

Historical revisit: Edmund Curtis, *A history of medieval Ireland* (1923, 1938)*

Mar bhara air mo mhéala, féach gur díol deora,
Go ngabhan gach Rex de réim chirt Roinn Euroip,
A bhfearantas féin go saoghlach rith-eoilte:
— Ach Banba i bpéin gan chéile is í pósta.

[To crown our grief, behold a tale for tears,
How every one of Europe's many realms,
Is happy, mated to its rightful king,
Save Erin, wedded to an absent lord.]

Aodhagán Ó Rathaille, c. 1700

These verses were written by the Irish poet to express his grief at the impact of the Williamite victory at the battle of the Boyne and all that followed for Ireland. They were chosen two hundred years later by the historian Edmund Curtis to make clear his attitude towards Ireland's past. In 1923, just after home rule was secured for what was officially known as Saorstát Éireann (Irish Free State), he published his history of medieval Ireland, and where a dedication would normally be printed he inserted 'The Absentee Lordship' and followed it with these verses.¹ In doing this, Curtis left no doubt that in his view medieval Ireland was a lordship wrongfully attached to the English crown and that it should rightfully have been a kingdom under its own native dynastic ruler. For this he was subsequently denounced as unhistorical, and to this day, especially in the view of the so-called revisionists, he is commonly regarded as not only out of date, but dangerous as well. It was argued that Curtis used the medieval past to justify the emergence of a self-governing state in Ireland. To quote just one example, Steven Ellis, the best of the medieval revisionists, wrote in 1987 that 'historians like Edmund Curtis concentrated on such topics as friction between the Westminster and Dublin governments, the Gaelic revival, the Great Earl uncrowned king of Ireland, the blended race and the fifteenth-century home rule movement'. In this way 'they were able to provide the

*A HISTORY OF MEDIEVAL IRELAND: FROM 1110 TO 1513. By Edmund Curtis. Pp vi, 436, maps, illus. Dublin: Maunsell & Roberts. 1923.

A HISTORY OF MEDIEVAL IRELAND: FROM 1086 TO 1513. By Edmund Curtis. Second edition. Pp xxxv, 433, maps, illus. London: Methuen. 1938.

¹Curtis, *Med. Ire.*, 1st ed. (1923). It was omitted in the second edition (1938). (Subsequent references are to the second edition unless otherwise stated.)

fledgling Irish Free State with respectable medieval precedents'.² This is not only unfair to Curtis, it is also in its own way unhistorical. A different case can be presented. Leaving terminology aside and concentrating on interpretation, it can be argued that Curtis was in fact a major figure in the historiography of medieval Ireland who has been unfairly neglected and ignored by most modern historians. It is about time that his contribution was recognised.³

Anyone who takes the trouble to dip into writings on medieval Ireland will notice that nowadays, and indeed for some time past, Curtis's *History of medieval Ireland* is hardly ever referred to. A good example of this is the seminal essay on King John and Ireland by the late Lewis Warren, a great historian of the reign of John.⁴ Not once is Curtis mentioned. Yet references abound to R. Dudley Edwards, who was no medievalist and can hardly be represented as having made a significant contribution to our understanding of John's relations with Ireland. When dealing with the problem which new colonisation of lands presented to the king, who was aware of how sensitive an issue it might be because of customs which protected existing tenants, Warren discovered a practice unique to Ireland. This was the 'assize touching villeins' (*assisa de villanis*).⁵ But as far back as 1923, in the first edition of his history, Curtis had already drawn attention to this assize and even offered an explanation — that the new landholder 'must not try to draw away other people's villeins'.⁶

To take a more recent example of neglect, the very fine *Ireland in the middle ages* by Seán Duffy lists Curtis in the bibliography (though surprisingly only the first edition). But there is in fact only one reference in the book to Curtis. That is contained in a footnote where the title which Curtis

²Steven Ellis, 'Nationalist historiography and the English and Gaelic worlds in the middle ages' in Ciaran Brady (ed.), *Interpreting Irish history* (Dublin, 1994), p. 162; he also included A. S. Green, *The making of Ireland and its undoing, 1200–1600* (Dublin, 1908) and Eoin MacNeill, *Phases of Irish history* (Dublin, 1919) in his condemnation.

³A much fairer assessment of Curtis in the general context of writings on fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Ireland is J. A. Watt, 'Approaches to the history of fourteenth-century Ireland' in Art Cosgrove (ed.), *A new history of Ireland, ii: Medieval Ireland, 1169–1534* (Oxford, 1987), pp 303–13. In an interview published in 1993 Brendan Bradshaw, the eminent historian of early modern Ireland, included Curtis with MacNeill when he was questioned about historians he admired. Curtis he called 'the great historian of medieval Ireland', and said that both of them 'tried to restore Irish historical experience in a way that was both sympathetic and highly scholarly' (*History Ireland*, i, no. 1 (1993), pp 52–3). Earlier Bradshaw had written about 'an emerging tradition of Irish historical scholarship which was thrust aside by the impatient young men of the 1930s' and insisted that it was time 'to recover the vision of its great luminaries Eoin MacNeill and Edmund Curtis' ('Nationalism and historical scholarship in modern Ireland' in *I.H.S.*, xxvi, no. 104 (Nov. 1989), p. 350).

⁴W. L. Warren, 'King John and Ireland' in James Lydon (ed.), *England and Ireland in the later middle ages* (Dublin, 1981), pp 26–39.

⁵*Ibid.*, p. 36.

⁶Curtis, *Med. Ire.*, 1st ed., p. 109.

gave to one of his chapters, 'Aristocratic home rule', is quoted.⁷ Duffy, at least, seems to approve of this view of Anglo-Irish relations in the late middle ages. Not so another graduate of Curtis's old university, Trinity College Dublin. Robin Frame, in his brief entry on Curtis in *The Oxford companion to Irish history*, writes that 'despite its insights', in his medieval history 'a somewhat artless style and a tendency to transport the political concerns of Curtis's own time into the middle ages make many of its judgements now seem quaint'.⁸

Why should historians ignore Curtis, while regularly referring to the work of Orpen, Otway-Ruthven (called 'magisterial' by Moody)⁹ and more recent medievalists? There are many reasons for this neglect. But there is no doubt that it is what has been condemned as his 'nationalistic' approach which has put Curtis beyond the pale. Writing on the new English-born chief governor, Anthony Lucy, in 1331, who was to implement a reform programme supposedly initiated by Edward III, Curtis left no doubt as to his 'nationalist' interpretation:

This programme for Ireland was at once opposed by the Norman baronage, whose power it proposed to break. An Anglo-Irish 'Patriot Party' formed itself, and we hear the first utterance of the spirit that was behind Swift and Grattan. The Patriots of the fourteenth century, like those of the eighteenth, resented English domination from overseas, were bent on keeping the government and power of Ireland in their own hands, while averse to a gradual enfranchisement of the Gaelic population which might lead to a reversal of the Conquest on which their land-titles rested, were ready to make their own terms as overlords with the Irish and admit them to a guarded equality. Ready to obey the King or any Prince of the Blood coming in person, they hated those officials, 'English by birth', against whom they habitually styled themselves 'English by blood', and especially resented the authority of English viceroys, who stayed but a short time, oppressed the land with exactions, and did no good.¹⁰

Later, writing about the first earl of Desmond, he proclaimed:

The career of Maurice FitzThomas is memorable for that Anglo-Irish movement which he formed and led, not against the English Crown but against the domination of English-born officials and the ruling of Ireland from Westminster. He is the first of the 'Patriot leaders' in the long history of Anglo-Ireland.¹¹

So here we have in fourteenth-century Ireland an eighteenth-century-style movement for limited independence, foreshadowing Grattan and Flood and

⁷Seán Duffy, *Ireland in the middle ages* (Dublin & London, 1997), p. 173. Another recent historian, Brendan Smith, in his *Colonisation and conquest in medieval Ireland: the English in Louth, 1170–1330* (Cambridge, 1999), does list both editions in his bibliography, but again has only one reference to Curtis in the text (p. 100).

⁸S. J. Connolly (ed.), *The Oxford companion to Irish history* (Oxford, 1998), p. 131. Frame does acknowledge that the history 'had the unusual merit of tackling both Gaelic and colonial society' and that Curtis did make much original material available in his many editions of original documents.

⁹Brady (ed.), *Interpreting Irish history*, p. 39.

¹⁰Curtis, *Med. Ire.*, p. 206 (virtually unchanged from 1st ed., p. 257).

¹¹*Ibid.*, p. 224 (1st ed., pp 275–6).

other Anglo-Irish patriots of a later age. Indeed, we have more than that — what can only be described as a ‘home rule movement’ of the kind experienced by Curtis himself in the early twentieth century. Indeed, Curtis explicitly stated this interpretation when he came to deal with fifteenth-century Ireland and headed chapter 15: ‘Aristocratic home rule, 1449–1477’.¹² He saw the second half of the fifteenth century as a time when the Anglo-Irish made use of the Yorkist–Lancastrian struggle in England, and especially the period of the so-called ‘Wars of the Roses’, to win a measure of independence tantamount to home rule. Edward IV, he wrote, ‘owed so much to Ireland that he had to leave it to the Home Rule lords who were professedly Yorkist’.¹³ Finally, he sees the climax of the home rule movement in the career of Garret Mór, the earl of Kildare, whom he calls ‘the first “Uncrowned King of Ireland”’,¹⁴

The influence of this interpretation of late medieval Ireland by Curtis can best be seen in a remarkable book published in 1933 by his former pupil Donough Bryan.¹⁵ This was in fact an essay written by Bryan which won him the Blake Scholarship of National History in Trinity in 1929. He died in 1932 at the age of twenty-eight before his book was published. In his preface Bryan wrote that the rule of Kildare ‘was neither Norman nor Gaelic but an organic compound of both; it represented all the then existent elements in Ireland, and in consequence the Earl was the most completely Irish man in Ireland’.¹⁶

Curtis’s view of the rule of Kildare as the climax of the home rule movement in fifteenth-century Ireland, beginning with the ‘revolution’ of the ‘patriot party’ in the fourteenth century was criticised as not only inaccurate, but worse, dangerous and anachronistic. He was condemned for having pushed his own political agenda back into the middle ages. The late George Sayles, for example, who together with H. G. Richardson made such an enormous contribution to the historiography of medieval Ireland, was very critical. In his famous essay on the first earl of Desmond, whom he significantly called ‘the rebellious first earl’, he dismissed Curtis’s interpretation as ‘the reading of history backwards’ and ‘extremely dangerous’. He went further when he implied that Curtis was not an historian ‘whose sole concern is to ascertain the contemporary truth’. There was no evidence, he argued, to support his view of Desmond as a patriot leader, active against the domination of English-born officials and the ruling of Ireland from Westminster.¹⁷

¹²Ibid., pp 309–36. (It is chapter 13 in 1st ed., pp 356–83).

¹³Ibid., p. 325. In 1st ed., p. 370, he had expressed it rather differently: ‘The first Yorkist king owed a family debt to Ireland, and so had perforce to leave the Home Rule lords in power.’

¹⁴Ibid., p. 339. In 1st ed., p. 381, he calls him ‘vice-king’.

¹⁵Donough Bryan, *Gerald Fitzgerald, the Great Earl of Kildare, 1456–1513* (Dublin, 1933).

¹⁶Ibid., Preface, p. ix.

¹⁷G. O. Sayles, ‘The rebellious first earl of Desmond’ in J. A. Watt, J. B. Morrall and F. X. Martin (eds), *Medieval studies presented to Aubrey Gwynn, S.J.* (Dublin, 1961), p. 226.

Such a condemnation by an historian of the stature of Sayles, the very epitome of the ‘scientific’ approach championed by Moody and others of what might be called ‘the club’, which in the 1930s founded what they believed to be the first school of ‘scientific historians’ in Ireland, was bound to help in making Curtis’s history seem ‘unscientific’.¹⁸ But Sayles, in fact, was overstating his case. It is true that while Desmond lorded it in four or five counties in the south-west, he got little support either from most of the tenants in that area or from other Anglo-Irish nobility outside. They saw no reason to assist what they perceived as Desmond’s personal ambitions. There was no ‘movement’, patriot or otherwise. It was merely an attempt on Desmond’s part to win some measure of power for himself and his dynasty in the south-west. But it must be said that there are problems with this interpretation as well. Sayles, for example, in his essay chose to ignore the important evidence which he himself had discovered and edited. Official court records contain the sworn evidence of juries in different places of an elaborate plot to make Desmond king of Ireland in succession to the Irish kings of old. Notables such as Thomas fitz John, John de Bermingham, James Butler, the bishop of Ossory and Brian O’Brien among others were involved.¹⁹ So the matter is not as simple as it is sometimes made to appear, and while Curtis has overstated the case, there may well be some historical truth behind what appear to be the preposterous suggestions he made.

Before examining the arguments of Curtis with regard to home rule in medieval Ireland and his interpretation of the nature of relations with England, it is necessary to look more closely at the man himself. Fundamental to any discussion of historiography is the proposition that the historian is always a man of his own age. His views are necessarily coloured by his own background, education and beliefs. Eoin MacNeill put it simply when he wrote in the preface to his *Phases of Irish history*: ‘Neither apathy nor antipathy can ever bring out the truth in history.’²⁰ So, as with all historians, it is important to know something of Curtis the man — his background and education which shaped his views, and his working life which continued to influence him. It is a remarkable story.²¹ His parents came from Protestant Ulster, father from Donegal and mother from Belfast. Curtis was reared in poverty in England, where his father could find little work. By 1895, when the family had moved to the east London slums, times were so hard that the young Edmund had to work ten and a half hours daily in a rubber factory for eight shillings a week. School became a distant memory. Yet he was intelligent and kept up his reading. He began writing as well, and in

¹⁸For the best account of this ‘revolution’ see Ciaran Brady, ‘“Constructive and instrumental”: the dilemma of Ireland’s first “new historians”’ in idem (ed.), *Interpreting Irish history*, pp 3–31.

¹⁹G. O. Sayles, ‘The legal proceedings against the first earl of Desmond’ in *Anal. Hib.*, no. 23 (1966), pp 203–29.

²⁰Eoin MacNeill, *Phases of Irish history* (Dublin, 1919), Foreword.

²¹The best short account is still T. W. Moody, ‘Edmund Curtis’ in *Hermathena*, no. 63 (1944), pp 69–78; see also idem, ‘The writings of Edmund Curtis’ in *I.H.S.*, xii, no. 12 (Sept. 1943), pp 393–400.

September 1895 had a short story ('Conor O'Donnall') published in a London newspaper. In the same month another paper published some verses. Then on 4 June 1896 a weekly paper, *London*, published four of his poems. The editor wrote that they were by 'a boy poet of the east end', and when it was revealed that they were by a fifteen-year-old factory worker it caused a minor sensation. Two benefactors came together, took him out of the factory, and provided for his schooling. He did so well that he eventually won a scholarship to Keble College in Oxford. He never looked back. A first-class honours degree led to an appointment lecturing in the University of Sheffield. In 1912 he published his first book, *Roger of Sicily, and the Normans in lower Italy, 1016–1154*,²² which won him much acclaim. It also gave him an acquaintance with Norman history which was to be important when he came to write about their expansion into Ireland.

By the time he was appointed professor in Trinity in 1914 he had already published important work on medieval Ireland, starting in 1908 with an essay on a subject which had been totally ignored until then. This was published in the leading English historical journal.²³ Two years later the same journal published another mould-breaking article.²⁴ Publications in Irish journals too showed his capacity to exploit sources in Irish.²⁵ So he came to Ireland with skills well established and with a deep and abiding interest in medieval Ireland already deep-rooted. His time at Oxford had been important in developing those skills. In the school of history there he had been trained in the traditional mode first established by Stubbs, in which the use of governmental records, coupled with a knowledge of administrative and legal systems which had preserved them, was made a basis of all inquiry. It is important to stress this, because all too often Curtis is regarded as someone who was lacking in those particular skills — a view which ignores how much effort he put into the editing of important source material to the day he died. His literary skills too had been finely honed. Another basic factor in his make-up was a conviction of the importance to him of his Irish ancestry. In a lecture to the Dublin Literary Society in 1925, where he addressed the subject of Irish history, he said: 'As a race we have the extraordinary habit of make-believe.'²⁶ This sensitivity to his Irishness certainly helped to shape his attitude towards Ireland's past. There was one other element which was essential to his historical perspective: his continued interest in and knowledge of the Irish language. Given all these facts in his background

²²Edmund Curtis, *Roger of Sicily, and the Normans in lower Italy, 1016–1154* (London, 1912).

²³Edmund Curtis, 'The English and Ostmen in Ireland' in *E.H.R.*, xxiii (1908), pp 209–19.

²⁴Edmund Curtis, 'The clan system among English settlers in Ireland' in *E.H.R.*, xxv (1910), pp 116–20. This used a transcript of an important chancery writ preserved in the Harris collection (N.L.I.) and shows Curtis's acquaintance with an important source largely neglected by contemporary Irish historians.

²⁵See in particular Edmund Curtis, 'The wars of Turlogh: an historical documentary' in *Irish Review*, ii (1913), pp 577–86, 644–7; iii (1913), pp 34–41.

²⁶Edmund Curtis, 'Irish history and its popular versions' in *Irish Rosary*, xxxix, no. 5 (May 1925), p. 321.

and education, it is no wonder that he quickly began to construe the history of medieval Ireland in the way that he did. He could not do otherwise, being the man he was.

Arriving in Dublin at the outbreak of the war, he quickly identified with the home rulers and remained committed to the Redmondite programme. Even though he was a friend and admirer of Eoin MacNeill, he was not swayed by 1916. Home rule remained his ideal. It was natural, then, that he should put a home rule gloss on events in medieval Ireland, whenever he felt that the evidence justified it. The question must now be asked: was there any justification for this, or were the critics right to dismiss him as not only anachronistic but dangerous as well?

A famous and much-quoted passage from the sixth statute of the Irish parliament of 1460 will provide a start:

Also, at the request of the Commons: That whereas the land of Ireland is and at all times has been corporate of itself, by the ancient laws and customs used in the same, freed of the burthen of any special law of the realm of England, save only such laws as by the lords spiritual and temporal and the commons of the said land had been in Great Council or Parliament there held, admitted, accepted, affirmed and proclaimed, according to sundry ancient statutes thereof made . . .²⁷

It could not be clearer. Ireland was a corporation and was therefore not bound by any English statute unless it was confirmed by an Irish parliament or great council.²⁸ In the context of the later attempts to establish the historical basis of Ireland's freedom from the legislation of the Westminster parliament, this statute should have pride of place. William Molyneux in particular initiated a long controversy between supporters of this freedom and opponents such as Serjeant Mayart who tried to establish the opposite view based on sound historical evidence.²⁹ In the course of that controversy a wide variety of medieval records, Irish as well as English, was employed in support of different views. Much of this was material transcribed from manuscript sources, such as the Irish statute rolls or the memoranda rolls of the Irish exchequer, which have since disappeared, so that to this day they remain a useful quarry for the historian of medieval Ireland. But nowhere in the great mass of evidence quoted in the long course of this polemic, so far as I can discover, was the 1460 declaration ever produced in evidence. This is odd, to say the least, since the original statute roll survived until the destruction of public records in the Four Courts in 1922. But it was not until 1865 that any historian referred to it. That was J. T. Gilbert, another historian whose work was neglected until very recently. Gilbert had consulted the

²⁷*Stat. Ire., Hen. VI*, p. 645.

²⁸The best general account of the argument and the historical context is still Art Cosgrove, 'Parliament and the Anglo-Irish community: the declaration of 1460' in Art Cosgrove and J. I. McGuire (eds), *Parliament and community* (Belfast, 1983), pp 25–41. See also James Lydon, 'Ireland and the English crown, 1171–1541' in *I.H.S.*, xxix, no. 115 (May 1995), pp 281–94.

²⁹For Molyneux see J. G. Simms, *William Molyneux of Dublin* (Dublin, 1982). Molyneux's *The case of Ireland stated*, with an introduction by J. G. Simms, was reprinted in facsimile in 1997 (Dublin).

original roll in Dublin, and in an appendix to his *History of the viceroys of Ireland* he printed one of the statutes. But this was not the famous sixth one, but rather the later tenth statute which established an independent Irish coinage.³⁰ It was Curtis who was the first to quote the now famous words of the sixth statute in the first edition of his history in 1923.³¹ He wrote that this parliament 'proceeded to declare the legislative and legal independence of Ireland . . . So bold an assertion of equality with England under the Imperial crown had never before been advanced.'³² As we have seen, Curtis saw this in the context of what he called 'aristocratic home rule'. It was an unashamedly nationalist view of fifteenth-century Ireland, with the Anglo-Irish cast in the role of patriots asserting their parliamentary independence. Anyone reading the wording of that sixth statute must admit that the language used does smack of the terms later used by Grattan or even by more moderate orators in asserting parliamentary independence. It *did* declare the independence of the Irish parliament in terms which we would understand as home rule, accepting the king as lord of Ireland (*dominus Hibernie*), but with the lordship of Ireland enjoying its own parliamentary independence, not bound by any legislation of any English parliament unless it was accepted and confirmed by the Irish parliament and thus enacted into law.

There are still differences of opinion as to the historical foundations for this claim of 1460, and I do not propose to examine them here. Indeed, parliament itself in 1460 did not argue the case, taking it as an accepted fact and using it to enact other legislation. Some of the legislation of this 1460 parliament is in fact much more controversial and so far has not received the attention it deserves. For example, the statute establishing an independent Irish coinage had important economic consequences, and some attention has been paid to this. But there were also serious constitutional aspects, and these have been ignored.³³ Much more important was the central part of the sixth statute which established freedom from writs out of England on the grounds that Ireland already had its own great seal. This necessarily severely limited the authority of the crown in the Irish lordship and imposed a much more serious constitutional restriction than that which proclaimed independence from Westminster legislation. Yet again this has received no real attention from historians. It is important too that the 1460 parliament used

³⁰J. T. Gilbert, *History of the viceroys of Ireland* (Dublin, 1865), p. 587. In his text he did write that 'parliament publicly enunciated the independence of the legislature in Ireland' (p. 369).

³¹Curtis, *Med. Ire.*, 1st ed., p. 369 (2nd ed., p. 322).

³²In the second edition Curtis was more cautious, inserting a footnote that 'Irish nationalism in the modern sense cannot be looked for in the acts or words of this Parliament'. But he did retain his view that in it Ireland did 'assert a complete separateness from England except for the personal link of the Crown' (p. 322).

³³The only two who have written on the subject have concentrated on the economic and monetary aspects: J. Moore McDowell, 'The devaluation of 1460 and the origins of the Irish pound' in *I.H.S.*, xxv, no. 97 (May 1986), pp 19–28; S. G. Ellis, 'The struggle for control of the Irish mint, 1460–c. 1506' in *R.I.A. Proc.*, lxxviii (1978), sect. C, pp 17–36.

the French term *separat* in stating Ireland's relationship with England — Ireland was separate from England.

When Curtis, therefore, used the 1460 legislation to construct what he called a 'home rule' situation, I have no doubt that his argument was sound. What has offended historians, and made them condemn his history, is what they have referred to as his 'nationalistic' terminology. If that terminology is put aside, and a more moderate one substituted, then the essence of his argument was sound. Given his background and the ethos out of which he wrote, his terminology is understandable. But it should not be used to condemn what is otherwise a sound argument.

I would go further and argue that Curtis deserves a special place in the historiography of medieval Ireland, because he was the first serious historian to break away from the narrow standpoint of previous writers. When he lectured in Dublin in 1925 on what he called 'popular versions' of Irish history, he was quite outspoken. He spoke of the 'solemn sham of "national history" which no one must criticise'. Later in his lecture he said: 'As a Nationalist of the old Home Rule type said to me once: "I believe that the virtues of the Irish are all their own, their defects have been put into them by their conquerors!"' Having stated that 'this brand of national history . . . has now rather curdled on the national stomach', he went on to insist: 'What we have to learn in Ireland now is that history is a science, that it is concerned with cause and effect, and that it must serve the truth at all costs.'³⁴ It is true that he continued to admire both Orpen and MacNeill. But they both, in fact, represented the very kind of bias which Curtis condemned. They inherited ways of interpreting Ireland's medieval past from opposite points of view. In the first two volumes of his *Ireland under the Normans* (1911) Orpen had one main theme — that pre-Norman Gaelic Ireland was in a state of anarchy; that the Norman invasion was therefore justified; and that what he called the *pax Normannica* provided for the first time the necessary peace and stability which was a prerequisite for progress. This stability, he argued, was the result of law and order in place of the anarchy which had hitherto prevailed. Every sphere of life, economic as well as political, benefited from the new order. But this was later shattered by Gaelic Ireland. The native Irish were unable to recognise the efficacy of Norman rule and the good which resulted from that rule, a theme which was developed in the third and fourth volumes of his history. Eoin MacNeill, in a series of public lectures, bitterly attacked Orpen and the view he propounded. These lectures were subsequently published in his famous book, *Phases of Irish history* (1919). MacNeill tried to show that Gaelic Ireland was far from anarchical before the Normans came. He argued that Orpen had greatly exaggerated the incidence of war by a too ready acceptance of every mention of a cattle raid in the annals as constituting a minor war. He insisted that the laws and institutions of Gaelic Ireland were well capable of maintaining the rule of law and preserving peace in the land. Orpen, indeed, had put the cart before the horse, because it was the intrusion of feudalism which proved to be the disruptive element responsible for the breakdown

³⁴Curtis, 'Irish history and its popular versions', pp 321, 323.

of law and order in Ireland. And so on. Both writers were openly biased in their approach, one openly nationalistic, the other openly unionist, and both deeply prejudiced as a result. MacNeill, to his credit, recognised that fact. In the preface to *Phases of Irish history* he made an open confession of the standpoint from which he viewed medieval Ireland, and went even further by insisting that no apology was necessary for this.

The irony is that both men worked from exactly the same false premise for the diametrically opposed arguments which they constructed. This was first pointed out by Daniel Binchy. Both scholars accepted that 'law and order were impossible in any society where the state had not substantially the same functions as in the later Victorian era in which they both grew up'.³⁵ The evidence convinced Orpen that pre-Norman Ireland lacked completely these Victorian elements, hence anarchy reigned. MacNeill on the contrary, accepting the necessity of discovering these same functions, argued that the king in his *tuath* governed through the laws which his authority enforced. Both were wrong.

Curtis was the first important historian of medieval Ireland to break away from the narrow viewpoint of previous writers like Orpen and MacNeill. He was able to pursue the history of the two Irelands, English and Gaelic, because he was able to draw on the two traditions in a way which was unique in his time. As we have seen, he was trained in the strict Oxford school of history where he necessarily had to acquire an expertise in the exploitation of records of different kinds. But he had also retained a skill in the exploitation of literary sources, and his early interest in the Irish language and its literature also provided access to a variety of historical sources which was denied to what we may call the school of Orpen. This gave him an advantage which none of his predecessors enjoyed, or for that matter most of his successors such as Otway-Ruthven. He said himself that the Irish language was important because in it 'is to be found the key to much of her history'.³⁶ He put his knowledge of Irish to good use, and in the first edition of his history he demonstrated his proficiency in utilising source material in Irish. Not only did he make good use of a wide variety of Irish sources in print, he was also skilled enough to exploit manuscript sources in the great collections in the Royal Irish Academy.³⁷ Indeed, this is one reason why his history still retains a value, despite all the researches that have been carried out since.

Because of his knowledge of Irish, coupled with the Anglo-Irish tradition to which he was heir, he possessed a unique talent for grappling with the problems which medieval Ireland poses to the historian. A knowledge of Irish in itself was not, of course, the important fact: it was the use to which

³⁵D. A. Binchy, 'Secular institutions' in Myles Dillon (ed.), *Early Irish society* (Dublin, 1954), p. 62.

³⁶Bryan, *Great Earl of Kildare*, Foreword, p. vii.

³⁷For example, when dealing with the conquest of Leinster and referring to its reputation as a source of gold, he remarks that two hundred years later it was still called 'a land of gold' by a Gaelic poet. In support of this he refers to an inauguration ode of c. 1376, contained in two R.I.A. manuscripts (Curtis, *Med. Ire.*, 1st ed., p. 51 n. 1).

Curtis put this knowledge, coupled with the sympathetic insight into Gaelic Ireland which it gave him. He loved the language and the people who spoke it. This is how his colleague in Trinity, T. W. Moody, put it in 1943 shortly after Curtis died, when writing about his nationalism. It was ‘rooted in affection for the people, the native language, the folk-lore, the soil of Donegal. Years before Ireland became his home, he sat by turf-fires in Gweedore, listening to the talk of old people and learning to speak their ancient tongue. And this living connection with the Gaelic past remained a source of delight and refreshment to him all his days.’³⁸ He retained a deep acquaintance of and sympathy with the literature of that language. When he came to Ireland for the first time, probably in 1899 while still at school, he stayed with relatives in Donegal and encountered living Irish for the first time. From then on he came to Ireland and visited other Gaeltacht areas, learning to speak and read the language which he quickly came to love. When he was a student at Oxford he founded the first branch of the Gaelic League there, one of the first branches in England. In 1905 he published, significantly in *An Claidheamh Soluis*, an article (‘Some Sean-Ghail names’) which showed that he already possessed the skill to make good use of his knowledge of Irish. In 1920 he brought together in *Cuisle na hÉigse*, an anthology of contemporary Irish poetry, writers such as Piaras Béaslaí, Pearse, Hyde, Pádraig de Brún and many others. He even collected poems preserved in the oral tradition of Donegal which would probably have been lost had he not taken the trouble to sit with old people and record what they had preserved orally.

But he was also interested in the exploitation of older sources for historical purposes. In July 1909 he began a course in Old and Middle Irish at the famous School of Irish Learning in Dublin, and right down to his death he maintained his attempt to master the older forms of the language. It should always be remembered that Curtis was a poet and never lost his instinctive sympathy with literary sources and the society which produced them. He was not afraid to move aside from the strict (pseudo-scientific?) exposition of political/constitutional/legal history which he had learnt at Oxford, the approach of Stubbs, Maitland and other giants of the world of English history. In the first edition of his history, writing about Dermot MacMurrough, he analysed his contribution to politics, the church and the art of war. But he also emphasised what possession of the Book of Leinster meant and the great literature it contained. This and other great books were not only inspirations to ‘the Gaelic aristocracy now and for centuries to come’; they contain a literature which is timeless. He cannot resist quoting — ‘the wail of the storm-play in the rafters of the firmament’, which he praises for its vigour. Better still, he quotes what he calls ‘tender wording’ in a description of a woman of great beauty: ‘Dark and dusky were her eye-lashes; the soft black lashes threw a shadow to the middle of her cheek. Sweet as the strings of lutes when long sustained they are touched by the hands of masters was the melody of her voice and her speech.’³⁹

This sympathy with Gaelic Ireland is reflected in all that he wrote, and it

³⁸Moody, ‘The writings of Edmund Curtis’, p. 393.

³⁹Curtis, *Med. Ire.*, 1st ed., p. 36.

enabled him to take a wider view of Ireland in the middle ages than was common in his generation. Too often writers before his time were partisan on racial, and sometimes even religious, grounds. Like Orpen and MacNeill, they had large axes to grind, and they went about their business with excessive zeal. Curtis too was often partisan in his view, and he undoubtedly went out of his way to be what he would consider 'fair' to Gaelic Ireland. At the same time, he was very conscious of the positive contribution made by the settlers and their descendants to the development of medieval Ireland, and this too he emphasised in his history. In contrast to his predecessors, he took an all-embracing view of medieval Ireland. If he was too conscious of the separateness of the Anglo-Irish community from England and too insistent on the way it became a part of Ireland in the middle ages, to the point where he saw the representatives of that community in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries as 'patriots' and 'home rulers', defying government from England by Englishmen, it should not condemn him to almost total neglect. If he was reflecting the attitude of many of his generation who found it difficult to adjust to a new political situation in Ireland, he was also trying to explain how medieval Ireland came to adopt what he rightly perceived to be its own peculiar relationship with the English crown.

In their investigations into different aspects of the English experience in the middle ages, English historians largely ignored Ireland. One of the few who appreciated that difficult problems might be resolved by examining them in an Irish context was H. G. Richardson. As a result, he made himself master of Ireland's administrative and constitutional history in the middle ages and with his colleague George Sayles helped to bring a whole range of neglected records to the attention of historians. When he came to write a long review essay on the second edition of Curtis's history, he was critical of Curtis in his treatment of law and administration generally. But he concluded that 'the merits of Dr Curtis's work are very great . . . and for a long time every future historian will have reason to be thankful to Dr Curtis for his guidance, not only to the facts of history but to the sources'.⁴⁰

Curtis has also been criticised for his neglect of, and sometimes his misunderstanding of, the medieval Irish administration. In the light of more recent advances in our knowledge of this aspect of medieval Ireland, there is some substance in the strictures concerning his lack of understanding. But he certainly did not neglect administrative sources. He was, as has been stressed, a product of Oxford, where administrative, legal and constitutional history were, in the view of some, given too much emphasis. In Trinity, nevertheless, he inaugurated a course on medieval constitutional history unique in its day and apparently spent more time on it in lectures than on the political history of medieval Ireland.⁴¹ Even a casual examination of the first edition of his history will reveal the wealth of administrative and legal records which he consulted, unlike most of his Irish contemporaries. He used the Record Commissioners' transcripts of memoranda rolls preserved in the

⁴⁰H. G. Richardson, 'English institutions in medieval Ireland' in *I.H.S.*, i, no. 4 (Sept. 1939), p. 382.

⁴¹Moody, 'Edmund Curtis', p. 76.

Public Record Office, the only scholar to do so for many years.⁴² His massive six-volume calendar of the collection of Ormond deeds in Kilkenny castle (published between 1932 and 1943), which occupied him for much of his later life, not only earned him the plaudits of historians, but even won him the attention of leading English newspapers.⁴³ In his *Richard II in Ireland* (1927) he not only edited fully a series of important and neglected texts from the London Public Record Office, including the legal record of the submissions gained by the king in Ireland, but he also provided the fullest analysis of that king's relations with Ireland.⁴⁴ He edited pipe rolls from the reign of Henry III, charters from different periods, and in Agnes Conway's book on Henry VII he provided a detailed analysis of the legislation of the famous parliament of Poynings which is still worth consulting.⁴⁵ The first edition of his history contains innumerable references to lost records of the Irish chancery, extracts from which were preserved by earlier antiquarians in collections such as the Haliday manuscripts in the Royal Irish Academy, the massive Harris collection in the National Library of Ireland, or the even larger Ware collection in the British Library, and many others besides. To say, then, that he was ignorant of the niceties of administrative and constitutional history is nonsense, and to dismiss his history on that particular ground is unfair.

It is my contention, then, that, for all its faults, Curtis's history of medieval Ireland is still a primary source for anyone interested in that subject. It is not without mistakes, omissions, wrong interpretations — but that is the norm.⁴⁶ Both editions must be used — in the second Curtis frequently refers the reader back to the first for necessary references or sometimes a fuller discussion of the point at issue. Neither is easy to read. Curtis never intended to provide a simple narrative, and the second edition in particular is broken into a series of sometimes unrelated sections discussing different problems. For example, if he is examining the history of conquest and analysing land grants which resulted, he will regularly break off to discuss the impact of this

⁴²See, for example, Curtis, *Med. Ire.*, 1st ed., pp 256, 258, 273, 275, 282.

⁴³Few, if any, books on Irish history in recent years can have achieved the distinction accorded to the first volume of *Ormond deeds*, namely a leader in *The Times* (27 March 1933) and a front page article in *The Times Literary Supplement* ("Strongbow's Ireland", 21 September 1933) (D. B. Quinn, review in *I.H.S.*, i, no. 1 (Mar. 1938), p. 81).

⁴⁴Edmund Curtis, *Richard II in Ireland, 1394–5, and submissions of the Irish chiefs* (Oxford, 1927); see also idem, 'Unpublished letters from Richard II in Ireland, 1394–5' in *R.I.A. Proc.*, xxxvii (1927), sect. C, pp 276–303.

⁴⁵Edmund Curtis, 'Sheriffs' accounts of the honor of Dungarvan, of Tweskard in Ulster, and of County Waterford' in *R.I.A. Proc.*, xxxix (1929), sect. C, pp 1–17; idem, 'Sheriffs' accounts for County Tipperary, 1275–6' in *R.I.A. Proc.*, xlii (1934), sect. C, pp 65–95; idem, 'Two unpublished charters of John de Courcy, *Princeps Ulidiae*' in *Belfast Natur. Hist. Soc. Proc.*, sess. 1928–9 (1930), pp 2–10; Agnes Conway, *Henry VII's relations with Scotland and Ireland, 1485–98* (Cambridge, 1932), pp 118–43.

⁴⁶As Richardson said in his long review, 'the book will remain an indisputable guide to all who are interested in medieval Ireland' ('English institutions in medieval Ireland', p. 392).

on the relevant Gaelic region and provide a short account, coherent in itself, of the local dynasty. But he remains the only historian who has tried to combine in a single major historical work an account not only of the English in medieval Ireland, their relations with England and the crown, and the rise and fall of the greatest among them, but also tried to tell the story of the impact of all this on Gaelic Ireland.⁴⁷ He is also unique in that not only did he begin his story in the eleventh century, so that the English impact when it came would be understandable in the context of the experience of Gaelic Ireland, but he continued it down to 1513, so that what was to happen later would make sense. Most importantly, Curtis helps us to understand better the context within which in 1541 Henry VIII was able to use an Irish parliament to create a kingdom of Ireland and thus bring to an end the lordship that had lasted intact since the time of Henry II.

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⁴⁷Despite this, and Curtis's known love of and use of the Irish language, an Irish translation of his history did not appear in print until 1956: *Stair na hÉireann sa mhéánaois*, trans. Tomás de Bhial (Dublin, 1956).