

The Stauntons of Galway in China: Irish Catholic networks and the expansion of the British Empire in Asia

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ABSTRACT. *George Leonard Staunton, who travelled on the first British embassy to China in 1793, and his son George Thomas Staunton, who translated the Chinese legal code into English, are well-known figures in the history of China. Their British identity was constructed by George Thomas to conceal the family's Irish Catholic background, but in fact George Leonard used that background for the benefit of an imperial career that propelled him from Galway to the West Indies, India and, finally, China. It enabled him to win the support of the papacy for the British embassy to China, and his son to learn Chinese and make a career as a merchant and translator. Their story shows some of the mechanisms that connected the nineteenth-century British Empire in Asia to the Catholic Church which had been the great global institution of the early modern age. Moreover, a distinctively Irish concern with property law can be seen to have influenced George Thomas's great work on Chinese law. The Stauntons' imperial careers made the family wealthy and much of this wealth came back to County Galway.*

As he passed through Brussels on his way to London in the summer of 1792, Li Zibiao, one of two Chinese Catholic priests who had been recruited by Sir George Staunton as interpreters for the first British embassy to China, wrote back to the superior of the college in Naples, where he had been trained, asking him to send a formal letter of thanks to Sir George. Not only had Staunton just provided them with suitably modest clothes to wear in England instead of their religious habits, but:

This gentleman encourages us greatly in our spiritual exercises and attends them as a religious superior would do to guard the laws of the church. In Lutheran areas he also paid for someone to take us to a Catholic church on feast days. He is a man who is both good hearted and generous, ... but he is obstinate in his religion without genuinely wanting to change it, even though he had a Catholic mother and was taught by the Jesuits including in religious subjects.¹

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¹ 'Questo signore ci favorisce molto in quanto agli exsercizii nostri spirituali, e ci attende quale superiore di religione per custodire le legi della chiesa, anzi pagava a chi ci conduceva

Li was a conscientious Catholic missionary and had clearly tried, and failed, to persuade Staunton to convert. George Leonard Staunton came from Galway and had received a Jesuit education in France. His wife, as Li noted precisely in a later letter, was Anglican.² Ambiguous and flexible religious practice, sometimes combined with philosophical scepticism, was a common enough response among elite Galway men operating under the penal laws and within the expanding British Empire of this period.³ What is more unusual is that Li shows Staunton using his Catholic socialisation and networks to win the support of the Catholic Church for the benefit of a British embassy to China. This resulted in the British embassy presenting to the Qianlong emperor a request for the toleration of Chinese Catholics. The broader interest of this history lies in the Irish links it suggests between the knowledge created by the early modern Catholic missions to China and later British empire-building in Asia.

The embassy led by George Macartney, earl of Lissanoure, with Sir George Staunton as his minister plenipotentiary, has long been understood as marking the start of British relations with China. Recent literature has also treated it as a turning point between positive Enlightenment images of China and nineteenth-century ideas of the country as an isolated, traditional state whose customs justified Western imperialism.⁴ However, if we look at the embassy in the light of George Leonard Staunton's Irish Catholic background, it can also be seen as connecting later British imperialism to early Jesuit knowledge of China. It can then be placed within a broader history that discusses the role of Irish men and women in the expansion of Britain's Atlantic and Asian empires.⁵

Staunton's career shows how conversion, or at least occasional conformity, to Anglicanism was essential to career success in most roles in the East India Company in the eighteenth century and accusations of Catholic origins were a political liability. Nevertheless, his Catholic identity and socialisation were an important part of the social and cultural capital that had projected him from a bankrupt Galway merchant family into a career that crossed the empire. That same resource also provided the foundations for his son George Thomas Staunton's achievements as the first European outside the Catholic missions to learn to read and write Chinese to a high level and his later fame as a translator of Chinese. This too

alla chiesa catholica in luoghi dei luterani in giorno di festa; ... pero ostinato nella sua religione senza voluta di volerla mutare quantunque ha avuta madre catholica, e fù instruito dai Gesuiti anche nelle Scienze Sacre': Giacomo Ly to Francesco Massei, 14 May 1792 (Archivio Istituto Universitario Orientale Napoli (hereafter cited as A.I.O.N.), 16.1.15).

² Paulus Cho and Ly, 22 May 1792 (A.I.O.N., 16.1.16).

³ James Hardiman, *The history of the town and county of Galway* (Dublin, 1820), p. 318; Philip Walsh, 'The Blakes of Ballyglunin: Catholic merchants and landowners of Galway town and county in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries' (Ph.D. thesis, University College, Dublin, 2017), p. 116; N. A. Zacek, *Settler society in the English Leeward Islands, 1670–1776* (Cambridge, 2010), pp 69–71; John Bergin, 'Irish Catholics and their networks in eighteenth-century London' in *Eighteenth-Century Life*, xxxix (2015), p. 91.

⁴ P. J. Kitson, *Forging romantic China: Sino-British cultural exchange 1760–1840* (Cambridge, 2013), pp 128–30; Hao Gao, *Creating the Opium War: British imperial attitudes towards China, 1792–1840* (Manchester, 2020), pp 21–46.

⁵ Barry Crosbie, *Irish imperial networks: Migration, social communication and exchange in nineteenth-century India* (Cambridge, 2011); Jane Ohlmeyer, 'Eastward enterprises: colonial Ireland, colonial India' in *Past & Present*, ccxl (2018), pp 83–118; Richard O'Leary, 'Robert Hart in China: the significance of his Irish roots' in *Modern Asian Studies*, xl, no. 3 (2006), pp 583–604.

contributed to the shaping of British empire in Asia, since his translation of the Qing legal code, which bore the imprint of distinctively Irish interests in property law, was not only used by the courts when Hong Kong became a British colony but had a lasting influence on Western understanding of Chinese law.⁶

In examining the role of Catholic social capital in the British Empire, the story of the Staunton family also casts light on studies of Irish identity in England and the impact of empire in Ireland.⁷ As representatives of British attitudes and institutions, the Stauntons are a well-known part of the history of China.⁸ This British identity reflects their public self-presentation: George Thomas Staunton had an English mother, wrote his father's Catholic Jacobite heritage out of his family history, bought an English estate and a seat in the Westminster parliament, and described himself as 'an *Englishman* resident in *England*'.⁹ However, he continued to draw his friends from Galway circles in London and spoke for Galway Catholics in parliament. And although he was a devout Anglican, he resigned his parliamentary seat over his support for Catholic emancipation. Moreover, a considerable portion of the fortune he made in China was either spent in Ireland or inherited by his Catholic relatives in Galway. His later life suggests that not only were converts a distinct hybrid group, but that the same political affiliations and commitment to religious tolerance could continue into the second generation even for a pious Anglican living in England.¹⁰ The combination of concealment and Anglicanism has hidden from historians the importance of the Stauntons' Catholic networks and their ongoing Irish political identity, as well as a broader understanding of the influence of empire on Galway.

I

When George Thomas Staunton published his memoir of his father's life and family in 1823, he began with an earlier George Staunton who 'having gone

⁶ Li Chen, *Chinese law in imperial eyes: sovereignty, justice and transcultural politics* (New York, 2016), pp 69–70.

⁷ Craig Bailey, *Irish London: middle-class migration in the global eighteenth century* (Liverpool, 2013); Caoimhe Nic Dháibhéid, Shahmina Akhtar, Dónal Hassett, Kevin Kenny, Laura McAtackney, Ian McBride, T. G. McMahon and Jane Ohlmeyer, 'Round table: decolonising Irish history? Possibilities, challenges, practices' in *I.H.S.*, xlv, no. 168 (2021), pp 303–32.

⁸ Alain Peyrefitte, *The collision of two civilisations: the British expedition to China in 1792–4*, trans. Jon Rothschild (London, 1993); Henrietta Harrison, *The perils of interpreting: the extraordinary lives of two translators between Qing China and the British empire* (Princeton, 2021); Roberta Bivins, 'Expectations and expertise: early British responses to Chinese medicine' in *Hist. of Science*, xxxvii, no. 4 (1999), pp 459–90; Guan Shippei, 'Ying Fa "Nanjing tiaoyue" yizhan yu Yingguo hanxue de chengli – "Yingguo hanxue zhi fu" Sidangdong de gongxian' [The translation war between Britain and France over the "Treaty of Nanking" and the establishment of British sinology – the contribution of the "Father of British Sinology" Staunton] in *Fanyishi yanjiu* [Translation history research], no. 3 (2013), pp 128–64.

⁹ G. T. Staunton, *Memoirs of the chief incidents of the public life of Sir George Thomas Staunton, Bart.* (London, 1856), p. 109.

¹⁰ T. P. Power, 'Converts' in T. P. Power and Kevin Whelan (eds), *Endurance and emergence: Catholics in Ireland in the eighteenth century* (Dublin, 1990), pp 101–28; Jennifer Ridden, 'The forgotten history of the Protestant crusade: religious liberalism in Ireland' in *Journal of Religious Hist.*, xxxi, no. 1 (2007), p. 82.

over to Ireland with his regiment in the year 1634, settled in the county of Galway, and became possessed of considerable landed property in that part of the kingdom'.¹¹ He goes on to explain how the Stauntons prospered and became one of the town's leading families and leaders of the moderate party which commiserated with the distressed condition of the Catholic inhabitants. After a brief mention of a petition against a pro-Catholic John Staunton by the town's strongly Protestant party, for which he cites James Hardiman's recently published *History of the town and county of Galway*, George Thomas dismisses 'the illiberal feelings which predominated at that unhappy period' as no longer relevant.¹² Instead, he moves quickly on to the English Staunton family, including their founding ancestor Sir Malger de Staunton, 'a brave and distinguished Saxon knight', and Dr Edmund Staunton, a Calvinist polemicist who became president of Corpus Christi College, Oxford.¹³

What George Thomas Staunton omits to tell his readers is that for several generations the Stauntons (or Stantons as they were known in Galway) were themselves Catholic. This sleight of hand is easy to accept because the book and the family trees that accompany it are constructed around the Staunton patriline. Staunton men whose family origins are in England are at the centre of the narrative, but if we look at their mothers the story changes.¹⁴ The first George Staunton married Eleanor Lynch, from one of the Old English 'tribes' of Galway.¹⁵ Marriages between English Protestant men and Catholic women were not uncommon in seventeenth-century Ireland, with the Catholic Church accepting them though requiring that the children be raised as Catholics.¹⁶ For the Lynch family, who had long been the most powerful in the city, marrying a daughter to an English soldier seems likely to have been one of the many strategies they used to preserve their interests.¹⁷ For George Staunton I, a younger son newly arrived from England, opportunities for his children were more likely to come from his wife's Lynch relatives, who were an important part of the commercial networks that spread out from Galway to Europe, London and the West Indies, than from England.¹⁸ Eleanor Lynch's sons and grandsons appear to have been raised Catholic, since not only did they marry Catholics but two of them converted to Anglicanism under the penal laws in 1704 and 1709.¹⁹

¹¹ G. T. Staunton, *Memoir of the life and family of the late Sir George Leonard Staunton Bart.* (Havant, 1823), p. 2.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 3. See also Hardiman, *History of Galway*, p. 171.

¹³ Staunton, *Memoir of the life and family*, pp 5, 7*–8*, 116–19.

¹⁴ I am grateful to Mark Caball for this insight.

¹⁵ Staunton, *Memoir of the life and family*, p. 143.

¹⁶ Monica Brennan, 'Taking sides: conformity in early modern Kilkenny' in Vincent P. Carey and Ute Lotz-Heumann (eds) *Taking sides? Colonial and confessional mentalités in early modern Ireland* (Dublin, 2003), p. 258.

¹⁷ Patrick Melvin, 'The Galway tribes as landowners and gentry' in Gerard Moran and Raymond Gillespie (eds), *Galway: history and society* (Dublin, 1996), p. 322.

¹⁸ 'Account of the Lynch family and of memorable events of the town of Galway. Written in 1815 by John, son of Alexander, Lynch', ed. M. J. Blake in *Journal of the Galway Arch. And Hist. Society*, viii, no. 2 (1912), pp 86–93; Paul McNulty, 'The genealogy of the Anglo-Norman Lynches who settled in Galway' in *Journal of the Galway Arch. and Hist. Society*, lxii (2010), pp 32–3.

¹⁹ Staunton, *Memoir of the life and family*, p. 59; *The convert rolls*, ed. Eileen O'Byrne (I.M.C., Dublin, 1981), p. 261.

George Staunton II, the couple's younger son, a successful Catholic merchant, married Elizabeth Martin of Tullyra, whose Old English Catholic family were large landowners.²⁰ When he began to invest in land he was caught up in the complexities of the penal laws. This began in the reign of James II, which was a major opportunity for Galway's Catholic elite: John Kirwan (later of Castlehacket) became the town's mayor, under the earl of Clanricarde as governor, with George Staunton II as one of the two sheriffs. Under this new regime, as Hardiman tells us, Catholics flocked back to the city and the Catholic clergy were re-established.²¹ Meanwhile, Staunton and Kirwan were involved in an intricate series of hidden loans, trusts and leases to acquire an estate belonging to Clanricarde at Cargin on the shores of Lough Corrib.²² After the defeat of James II's forces, the Stauntons managed to hold on to their property, despite their involvement in the town's Jacobite government. Clanricarde, however, was captured in the fighting and his property forfeited.²³ It seems likely this was why, in 1701, George Staunton II put both his new Cargin estate and his house on the main street of Galway into a strict marriage settlement for his son, George Staunton III, who was engaged to Anne, the daughter of Nicholas Lynch fitz Ambrose.²⁴ Not only would this preserve the estate from forfeiture, but new penal laws restricting the ability of Catholics to buy or inherit land were already under discussion.

When the 1704 Act to Prevent the Further Growth of Popery passed into law, John Staunton, who had inherited the family's original estate at Waterdale and was the town's member of parliament, immediately registered as an Anglican convert. In 1709, George Staunton III followed him as he took up the position of town sheriff.²⁵ Thus, by the 1720s the Staunton family appeared to have navigated their religious transition successfully and were the most powerful family in the town's Protestant corporation.²⁶ However, the Stauntons' conversions and marriage settlement brought their own risks. Scholars of the penal laws have recently argued both that converts helped their relatives to protect property and that Catholic families were able to pass down estates because family cohesion meant that potential heirs were seldom willing to actually sue their older brothers for a full share of the estate.²⁷ In the Staunton case, the conversion of some of the family's senior men and the marriage of their daughters to Protestants, while other members of the family remained Catholic, sowed division.

This complex background set the stage for George Leonard Staunton's career in the British Empire. He was born in 1737 to George Staunton IV, a colonel in

²⁰ Staunton, *Memoir of the life and family*, p. 59.

²¹ James Kelly, 'The politics of "Protestant ascendancy": County Galway 1650–1832' in Moran and Gillespie (eds) *Galway: history and society*, p. 235; Hardiman, *History of Galway*, pp 151–2, 219.

²² Report of Judge Vandelen, brief no. 1. and deed, 1 May 1688 (N.A.I., 999/241/1/7).

²³ Kelly, 'Politics', p. 237. See also Eoin Kinsella, *Catholic survival in Protestant Ireland 1660–1711: Colonel John Browne, landownership and the Articles of Limerick* (Woodbridge, 2018), pp 39, 137–40.

²⁴ Marriage settlement between George Staunton and Anne Lynch, 26 Apr. 1701 (N.A.I., 999/241/4).

²⁵ O'Byrne, *Convert rolls*, p. 261; Hardiman, *History of Galway*, p. 222.

²⁶ Kelly, 'Politics', p. 244.

²⁷ K. J. Harvey, *The Bellevs of Mount Bellew: a Catholic gentry family in eighteenth-century Ireland* (Dublin, 1998), pp 14–15; Richard Fitzpatrick, 'Catholic inheritance under the penal laws in Ireland' in *I.H.S.*, xlv, no. 166 (Nov. 2020), pp 224–47.

Galway's Protestant militia, and his Catholic wife, Margaret Leonard of Carra, and spent his childhood with two sisters and a younger brother in a small castle at Cargin.²⁸ However, George Staunton III had married one of his daughters, Elisabeth, to Samuel Simcocks of the town's ardently Protestant faction. They agreed a sizable £200 marriage portion for Elisabeth and when Samuel Simcocks did not receive this he gathered Elisabeth's younger siblings and they sued their eldest brother, George Staunton IV, for the money set aside for younger children in the 1701 settlement. The case went to chancery, where, after a thirteen-year legal battle, the younger siblings won not only the original sums but also interest and legal costs. George Staunton IV was bankrupted and the estate was sold on a ninety-nine-year mortgage to Robert French of Monivea.²⁹ The loss of his father's estate, which moved him out of the landed gentry and into the professional classes, shaped the rest of George Leonard Staunton's life.

The Stauntons are treated in histories of Galway, depending on the period, either as Catholics or as members of the Protestant Anglo-Irish Ascendancy, but their identity was more fluid and complex than these labels suggest. George Leonard must have been baptised as a Catholic since at the age of sixteen, his parents sent him to France, where he entered the Irish seminary in Toulouse and then studied at the Jesuit college there. He did well in his exams, learned to speak fluent Latin, as well as French, and 'had I not my eyes wishfully looking back at Ireland, I should be very happy here'.³⁰ Irish Catholic colleges in Europe, where students lived together exiled from their homeland at a formative stage of their lives, were important institutions for forging Irish identity.³¹ Staunton followed the path of other Irish Catholics, who were restricted by the penal laws in their choice of profession, when he went on to study medicine at Montpellier.³² He was excited to tell his parents that he had travelled to Montpellier with George Kelly, an Irish Jacobite who had escaped from the Tower of London.³³ When the English were required to leave the town after the outbreak of war between Britain and France in 1756, he relied for money on Messrs Lynch in Bordeaux, was questioned about his religion, and persuaded the authorities to allow him to remain.³⁴

What information there might once have been on George Leonard's personal beliefs at this time was destroyed when George Thomas Staunton edited his father's letters home from France.³⁵ However, it is abundantly clear from all his later writings that George Leonard had a huge enthusiasm for the natural sciences and philosophy of the Enlightenment. He wrote notes on his son's education in French, and his plan of educating his son himself, keeping him isolated from other children and

²⁸ Staunton, *Memoir of the life and family*, pp 1, 3, 10–11.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, pp 10, 94; Jeremy French to Edw. Blakeney security, 2 Aug. 1783 (N.A.I., 999/241/4A); Hardiman, *History of Galway*, p. 176.

³⁰ Staunton, *Memoir of the life and family*, pp 160, and pp 10, 164.

³¹ Marc Caball, 'Creating an Irish identity: print, culture, and the Irish Franciscans of Louvain' and Ciaran O'Sceá, 'The Spanish court, ecclesiastical patronage, and the Irish College of Santiago de Compostela (1611–17)' in Liam Chambers and Thomas O'Connor (eds), *Forming Catholic communities: Irish, Scots, and English college networks in Europe, 1568–1918* (Leiden, 2017), pp 143–68, 232–58.

³² Staunton, *Memoir of the life and family*, p. 169.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 165; Éamonn Ó Ciardha, 'Kelly, George (c.1680–1762)', *D.I.B.*, v, 74–5.

³⁴ Staunton, *Memoir of the life and family*, pp 174–6.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, pp 159–77.

having him learn by experience and observation, suggest that he was influenced by Rousseau's *Émile*, a text that also scandalised contemporaries for putting forward a claim to the validity of all religions.³⁶ Moreover, as was the case for many of his French peers, these ideas developed into support for the 1789 French Revolution that attacked the church and briefly made deism a state religion. Study in France in the 1750s clearly had the potential to undermine loyalty to the Catholic Church in philosophical terms. Alexander Lock has recently argued that English Catholicism became more liberal in this period partly due to the influence of the Enlightenment and scientific rationalism on the English Catholic schools in France, and that this set the stage for politically motivated apostasy in some of their pupils.³⁷ There is no evidence that Staunton ever formally converted to Anglicanism, but his continental education may actually explain his later willingness to conform, even as it confirmed his identity as a member of the Irish Catholic diaspora.

George Leonard Staunton's religious affiliation — social, political and personal — was clearly complex. Given that his father was part of Galway's Protestant elite, it is not impossible that this began in his infancy and that George Leonard was baptised Anglican as well as Catholic (though this was not usual practice in Ireland). Such multiple religious identities can be interpreted as changes through time — in other words, as conversions — and such an interpretation would certainly have been necessary to any clergy involved. For subsequent generations there has often been a desire to understand this process of conversion by seeing one set of beliefs as private and genuine in contrast to public declarations made in conformity to political or social pressure. However, these pressures could work both ways. Social pressure towards Catholicism within the Galway merchant community, to which the Stauntons had originally been English outsiders, was clearly intense even as the penal laws pushed wealthy heads of household towards Protestantism. George Staunton IV was one of the signatories to a petition claiming that Catholics were excluding Protestants from branches of the town's trade, after which it was said that many of the signatories converted to Catholicism.³⁸ So, we cannot assume that George Leonard's Catholicism was genuine and authentic and his Anglicanism merely a public performance. Perhaps the limit of what we can conclude with certainty is that he had strong Irish Catholic affiliations, both religious and political, but that his personal beliefs were not Catholic when he met Li Zibiao. It is also clear that by avoiding the subject of religion and emphasising the family's English origins, both George Leonard and his son were later able to operate comfortably in the British Empire.

II

George Leonard Staunton's combination of Irish Catholic and English Protestant identities shaped his career in the expanding British Empire. His Catholic origins

³⁶ *Ibid.*, pp 316–18; Staunton, *Memoirs of the chief incidents*, pp 3–7, 18–19.

³⁷ Alexander Lock, *Catholicism, identity and politics in the age of enlightenment: the life and career of Sir Thomas Gascoigne, 1745–1810* (Woodbridge, 2016), pp 18, 142. See also W. E. H. Lecky, *A history of Ireland in the eighteenth century* (5 vols, Cambridge, 1892) ii, 200–02.

³⁸ Hardiman, *History of Galway*, pp 183–4, note a.

meant that he began his working life as a physician, but his ambition to restore the family fortunes drove him rapidly towards more profitable posts in colonial government, for which it was necessary for him to claim a British Protestant identity. However, even as he did so, he repeatedly used the social capital he could leverage from his Irish Catholic connections to give himself a competitive edge and to power his career from the West Indies, India and eventually to China.

Having completed his studies, Staunton tried first to find work in London, but when that failed, he set off for the West Indies.³⁹ The opportunities provided by Galway connections almost certainly drove this decision. Galway merchants had been trading and settling in the West Indies since the early seventeenth century and the Lynch family were among the earliest and most successful.⁴⁰ Staunton, arriving in 1762, was part of a second wave of immigrants for whom opportunities opened up in the aftermath of the Seven Years War when Britain took the islands of Grenada, Dominica, Tobago and St Vincent from France.⁴¹ Pressure from the penal laws was encouraging wealthy Galway families to invest overseas at a time when sugar plantations were making the West Indies one of the most profitable opportunities available. As recent scholars have shown, the Caribbean was also an environment where Irish religious identities were often blurred and fluid, allowing Catholics, as well as Protestants, to prosper.⁴² The practice of medicine, which required almost no capital and was open to Catholics, was precisely the kind of high-risk, high-return venture through which, as Mackillop argues, Irish emigrants could enter imperial spaces.⁴³ The mortality rates from infectious tropical diseases meant that medical expertise was much needed, but also that the profession was so risky that Staunton chose to cut off all contact with his parents for several years.⁴⁴

As soon as he could, Staunton moved from medicine into the islands' government, a transition which required him to leverage his Irish Catholic heritage but also made the need for concealment obvious. He had initially settled in Dominica, where he found work as the governor's private secretary. By 1767, he felt secure enough to travel back to London and Ireland and was able to obtain a position as secretary to Ulysses Fitzmaurice, the newly-appointed governor of Grenada, whose cousin had been a leading member of the Irish community in

³⁹ Staunton, *Memoir of the life and family*, pp 12–15.

⁴⁰ McNulty, 'Genealogy', p. 32.

⁴¹ Harvey, *Bellevs of Mount Bellew*, p. 117.

⁴² Walsh, 'Blakes of Ballyglunin', pp 169–70; Kristen Block and Jenny Shaw, 'Subjects without an empire: the Irish in the early modern Caribbean' in *Past & Present*, cxc (2011), pp 33–60; J. J. Wright (ed.), *An Ulster slave-owner in the revolutionary Atlantic: the life and letters of John Black* (Dublin, 2019), p. 31; Ciaran O'Neill and Finola O'Kane (eds), *Ireland, slavery and the Caribbean: interdisciplinary perspectives* (Manchester, 2023).

⁴³ Andrew MacKillop, *Human capital and empire: Scotland, Ireland, Wales and British imperialism in Asia, c.1690–c.1820* (Manchester, 2021), p. 17. See also Jennifer McLaren, 'An Irish surgeon in Barbados and Demerara: vexation, misery and opportunity' in D. S. Roberts and J. J. Wright (eds), *Ireland's imperial connections, 1775–1947* (Basingstoke, 2019), pp 251–72; Marc Caball, 'Transforming tradition in the British Atlantic: Patrick Browne (c.1720–90), an Irish botanist and physician in the West Indies' in John Cunningham (ed.), *Early modern Ireland and the world of medicine: practitioners, collectors and contexts* (Manchester, 2019), pp 211–31.

⁴⁴ G. L. Staunton to parents, 5 Dec. 1767 (B.L., Sir George Leonard Staunton papers, 1753–1804).

Montpellier.⁴⁵ This was at the height of the transatlantic slave trade when a tiny minority of white men were sitting atop a system that controlled tens of thousands of enslaved Africans, and there had been terrifying recent slave rebellions in Jamaica and in Guyana on the south American mainland. In Grenada, most of the white population consisted of French Catholic settlers who were refusing to accept their disenfranchisement as Catholics under the Protestant British state. Fitzmaurice was being sent out by the British state to conciliate them and the French-speaking, Catholic-educated Staunton was a useful mediator. The British settlers attacked him in the London press as ‘jesuitical’ and accused him of having been selected ‘by the united interest of French and Irish Roman Catholic subjects’.⁴⁶ These disputes, fought out over the creation of a unified white European identity, had real implications for Ireland: if the French could be exempted from the Test Act in Grenada for political expediency, then why not Irish Catholics? For Staunton, the personal attacks included claims that he had been educated at St Omer, a common calumny but one which in his case was all too nearly true.⁴⁷ The fragility of his position was evident, and this is likely to have been one of the reasons why, when he travelled to England in 1771, he married Jane, the daughter of Benjamin Collins, a Salisbury banker and newspaper publisher, presumably in an Anglican religious service. His English wife would make it much harder for his opponents to attack him as a Catholic. He did not tell his parents what he had done until after the event.⁴⁸

Marriage to an English woman was also a means of accessing English funds. By this time, Staunton had already purchased two estates on the island and slaves to work them.⁴⁹ Collins lent him £4,000 in an interest-paying mortgage on one of these estates.⁵⁰ Staunton also arranged to buy an estate for a cousin, Thomas Staunton, now living in England.⁵¹ Such deals made West Indies investments available to those who chose not to make the dangerous journey themselves. These activities were profitable: over time Staunton sent nearly £700 to his father in Galway, as well as providing £100 for his sister Margaret to buy a house.⁵² Later, his sisters decided to join him in Grenada where they both married Galway men, which suggests the tight Galway circles in which he was moving. Lucy married Richard W. Cormick, a successful planter, while Margaret married Richard Blake, from a Galway family whose investments in the West Indies dated back to the seventeenth century.⁵³

⁴⁵ Staunton, *Memoir of the life and family*, pp 15, 167, 207.

⁴⁶ *Public Advertiser*, 12 Sept. 1772, 24 Jan. 1770.

⁴⁷ Aaron Willis, ‘The standing of new subjects: Grenada and the Protestant constitution after the Treaty of Paris (1763)’ in *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth Hist.*, xlii, no. 1 (2014), p. 12.

⁴⁸ Staunton, *Memoir of the life and family*, pp 17, 209–10.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, pp 212–13; William Collins to Staunton release and surrender, 27 Jan. 1778 (N.A.I., 999/242/2/3).

⁵⁰ Jane Staunton’s marriage portion, 23 July 1771 (B.L., Sir George Leonard Staunton papers).

⁵¹ G. L. Staunton to sister, 20 Apr. 1768 (B.L., Sir George Leonard Staunton papers).

⁵² Brief no. 1 copy deed, 27 Dec. 1789 (N.A.I., 241/1/7 1780); G. L. Staunton to sister, 20 Apr., 26 July 1768 (B.L., Sir George Leonard Staunton papers).

⁵³ Staunton, *Memoir of the life and family*, pp 57–9, 211; Walsh, ‘Blakes of Ballyglunin’, pp 176–8.

Staunton's activities in Grenada also introduced him to another Irishman, George Macartney, whose patronage would take him from Britain's Atlantic empire into Asia and the orbit of the East India Company. Macartney, who came from an Ulster Scots background and had risen in the world through the patronage of Lord Holland, arrived in Grenada in 1774 to replace Fitzmaurice. He and Staunton soon developed a 'confidential intimacy and friendship'.⁵⁴ When, in 1779, Grenada was recaptured by the French, they suffered a shared disaster, though Staunton's Irish background also suggested solutions: 'Some of my lands were given to Frenchmen under perilous pretences.'⁵⁵ They were sent to France as hostages, where Staunton was also able to negotiate Macartney's exchange for a French prisoner, thus freeing him to seek a new position.⁵⁶

The post that Macartney succeeded in winning was as governor of Madras, and he took Staunton with him as his secretary and assistant. Irish networks were significant in helping him get the post, in those who rose under his patronage, and in the political alliances that were forged.⁵⁷ Edmund Burke set the stage for Macartney's appointment with his calls for the British government to send an outsider to deal with East India Company corruption in Madras.⁵⁸ However, the position did not turn out to be an easy one. When Macartney arrived, he found himself responsible for provisioning a war against the expanding south Indian state of Mysore which was allied with the French. The war ended with the surrender of the besieged British garrison at Mangalore, and the final treaty, which Macartney sent Staunton across India to negotiate, was widely criticised.⁵⁹ This led to links between Staunton and Burke who shared a similar Irish background.⁶⁰ They corresponded in India, after Staunton's return he and his wife went to stay with Burke in Beaconsfield, and Burke later dined with the Stauntons, where he met the Chinese priests.⁶¹

Staunton was not unusual in these circles in combining involvement in politics hostile to the expansion of empire with profit from those same processes. The East India Company had provided a generous salary and, on his return from India, he received a pension of £500 per annum, as well as a baronetcy.⁶² It appears that he also made money from the ongoing extortion of Indian rulers. George Thomas later received £3,744 from the Raja of Tanjore, in payment of a debt to

⁵⁴ Staunton, *Memoir of the life and family*, p. 19.

⁵⁵ G. L. Staunton to parents, 5 Feb. 1780 (B.L., Sir George Leonard Staunton papers).

⁵⁶ Staunton, *Memoir of the life and family*, pp 30–31.

⁵⁷ L. S. Sutherland, 'Lord Macartney's appointment as governor of Madras, 1780: the Treasury in East India Company elections' in *Eng. Hist. Rev.*, xc, no. 356 (1975), pp 523–35; MacKillop, *Human capital and empire*, pp 71–2; Crossbie, *Irish imperial networks*, pp 53–4.

⁵⁸ John Barrow, *Some account of the public life and a selection from the unpublished writings of the earl of Macartney* (2 vols, London, 1807), i, 72–3.

⁵⁹ *The private correspondence of Lord Macartney governor of Madras (1781–85)*, ed. C. Collin Davies (London, 1950).

⁶⁰ Conor Cruise O'Brien, *The great melody: a thematic biography and commented anthology of Edmund Burke* (London, 1992), chapter 1.

⁶¹ Edmund Burke, *The works and correspondence of the Right Honourable Edmund Burke* (8 vols, London, 1852), i, 518; Staunton, *Memoir of the life and family*, pp 263, 301–05; Fanny Burney, *The journals and letters of Fanny Burney*, ed. Joyce Hemlow et al. (Oxford, 1972), i, 195.

⁶² Barrow, *Some account of the public life*, i, 335.

George Leonard. Moreover, George Thomas's London bank account records that he received regular interest payments on a claim on the Nawab of Arcot which in 1815 was worth £8,107.⁶³ These private loans at nominal rates of 20 to 36 per cent per annum, were part of the interconnected webs of finance that, as Jessica Hanser has argued, drove British imperial expansion in Asia, as well as being one of the most famous scandals of East India Company corruption.⁶⁴ It is possible that George Thomas bought up the Arcot debts when he was in China many years later but just as likely that George Leonard acquired them in Madras.

A significant proportion of these profits went into Galway, where, on his return from India in 1785, George Leonard bought back the mortgage on the Cargin estate. He also invested in planting a hundred-acre wood which his son later anticipated would bring in £30 per annum, as well as £10,000 from the ultimate value of the timber. Then in 1793, before he set off on the risky voyage to China, as well as investing a large sum in United States 6 per cent stock (worth \$63,312 in 1800), he made a significant purchase of land to expand the Cargin estate.⁶⁵ At some point, he also started paying for a Catholic priest for his tenants.⁶⁶

George Leonard's ongoing commitment to Galway can also be seen in his arrangements for his son. Two children had died in the West Indies, and Jane Staunton was pregnant when her husband left for India. She was staying with her parents in Salisbury, but George Leonard decided that his mother must bring up her grandchild, so the infant George Thomas was sent off to Galway.⁶⁷ George Leonard also asked his mother to ensure that the boy was taught to 'spake, read and write the Irish language'.⁶⁸ This enthusiasm for Irish was not uncommon: even the Ulster Scots Macartney sponsored an Irish bard.⁶⁹ It also cannot have proceeded very far as George Thomas was sent back to England when he was four years old. However, George Leonard had grown up in a small tower house in an entirely Irish-speaking area, and it does seem probable that he wanted to hand the language on to his son as part of his family's identity.⁷⁰

Despite the Stauntons' English origins, and George Leonard's marriage to an English woman and move into a British imperial world, he remained committed to Galway. His Irish identity functioned for him in this new context as a network

⁶³ G. T. Staunton to Jane Staunton, 14 Dec. 1814 (Duke University Library (hereafter cited as D.U.L.), George Thomas Staunton papers); George Thomas Staunton account, ledgers S, June 1811–June 1816 (Coumts Bank Archive).

⁶⁴ Jessica Hanser, 'From cross-cultural credit to colonial debt: British expansion in Madras and Canton, 1750–1800' in *Amer. Hist. Rev.*, cxxiv, no.1 (2019), pp 87–107.

⁶⁵ George Leonard Staunton Will, 1800 (B.L., Sir George Leonard Staunton papers); Staunton, *Memoir of the life and family*, p. 10; Arthur Piggott to G. L. Staunton, 23 Sept. 1792 (B.L., Sir George Leonard Staunton papers); G. T. Staunton to Jane Staunton, 22 Sept. 1802 (ibid.); G. L. Staunton to Arthur Piggott, 16 Dec. 1792 (D.U.L., George Thomas Staunton papers).

⁶⁶ Staunton, *Memoir of the life and family*, p. 355.

⁶⁷ Staunton, *Memoirs of the chief incidents*, p. 2; Jane Staunton to Margaret Staunton, 6 Sept. 1781, Margaret Staunton to Jane Staunton, 28 July 1782 (D.U.L., George Thomas Staunton papers).

⁶⁸ Margaret Staunton to Jane Staunton, 5 Apr. 1784 (D.U.L. George Thomas Staunton Papers).

⁶⁹ 'O Gorman's Irish verses to the Rt. Hon. Sir George Macartney Kt.' (Bodl., Eng Misc b 162).

⁷⁰ M. H. Carroll, 'Of beauty rarest': a history of Clydagh National School, Headford, Co. Galway. (Galway, 2002), pp 129–53.

which provided job opportunities and political links. Macartney, Burke and Staunton were joined by their politics as Foxite Whigs, but these national and political layers of identity intersected. More unusually, in a world of competing imperialisms, Staunton's French Catholic socialisation provided him with valuable connections in Grenada and Paris and would go on to be an important part of his contribution to the embassy to China.

The new embassy to China aimed not just to increase the profits from the tea trade by obtaining an island off the coast and a resident at the Chinese court and expanding British exports to China, but also to bring a new generation of knowledge about China to Europe. Irish links played a significant role in both respects. Much of the enthusiasm that made the embassy such a celebrated event came from Staunton. He had applied unsuccessfully a few years earlier to lead an embassy to China himself, and the rank of minister plenipotentiary would put him in position to take over if Macartney returned to England.⁷¹ Staunton was hardly likely to mention his French Jesuit education in regard to this, but it is surely relevant. And although Macartney claimed that he would select staff on ability, he took with him many of his own Irish connections, not only Staunton and his small son but also three young cousins (Edmund Winder, John Crewe and George Benson), as well as Thomas Hickey, a London Irish portrait painter, who went as the embassy's artist.⁷² A Latin poem that Macartney composed on the voyage begins 'Erin gave birth to us'.⁷³ The East India Company sent large quantities of English woollens as gifts, but the textiles that Macartney actually took with him to present to the emperor in person were Irish tabbinets.⁷⁴

Irish Catholic links were valuable because Catholic institutions were still the main reservoir of European knowledge of China and almost the sole resource for learning the Chinese language.⁷⁵ Moreover, revolution in France had made possible a rapprochement between Britain and the papacy, opening an opportunity which Staunton and Macartney were quick to grasp. One of the embassy's most obvious needs was to find Chinese interpreters who were not aligned to the Portuguese in Macao, so Staunton travelled to Paris, where he was eager to see the ongoing revolution, and then on to Naples, where there was a college that trained Chinese for the priesthood.⁷⁶ There, he obtained two of the students, Li Zibiao and Ke Zongxiao, to

⁷¹ G. L. Staunton to John Menzies, 10 Apr. 1788 (B.L., Sir George Leonard Staunton papers); *An embassy to China: Being the journal kept by Lord Macartney during his embassy to the Emperor Ch'ien-lung 1793–1794*, ed. J. L. Cranmer-Byng (London, 1962), p. 123.

⁷² Crosbie, *Irish imperial networks*, p. 53; John Barrow, *An auto-biographical memoir of Sir John Barrow, Bart., late of the Admiralty* (London, 1847), pp 49, 51; Documents relating to the pedigree of the Winder family (N.L.I. MS 8799(3)); Burney, *Journals and letters*, i, 207; John Ingamells, 'Hickey, Thomas (1741–1824)', *O.D.N.B.*, xxvii, 15–16.

⁷³ 'Erin nos genuit' (Barrow, *Some account of the public life*, i, title page).

⁷⁴ Aeneas Anderson, *An accurate account of Lord Macartney's embassy to China* (London, 1797), p. 79; E. H. Pritchard, 'The instructions of the East India Company to Lord Macartney on his embassy to China and his reports to the Company 1792–4' in *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Brit. and Ire.*, lxx, nos. 2–4 (1938), pp 210, 221–2.

⁷⁵ For late Enlightenment European knowledge of China, see Nicolas Standaert, *The intercultural weaving of historical texts: Chinese and European stories about the Emperor Ko and his concubines* (Leiden, 2016); Alexander Statman, *A global Enlightenment: western progress and Chinese science* (Chicago, 2023).

⁷⁶ G. L. Staunton, *An authentic account of an embassy from the king of Great Britain to the emperor of China* (2 vols, London, 1797), i, pp 40–41.

instruct the embassy in the customs and language of China. He offered the voyages for free and promised that they could leave the embassy at Macao.⁷⁷

On his return, Staunton stopped in Rome, hoping to get approval for Li and Ke's participation, but also broader support. His opportunity came when Li and Ke ran into Cardinal Stefano Borgia, an enthusiastic patron of their college, who arranged for them to meet Pope Pius VI. Staunton followed up by approaching Cardinal Antonelli and Monsignor Zondadari Secretary of the Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith, who

treated him not only as an eminent person but also as a great benefactor of the missions to such an extent that after a gift of Chinese ink the Cardinal also took a Chinese-Latin dictionary from the library of the Congregation and quite unexpectedly gave it to him. And the Secretary ... also came to see this English man and commends him in a letter to the bishops residing in China that they should help him as much as they can and promote his embassy and business.⁷⁸

Li, who wrote this, was clearly surprised at such support for the Protestant British, but presumably Staunton had addressed himself to Antonelli because, a year earlier after the flight of Louis XVI from Paris, the cardinal had told Irish archbishops that they had a duty to obey the English king.⁷⁹ Moreover, the Congregation had longstanding tensions with the Portuguese over the agreement which gave control over the missions in China to the king of Portugal. Staunton was clearly able to present the embassy successfully as an event that would work for the advantage of the papacy: the Chinese dictionary the cardinal presented was a valuable gift. There were no published European dictionaries for Chinese at this time and this massive five-volume manuscript introducing the spoken language of Beijing was the life's work of a recently deceased Carmelite missionary.⁸⁰ Moreover, Antonelli wrote to Naples to approve the arrangements and convey the satisfaction of the pope 'if the King of England has really been asked to take under his protection all our Chinese missionaries'.⁸¹

Li's correspondence also suggests that Staunton was operating effectively to win his and Ke's support too. Apparently, he discussed European politics with them from an Irish Catholic perspective, since Li wrote to Naples that the French

⁷⁷ Francesco Massei to Antonelli, 17 Mar. 1792 (Archivio Storico di Propaganda Fide (hereafter cited as A.P.F.), Collegi vari 12:131).

⁷⁸ 'Qui eum non modo magni habent, sed etiam pro magno benefactore missionis colunt, adeo ut Cardinalis, postquam ei donaverat atramentum Sinicum, ex bibliotheca Propag. extraxerit dictionarium Sinico-Latinum ei donandum praeter omnium opinionem, et ipse secretarius ... ad istum Anglum venit etiam, eumque per litteras Episcopis in Sinis degentibus commendat, ut quantum ipsorum est, ejus legationi et negotio faveant' (Raccolta di lettere degli alunni Cinesi dalla Cina 1753–1883, Archivio della Curia Generalizia dell'Ordine dei Fratelli Minori (hereafter cited as A.C.G.O.F.M.), Missioni 53, p. 138).

⁷⁹ Matthias Buschkühl, *Great Britain and the Holy See, 1746–1870* (Dublin, 1982), pp 25–6.

⁸⁰ Eugenio Menegon, 'Empire of paper: a shady dealer, an insatiable linguist, an industrious missionary, and the extraordinary journey of a manuscript vocabulary between Beijing and Rome, 1760s–1820s' in Michela Bussotti and François Lachaud (eds), *Mastering languages, taming the world: the production and circulation of European dictionaries and lexicons of Asian languages (16th–19th centuries)* (Paris, 2023), pp 317–50.

⁸¹ 'si è validamente pregato il Re d'Inghilterra di prendere sotto la sua protezione tutti [nostr]i Missionari della Cina' (Antonelli to Massei, 3 May 1792, A.I.O.N. 5.2).

Revolution had intimidated the English parliament into ‘making many concessions to the Catholic people in Ireland, who were seeking their rights which for many centuries have been prohibited to them on pain of death’.⁸² In London and on the voyage to China, Staunton also arranged for Ke to teach George Thomas Chinese.⁸³ After his return from India, George Leonard had decided to bring the boy up speaking Latin rather than Irish. He not only spoke to Latin to his son himself, but employed a Latin-speaking Irish servant who had originally been trained for the Catholic priesthood.⁸⁴ As a result, eleven-year-old George Thomas was fluent enough to communicate with Li and Ke, who did not speak English. It was the year of Chinese lessons he received from a Catholic priest using the language of the church that laid the foundation for his later career as a Chinese translator.

During the long voyage to China, it appears that Staunton and Macartney continued to emphasise to Li that the embassy would work for the benefit of the Catholic Church. Li wrote back to Naples from Batavia that Macartney ‘solemnly promised he would act as a Papal legate, insofar as he was able, whilst employing all prudence and perseverance before the emperor in such a way as to promote the spread of our Catholic religion and our mission in our idolatrous region’.⁸⁵ (Whether the Ulster Scot Macartney made this promise himself or whether perhaps Li was told by Staunton that he had done so is impossible to know). In Macao, the first port they called at on the China coast, Staunton met with Giambattista Marchini, procurator of the Catholic missions in China, presented the letters of introduction he had received from the cardinals in Rome and asked for letters of introduction to the missionaries in Beijing. Marchini was impressed, sending letters to two of the missionaries in Beijing and providing a servant to interpret. Staunton, in return, agreed to take Robert Hanna, an Irish Jesuit who wished to go as a mathematician to the court, with the embassy.⁸⁶

All this undoubtedly carried some risks for Macartney and Staunton. Hanna was turned back by Qing officials, but that was a minor issue. The members of the embassy were welcomed and taken to Beijing and then a group, from which Macartney carefully excluded most of the English members of his staff, travelled out beyond the Great Wall for an audience with the Qianlong emperor. Afterwards, the British were told that they must return to their country and were given a formal letter in which the emperor refused their requests.⁸⁷ When this letter was explained to Macartney, he found that the last item was one the British had not asked for: toleration for the Catholic Church. This had been privately added by Li, apparently without Macartney’s knowledge.⁸⁸ Macartney had to explain the situation to London, claiming implausibly that the statement referred to the Anglican religion, and saying

⁸² ‘multa concessit populo catholico iura sua petenti in Hibernia, quae per plura saecula sub poena capitis illis prohibita erant’ (A.C.G.O.F.M., *Missioni* 53, p. 145).

⁸³ A.C.G.O.F.M., *Missioni* 53, p. 150; *Diary*, 13 Jan. 1793 (D.U.L., George Thomas Staunton papers).

⁸⁴ Trial of Leonard Wilson, June 1789, available at Old Bailey Proceedings Online (<https://www.oldbaileyonline.org/record/t17890603-2>) (5 Mar. 2024).

⁸⁵ ‘veraciter promittebat ita gesserum ut legatum Papalem pro virili, adhibita tamen summa prudentia ac perseverentia coram Imperatore emolumentum Catholicae nostrae Religionis propaganda ac Missionis in nostra regione idolatra’: Ly, 16 May 1793 (A.I.O.N., 42/2/8).

⁸⁶ Giambattista Marchini, 3 Nov. 1793 (A.P.F., S.O.C.P., vol. 68, pp 485–60).

⁸⁷ George Macartney, *An Embassy to China; being the journal kept by Lord Macartney during his embassy to the emperor Ch’ien-lung 1793–1794* (London, 1962), pp 122–69.

⁸⁸ Giacomo Ly, 20 Feb. 1794 (A.P.F., S.O.C.P., vol. 68, p. 613).

that he had explained to the Chinese that the British held ‘men of morality in all religions in equal estimation’.⁸⁹ He told Li that he was puzzled ‘why zeal for the Anglican religion had been ascribed to him, to which he gave no more preference in faith than to the Catholic’.⁹⁰ He wrote an inscription for his Lissanoure estate that read ‘Religion is a matter only between Man and God – In this world all men are brothers’, but this was scarcely the position of the British state.⁹¹

Nevertheless, back in Macao Macartney and Staunton continued to conciliate the Catholic missionaries as part of their plans for the future expansion of British influence in China. Macartney dined repeatedly with Marchini, while Staunton provided a large interest-free loan and agreed to take two new Chinese students to Europe. Marchini wrote that Staunton was ‘a most honourable knight, and very affectionate to both Catholics and the missions’, believing he might be able to serve the mission if he returned to China.⁹² The connection also enabled Staunton to contract the services of a Chinese boy to return to England with them so that George Thomas could continue to practice his Chinese.⁹³ Meanwhile Hanna, now also back in Macao, was quietly passing on copies of internal missionary analysis of the embassy to Staunton.⁹⁴ George Leonard’s Catholic background had projected him into Asia; with the Macartney embassy, his Catholic socialisation was mobilised for the benefit of the British Empire.

III

George Thomas Staunton lived most of his life between England and China with only occasional trips to Ireland. However, his career as an East India Company interpreter, translator and merchant was set up by his father and continued to rely on his father’s Irish Catholic links even as he wrote them out of his family history. Moreover, his great translation of the Chinese legal code drew on an interest in law that was nurtured and shaped by his Irish father’s Catholic connections in the London Inns of Court. The influence of this Irish heritage was obvious not only in his attitudes to religion and his politics, but also in his friendships, patronage networks and finances, and ultimately brought his money back to Galway. His story fits with arguments that Irish identity could still be important to second-generation migrants, even when they were Protestants living in England.⁹⁵

George Leonard suffered from a stroke shortly after his return from China, meaning that any hope of his own return to China had to be abandoned, but this did not limit his ambitions for his son. He wrote the *Authentic account of an embassy from the king of Great Britain to the emperor of China*, which is often seen as the start of a new British vision of China, at least partly with the intent of promoting George

⁸⁹ Giacomo Ly, 20 Feb. 1794 (A.I.O.N., 27/10/9); Macartney to Dundas, 9 Nov. 1793 (B.L., IOR/G/12/92, p. 102).

⁹⁰ ‘cur zelus anglicanae Religionis sibi adscriptus fuisset, cui non plus fidei praestat, quam catholicae’: Giacomo Ly, 20 Feb. 1794 (A.P.F., S.O.C.P., vol. 68, p. 614).

⁹¹ Macartney’s commonplace book (Bodl., Eng misc f. 533), p. 6.

⁹² ‘Un Cavaliere pieno di onore, ed assai affezionato ai Cattolici, ed alle Missioni’: Marchini, 2 Mar. 1794 (A.P.F., S.O.C.P., vol. 68, p. 635).

⁹³ G. T. Staunton to G. L. Staunton, 27 Mar. 1800 (D.U.L., George Thomas Staunton papers).

⁹⁴ Robert Hannah to G. L. Staunton, 1, 3 Mar. 1794 (Cornell University Library, Original Manuscripts, papers and letters relating to Macartney’s Mission to China, 1792–4).

⁹⁵ See Bailey, *Irish London*, p. 124.

Thomas and finding him employment. The book was a great success, quickly running into multiple editions. By emphasising George Thomas' unique Chinese language skills, George Leonard succeeded in compelling the directors of the East India Company, to give him a post they usually reserved for their own sons and nephews in the company's factory in China.⁹⁶

When George Thomas Staunton returned to China in 1799, it was to Marchini and Claude Letondal, the Catholic missionaries with whom his father had made contacts in Macao, that he turned for help improving his Chinese. The trade was seasonal and over the summer Letondal arranged daily lessons from a Chinese Catholic called Michael Ko in the missionaries' house.⁹⁷ George Thomas also corresponded with Li Zibiao, now a missionary in the interior, wrote to his father of plans to 'cultivate ... the good disposition of the missionaries already at Peking or that of their agents at Canton and Macao', and for many years arranged the journeys of further Chinese students to Naples free of cost.⁹⁸

Irish Catholic links also influenced George Thomas Staunton's great translation of the Qing legal code: *Ta Tsing Leu Lee being the fundamental laws and a selection of the supplementary statutes of the penal code of China*.⁹⁹ This was published in 1810 and was the first book to be directly translated from Chinese into English. It made Staunton's name, was soon translated into other European languages, and was a crucial text in shaping Western understandings of Chinese law.¹⁰⁰ Looked at today, the translation is a strikingly sympathetic rendering of Chinese law. Staunton argues in his introduction that the Chinese have 'some very considerable and positive moral and political advantages' which include the sacred regard paid to the ties of kindred, the absence of feudal rights and privileges, equitable distribution of land, and a disinclination to indulge in ambitious projects and foreign conquests.¹⁰¹ Recent scholarship has emphasised his interest in topics relevant to the expansion of British power in China and how, by removing the lengthy sub-statutes, he presented Chinese law as an unchanging code, contributing to images of China as an unchanging society that were later used to justify British military intervention.¹⁰²

What has not been noticed is that Staunton's work grew out of London legal circles around Charles Butler, an English Catholic, an eminent conveyancing lawyer, and an outspoken activist for the repeal of the penal laws in Ireland. Not only was Butler a lifelong friend of George Leonard Staunton, but George Thomas's maternal cousin and close friend Peter Bellinger Brodie lived with him when he was

⁹⁶ Staunton, *Authentic account of an embassy*; Staunton, *Memoirs of the chief incidents*, p. 17.

⁹⁷ G. T. Staunton to G. L. Staunton, 27 June, 9 Aug. 1800 (D.U.L., George Thomas Staunton papers).

⁹⁸ G. T. Staunton to G. L. Staunton, 26 Feb. 1801 (D.U.L., George Thomas Staunton papers). See also Ly to Macartney, 25 Feb. 1801 (P.R.O.N.I., D572/7/77); G. T. Staunton to Richard Hall, 3 Jan. 1802 (B.L., IOR/G/12/136), pp 209–10; Naples College to G. T. Staunton, 23 June 1816 (A.I.O.N., 1/2).

⁹⁹ G. T. Staunton, *Ta Tsing Leu Lee; being the fundamental laws and a selection from the supplementary statutes of the penal code of China* (London, 1810).

¹⁰⁰ Guido Abbattista (ed.), *Law, justice and codification in Qing China: European and Chinese perspectives* (Trieste, 2017).

¹⁰¹ Staunton, *Ta Tsing Leu Lee*, p. xi. See also James St. André, "'But do they have a notion of justice?'" Staunton's 1810 translation of the Great Qing Code' in *The Translator*, x, no.1 (2004), pp 1–31.

¹⁰² Chen, *Chinese law*, pp 99–111.

training for the law. Butler was a warm host to the Brodie brothers and their friends when George Thomas came back to London after his father's death in 1801.¹⁰³ He was also compiling notes for a comparative history of legal codes.¹⁰⁴ Thus, the social and legal context in which George Thomas was thinking about how to translate the full Chinese code which he had recently obtained was influenced not only by East India Company interests and general British attitudes to China but also by concerns over the penal laws and Irish Catholic property rights.

If one looks at the *Ta Tsing Leu Lee* bearing this context in mind, one sees not only a defence of the Jesuit missions but also specifically Irish interests in property law.¹⁰⁵ Staunton's translation did in fact include some of the sub-statutes in a series of appendices. In addition to those relevant for the East India Company trade (usury, embezzlement, robbery and homicide) and for missionaries (rebellious groups and seditious books), the third main theme of these was land tenure, inheritance and mortgages, topics that were not obviously relevant to Europeans in China in this period. Moreover, within these broad topics, Staunton again selected the sub-statutes he chose to translate, though he does not inform the reader of this. In a section whose heading he translates as 'Law of mortgages' (a recent translation of the text gives 'Fields and Houses') he accommodates the wording to British legal ideas (Chinese words that might simply be translated 'fields and houses, gardens and woodlands, mills and suchlike' became 'any lands or tenements').¹⁰⁶ In the appendix, he translated four of the ten sub-statutes, those dealing with challenges to existing land tenure arrangements including rulings that no mortgage can be reversed after it has been signed by all involved and accepted for five years, and no land deed can be reversed after it has been accepted for thirty years, an institutional structure that would clearly have had significant impact in Ireland. The sub-statutes he omitted concern land holding by the Qing military, a topic quite equally important to understanding the Chinese state but evidently of less interest to Staunton. It seems likely that he was choosing and presenting material in such a way that it could be part of a legal critique of the problem of insecure land tenure in Ireland from which his father had suffered.

By 1817, when he left China permanently, George Thomas Staunton had a safe fortune of £128,500 invested in government stock, in addition to the Irish land and US stock he inherited from his father.¹⁰⁷ He made this fortune initially by exporting silver to China to loan out at interest and exploiting the differential in interest rates between England and China. These loans were especially valuable because, in order to prevent interference by the East India Company backed up by the British navy, the Qing government insisted on the Chinese merchants guaranteeing each other's debts. They were, as a result both profitable and safe, and Staunton received large sums from investors in England and India in exchange for a cut

¹⁰³ Benjamin Brodie, *The works of Sir Benjamin Collins Brodie* (3 vols, London, 1865), i, 23; Staunton, *Memoir of the life and family*, pp iii–iv.

¹⁰⁴ Charles Butler, *Horae juridicae subsecivae* (Philadelphia, 1808), pp vii–viii.

¹⁰⁵ For Jesuits, see Staunton, *Ta Tsing Leu Lee*, p. iii.

¹⁰⁶ 'tianzhai, yuanlin, zhanmo deng wu': *Da Qing lili tongkao jiaozhu* [Annotated edition of the Great Qing Code], eds. Ma Jianshi, Yang Yutang (Beijing, 1992), p. 435; Staunton, *Ta Tsing Leu Lee*, p. 529; *The Great Qing Code*, trans. W. C. Jones (Oxford, 1994).

¹⁰⁷ G. T. Staunton account, ledgers S, June 1816–June 1817 (Coutts & Co Bank Archive, London). From 1809, he kept significant sums in his mother's name, so this includes £112,357 in his own name, £8,990 jointly held with Jane and £7,153 in Jane's name alone.

on the profits. Thus, a significant part of his profits was based on the risks to the Qing of British naval aggression.

Much of the wealth that George Thomas Staunton acquired in China was spent on his parliamentary career, English gardens and other interests, but a significant portion of it came to Galway, even though he himself was an infrequent visitor to the town. George Leonard had already provided for the children and grandchildren of his surviving sister Lucy, who had returned from the West Indies to Galway with her husband and children. Her daughter, Victoire, married Mark Lynch (later of Duras Park) and their eldest son was made heir to George Leonard's property if George Thomas died childless, on condition that he took the surname Lynch-Staunton. Victoire's unmarried daughter was provided with an annuity and was employed as a companion to Jane Staunton. Three sons and grandsons went into the East India Company army in Madras which brought with it the prospect of significant prize money, though also very high risks: one of George Thomas' cousins died at the battle of Seringapatam in 1799.¹⁰⁸ When the new Sir George Staunton went back to Galway in 1802 to take over his father's property, he stayed with Mark and Victoire Lynch and was treated in a way that confirmed his status as a powerful local patron. He was visited by 'my numerous relations in all the remotest degrees of consanguinity and affinity'.¹⁰⁹ As well as the Lynchs' hospitality, there were dinners, parties and balls in his honour given by Sir John Blake of Menlough, Hyacinth Daly the mayor, and Walter Joyce. He was also made a member of the Amicable Society of Galway. Everyone had something to gain from getting to know him.¹¹⁰

One of Staunton's first decisions when he inherited Cargin was to place his property with Mark Lynch to manage.¹¹¹ Already in 1802, his business in China meant that he could afford to treat his estate with a certain romantic generosity. He wrote back to his mother:

You will not I am sure blame my vanity when I mention how interesting and affecting were to me on this occasion the grateful acclamations of more than two hundred poor tenantry including their wives and children, whom I found assembled in their best attire, to greet the arrival of their landlord with music, dancing and bonfires.¹¹²

He knew that if the land were leased to a few solvent tenants he could double the rent, but despite Lynch's advice, he decided that he could not 'reconcile it with my feelings to banish so many of the most established residents on the soil and expose them to greater hardships, however the measure may be recommended by pecuniary considerations'.¹¹³ The profits of his Irish estate, which brought in approximately £200 per year, were negligible compared to his other sources of income at this time and even more so later. (In the single year from 1812 to 1813 he brought

¹⁰⁸ Staunton, *Memoir of the life and family*, pp 57–9; MacKillop, *Human capital*, p. 140; George Leonard Staunton Will, 1800 (B.L., Sir George Leonard Staunton papers); G. T. Staunton to Jane Staunton, 16, 19 Sept. 1813 (D.U.L., George Thomas Staunton papers).

¹⁰⁹ G. T. Staunton to Jane Staunton, 9 Sept. 1802 (D.U.L., George Thomas Staunton papers).

¹¹⁰ G. T. Staunton to Jane Staunton, 9, 14 Sept., 3 Oct. 1802 (D.U.L., George Thomas Staunton papers).

¹¹¹ G. T. Staunton to Jane Staunton, 14 Sept. 1802 (D.U.L., George Thomas Staunton papers).

¹¹² G. T. Staunton to Jane Staunton, 22 Sept. 1802 (D.U.L., George Thomas Staunton papers).

¹¹³ *Ibid.*

back to London approximately £25,000). Prestige was important to him and grateful tenants were a luxury that he could well afford.¹¹⁴

A month after they first met, George Thomas, Mark Lynch and Walter Joyce (who had hosted a party of 170 people in his honour) established Joyce's Bank in Galway, which existed from 1802 to 1807, when Lynch withdrew to set up Mark Lynch & Son of Galway, which lasted until 1815. Little is known of these banks, but the records from George Thomas' London operations suggest that the two businesses were interconnected. Lynch regularly paid the rents from the Cargin estate into Staunton's London account, but between 1811 and 1815 George Thomas also paid out significant sums on Lynch's bills: when Mark Lynch and Son came under pressure and eventually collapsed at the end of the Napoleonic Wars, Staunton paid out £4,000.¹¹⁵

Galway links also mattered in China. One of Staunton's younger colleagues in China was James Molony of Kiltanon, County Clare. The Molony family had Gaelic roots, but they were like the Stauntons in that they had supported the Jacobites and then converted in the early eighteenth century. They had also married English women: James was the nephew of Charles Mills, an English banker and director of the East India Company. With these ties to the Company's top elite Molony, unlike Staunton whose appointment had been resented, was invited to join the profitable private agency business with India centred on the opium trade. In 1811, Molony lost £50,000 when a crackdown prevented the drug from being sold. He stayed on in China for another ten years to try and recoup his losses before returning to Kiltanon where he engaged in various improvement projects.¹¹⁶ The Irish connection clearly mattered to both of them: Staunton visited Molony's father on a trip to Galway in 1813 and he later presented Molony with a silver-mounted walking stick from the wood his father had planted at Clydagh.¹¹⁷

After his return from China, Staunton, who never married, settled in London with his mother, became a member of parliament and bought an estate in Hampshire, but his political and financial ties to his Galway heritage continued. He was M.P. for Mitchell between 1818 and 1826, and Heytesbury from 1830 to 1832. Having purchased these seats, he had no constituents, and Galway Catholics appear to have been the group that he actually felt that he represented. In 1826, he resigned his seat over his support for Catholic emancipation. He was a nervous public speaker and did not make his maiden speech till 1830, but when he did so it was in support of a petition to extend the franchise to Galway Catholics.¹¹⁸ Galway links also continued to be an important part of his social

¹¹⁴ G. T. Staunton account, ledgers S, June 1805–June 1806, June 1811–June 1813 (Coutts & Co Bank Archive).

¹¹⁵ G. T. Staunton to Jane Staunton, 14 Sept. 1802 (D.U.L., George Thomas Staunton papers); G. T. Staunton account, ledgers S, June 1811–June 1812, June 1814–June 1815 (Coutts & Co Bank Archive); Séan Kenny and J. D. Turner, 'Wildcat bankers or political failure? The Irish financial pantomime, 1797–1826' in *Lund Papers in Econ. Hist.*, clxxvi (2019), pp 65–6.

¹¹⁶ Memoir of the life of James Molony (b. 1785) (B.L., IOR Neg. 11666), vol. 1, pp 6, 15–16, 26–7, 31; Teresa Shoosmith, 'Settlement and social change in the Barony of Tulla, c.1650–1845' (Ph.D. thesis, National University of Ireland, Galway, 2015), pp 39, 93, 115.

¹¹⁷ G. T. Staunton to Jane Staunton, 28 Sept. 1813, 14 Dec. 1814 (D.U.L., George Thomas Staunton papers).

¹¹⁸ Staunton, *Memoirs of the chief incidents*, pp 115–16; Stephen Farrell, 'Staunton, Sir George Thomas, 2nd bt. (1781–1859), of Leigh Park, Hants and 17 Devonshire Street,

life: one of his closest friends was the Irish Catholic portrait painter Martin Archer Shee, whose grandmother was a Kirwan from Galway.¹¹⁹ He also continued to enjoy visiting the town. In August 1813, for example, he gave a copy of his translation of the Qing legal code to a friend there, took up invitations to the convent of a Miss Staunton, who was a Catholic nun, attended a Protestant service one Sunday morning, sitting in the Staunton pew to hear an excellent sermon, and that afternoon went to the Benedictine service with a cousin, where he found the singing and music very pleasing.¹²⁰ He was also drawn into local politics, taking part in meetings about the town's parliamentary representation and making a large donation to the independence of the borough.¹²¹

Social visits diminished as Staunton grew older, but his Chinese wealth continued to influence the Cargin estate. In accordance with his father's will, he made George Lynch, son of Mark Lynch, his heir. In 1828, he had a new house built in the woodlands at Clydagh, designing a beautiful garden and placing the marriage stone of George Staunton II and Elizabeth Martin of Tullyra at one of its key points. Very much aware of the criticism of absentee landowners, but also wanting to display his ancestral estate, he installed George Lynch in the house and gave him an allowance to do the duties of a resident landlord, an arrangement that he thought was more likely than allocating him the rents to encourage good relations with his tenants.¹²² In 1839, a school was established for the estate, bringing in the English-speaking education that would help to weaken the area's Irish-speaking tradition. Staunton visited when famine struck in 1846, remitted the rents for two years and gave aid to his tenants. He also made sure his actions were reported not only in the *Galway Mercury* but also in his constituency in Hampshire, where good publicity was important for the upcoming election. As always, Staunton's philanthropy served a purpose, but nevertheless his Chinese wealth did not just change the houses and gardens of Galway's commercial elite, but also touched the lives of poor cottagers on his Cargin estate.¹²³

When George Thomas Staunton died, George Lynch, who took the name George Lynch-Staunton, inherited the Irish estate and most of the very considerable investments, while his younger brother, Henry Cormick Lynch, inherited the English estate.¹²⁴ The 1901 census records Charles Lynch-Staunton as Catholic and resident at Clydagh.¹²⁵ Thus, the Staunton fortune, with its origins in the West Indies, India and China, eventually came to Galway where it ultimately, through

Portland Place, Mdx' in D. R. Fisher (ed.), *The history of parliament: the House of Commons 1820–1832* (Cambridge, 2009) (History of Parliament Online).

¹¹⁹ M. A. Shee, *The life of Sir Martin Archer Shee, President of the Royal Academy, F.R.S. D.C.L.* (2 vols. London, 1860), i, 3; *ibid.*, ii, 247–8.

¹²⁰ G. T. Staunton to Jane Staunton, 12, 22, 31 Aug. 1813 (D.U.L., George Thomas Staunton papers).

¹²¹ G. T. Staunton to Jane Staunton, 12 Sept., 4 Oct. 1813 (D.U.L., George Thomas Staunton papers).

¹²² Staunton, *Memoirs of the chief incidents*, pp 147–8; Marriage stone in the garden of Clydagh House, Headford, County Galway.

¹²³ *Galway Mercury*, 5 Sept. 1846; *Hampshire Telegraph*, 27 Mar. 1847; Carroll, *Beauty rarest*, pp 1–2. See also MacKillop, *Human Capital*, pp 234–46.

¹²⁴ Will of Sir George Thomas Staunton of Leigh Park, 30 Jan. 1852 (Hampshire Record Office, Copy/628/4).

¹²⁵ Carroll, *Beauty rarest*, pp 149–50.

another and more familiar act of Irish emigration, propelled the Lynch-Stauntons into Canada's political elite.¹²⁶

IV

Today, George Thomas Staunton is a figure in China's national history: recent television series depict him as the cute foreign child who learns Chinese, conforms to China's rituals and is rewarded with a gift by the Qianlong emperor.¹²⁷ Chinese scholars analyse the impact of the Stauntons on Western views of China and pore over George Thomas's translations.¹²⁸ But in the local history of Galway, let alone the national history of Ireland, George Leonard and George Thomas Staunton are almost entirely absent. Histories of Galway cover the earlier history of the family, but George Leonard's departure to the West Indies removes them from view.

This paper has argued that the disappearance of the Stauntons from Irish history is the result of intentional concealment by George Thomas, who wrote his father's Catholic background out of his family history, emphasised their English origins and effectively relocated them into a story about England even while he remained part of Catholic circles in China, London and Galway. This is worth considering as part of the complex impact of the penal laws which may, among other things, have produced a narrative of Irish history that overly diminishes Ireland's relations with the world beyond Europe. At the same time, it has made invisible the role that George Leonard's Catholicism played in his career. Recent scholarship has shown that Irish Catholics could penetrate the East India Company, and that during the Stuart period, they used the opportunities presented by overseas expansion to advance their interests in public life.¹²⁹ The story of the Stauntons suggests that their links within the Catholic Church, the great global institution of the preceding age, might also have benefitted them and contributed to British imperial expansion. For two centuries, Catholic missionaries had been the only Europeans with significant access to China and knowledge embedded in the institutions of the church was a valuable resource. George Leonard Staunton took advantage of this both to advance his own career and to create the networks that would enable his son George Thomas to make his fortune and, thus, transform the fortunes of the family.

¹²⁶ 'The Hon. George Lynch-Staunton, Senator' and 'The Hon. John Lynch-Staunton, Senator', Parliament of Canada website (lop.parl.ca) (22 Jan. 2024).

¹²⁷ Changcheng: Zhongguo de gushi [Great Wall: the Story of China] episode 11, CCTV, 15 Jan 2022 (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PGMIC_p3QFE); Zhongguo [China] 2nd series, episode 8, Mango TV, 12 Mar. 2022 (<https://w.mgtv.com/b/410211/15678995.html>).

¹²⁸ Wang Hongzhi, 'Sidangdong yu Guangzhou tizhi Zhong Ying maoyi de fanyi: jianlun 1814 nian Dong Yindu Gongsi yu Guangzhou guanyuan yi ci sheji fanyi wenti de huiyi' [George Thomas Staunton and translation in Sino-British trade in the Canton system: With special reference to the 1814 Meeting involving the translation issue] in *Fanyixue yanjiu jikan* [Translation research journal], xvii (2014), pp 225–59; Hou Yi, 'Ouzhouren di yi ci wanzheng fanyi Zhongguo falü dianji de changshi – Sidangdong yu 'Da Qing lüli' de fanyi' [The first attempt by a European to make a complete translation of a Chinese legal code – Staunton and the translation of the 'Great Qing Laws and Statutes'] in *Lishi dang'an* [Historical Archives], no. 4 (2009), pp 97–104.

¹²⁹ MacKillop, *Human capital*, pp 100–02; Gabriel Glickman, 'Catholic interests and the politics of English overseas expansion 1660–1689' in *Journal of Brit. Studies*, lv, no. 4 (2016), pp 680–708.

In losing the Stauntons from Irish history, Ireland has also been lost from the history of China. The Chinese have a history of passionate nationalism and anti-imperialism, but they also have a long tradition of studying transcultural knowledge flows. The Jesuit mission, with its policies of accommodation to Chinese culture and its positive representations of China in Europe, has always been one pole of this history set in contrast with the period of nineteenth-century imperialism. The Stauntons, with their complex Irish Catholic background, stood at the turning point between these two phases. This was a moment that created ideas and attitudes that then persisted for generations. Both Stauntons influenced Western understandings of China in ways that persist until today. Their story suggests some of the ways in which their Irish Catholic heritage contributed to shaping China's relations with the wider world.