

> This Adventure is mentioned by an old Poet, whose Verses are to be found in the *Psalter* of *Cashel…*
>> Adhna Biotha*'s Son, we all agree*
>> *After the Flood, first try'd the* Irish *Sea,*
>> *He prov'd the Soil, and from the Earth he tore*
>> *A handful of rich Grass, then left the Shore,*
>> *And so returned.*[2]

The waters have a permanency: they remain after the Flood, encircling the island, which has emerged from the catastrophe fertile and green with 'rich Grass'. This girdle of channels, seas, and oceans defines the land contained within, sustaining the identity of Ireland as an island.

This sea was named by the Romans *Oceanus Hibernicus*, while that to the south was the *Oceanus Vergivius*. By the eighteenth century, on which I will be focusing in this paper, the Irish Sea was also known as St. George's Channel. In *The Compleat Fisherman* (1724), for example, James Saunders remarks upon

> the *Irish* and *Welsh* Seas, that is to say, the *Severn Sea*, vulgarly call'd the *Bristol Channel*, and the Sea between *England* and *Ireland*, call'd St. *George's Channel*.[3]

The Irish Sea was also, more apocalyptically, called the 'Irish Gulph'[4]. This may have been in reference to its well-deserved reputation for turbulence. In one of the letters that comprise his *Journey through England* (1724), John Macky described that at Holyhead

> The Pacquet Boats from *Dublin* arrive Thrice a-Week, and are larger than those to *Holland* and *France*, fitted with all Conveniencies for Passengers; and indeed St. *George*'s Channel requires large Ships in Winter, the Wind being generally very boisterous in these narrow Seas.[5]

The appropriately named Gerard Boate, however, disagreed in his *Natural History of Ireland* (1726). Chapter VI begins with a section headed: '*The* Irish *Sea not so tempestuous as it it* [sic] *is bruited to be*'. He quotes chorographical authorities such as Solinus, Giraldus, Camden, and Speed, before putting them right by means of the Irish alchemist and experimental poet Richard Stanihurst:

> THAT part of the Irish sea which divideth Ireland from Great Britain, is very much defamed both by ancient and modern writers, in regard of its boysterousness and tempestuousness, as if it were more subject to storms and raging weather than any other, and consequently not to be passed / without very great danger…. Yea, it is a common proverb in England, *As unquiet as the* Irish *sea*. Nevertheless it is nothing so bad as they make it; and in the words of *Stanyhurst*, in his annotations upon *Giraldus*, …*The* Irish *Sea is quiet enough, except when by high winds it is stirred, so as not only in the summer, but even in the midst of winter people do pass it to and fro*, are altogether true, and confirmed by daily experience. True it is that some ships do perish upon this, but the same happeneth also on other seas, who are all subject to the disaster of tempests and shipwracks.[6]

Gerard Boate attributes wrecks to long, dark winter nights and ships foundering on rocks, and warns the reader and prospective mariner to beware of the strong and distinctive tides here.[7] It is, however, worth noting in passing that Stanihurst was a spicily idiosyncratic writer whose definition of a smooth crossing may well have been at odds with usual expectations. In his translation of *The First Four Books of Virgil's 'Aeneis' Translated into English Heroicall Verse* (1582), Stanihurst developed a radical new style of poetry based around sound and metre. This is his description of a storm:

>   Thee whilst in the skye seat great bouncing rumbelo thundring
> Ratleth: downe powring too sleete thick hayle knob is added.
> Thee Tyrian feloship with yoouthful Troian asemblye
> And Venus hautye nephew doo run too sundrye set houses.
> Hudge fluds lowdlye freaming from mountayns loftye be trowlling,
> Dido and thee Troian captayne doo iumble in one den.
> Then the earth crau's the banes, theare too watrye Iuno, the chaplayne,
> Seams vp thee bedmatch, the fyre and ayre testifie wedlock.
> And Nymphs in mountayns high typ doe squeak, bullelo, yearning.[8]

Whatever the conditions on Irish Sea crossings, it was inevitably the major route between Ireland and Great Britain, and a rich fishery. In *A Tour Thro' the Whole Island of Great Britain, divided into Circuits or Journies* (1724 and subsequently enlarged and updated), Daniel Defoe comments that the English westward trade was split between Liverpool and Bristol: 'One has all the North, and the other all the South of Britain to correspond in', and '*Ireland* is, as it were, all their own, and shared between them as above'.[9] Defoe also notes that Whitehaven on the Cumbrian coast is England's third biggest port for exporting coal, after Newcastle and Sunderland, as it supplies Dublin 'and all the Towns of *Ireland* on that Coast'. He observes of the maritime traffic on the Irish Sea that ''tis frequent in time of War, or upon the ordinary Occasion of cross Winds, to have two hundred Sail of Ships at a time go from this Place [Whitehaven] for *Dublin*, loaden with Coals'.[10] Coal was also supplied to Ireland from Irwin in Scotland, exporting to Belfast and Carrickfergus, and even down as far as Dublin.[11] Below the waves the waters were mainly fished for herring and salmon, and there were allegedly no lobsters in the Irish Sea.[12]

Theory

The early eighteenth-century emphasis on the Irish Sea as a prized trade route and a rich fishery is a mercantilist redefinition of the waters that attempts to eclipse (or rather quell) the deeper currents of identity. The Irish Sea not only irrigates Irish identity, it defines the archipelago: without it, the Isles would simply be the Island.[13] And although seafaring and the island mentality is acknowledged to run deep in *English* identity, the sea – specifically the Irish Sea – is also the medium of communication and interaction with Ireland. Hibernia

was represented as a more contained island than the three nations of Britain. Engravings concerning Irish affairs – such as this account of the controversy surrounding 'Wood's Ha'pence' in which a new coinage with a debased intrinsic value was introduced to Ireland – reminded viewers of the omnipresent shipping channel between the two countries. Ireland was not geographically part of Britain.

Émile Durkheim posits that space is not an absolute or abstract set of co-ordinates but is constituted by relative relationships inflected by emotional and therefore social values.[14] This is a reminder that the Irish Sea has a history, not only in its name but in its material being: the entire body of water and its social, political, and cultural significance. And the history of the deep sea can be excavated in the same way that the history of the deep land can be excavated: as a catachthonic investigation into subterranean – or submarine – identity.[15] This is best shown by imagining what would happen if the Irish Sea ceased to exist.

Politics

But before the Irish Sea is drained, some politics. By the mid-eighteenth century, English (that is, Anglo-Norman) control extended across the whole of the Atlantic archipelago.[16] In Ireland, of course, this was the Age of Ascendancy, which had effectively begun with the Treaty of Limerick (1691). Dublin expanded massively in this period – from a small town to the second largest city of the British Empire. It was built in a fashionable Georgian style that rivalled Edinburgh, and was a significant cultural centre. David Garrick performed at Thomas Sheridan's theatre and Handel's *Messiah* was first performed at Dublin City Hall.[17]

Yet Ireland was ruled by a minority Protestant elite who were increasingly subordinate to the British government. In 1720 Westminster passed the 'Declaratory Act' (known as 'Sixth of George I'), which asserted British power over the Irish Parliament 'to bind the kingdom and people of Ireland' and determine foreign policy, and in 1751 control of the Irish economy also moved to Westminster. Imports of Irish woollen goods were banned by Westminster, and imports of food only allowed after 1748.[18] Ireland was in effect a cash cow for absentee landlords, and served as a vast garrison for the British army when it was not on campaign.

Opposition to British rule had been fiercely articulate since William Molyneux's attack *The Case of Ireland being bound by Acts of Parliament in England* (first published in 1698). Molyneux was a friend of Jonathan Swift, and in the 1720s Swift himself was, reluctantly, one of the foremost critics of the British government in his 'Drapier's Letters' (1724) and other satirical pamphlets. These included his attack on Wood's ha'pence, his *Short View of the State of Ireland* (1728, which attacked the trade restrictions on Ireland), and culminated in his notorious and exemplary satire *A Modest Proposal* (1729). At the same time as he was writing as the 'Drapier' and pamphleteering, Swift was also completing *Travels into Several Remote Nations of the World*, which would be published in 1726 under the name 'Lemuel Gulliver'. As Swift wrote in a letter on 19 January 1724, 'I have left the country of the horses, and am in the flying island, where I shall not stay long, and my last two journeys will be soon over.'[19]

This, the third of Gulliver's voyages and the last to be written of the four, described Gulliver's encounter with the flying island of Laputa and the philosophers and projectors he is subsequently introduced to. These episodes were derived from earlier Scriblerian satire developed with John Arbuthnot, John Gay, Robert Harley, Thomas Parnell, and Alexander Pope. But Swift gave a decidedly Irish spin to the island in a passage that ferociously described the Wood's ha'pence debacle as an allegory, arguing that it could have deservedly brought down the British government and monarchy. In this censored scene, the citizens of 'Lindalino' (Dublin) threaten to 'kill the King and all his Servants, and entirely change the Government'.[20]

Improvement

In addition to its blistering political satire, *Gulliver's Travels* is laced with topical references to the South Sea and the South Sea Bubble, the ruinous stock market crash of 1720.[21] In 1721 Swift had written a poem, 'The Bubble', on the over-speculation, fraudulent dealing, fantastical money-making schemes, and nascent capitalist greed of the times:

> The Sea is richer than the Land,
>   I heard it from my Grannam's Mouth;

> Which now I clearly understand,
>   For by the Sea she meant the *South*.[22]

'Bubbles' were joint-stock companies that dazzled credulous investors yet had the life expectancy and profit potential of a soap bubble; they were symptomatic of the 'Age of Projectors' – projectors being the innovators and financial backers of get-rich-quick wheezes. Daniel Defoe was a typical example, investing (and rapidly losing) money in the manufacture of roofing tiles, the farming of civet cats for perfume, and the development of a bathyscaphe (a primitive submarine) to recover lost treasure from the seabed.

Hence during Gulliver's visit to Balnibari, Swift describes a 'Club of … Projectors' from the Academy of Lagado who propose diverting a river and digging a canal to direct water by means of 'Pipes and Engines' to a new mill on the side of a mountain, 'Because the Wind and Air upon a / Height agitated the Water, and thereby made it fitter for Motion: And because the Water descending down a Declivity would turn the Mill with half the Current of a River whose Course is more upon a Level'.[23] However, after employing a hundred men for two years the project is abandoned. It is surely no coincidence that the Grand Canal (Ireland), connecting Dublin with the River Shannon, was first proposed in 1715; that project, however, was eventually completed in 1779.

As Pat Rogers points out, these sorts of activities are examples of the 'commercial exploration' of natural resources.[24] Pumping water seems to have been particularly appealing to projectors. In his *Tour*, Defoe noted an innovative new mill devised by George Sorocold, an engineer specializing in hydraulics, and many others, including Thomas Savery and Thomas Newcomen, the most celebrated engineers of the period, built contraptions for pumping water out of mines. As the broadside *The Bubblers Mirrour; or England's Folley* (1720?) described this market:

> Come all ye Culls, my Water Engine Buy,
> To pump your flooded Mines and Coal Pits dry:
> Some projects are all Wind, but ours is Water,
> And tho' at present low, may rise hereafter [25]

Pumping water out of flooded mines was however small beer compared with the possibilities of pumping water out of flooded land. Land reclamation had already been underway in agriculture for decades and was an established aspect of land management. The second chapter of John Mortimer's *The Whole Art of Husbandry: or, The Way of Managing and Improving of Land* (4 edn, 1716), for example, is devoted to reclamation: draining and improving bogs, fens, marshes, and so forth.

Projectors and modern agriculturalists both agreed that water was something to be controlled and restricted. Samuel Johnson's remarks to Allan McLean while on his tour of the Hebrides later in the century reveal this prejudice. As James Boswell reported:

> Sir Allan M'Lean bragged, that Scotland had the advantage of England, by its having more water. JOHNSON. 'Sir, we would not have your water, to take the vile bogs which produced it. You have too much! A man who is drowned has more water than either of us'; and then he laughed. (But this was surely robust sophistry: for the people of taste in England, who have seen Scotland, own that its variety of rivers and lakes makes it naturally more beautiful than England, in

that respect.) Pursuing his victory over Sir Allan, he proceeded: 'Your country consists of two things, stone and water. There is, indeed, a little earth above the stone in some places, but a very little; and the stone is always appearing. It is like a man in rags; the naked skin is still peeping out.'[26]

The primacy of land over water is here roundly asserted. Land should be rock and earth; water is for the sea. But it is a small step from here to think not merely of reclaiming land from water-logged environments, but of reclaiming land from the sea itself: a reversal of the Deluge accomplished by the expertise of science and industry, the salvaging of the primal Biblical catastrophe.

While the Dutch culture of dyke building influenced land reclamation and security in Britain, this branch of thinking actually emerged from the innocuous field of tide-tables. As a maritime island nation, tide tables in Britain were, unsurprisingly, well developed in the period. The ebbs and flows of tidal currents could be predicted with impressive accuracy. This was not meteorological forecasting or weatherlore, still less astrological prognostication, but the application of the new science to maritime and commercial interests. Such techniques of calculation could be applied to all sorts of areas: political economy was given a new arithmetical basis – which was of course rapidly and scathingly attacked in Swift's cannibal polemic *A Modest Proposal* (1729). But political arithmetic was the new orthodoxy and provided, for example, the theoretical basis for the control of the Highlands after the Battle of Culloden in 1746, influencing for instance road-building programmes and the Ordnance Survey.[27] The unruliness of the sea could therefore be measured and, if not controlled, at least reliably governed in the interests of trade and empire.

The potential transformation of the sea into land also received intellectual impetus from theories of circulation. It is worth bearing in mind that the body had comparatively recently been redefined as a circulatory system by William Harvey in 1628. But Harvey's ideas on the circulation of the blood were, according to the 'maverick social critic' Ivan Illich, slow to spread: 'To accommodate circulation, the quivering and symbol-laden flesh of tradition must be recast as a functional system of filters, conduits, valves, and pumps'.[28] Illich notes that by the early eighteenth century the notion of 'circulation' was being applied by botanists to sap, then to the spread of ideas, and around 1750 money is described as 'circulating' (interestingly, the word 'circulation' derives from the Latin *circulator*, an itinerant performer or street busker).[29] But in fact the term was being used some half-a-century sooner than Illich claims. Already by the early eighteenth century 'circulation' was being used in England to describe the passions, and there are instances of fashionable use in seventeenth-century popular literature.[30] By at least 1701 credit in the economy was being described as 'circulating', and Johnson's *Dictionary* (1755) quotes Swift himself writing on the '*circulation* of human things'.[31] The sea too was conceptualized as a circulatory system rather than an inert body, most notably in Joseph Mead's treatise with the self-explanatory title,

> *An Essay on Currents at Sea; By which it appears, There is Reason to Apprehend, that the Sea is not a Fluid in a State of Rest, except those Motions which are caused by the Impulse of Winds, and that [are] known by the Name of Tides: And consequently, That this Earth is not of a uniform Density, according to the Supposition of Sir Isaac Newton; but that the Currents of the Gulph of Florida,*

*also on the Coast of Brasil, and the Northern In-Draught on this Western Coast, are Currents of **Circulation**, kept up by different Densities in this Earth, and its Motion round its Axis* (1757).

The combination of land reclamation projects, political arithmetic, and the comprehension of the sea as a process that could be directed or influenced rather than as an absolute given meant that the sea could be improved: in other words, done away with. The sea could become not only the medium but the very ground of British colonialism. The sea could literally become a new territory, land could be created from unproductive water. In practical terms, then, the sea was recast as a geography of natural resources that could potentially be pumped, mined, and diverted using locks and drains, all for the health of the nation.

Draining the Irish Sea

Reclamation was therefore an expansion of territory beyond the immediate borders of one's own land. It was a striking metaphor for imperialism not only because it redefined physical geography in political terms, but also because it literally redrew the map of the world. Draining the sea – like draining marshes, water meadows, floodplains, and so forth – is also a radical example of the impact of commercial ecology on identity, and even raises questions of environmental sustainability today.

In Arthur C. Clarke's 1972 science fiction novel *Rendezvous with Rama* a character remarks in passing that the Mediterranean has been drained in order to assist

North Sea Drainage Project to Increase Area of Europe

If the extensive schemes for the drainage of North Sea are carried out according to the plan illustrated above, which was conceived by a group of eminent English scientists, 100,000 square miles will be added to the overcrowded continents of Europe. The reclaimed land will be walled in with enormous dykes, similar to the Netherland dykes, to protect it from the sea, and the various rivers flowing into the North Sea will have their courses diverted to different outlets by means of canals.

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archaeological study(!) – preposterous as this sounds, perhaps in the twenty-second century heritage tourism will be more important than life and death. More seriously, perhaps, in September 1930 the magazine *Modern Mechanix* (subtitled 'Yesterday's Tomorrow Today') reported a scheme to drain the North Sea to ease problems of European overpopulation:
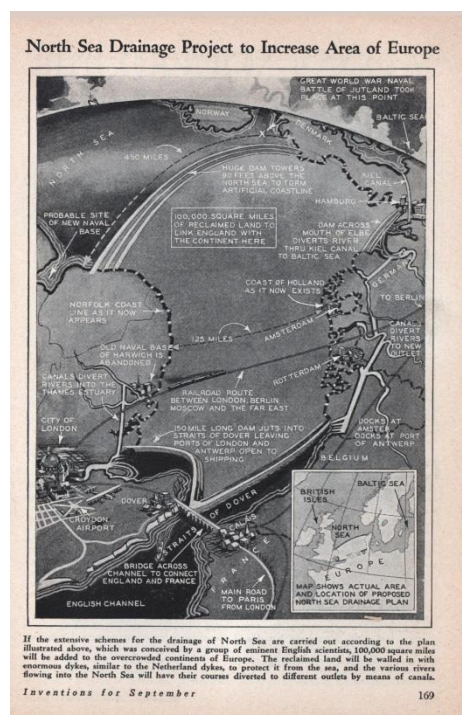
> If the extensive schemes for the drainage of [the] North Sea are carried out according to the plan illustrated above, which was conceived by a group of eminent English scientists, 100,000 square miles will be added to the overcrowded continents of Europe. The reclaimed land will be walled in with enormous dykes, similar to the Netherland dykes, to protect it from the sea, and the various rivers flowing into the North Sea will have their courses diverted to different outlets by means of canals.

The Irish Sea covers a more modest 40,000 square miles.[32] Nevertheless, in 1722 an anonymous author styling himself with the degree 'A. M. in Hydrostat' published a proposal in Dublin with the title, *Thoughts of a Project for Draining the Irish Channel*.

Thoughts of a Project

Thoughts of a Project for Draining the Irish Channel is a satire on both the South-Sea Bubble and Anglo-Irish politics. It capitalizes on the craze for projects and speculation, scientific advances in hydraulics and circulation, resource management and political arithmetic, and improvement and reclamation. It is also focused on Dublin and was an almost immediate response to local plans to improve the port of Dublin by dredging.[33]

The problem with Dublin harbour was that it contained a significant bar, or bank of sand, which presented a serious obstacle to ships and therefore to trade. As Gerard Boate described the situation:

> DUBLIN haven hath a bar in the mouth, upon which at high flood and spring tide there is fifteen and eighteen feet of water, but at the ebbe and nep tide but six. With an ordinary tide you cannot go the key of Dublin with a ship that draws five feet of water, but with a spring tide you may go up with ships that draw seven and eight feet. Those that go deeper cannot go nearer Dublin than the Rings-end, a place three miles distant from the bar, and one from Dublin. This haven almost all over falleth dry with the ebbe, as well below Rings-end as above it, so as you may go dry foot round about the ships which lye at an anchor there....[34]

Ships therefore risked running aground because of the combined hazards of the shallow channel and the windswept bay. Moreover, as silt and sand was used for ballast, boats jettisoning this into the bay to lighten ships had raised the bed of the bay and eroded sand banks. In 1707 this led to a Ballast Board being established, but the problem required a much more radical solution.[35]

In September 1713 the hydraulic engineer Capt. John Perry arrived in Dublin at the invitation of Sir Alexander Cairnes to assess 'a Proposition of mine for the making of a better Depth of Water going over the Barr'.[36] Perry spent three months studying the problem before returning to London to repair the Thames Embankment.[37] Perry, who had studied Dutch water management technology and worked for the Russian tsar Peter the Great building canals, dams, and locks, visited Dublin again in 1720-1 and published *An Answer to Objections against the Making of a Bason, with Reasons for the bettering of the Harbour of Dublin* (1721).[38] In this treatise Perry proposed building a 'New common Shore … parallel to the River'.[39] This channel would be properly drained and sealed to answer objections that the seawater would stagnate or flood districts, affecting property and land rights. From the current size and unloading practices of ships Perry estimated the probable effect on the size of cargoes and the consequent impact on imports – coal, for example, would become cheaper.[40] He compared the potential expanded capacity of Dublin with the increased harbour size at Liverpool, which from the end of the seventeenth century had begun to compete with Dublin as a route to North America and the West Indies, and also remarked on a sea wall built at Teignmouth to reclaim land. Perry was back again in 1725 to survey and map the bay, but his proposals to make the port more navigable were ultimately rejected.[41] By this time, some 1,834 ships totalling 90,758 tons entered the harbour annually, accounting for more than half the imports into Ireland.[42]

This is the context for *Draining the Irish Channel*. The anonymous author begins by describing the boisterous weather caused by the narrow passage of the Irish Sea:

> the Channel is so cramp'd by the Shores on each side, that in Winter time, for want of Elbow-room, you'll find nothing but the Sea foaming, roaring, bouncing, frisking, skipping, / jerking, heaving, setting, tossing as if in a Ferment, and full of frothy and fiery Billows.[43]

Consequently, 'Commerce is hindered, Passengers drown'd or starv'd, … Ships and Goods lost, Merchants ruin'd, Trade destroy'd'.[44]

Such calamities will obviously be avoided if the Sea is drained, and Perry is proposed as the man to do so. The author of *Draining the Irish Channel* is suspicious of Perry's reasons for visiting Dublin to date, suggesting that his dredging proposals are a money-making project – something Perry had explicitly denied in *An Answer to Objections*. But the anonymous author points out that draining the entire sea instead will provide far richer benefits than simply improving the harbour: 'there will be found (without doubt) immense Treasure, enough to defray all the Expence, and to pay very well for the Trouble of doing the same'.[45] This will encourage projectors to invest no less than £100,000 in the scheme, at a remuneration of 'a Pound for their Peny'.[46] The author of *Draining the Irish Channel* speculates on the 'vast Quantities of Gold, Silver in Bullion and Specie, Pearl, Rubies, and Diamonds, / … [and] vast Quantities of noble Timbers'.[47] Precious submarine minerals will be free to be excavated, and from the larger sea-game a variety of sea-ivory can be collected.

Anticipating the Admiralty's objection to the loss of military bases and routes, as well as duties, the anonymous author balances this against the potential savings: there will be fewer ships required. Locks at either end of the drained sea will allow passage upriver on the longer waterways of the Liffey and the Mersey and administer custom duties more effectively, and land transport will be a safer way of traversing the distance: 'instead of being at the Expence of Packet-Boats, we will have Post-Horses and Post-Boys'.[48] Despite the British preference for travelling by sea, land transport is promoted as a way of employing 'Millions of poor Families'.[49] Other rivers will be 'carried away in large Trunks' [i.e. conduits].[50] The success of the whole construction project is assured by the construction innovations in canal and sluice building on the continent, and Capt. Perry's Dutch training.[51]

Details are provided as to where best to position the locks. Their design is to be based on those currently on the Liffey, and they can be constructed from salvaged timber already seasoned by the sea. The locks will also double as fishing traps for large marine livestock such as whales and sharks, as well as sea-cows (which apparently taste as good as veal), and once the Sea is drained huge stocks of crabs and lobsters with claws as big as the antlers of elks will become available. The harvesting of marine phosphorescence will provide illumination for everything from streets to lighthouses. Shooting stars generally fall into sea and may be gleaned as sources of light and heat, and every old Moon has also sunk into the depths and so may be fished out for similar commercial advantage.

A variety of sea-monsters will be available to furriers, such as '*Sea-Goats, Kids, Rabits, Hares, Cats*, and *Sea-Kitlings, Apes, Baboons, Monkeys, … Squirrels, Ferrets, Sea-Bitches Babies, Foxes* and their *Cubs*' from which can be manufactured tippets [stoles] and riding breeches;

and would it not be a pretty Sight to see a *Sea-Horse* at the Tower? Such a Present was never known to be made to any Monarch on Earth, who knows what may happen in this Reign.[52]

Other sea creatures may provide perfume. '*Sea-Cantharides*' will supply apothecaries with vesicants (wart removers) and aphrodisiacs, and a variety of sea fauna can be utilized to cure both coughs and sexually-transmitted diseases: 'In short, we need never go to the *Indies* for Druggs, if we once came acquainted with, and to a perfect Knowledge and Understanding of the Wonders of the Deep'.[53]

The pamphlet concluded, there are two pages of wild errata:

> for After long and mature Deliberation, read 150 *to* 80; …for Whores and Bawds, read *Members and Tools*; … for Hoop-Petticoats and Bum-Perspectives, read *Inquire within and you shall know further*; … for Anchovies, Oyl, and Vinegar, read *Radishes, Oysters, and Bulls-Pizzels*; … for The North-Strand, read *All in good Time*; … for She hides her Face, read *She shews her A–se*; … for Country and Court-Party, read *Wash-Balls and Spectacles*; … for Fi, fa, sci, fa, *Re, fa, lo, po, lo*; read what you please for I'm in haste.[54]

There's also a final promise that draining the Irish Channel will discover those elusive chimerae perpetual motion and longitude.

Authorship

Could Jonathan Swift be the author of *Draining the Irish Channel*? It is tempting to suggest as much. His satire on the Academy of Lagado's projectors in *Gulliver's Travels* is specifically aimed at an hydraulic venture, and there are other more intriguing connections. The odd nonce-words delineating exotic races that pepper *Draining the Irish Channel* compare favourably with Swift's own inventions:

> we may, 'tis likely, meet with some Foreigners, taking a Tour to our Channel, as your *Lalligo*'s from the Sea of *Mauritania*, one of which is able to overset the best Man of War in *Europe*; your *Vronoscopo*'s, with one Eye, which when taken out, and well cured, is equal to the *Carbuncle*, taken by Captain *Ivory*, some Time ago, out of the Great *Mogul*'s Daughter's Saddle, which I have had often in my hand; your *Aquipensers*, *Callionymus*, *Remelligo*'s, *Remora*'s, *Aricas*, *Auxumæ*, *Loliguncula*'s, and *Antacæi* which are Natives of the famous River *Borysthenes*, some of whose Skins are better than any of our Tann'd-Hides, or Buff either, being often try'd, and found to be Cannon-Proof.[55]

The crazy natural history of Irish Sea fauna is also suggestive (moreover most of these names are otherwise unrecorded):

> The *Sea-Earwick*, or *Twitch-bell*, the *Tadpole*, the *Water-Lop*, the *Chur-worm*, or *Fen-Ricket*, the *Sea-Gnat*, or *Jenny-Spinner*….[56]

Similarly, there is a shared interest in contemporary fashions such as 'hoop-petticoats' and 'setting dogs' between Swift's satires and *Draining the Irish Channel*.[57] But all of these are at

best only passing references. The dedicatee 'R-------- D-------' is an opaque reference, and the mentions of 'my Friend *St——n*' and 'Mr. *L——* … (now) at hand' are equally unclear, although the former may conceivably refer to Swift's friend and colleague John Stearne, Bishop of Clogher and from 1721 vice-chancellor of Trinity College.[58]

More promising is the anonymous author's reference to 'perpetual motion', which is also mentioned by Swift in 'A Discourse concerning the Mechanical Operation of the Spirit', 'A Tritical Essay upon the Faculties of the Mind', and – again – in *Gulliver's Travels*. This submarine ambition of *Draining the Irish Channel* is given in a concluding note:

> *N. B.* In my next Thoughts you shall have an Account of the particular Places of the Channel wherein (most likely) the perpetual Motion, and the Longitude, are to be grappel'd up; for you will allow, that 'tis matter of great Depth to find those out….

While it was not unusual for commentators to link the search for ascertaining longitude with perpetual motion, Gulliver's meditations on what the Struldbruggs would live to see evokes the final paragraph of *Draining the Irish Channel*, linking maritime shifts in rivers and seas with impossible inventions:

> ADD to all this the pleasure of seeing the various Revolutions of States and Empires, the Changes in the lower / and upper World, antient Cities in Ruins, and obscure Villages become the Seats of Kings. Famous Rivers lessening into shallow Brooks, the Ocean leaving one Coast dry, and overwhelming another: The Discovery of many Countries yet unknown. Barbarity over-running the politest Nations, and the most barbarous become civilized. I should then see the Discovery of the *Longitude*, the *perpetual Motion*, the *Universal Medicine*, and many other great Inventions brought to the utmost Perfection.[59]

As James Kelly has observed in his article ''Jonathan Swift and the Irish Economy in the 1720s', 'Swift … had little patience with "visionary schemes" that promised immediate solutions because he accepted neither the mercantilist premises nor the optimistic expectations for the Irish economy on which they were invariably founded'.[60] Although Perry's proposals would seem to be fairly mild compared with the Wood's ha'pence affair, the rapid escalation from improving a harbour to draining the sea does demonstrate how the logic of hydraulics and irrigation can easily be taken to extremes. Kelly does however note that in Swift's unpublished 'Answer to several letters … from unknown hands' to improve the condition of Ireland he recommended among 'improving the highways, … planting trees, abolishing the Irish language, inculcating virtue in the population, counteracting absenteeism, encouraging agriculture and minting of coin' the reclamation of bogs.[61]

The case is not proven, but even if *Draining the Irish Channel* is not by Jonathan Swift, it nevertheless deserves a wider audience.

Thought experiment

What are the ultimate implications of this drainage project? Is it proposed as a way of extending England? Or Wales? Or Ireland? Or Scotland? Or even the Isle of Man? All five have Irish Sea coastlines. And how would this activity affect Britain? This, I think, is the nub

of the satire and the point of this paper: Can the Irish Sea be considered the axis around which the Isles define themselves? I would therefore like to end on a thought experiment, taking the satire *Draining the Irish Channel* at face value and projecting what could have been the consequences if the Irish Sea really had been drained in the 1720s.

Let us consider how this new 'Former Irish Sea' ('F.I.S.') territory would be defined, named, and governed – what form of rule would be appropriate? From the seventeenth century Britain has had considerable problems in theorizing the relationship between the four nations: no part of Britain is actually solely British, but has a primary identity as English, Irish, Manx, Scottish, Welsh, and so forth. The F.I.S. would be an area with a very different history to that of the pre-existent land, reminding us of the profound influence of history, particularly political history – or perhaps rather of memory – on British identities. And who would populate this new land?

Presumably the mystical liberties embedded in the matter of Britain would influence the status of the new territory, and thereby all contiguous territories. Lord Mansfield famously declared in 1772 that the air of England was too pure to be breathed by a slave, consequently it was believed that any slaves who set foot on English ground were instantly free. With the creation of the F.I.S. would English ground and its proclamations of liberty now literally run continuously to the west coast of Ireland, with all British subjects sharing similar status, rights, and opportunities?

I propose the following scenario. Parliamentary union between Britain and Ireland would have occurred much sooner because the four countries would now occupy a single land mass: a continental island. New Britain wouldn't be able to run on multiple structures of government – the dual constitutional, legal, and ecclesiastical structures of England and Scotland were difficult enough to manage and only really eased by the successes and profits of Empire. A single parliament would therefore govern, and the head of state would be the monarch of England, Scotland, Ireland, and France (which still formed part of the royal style). The F.I.S. would initially be run as a colony on the model of the American territories –

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indeed, the American colonies should also be included in this model of the archipelago.[62] It would need a very stable monarchy to keep all of this together – would George III have been the man? Or possibly an Emperor would be a better head of state, ceding more power to constituent territories – but not, I think, a confederacy of devolved parliaments, which would place too much power in the hands of politicians for eighteenth-century tastes.

A pragmatist would, I think, rapidly incorporate the F.I.S. and the American colonies as full nations of New Britain, perhaps meaning that the American colonies would never have become independent. A state-of-the-art infrastructure consisting of turnpike roads would connect the internal territories, funded by the huge profits made from the drainage project. The North Devon and Cornish coasts and the South and West Irish coasts would be developed as shipping centres to connect with the American lands of New Britain (and because the waters of St George's Channel would now be less turbulent). Access to copious and untapped new natural mineral resources would speed the industrialization of landlocked cities such as Dublin and Liverpool, which would expand along the lines of Birmingham, driven by the intellectual advances of the F.I.S. Enlightenment.

National attention would be focused on internal affairs, the global colonial project would be diverted as 40,000 square miles of new territory (an area larger than Maine) would now be available on the doorstep. The reduced coastline and ship-building centres would also slow trade and imperial expansion, and consequently lead to a more isolationist foreign policy. A successful Jacobite invasion in 1745 would place a Catholic Stuart on the throne of Scotland and drive Scottish Presbyterians into the F.I.S., but the King of Scotland would rule by permission of the Hanoverian Emperor of New Britain to avoid civil war, and restrictions against Catholics across the land would be lifted. The European context for the former archipelago would almost completely disappear, its attention confined to internal affairs, North America, and Atlantic-based foreign policy; there would be little energy to pursue colonial activities in the southern hemisphere.

What this scenario suggests is that the contradictions of British historiography and governance are brought into a much sharper focus if they are not mentally compartmentalized by the expediency of the sea. Some things happen more quickly (union and emancipation), and some things might not happen at all (the global expansion of empire). I don't think that British history is, in this model, a predominantly Whiggish history of progress (some might disagree), but one of expediency and contingency. It could, however, become something quite different: a history of oppression and exploitation in which the F.I.S. becomes a huge industrial site mercilessly mined to fuel the ever-growing empire while Liverpool and Dublin expand exponentially into sprawling megacities, over which remote London rules imperiously: a sort of cross between *Mansfield Park* and *Bladerunner*.

Whatever the outcome of the drainage project, while Ireland would continue to exist as a material territory, it would no longer exist in the same way as a social or cultural identity. But then all the babies would, so to speak, have been drained away with the bathwater. The lack of oceanic permanency would be fatal to the traditional identities of England and in fact Britain as well, not to mention the Atlantic – which would now be being eyed speculatively by the next generation of projectors. So – the archipelago would have been historicized out of existence by removing the 'silver sea'. The 'unnameable archipelago' (in the words of Andrew McNeillie), 'the unknown subject' (in the words of J.G.A. Pocock) rests on the sea.[63] But we must not forget that that sea itself has its own tales to tell, and not allow the Irish Channel to empty into the forgetful waters of Lethe.[64]

Notes

[1] See Michel de Certeau, *Heterologies: Discourses on the Other*, tr. Brian Massumi (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1968), 140.

[2] Geoffrey Keating, *The General History of Ireland* (1723), 23.

[3] James Saunders, *The Compleat Fisherman* (1724), 37; see also Guy Miège, *The Present State of Great Britain and Ireland, in Three Parts. The I. Of South Britain II. Of North , III. Of Ireland* (1723), 20.

[4] Edward Barlow, *An Exact Survey of the Tide* (1722), 155. John Chamberlayne, among others, comments that Anglesey is completely surrounded by the Irish Sea: *Magnæ Britanniæ Notitia: Or, The Present State of Great Britain; with Divers Remarks upon the Antient State Thereof* (1726, p. 23).

[5] Macky, John, *A Journey Through England. In Familiar Letters from a Gentlemam [sic] Here, to his Friend Abroad*, 2 vols, 2d edn (1724), ii. 140.

[6] Gerard Boate, *A Natural History of Ireland, in Three Parts* (attrib. to 'several hands', Dublin, 1726), 28-9.

[7] Boate, *A Natural History of Ireland* (1726), 30.

[8] Quoted in part from *ODNB*: see Book IV, p. 69 [http://xtf.lib.virginia.edu/]. 'Crau' is a confluence of two rivers.

[9] Daniel Defoe, *A Tour Thro' the Whole Island of Great Britain, divided into Circuits or Journies*, 3 vols (1724), iii. 203.

[10] Defoe, *A Tour Thro' the Whole Island* (1724), iii. 230.

[11] Defoe, *A Tour Thro' the Whole Island* (1724), 'Account and Description of Scotland', iii. 77.

[12] James Saunders, *The Compleat Fisherman* (1724), 37, 53. Donal Flood notes the local trade in cockles, and the tradition that following a glut herring had suddenly abandoned Dublin Bay (Donal T. Flood, 'Dublin Bay in the 18th Century', *Dublin Historical Record* 31.4 (1978), 129-41: 132).

[13] Hence J.G.A. Pocock objects less to the Anglocentrism of the term 'British Isles' than 'British history' (77).

[14] 'Space is not that vague and indeterminate milieu that Kant had imagined: in this pure and absolutely homogenous form it would be totally useless, and not even thought could grasp it. Spatial representation consists essentially in a first coordination of the sensible experience. However, such a coordination would not be possible if the regions of space were qualitatively equivalent, if they were really such that one could be substituted for the other. In order to place things in space, it is essential that one place them differently, some to the right and some to the left … some up there, others down there…. Space could not be what it is if it were not divided and differentiated … and these differences seem to come from the fact that a different emotional value is assigned to these regions. And since all people who belong to the same civilization imagine space in the same way … it is unavoidable that their emotional values should also be alike, that they be – almost inevitably – of social origin.' Émile Durkheim, *Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (New York: Free Press, 1965), 15 (qtd by Illich, 8).

[15] For 'catachthonic history' see Nick Groom, 'Gothic and Celtic Revivals: Antiquity and the Archipelago', *The Blackwell Companion to British Literature*, 4 vols, ed. Robert DeMaria, Jr., Heesok Chang, and Samantha Zacher (Oxford: Blackwell's, forthcoming 2014).

[16] Pocock, 39.

[17] See Frank Welsh, *The Four Nations: A History of the United Kingdom* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2003), 208-13.

[18] See Jonathan Swift, *The Writings of Jonathan Swift*, ed. Robert Greenberg and William Piper (New York & London: Norton, 1973), 498, 500.

[19] *Correspondence of Jonathan Swift*, ed. Harold Williams (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1936-65), iii. 5: see Robert P. Fitzgerald, 'Science and Politics in Swift's Voyage to Laputa', *JEGP* 87 (1988), 213-229, 217.

[20] Swift, 146.

[21] See Pat Rogers, 'Gulliver and the Engineers', *MLR* 70 (1975), 260-70, 260.

[22] Jonathan Swift, *The Bubble: A Poem* (London, 1721), 7.

[23] Swift, 152.

[24] Pat Rogers, 'Gulliver and the Engineers', *MLR* 70 (1975), 260-70, 261; see John Carswell, *The South Sea Bubble* (Cresset Press: London, 1960), esp. 14-16.

[25] Quoted in part by Rogers, 264. This broadside exists in variant forms: compare the text archived by ECCO with *The Bublers Mirrour* in Paul Langford (ed.), *Walpole and the Robinocracy: The English Satirical Print* (Cambridge: Chadwyck-Healey, 1986), 38-9.

[26] James Boswell, *The Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides*, ed. George Birkbeck Hill and L. F. Powell (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964), 369.

[27] See Rachel Hewitt, *Map of a Nation: A Biography of the Ordnance Survey* (London: Granta, 2010).

[28] Ivan Illich, *H_2O and the Waters of Forgetfulness: Reflections on the Historicity of 'Stuff'* (Dallas: Dallas Institute of Humanities and Culture, 1985), 42. Illich has, after Bachelard, described the relationship between water and space as a relationship between form and matter (3-6).

[29] Illich, 43. 'Liquidity' was likewise used throughout the century as a scientific property applied to other areas.

[30] See, for example, Edward Ward, *The London-Spy Compleat* (1700), pt iv, p. 1 (for February, 1699).

[31] See Charles Davenant, *A Postscript to a Discourse of Credit, and the Means and Methods of Restoring it* (1701); Johnson's *Dictionary* quoting 'Swift on Modern Education' (1755-6).

[32] The Isle of Man accounts for 221 square miles.

[33] See H. A. Gilligan, *A History of the Port of Dublin* (Gill & MacMillan, 1988), 18-25.

[34] Boate, *A Natural History of Ireland* (1726), 15.

[35] Geoffrey Corry, 'The Dublin Bar: The Obstacle to the Improvement of the Port of Dublin', *Dublin Historical Record* 23.4 (1970), 137-52: 143.

[36] Quoted by Flood, 138.

[37] Perry's work on the Thames is described in *An Account of the Stopping of Daggenham Breach* (1721).

[38] See John Perry, *The State of Russia, under the Present Czar* (1716), and *ODNB*.

[39] John Perry, *An Answer to Objections against the Making of a Bason, with Reasons for the bettering of the Harbour of Dublin* (Dublin, 1721), 7.

[40] Perry, *An Answer to Objections* (1721), 18.

[41] Desmond F. Moore, 'The Port of Dublin', *Dublin Historical Record* 16.4 (1961), 131-43: 137-8; *ODNB*.

[42] Figures for 1723 are from Arthur Dobbs, *An Essay on the Trade and Improvement of Ireland* (Dublin, 1729-31), 15-16). See also Sir William Petty, *A Geographical Description of Kingdom of Ireland, Newly Corrected & Improv'd by Actual Observations* (1728).

[43] [Anon.,] *Thoughts of a Project for Draining the Irish Channel* (Dublin, 1722), 8-9.

[44] *Draining the Irish Channel*, 9.

[45] *Draining the Irish Channel*, 10, 11; Perry, *An Answer to Objections* (1721), 26-7.

[46] *Draining the Irish Channel*, 11.

[47] *Draining the Irish Channel*, 14.

[48] *Draining the Irish Channel*, 12. Much detail is provided for an Irish readership: Mardyke is part of Cork, Tuskard is an Irish port mentioned in James Deacon Hume's *The Laws of the Customs* (London: Eyre & Strahan, 1826).

[49] *Draining the Irish Channel*, 13.

[50] *Draining the Irish Channel*, 23.

[51] *Draining the Irish Channel*, [5].

[52] *Draining the Irish Channel*, 19.

[53] *Draining the Irish Channel*, 21.

[54] *Draining the Irish Channel*, 28-9.

[55] *Draining the Irish Channel*, 18 [misnumbered '81'].

[56] *Draining the Irish Channel*, 20. *OED* records *twitch-bell* as an earwig (1790) and *jenny-spinner* as an early C19th term for a daddy longlegs, and offers a quotation from Swift for *earwig*, '1727 … To fall into fits at the sight of a Spider, an Earwig, or a Frog' (*Let. to very Young Lady* in *Misc*. II. 335); unrecorded words have been submitted to *OED*.

[57] Jonathan Swift, *Miscellanies, written By Jonathan Swift, D. D. Dean of St. Patrick's, Dublin. Viz. I. The Art of Punning. II. The Right of Precedence. III. Advice to a Young Poet. IV. The Swearer's Bank. V. A Defence of English-Commodities. VI. An Imitation of Horace. Vii. Letters, Poems, Tales, &c.*, 4 edn (1722; this part first published 1720): mentions '*Hoop-Petticoats*' ('Advertisement' preceding 'The Right of Precedence between Physicians and civilians Enquired Into', 32). For 'setting dogs' see *Draining the Irish Channel* (15) and *The Memoirs of the Extraordinary Life, Works, and Discoveries of Martinus Scriblerus*, ed. Charles Kerby-Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 130.

[58] *Draining the Irish Channel*, 3, 21, 22. The epigraph, '*Difficile est propriè Communia dicere*', is taken from Horace's 'The Art of Poetry' ['*De arte poetica liber, ad pisones*']; it is translated by the author on p. 7 of the pamphlet from Roscommon's version: Wentworth Dillon, Earl of Roscommon, *Poems* (1717), l. 128 (p. 199).

[59] Jonathan Swift, *Travels into Several Remote Nations of the World*, 4 vols (1726), ii. 136. For perpetual motion and longitude, see Jeremy Thacker, *The Longitudes Examin'd. Beginning with a Short Epistle to the*

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Longitudinarians, and Ending with the Description of a Smart, Pretty Machine of my own, which I am (almost) sure will do for the Longitude, and procure me the Twenty Thousand Pounds (1714), 7; and *A Collection of Miscellany Letters, selected out of Mist's Weekly Journal*, 4 vols (1722-27), iii. 29 (letter vi).

[60] James Kelly, 'Jonathan Swift and the Irish Economy in the 1720s', *Eighteenth-Century Ireland: Iris an dá chultúr* 6 (1991), 7-36: 8.

[61] Kelly, 30: see Herbert Davis (ed.), *The Prose Writings of Jonathan Swift*, 14 vols (Oxford, 1939-68), xii. 83-90.

[62] Pocock, 78.

[63] Pocock, 77; for Pocock, archipelagic history is 'pelagic, maritime and oceanic' (78). Pocock subsequently argues for overlapping autocentric and heterocentric historical approaches (95).

[64] Liffey – Lethe – mud (Irish, *loth*; Latin, *lutum*).