

The Pursuit of Signs: Searching for Ireland after the Union¹

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Beyond Interpretation

In a general sense, the term 'region' refers to a tract of land which has been deemed distinct and which, for a variety of reasons, represents an identifiable unit, either in itself, or within a larger territory. One might imagine that such distinctions are both easy to determine and administer; yet in the Irish case one finds a greater degree of difficulty than might be expected. The problem which arises in Ireland is that for all the taxonomical niceties associated with the word, it is often more closely associated with power. This may be a rather fraught way of appreciating its implications; but power is the issue at stake within much Irish regionalist discourse. It is not, in other words, a matter of simply pointing at some mark on the horizon and claiming that it constitutes difference. It depends on how one looks at a place, and in Ireland's case that frequently means whether one agrees that its future lies in some sort of alternative political structure. Regionally-based sentiments frequently stem from a desire for purity and difference. Yet the regionalist's position, not unlike the nationally-based positions they so abhor, can make for a disturbing, certainly no less troubled arrangement.² The de-centring and decentralizing impulse that makes regionalism attractive to some, the sense of richness and vitality that the term engenders, can appear singularly unfruitful in the Irish case. Multiplicity, heterogeneity, diversity – these terms have a habit of cropping up as part of the discourse of Irish regionalism. Ironically, the place most wedded to regionalism has demonstrated the greatest resistance to change and, historically speaking, shown precious little appetite for diversity over the years. In short, it is precisely the territory which clamours for specificity loudest which has done the case for Irish regionalism the greatest harm.³

1 I wish to thank Declan Kiberd and Kevin Whelan for reading an earlier version of this essay. **2** 'Regions are not a given fact of life, or a historic relic, but a social construction, constantly being made and remade. Historic elements are often pressed into service, but even their meaning is shaped by contemporary forces' (M. Keating, *The New Regionalism in Western Europe: Territorial Restructuring and Political Change* [Cheltenham, 1998], p. 109). **3** Keating's efforts are instructive in this regard: 'There are three elements in analysing regional identity and its relationship to political action ... The first element is the cognitive one, that is people must be aware of such a thing as a region ... A second element is the affective one, that is

This essay will examine how a regional sense is constructed, not in relation to contemporary Ireland but, rather, with reference to the politically turbulent post-Union period. Although the problems associated with contemporary Irish regionalism are many, a consideration of nineteenth-century regionalist thinking throws up no less interesting a set of conditions. Before 1800, constructions of Ireland moved so often as almost to defy classification. Sometimes seen as a collection of distinct, frequently opposing regions, sometimes as part of Britain and, occasionally, as a separate entity with a greater affinity to continental Europe and beyond, Ireland's position was both fluid and contested. After 1800, however, when Ireland became a constitutionally incorporated member of the United Kingdom, she ceased to be merely a neighbouring island in whom Britain had an ongoing commercial and political interest. Ostensibly an equal partner, Ireland after the Union was effectively regionalized within the broader political configuration – a development deemed necessary if the Union was to survive. As might be deduced from this type of strategy, the form of regionalism bestowed upon Ireland was therefore both complex and relatively straightforward. Regionally-regarded Ireland could express difference but, significantly, only as part of a larger whole. Its native culture or language could suggest alternative origins and influences, but so long as the political trajectory was clearly enough understood, then difference could occasionally be admitted. Ireland was granted a degree of specificity, in other words, because a highly centralized Union could always subsume regional difference, or at the very least make it subordinate, to the larger political unit.

Geopolitical difficulties aside, an examination of certain post-Union narratives discloses several interesting themes, particularly when faced with the regional incorporation of Ireland, and the tasks necessary for its implementation. Because of Ireland's fluctuating, undefinable presence, its apparently wilful attachment to rebellion, and its increasing importance within European politics, many writers felt the need literally to rediscover Ireland in the aftermath of the Union. More specifically, within the first two decades of the nineteenth century many British and Irish Unionist writers suggested that if the absorption of the country within the United Kingdom was to be a success, significantly greater amounts of information should be garnered. The Union may have attempted to overcome, or at least mask, the events of 1798, but the disturbances of that era were resonating loudly within post-Union writing. Indeed, it was during this period that many narrators made a direct link between Irish political instability and a lack of knowledge about the country, and argued that if Ireland had been more

how people feel about a region and the degree to which it provides a framework for common identity and solidarity ... [and] the third element, the instrumental one, whether the region is used as a basis for mobilization and collective action in pursuit of social, economic and political goals' (*ibid.*, p. 86). Even allowing for some differences of emphasis, it would be interesting to hear Irish regionalists apply themselves to these points.

effectively understood then rebellion might never have happened. Resolve the epistemological lack at the heart of the Union (ran the argument in the early years of the nineteenth century) and a significant step towards ameliorating the sorts of difficulties that plagued Anglo-Irish relations would be achieved. An epistemological absorption of Ireland was seen as a way of not only satisfying the newly established political order, of gratifying the fact of Union, but also of providing much needed information about an undependable and potentially disloyal terrain. If Irish difference was what really worried – sometimes antagonized – Britain in the aftermath of Union, then a satisfactory provision of knowledge was regarded as a stabilizing element in the relations between these states.

A Theory of Reading

In Christine Bolt's *Victorian Attitudes to Race*, the period between 1830 and 1865 is cited as institutionally important for the development of what she calls the 'scientific spirit'.⁴ Indeed, Bolt regards the founding of institutions such as the Royal Geographical Society in 1831, the English Ethnological Society in 1843, and the London Anthropological Society in 1863, as instrumental in determining the move towards an epistemological discourse. More important than their contribution to scientific and pseudo-scientific endeavour, these societies also functioned as supplements of empire, their very foundation pushing the desire for information high onto the political agenda. Knowledge of geographical regions, or of ethnographical groupings, or of climatic or topographical conditions, would be the new determinants in the nineteenth-century race for empire.

While Bolt's survey of certain early- to mid-nineteenth-century institutions places the structures of empire in an interesting light, similar developments were also underway in Ireland, particularly after the Union, when a spate of publications competed for attention. What sort of texts were they? Not surprisingly, the sorts of narratives especially prized in the post-Union period were statistical surveys, with travel and antiquarian studies favoured by the more aesthetic reader, and histories of Ireland maintaining a steady readership within more politically charged circles. Indeed, historiographical material, particularly when it involved an interpretation of recent events, proved the most lively of these texts, and potentially the most controversial. In Sir Richard Musgrave's *Memoirs of the Different Rebellions in Ireland* (1801), for example, the narrator declares that

History, which is a mirror of past times, is the best guide to the statesman; and Livy tells us, that he wrote his, that the Republick might learn lessons of wisdom and prudence from it, by avoiding such measures as had proved fatal, and by embracing such as had been found salutary for its interest.⁵

⁴ Christine Bolt, *Victorian Attitudes to Race* (London, 1971), p.1. ⁵ *Memoirs of the Different*

Musgrave's desire to construct a new history of Ireland by drawing on the lessons of the past constituted an acceptable – if methodologically naïve – approach to the island's political and historical difficulties. The tone is a little sober, but the message hardly evidence of the most strident of historiographical positions.

However, when in 1803 Francis Plowden, the well respected British legal and political writer,⁶ published *An Historical Review of the State of Ireland*, it immediately drew the scorn of Musgrave: 'I mean no offence to this Gentleman', he wrote, 'by imputing to him any improper design by his publication; at the same time, I cannot avoid lamenting the misrepresentations, which his great ignorance of the History of Ireland, his party prejudices, the false information furnished him, and his astonishing credulity have betrayed him into'.⁷ Plowden, left with little option but to make an equally public response, published *An Historical Letter from Francis Plowden to Sir Richard Musgrave* (1805), in which he dismissed the charges, defended his English Catholicism, and corrected Musgrave on a number of apparent errors. The charges and counter-charges levelled by these writers serve to remind us of how deep historiographical arguments have always run in Ireland; but they also indicate how highly regarded the 'story' of Ireland appeared in the post-Union period, and why the establishment of satisfactory narratives was considered an important Union-building exercise. The rush of historians, travellers and other field-workers into the vacuum created by the Union – irrespective of professional jealousies and methodological disagreements – was indicative of a desperation for knowledge that existed at almost every level of intellectual life.

Although altercations such as those between Musgrave and Plowden added to the interest surrounding historiographical discussion, another element was the republication of certain texts, in which Ireland's medieval and early modern history was used as a way of propping up the newly established narratives upon which the Union would depend. In the period 1807-08, for example, Raphael

Rebellions in Ireland (Dublin, 1801), p. v. The *DNB* describes Musgrave (1757-1818) as an 'Irish political writer, born near Dungarvan. A staunch Protestant and loyalist. A man of considerable talent, warped by blind prejudice and savage party spirit. Though strongly attached to the English connection, he was no less strongly opposed to the Act of Union, and never sat in the imperial parliament'. Interestingly, his *Memoirs of the Different Rebellions* is described as a work so steeped in anti-Catholic prejudice as to be almost worthless historically. ⁶ Francis Plowden (1749-1829). An English Catholic, he entered the novitiate of the Society of Jesus at Watten, Belgium, on 7 Sept. 1766, and was Master of the College of Bruges from 1771 to 1773. Returned to secular life in 1773. In 1813 a prosecution was instituted against him at the Lifford assizes by a Mr Hart, who was connected with the government, for a libel contained in his 'History of Ireland' [a later text, published in 3 vols, Dublin, 1811]. A verdict was returned for the plaintiff, with £5,000 damages, and to avoid payment of the sum Plowden fled to France, and settled in Paris, where he was appointed a professor in the Scots College. He died in his apartments in the Rue Vaugirard on 4 Jan. 1829. See *DNB*. ⁷ Richard Musgrave, preface to *Strictures upon an Historical Review of the State of Ireland* (London, 1804).

Holinshed's *Chronicles of England, Scotland, and Ireland* was republished; this mammoth, six-volume narrative not only coincided with the immediacies of the Union, but narrated the story of British history holistically. Always highly regarded, Holinshed's *Chronicles* held a particular fascination for those ideologues working to re-establish Ireland as a known entity after 1800.⁸ The *Chronicles* told of an earlier history between Britain and Ireland; but by telling it in terms of an integrated narrative, it helped to galvanize Irish reattachment to Britain at a time of heightened political and constitutional change. Like the republication of Ware's 1633 edition of *The Works of Spenser, Campion, Hanmer and Marleborough* in 1809, such texts made the absorption of Ireland within the Union easier, even if individual texts such as Spenser's might have suggested a less than favourable narrative.⁹ Like the publication of Plowden and Musgrave's texts, reprinted history classics revealed the extent to which information – ideologically amenable information notwithstanding – was keenly desired in the post-Union period.

Securing Ireland, by gathering as much information about it as possible, then, became one of the primary themes within many texts. For instance, in Sir Richard Colt Hoare's *Tour in Ireland* (1806) an anxiety to address the problem of potential unrest, while at the same time attempting to draw Ireland more fully within the orbit of British ideological influence, is steadily observed.¹⁰ Hoare's interest in Ireland, apparently stimulated by an affection for the writings of Giraldus Cambrensis, is a curious amalgam of travel description, historiographical speculation and antiquarian research. A fellow of both the Royal Society of Antiquities and the London Society of Antiquaries, Hoare travelled to Ireland at a time of renewed interest in the country, and sent back to the metropolis images of heartening and improved cordiality. However, like many of his post-Union colleagues, Hoare also emphasized the distinctly uninformed nature of British involvement in Ireland:

8 Although Roy Foster suggests that many of these histories were simply pro- or anti-Union responses, I would argue that a somewhat different agenda lay behind British Unionist narratives. As this essay will demonstrate, while Irish narrators were possibly more concerned with specifically Unionist issues, many British writers saw the Union as a way of shoring up longer term objectives, and of consolidating information about the country in ways that had been denied in all but the most rudimentary of forms. See R.F. Foster, *Modern Ireland 1600-1972* (London, 1988), p. 290.

9 Although Spenser's *View* is less than favourably disposed towards Ireland, its post-Union republication nevertheless suggests a desire to maximize knowledge about the country. Moreover, the version edited by Ware endured selective cutting (and sanitizing) of the original text, thereby making its inclusion a less than awkward gesture. See Andrew Hadfield, 'Another Case of Censorship: the Riddle of Edmund Spenser's *A View of the Present State of Ireland*' in *History Ireland* (Summer 1996), pp 26-30, for a fuller discussion of the issues surrounding the publication of Spenser's infamous narrative. 10 Sir Richard Colt Hoare (1758-1838). Historian of Wiltshire, published *History of Modern Wiltshire* (1822-44), and *Ancient History of North and South Wiltshire* (1812-21). A writer and traveller, he also published journals of Tours in Ireland (1807), Elba (1814), Italy and Sicily (1819), as well as a *Topographical Catalogue of the British Isles* (1815).

To the traveller, who fond of novelty and information, seeks out those regions, which may afford reflection for his mind, or employment for his pencil, and especially to him who may be induced to visit the neglected shores of Hibernia, the following pages are dedicated.¹¹

Keen to see better relations fostered between Britain and Ireland, Hoare finds that one of the major difficulties towards improving relations lies in the insufficient levels of knowledge about Ireland that exist in Britain. Ireland is a neglected shore, perhaps even a neglected region; but an extraction of information is necessary if a closer association between the two countries is to be effected. From his opening lines, then, Hoare attends to the principal issues at stake: Ireland is an unattended entity which must be better secured to Britain; information should be amassed as quickly and efficiently as possible; the Act of Union's centralizing powers at Westminster should convert Ireland into a region within the larger geopolitical unit. Interestingly, the lengths to which Hoare goes to make Ireland both an attractive venue for scholars, as well as a fully incorporated member of the United Kingdom, are comparatively based: 'Whilst the opposite coasts of Wales and Scotland, have for many successive years attracted the notice and admiration of the man of taste ... whilst Wales and Scotland, I say, have had the assistance of the Historian's pen to record their annals', declares Hoare, 'the island of Hibernia still remains unvisited and unknown'.¹² Wales and Scotland, of course, are better known because they have been a part of the British political scene for that much longer, with Union bringing knowledge, and knowledge bringing increased security and co-dependence.

Although Hoare's interest in fostering an appetite for constitutional union may be deduced from his *Tour*, his text was only one of several committed to a similar agenda. William Patterson's *Observations of Ireland* (1804), Edward Wakefield's *Account of Ireland, Statistical and Political* (1812), John Gamble's *View of Society* (1813) and William Shaw Mason's *Statistical Account of Ireland* (1814) all demonstrated a keen interest in securing information about the country above all else.¹³ Even J.C. Curwen, in his *Observations on the State of Ireland* (1818), was still relaying the message quite emphatically to a British readership some years after the Union: 'I regret that I have not employed more of my leisure on the topography and locality of Ireland. I perceive I am on a voyage of discovery', he intoned, 'and, like a mariner without a compass, at a loss how to steer my course ... It is really a national reproach to us to be thus generally ignorant as we are, of so important a part of the empire'.¹⁴

In Sir John Jervis White's *A Brief View of the Past and Present State of Ireland* (1813), an awareness of the potential value of Ireland is married to a graphic

¹¹ Hoare, introduction to *Journal of a Tour in Ireland* (London, 1807). ¹² *Ibid.*, pp i-ii. ¹³ My thanks to Tadgh O'Sullivan for drawing my attention to Mason's text. ¹⁴ J.C. Curwen, *Observations on the State of Ireland*, 2 vols (London, 1818), vol. i, p. 4.

illustration of insecurity in the post-Union period. Although White, like Hoare, views the country as an interpretively rich field, the 'knowledge for power' paradigm he develops suggests a level of palpable unease also. Like many others writing on the subject, White opens his text by specifically remarking on how poorly researched Ireland has been: 'I conceive it advisable to pay some attention, in particular, to that part of these united realms called Ireland; a matter which has been too much neglected; and ... to point out what may now appear for the benefit of that valuable whole portion of the great whole'.¹⁵ In White's case one not only finds the usual anxieties about how unknown Ireland is when compared to other places in the empire, but how necessary is the reintegration of Ireland with the rest of Britain, a reintegration that can only occur with greater and more developed knowledge:

We are too prone, in considering matters of consequence to the British empire, to almost entirely occupy our attention with what more immediately appertains to that part of his Majesty's dominions called *Old England*, and to lose sight of those valuable parts which may with great propriety be denominated the *limbs*. Of those united limbs, well known by the support which they give the body, I intend to class *Ireland* as the principal or right leg, and as such to view the importance of her good condition, in order thereby to effectually sustain, along with the fellow limb, *Scotland*, the ponderous frame.¹⁶

Apparently without any humour whatsoever, White demonstrated, in his own idiosyncratic manner, the necessity for constitutional change, and the need for Ireland to become culturally – not just geographically – accessible to Britain. Without the benefits of Union, argued White, 'Old England' would be condemned to a life of political incapacitation and enfeeblement. Too many people, he claimed, were prepared to view Ireland as 'an *unbecoming excrescence*, [rather] than as a *necessary* and ornamental part of the whole', whereas he regarded the inclusion of Ireland as both a natural and a necessary development.¹⁷

Although less seriously considered than writers such as Plowden and Musgrave, White's contribution nevertheless emphasized the historical and statistical interest taken in Ireland in the immediate post-Union period. In Stephen Barlow's two volume *History of Ireland, From the earliest Period to the Present Time; Embracing also a Statistical and Geographical Account of that Kingdom*, a further text is added to the post-Union corpus, but in a methodologically more imagina-

¹⁵ John Jervis White, *A Brief View of the Past and Present State of Ireland* (Bath, 1813), p. 1. White (1766–1830) is described in the *DNB* thus: 'Miscellaneous writer, graduated B.A., as a fellow-commoner at Dublin University, became barrister-at-law and LL.D. Was created a Baronet of Ireland 10th Nov. 1797, probably a reward for having in the previous year raised a corps of volunteers, whom he equipped at his own expense'. ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp 2–3. ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

tive style, and in a manner that indicates a greater interest in fact gathering and pure information. In volume one Barlow offers a broad history of Ireland, with the dissatisfactions that entails; but in his second volume he locates Ireland within a discourse of statistical and geographical discovery. Like White, he begins by deploring the state of British scholarship on Ireland: 'It must surely have excited surprise in the minds of many readers, that while we have histories of Greece, Rome, and England, adapted to popular use, no attempt has been made to familiarize us with the events of Irish History'.¹⁸ He then extends to other areas the criteria normally employed for historical research. Perhaps 'it may be permitted to borrow something from the peculiar province of geography', he suggests, 'in laying the foundations upon which the fabric is to stand'.¹⁹ For Barlow the need to comprehend Ireland as fully as possible is paramount, not just because such 'auxiliary knowledge helps to infix more strongly in our memory those facts',²⁰ but because 'every man who wishes well to the general prosperity of the empire, must ardently wish to see Ireland conciliated, and find her a cordial and willing labourer in the great national vineyard'.²¹ Like White, Barlow's overview of British histories of Ireland suggests a topic less than satisfactorily developed, but one which would bear considerable fruit if properly undertaken.

Facts and knowledge, regarded as indispensable areas of human understanding by writers such as Barlow, became one of the standard methods of understanding other cultures and territories in the nineteenth century. Indeed, the sorts of statistical institutions and societies which were established specifically linked a desire for control over other regions with information itself. The literary critic Thomas Richards, in an astute assessment of nineteenth-century classificatory practices, describes the impulses, as well as the limitations, of such a scheme:

From all over the globe the British collected information about the countries they were adding to their map. They surveyed and they mapped. They took censuses, produced statistics. They made vast lists of birds. Then they shoved the data they had collected into a shifting series of classifications. In fact they often could do little other than collect and collate information, for any exact civil control, of the kind possible in England, was out of the question. The Empire was too far away, and bureaucrats of Empire had to be content to shuffle papers. This paper shuffling, however, proved to have great influence. It required keeping track, and keeping track of keeping track. It required some kind of archive for it all.²²

The usefulness of Richards' thesis lies in its ability to attach the collection, classification and adaptation of knowledge to particular moments and institutions,

¹⁸ Stephen Barlow, *The History of Ireland, From the earliest period to the Present; Embracing also a Statistical and Geographical Account of that Kingdom*, 2 vols (London, 1814), vol. i, p. v. ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 16. ²⁰ *Ibid.* ²¹ *Ibid.*, vol. ii, p. 313. ²² Thomas Richards, *The Imperial Archive: Knowledge and the Fantasy of Empire* (London, 1993) p. 3.

such as the British Museum, the Royal Geographical Society and the India Survey. However, Richards' appreciation of the imperial archive also reveals how facts were linked to authority, and how information was regarded as something to be utilized, rather than merely regarded as an archival source; hence the classification of races, the development of ordnance surveys, the establishment of censuses. Flawed and limited, these developments nevertheless documented the empire in the name of knowledge, sometimes in the name of progress, ultimately in the interests of political power.

To examine nineteenth-century Ireland is to note the establishment of similar developments, particularly in the interest shown in statistical surveys, which had a frequently regional and chorographical flavour. Indeed, one particularly notable development, brought about as a result of similar exercises in England and Scotland, was the work of the Dublin Society. Although the later accomplishments of the Statistical and Social Inquiry Society has been well documented since their establishment in the 1840s, there has been less research on the Dublin Society, and on the background to its work.²³ In brief, the establishment of the Society's work followed that of 'the Board of Agriculture in England under Sir John Sinclair in 1793', who had overseen the publication of county surveys of England between 1794 and 1815, and who had previously worked on compiling a statistical survey of Scotland between 1791 and 1799.²⁴ In his *Statistical Account of Scotland*, the analytical model proposed by Sinclair was not only ambitious, but singularly effective in terms of coverage.²⁵ Sinclair simply asked ministers operating within the different parishes of Scotland – obviously interpreting them as scrupulous and reliable statisticians – to provide him with as much detail about daily life as possible. Amongst those categories for which he desired information, were 'number of the poor, climate and diseases, quantity of grain consumed, wages and price of labour'; however, he also attempted to gauge the number of orchards and woods that existed in various regions, and even went to the extent of determining the whereabouts of caves and rocks, as well as islands and rivers. He then collated and published the material from 1791 onwards.

Interestingly, it was not until Sinclair's third volume, on Roxburgh in 1792, that some sort of discussion of the author's intentions and rationale was made clear. In the Advertisement that preceded the volume, Sinclair simply declared

²³ See Mary Daly, *The Spirit of Earnest Inquiry: the Statistical and Social Inquiry Society of Ireland 1847-1997* (Dublin, 1997). ²⁴ Desmond Clarke, 'Dublin Society's Statistical Surveys', paper read before the Bibliographical Society of Ireland, 30th April 1957, p. 3. ²⁵ Sir John Sinclair (1754-1835), first President of the Board of Agriculture, was born on 10 May 1754 at Thurso Castle, Caithness. Educated at Edinburgh, Glasgow, and Oxford. In 1794 Sinclair raised a regiment of fencibles, called the 'Rothesay & Caithness Fencibles', of which he was appointed colonel. Subsequently he raised another regiment of a thousand men, called the 'Caithness Highlanders', for service in Ireland. Also published *Observations on the Scottish Dialect* (1782), and *History of the Public Revenue of the British Empire* (1784). See DNB.

that his object was 'to lay the foundation of a great, methodical, and complete survey of Scotland'.²⁶ However in his 'Address to the Reader' the extent of his belief in statistics, and their relation to the political well-being of a country, become manifest:

The superiority, which the philosophy of modern times has attained over the ancient, is justly attributed to that anxious attention to facts, by which it is so peculiarly distinguished. Resting not on visionary theory, but on the sure basis of investigation, and of experiment, it has arisen to a degree of certainty and pre-eminence, of which it was supposed incapable.²⁷

Inquiries about the political and economic condition of countries have been attempted before, he acknowledges, but usually for selfish or political reasons – for tax-gathering purposes or for raising an army – certainly not, he insists, for anything less than the self-improvement of a few individuals or a particular social grouping. In Sinclair's opinion, however, the true value of statistics is that they can operate like an early warning system for central and regional government alike, highlighting possible difficulties, as well as offering ways for dealing with unavoidable problems should they arise. From statistics, he believes, can be derived a better way of life, and he links statistical knowledge specifically with progress and change:

No science can furnish, to any mind capable of receiving useful information, so much real entertainment; none can yield such important hints, for the improvement of agriculture, for the extension of commercial industry, for regulating the conduct of individuals, or for extending the prosperity of the state; none can tend so much to promote the general happiness of the species.²⁸

Although we may dispute the interpretation offered by Sinclair of the purpose behind statistics gathering, we cannot dispute the generosity, certainly the benign purpose, of Sinclair himself. A similar series of published surveys for Ireland, however, would be somewhat differently devised. As with the Scottish surveys the actual scope of the Irish surveys suggested significantly greater breadth than might ordinarily be associated with such undertakings. For example, although particular emphasis, in the public notice which accompanied the surveys, was placed upon the importance of deriving accurate information about, for example, breeds of cattle, nature of soil and size of farms, authors were also encouraged to assess the minutiae of wages and food, as well as 'clothing and habitations

²⁶ John Sinclair, *The Statistical Account of Scotland, drawn up from the Communications of the Ministers of the Different Parishes* (Edinburgh, 1792), vol. iii, p. xi. ²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. xii. ²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. xvi.

of the lower orders'. Clearly the statistical surveys which were being carried out in the early 1800s provided much-needed information about the country, and on a number of levels.²⁹

In 1801 alone five surveys were published by the Dublin Society. The third, by Robert Fraser, on County Wicklow, gives some sense of the information these surveys actually generated. We read in Fraser's text about drill husbandry, pasture, manufactures, soil, fisheries, nurseries and mines. Even comments on the use of the English language – less beneficial to the agriculturalist than we might think – are presented with some interest. However it is in Fraser's introduction, in which speculative capital is first appealed to, then interpreted as an issue of patriotic service, that the full potential of the survey is revealed:

The account also which I have given of the singular phenomenon of gold being found in this country, of the extensive metalliferous strata with which it abounds, the numerous streams of water also, and opportunities for the erection of machinery, may attract the attention of men of extensive capital in other parts of the United Kingdom, fair and ample scope being here afforded for the employment of vast sums, in the skilful pursuit of the treasures contained under the surface of the earth; as well as in the improvement of the soil, and the establishment of manufactures. At the same time that the attentive observation of all these extensive resources, impresses the fullest conviction, that the County of Wicklow must in the natural progress of things attract enterprize and capital, to the production of additional wealth and strength to the empire.³⁰

29 Although the Irish surveys may be seen as part of a project which predates both the Act of Union and the insurrection of 1798, the timing of their production nevertheless says much about the demand for increased knowledge about Ireland: "Though the Dublin Society realised the necessity for statistical surveys almost twenty years before, considerations prevented it from carrying out its plan. In 1799 in a general petition to the Irish Parliament the Dublin Society, praying for a larger parliamentary grant, enumerated among other tasks the need for carrying out a statistical survey similar to that undertaken in Scotland and England. Parliament almost at the end of its independence and as a last gesture passed an act early in 1800 conveying to the Society a grant of £15,000 to enable it to carry out its many activities, and specifying that £1,500 "shall be applied by the Society in procuring agricultural examinations into all or any of the counties of this kingdom" ' (Clarke, 'Dublin Society's Statistical Surveys', pp 3-4). **30** Robert Fraser, introduction to *General View of the Agriculture and Minerology, Present State and Circumstances of the County Wicklow* (Dublin, 1801). The *DNB* describes Fraser (1760-1831) thus: 'Born in Perthshire, the son of a local clergyman. Educated at Glasgow University before moving to London where he was employed by the Government on various statistical projects (Devon & Cornwall, 1794, and Wicklow, 1801). Made great efforts to improve Scottish fisheries and mines, especially in the western Isles and Highlands. He was also associated with the construction of the harbour at Kingstown (Dun Laoghaire)'. **31** Although Fraser's later survey

Like the post-Union optimist that he is, Fraser articulates a sense of Ireland as an untapped source, capable of providing considerable wealth for modest investment. Indeed, the language of pushy commercialism which the introduction presents suggests how several of these surveys really operated. 'Account', 'gold', 'opportunities', 'capital', 'afforded', 'vast sums', 'treasures', 'manufactures', 'enterprize', 'capital' and 'wealth' – these terms outline a significantly different programme from the one envisaged by Sinclair. No longer a method for dealing with particular social or regional problems, the statistical surveys of Ireland – significantly coincident with the Act of Union – display a wanton appetite for capital. Moreover, while the language of economic advancement is being shamelessly exploited here, a broader sense of Ireland's availability is also being declared. The country's wealth, but also the country's geographical proximity to Britain, demands keener and closer co-operation.³¹

From being associated with insurrection, to being presented as a realm of easy financial gain, Ireland's status is rewritten and repackaged in the mind of Robert Fraser. And if the promise of gold fails to excite the interests of the more wary investor, then an appeal to geography might more effectively convey the advantages to be gained. The 'wonderful beauty and variety of the country, [with] its immediate vicinity to the metropolis, [and] the extension of its maritime coast', suggests Fraser, forms 'an easy communication with the British shores'.³² It is true that County Wicklow might have presented the author with more obvious reasons for talking up the benefits of Union than, say, Donegal (published in 1802); but the sense of spatial access suggested by these lines indicates the extent to which the country was being more effectively absorbed. Ireland might exist as a separate geographical entity; but by stressing the harmonising benefits of Union, the newly established constitutional relationship to Britain would overcome such divisions. Like the mineral wealth that is apparently just there for the asking, Ireland appears remarkably accessible, and available.³³

Although Fraser's text provides an interesting gloss on the desires of the post-Union period, it is only one of a number of statistical surveys conducted after the legislative Union of Britain and Ireland.³⁴ Because information was of premium

of Wexford (1807) displays less enthusiasm than his survey of Wicklow, efforts to 'sell' the region are nevertheless evident from several statements: 'But, although metallic veins of ore have not hitherto been discovered to any great extent, it may not be unworthy to enquire, whether there is any such probability of the existence of such veins' (Robert Fraser, *Statistical Survey of the County of Wexford* [Dublin, 1807], p. 14). ³² Fraser, introduction to *County Wicklow*. ³³ Mineralogical treasure is a constant theme in Fraser's work, but nowhere more so than in his *Gleanings in Ireland*: 'Even in this outline, abundant opportunities are pointed out, of the application of vast sums, in the *skillful* pursuit of the treasures contained under the surface of the earth' (Robert Fraser, *Gleanings in Ireland; particularly respecting its Agriculture, Mines, and Fisheries* [London, 1802], pp v–vi). ³⁴ Even statistical accounts used for the purpose of attacking the Union still considered the development of information about Ireland a necessity: 'No inquiry, perhaps, can be considered more important, in the present very eventful period of the British Empire, than

value in these post-Union years, and because there was a particular appetite for more factually based models, such studies noticeably increased in the early 1800s. Statistical surveys and histories were especially important because they were seen as providing one of the most dependable forms of knowledge. Picturesque views and narratives of a more imaginative cast were, of course, also popular; but from an administrative viewpoint, statistical surveys, particularly those in which the country was rendered in truly detailed ways, were crucial. Broken into counties, townlands, populations, religious groupings, social classes, urban and rural locales, such statistical surveys presented a picture of Ireland which, before the advent of the census, offered about as thorough an impression as could be achieved. In 1802 a further ten county surveys were added to the list (Donegal, Leitrim, Sligo, Mayo, Down, Kilkenny, Londonderry, Meath, Tyrone and Dublin), while a survey of Armagh was published in 1804, and surveys of Wexford and Kildare in 1807. By 1832, when the final county survey – of Roscommon, by Isaac Weld, Secretary of the Society – was eventually published, the work had apparently run its course.³⁵ Despite being literally incomplete in its aims, the Dublin Society had nevertheless produced twenty-three surveys in total, helped establish a statistical record of Ireland, and fuelled the interest in fact-gathering studies which was to continue for much of the century.

The Turns of Metaphor

If Britain felt that it had paid dearly for its epistemological disregard of Ireland – through the 1798 Rebellion – then attempts to fill the gaps in its knowledge were being strenuously encouraged in the early 1800s. In addition to work done by the Dublin Society, other statistical accounts were published, testifying to the seriousness with which the demand for Irish research was being taken. Not surprisingly, some of the most interesting material produced during the period was written by Irish writers who saw precisely the same danger in not having a sufficient knowledge of the country. One such figure, Thomas Newenham, who was explicit in his sympathy for the enfranchisement of Catholics, and well-intentioned in his attitude towards the improvement of the country, was one of the most prominent in this regard.³⁶ In his *Statistical and Historical Inquiry*

an honest and impartial Statistical Account of Ireland' (George Barnes, *A Statistical Account of Ireland, founded on Historical Facts* [Dublin, 1811], p. 3). **35** Isaac Weld (1774–1856) is described thus by the *DNB*: 'Topographical writer, born in Fleet Street, Dublin. Educated at Whyte's Academy, Dublin, and at Palgrave, near Diss, Norfolk. Published *Travels through the States of North America and the Provinces of Upper and Lower Canada* (1799). Translated into French, German and Dutch, this work did much to establish his reputation. Elected a member of the Historical and Literary Society of Quebec, and on 27 Nov. 1800 was elected a member of the Royal Dublin Society, of which he subsequently (1847) became vice-president'. **36** Thomas Newenham (1762–1831) is characterized thus by the *DNB*: 'Elected member for Clonmel in the Irish parliament of 1798, he was one of the steadiest opponents of the Act of

into the *Progress and Magnitude of the Population of Ireland* (1805), the narrator opened with these lines: 'The political condition of Ireland, from the revolution until near the close of the last century, was little calculated to keep alive those hopes or fears which alone could have operated in rendering the British public solicitous to attain a knowledge of the different circumstances of that country'.³⁷ Although Newenham's sense of quiet concern for the state of the Union is evident here, the link between knowledge and power is particularly striking.³⁸ As the narrator sees it, Ireland is 'almost as imperfectly known in England, as those of some of the more remote parts of the British dominions', which is why he encourages the British public to become as fully informed about Ireland as possible.³⁹ If people are not familiar with the country, he declares, then 'it is not improbable that Ireland may furnish permanent grounds of perplexity and debilitating alarm'.⁴⁰ Lack of knowledge, the narrator clearly states, can do little but endanger the Union. Cementing the relationship through the development of detailed and comprehensive writing about Ireland is to offer at least one way of preventing future disturbances.

Another way, of course, is simply to produce a fantasy of empire in which Ireland, played like a patient on an operating table, is seen as both fixed and available. Moving away from the more empirical realm of statistics and population figures, Newenham interprets the attractions of Ireland in truly tempting terms: '... open to the four quarters of the world. Its seas may be navigated throughout the year. Its coasts may for the most part be approached with safety in the most tempestuous weather'.⁴¹ Although clearly aimed at promoting the empire, and of offering Ireland as an advantage to – rather than a beneficiary of – constitutional change, Newenham aims high in the post-Union stakes. The authors of the county surveys overseen by the Dublin Society might have been content to section the country into manageable units, rigorously replacing igno-

Union. After 1800 he appears to have lived principally in England. Believing that the prevailing ignorance of Irish affairs on the part of Englishmen would lead to misgovernment, he applied himself to the investigation of the resources and capabilities of Ireland, in the hope of influencing public opinion in England. Also published *A Letter to the Roman Catholics of Ireland [on the impolicy of rebellion against England]* (1823). A major of militia, he died at Cheltenham on 30 Oct. 1831'. ³⁷ Thomas Newenham, *A Statistical and Historical Inquiry into the progress and magnitude of the Population of Ireland* (London, 1805), p. i. ³⁸ Although Newenham is described as an opponent of the Union, I wish to make a distinction between his disappointment at the loss of the Irish parliament, and the ideology of Unionism which colours much of his writing: 'A due consideration of the various facts which have been brought into view in the foregoing pages cannot, it is presumed, fail to impress every reader with the vast and increasing importance of Ireland in the political scale of the British empire: and to excite in every good, loyal, and patriotic man, the utmost solicitude for the continuance of internal tranquility in that country, manifestly qualified to furnish, in the greatest abundance, the means of sustaining the power of the United Kingdom amidst the momentous changes which Europe seems likely to undergo' (ibid., p. 354). ³⁹ Ibid., p. ii. ⁴⁰ Ibid., pp iii-iv. ⁴¹ Ibid., p. 352.

rance with knowledge in an effort to stave off potential dissatisfactions, but figures like Newenham were working to a much more ambitious brief. While having some sympathy with the work of the Dublin Society, Newenham saw Ireland less in terms of a series of well defined regional studies, than an economic opportunity on a considerably larger scale:

It is everywhere indented by secure harbours, there being no fewer than sixty-six in a circuit of about 750 miles. Noble rivers already navigable, or which may be rendered so, intersect it in all parts. Canals may be cut through it in all directions, without exhausting, as in other countries, that supply of water which is requisite for many other useful purposes. Smooth and durable roads may be, and indeed are made, in every district, however comparatively unfrequented, at an inconsiderable expense. In short, it presents such facilities for an importation and quick transportation of provisions throughout its whole extent, as are not to be found in any other country in Europe, Holland perhaps excepted.⁴²

The fact that Ireland *may* be rendered navigable, that canals *may* be cut through it, and that durable roads *may* be built, is interesting for the way in which it positions the country within a discourse of infrastructural potential and improvement. But the language also bears witness to the newly inscribed vision of the country that Newenham shares: of a proximity that can be capitalized upon, of a complexity that can be overcome by a thorough reorganization of the landscape.

In Newenham's *A View of the Natural, Political, and Commercial Circumstances of Ireland* (1809) these ideas are further developed, and more explicitly expressed. Indeed, even the title of the text marries several complex issues, and suggests the sort of robust appreciation necessary for consolidating the Union. Yet nowhere are Newenham's desires for Ireland – and, more importantly, for Ireland's newly established relationship with Britain – more clearly stated than in the opening lines of his preface:

Under a well established government, exempt from popular control, an accurate and comprehensive knowledge of the various circumstances of a country, on the part of those who exercise the principal functions of the state, does not appear to be indispensably necessary, when the obedience of the people is the sole, or paramount object of concern. To insure obedience, a due proficiency in the art of government is the chief, or, perhaps, the only requisite. To promote the prosperity of a nation, a much more diversified knowledge, than that of the mere statesman, must unquestionably be attained.⁴³

⁴² *Ibid.*, pp 353–4. ⁴³ Thomas Newenham, *A View of the Natural, Political, and Commercial Circumstances of Ireland* (London, 1809), p. i.

Although a series of issues compete within these lines, the sense of increased prosperity tied to improved knowledge, and the manner in which both are regarded as necessary for political stability, is clear enough. Ireland is locked into an arrangement which surpasses any relationship which Britain might have with her other possessions, suggests Newenham, and that relationship should be advanced as far as possible: 'The eastern possessions of Great Britain are confessedly valuable, in a high degree; so also are her possessions in the western parts of the world. But considered as sources of imperial strength, they are, indisputably, upon the whole, inferior to Ireland'.⁴⁴

In both of Newenham's texts an emphasis on disclosing the benefits of empire, while arguing that a closer set of relations can only come about through increased knowledge, is consistently displayed. More importantly, Newenham's reading of the available texts on Ireland has convinced him, among other things, that British prosperity – indeed British national security – is dependent on the political stability of Ireland. 'The strength', he insists, 'indeed in times like the present, the very stability of the British empire incontrovertibly requires the permanence of tranquility in Ireland'.⁴⁵ However, unlike the post-Union optimism of some of Newenham's colleagues across the Irish Sea, the view expressed of how exactly Ireland might function within the empire is more directly stated. Rather than view Ireland as a minor player in the field of international politics, Newenham argues for a greater share of responsibility, seeing in the Union an opportunity for Ireland to become not just a member of the United Kingdom, but an equal partner in all of Britain's overseas transactions. If that fails, if Ireland is less than equally treated, then 'the union will surely be regarded, by all reflecting and unbiassed men, as a vain, illusive, nugatory, and even mischievous measure'.⁴⁶

Yet for all the talk of empire, and of Ireland's indispensable relation to it, the central theme of Newenham's text is knowledge. Again and again the narrator points to this issue, and to its importance in bringing about the political satisfaction of Union. 'To suspect a deficiency of due knowledge', claims Newenham, 'with regard to the circumstances of Ireland, on the part of the principal ministers of the executive power, may appear extremely presumptuous in an individual who has few opportunities of ascertaining the extent of their information. Such a suspicion, however, seems not altogether unwarrantable'.⁴⁷ To have knowledge is clearly to be empowered; to be without it is to be at the mercy of your enemies. Like the authors of the statistical surveys feverishly written at the same time, Newenham searches for Ireland amidst the wreckage of discredited or methodologically unimpressive texts. He describes the work of the Royal Irish Academy as very worthy, yet concludes that 'notwithstanding the acknowledged merit of these writers, especially Smith⁴⁸ and Beaufort,⁴⁹ the inquirer, after perus-

44 *Ibid.*, p. iii. 45 *Ibid.*, p. vi. 46 *Ibid.*, p. viii. 47 *Ibid.* 48 Charles Smith (1715–1762) was born in Waterford, took a medical degree at Trinity College Dublin (1738), and practised as an apothecary in Dungarvan. Devoted most of his time to historical and topographical

ing them all, will still have much to learn'.⁵⁰ When he turns to the narratives of Ireland's trade – a central issue for one so enamoured of the economic potential of the country – he suggests, 'very little has, as yet, been written'.⁵¹ Even historical accounts of the trade and manufactures of the country are 'still wanting',⁵² he believes, while the statistical surveys being carried out by the Dublin Society are 'far from satisfactory',⁵³ and history writing more generally entirely unrewarding: 'The historical accounts of Ireland have, for the most part, been written under strong inveterate prejudices and biases, perpetually operating, in some shape or other, to the preclusion of truth; and cannot, therefore, generally speaking, be, with safety, individually relied on'.⁵⁴

Whether Newenham's almost complete dismissal of a considerable cross-section of research on Ireland is a valid critique, or evidence of professional jealousy, is unclear. Certainly, the tentatively punctuated last line quoted above, as the narrator builds to a denunciation of several predecessors, suggests a nervousness borne out of making too great a case against other writers of Ireland. That said, the sense of opportunity which Newenham expresses demands an image of Ireland as a textually renewable place, either written up but faultily, or not written up at all. Newly established political relations, he seems to suggest, require newly composed narratives. The picture of expectancy presented by the narrator in his *Inquiry into the Population* of 1805, when the country was read as offering the benefits of access to the British shores, is now surpassed by something much more ambitious. In the earlier text it was simply necessary to stress Ireland's favourable position, how it needed only the importation of capital and resources to make it a lucrative investment; however in his *View of the Natural, Political, and Commercial Circumstances of Ireland*, written only four years later, the importance of reading Ireland not just in commercial and trading terms, but in the light of a global economy, becomes paramount:

Whoever will cast an eye over a chart of the world, as exhibited by a projection of the sphere, will find no difficulty in admitting, that the situation of Ireland, relatively to all other countries, capable of receiving and bestowing the reciprocal benefits of external commerce, is favourable in

research. He published histories of Waterford, Cork and Kerry in 1746, 1750 and 1756 respectively under the patronage of the Physico-Historical Society of Dublin (a forerunner of the RIA). He died in Bristol, 1762. 49 Daniel Augustus Beaufort (1739–1821) took a B.A. and M.A. at Trinity College Dublin in 1759 and 1764 respectively. He was ordained in 1763, and succeeded his father, Daniel Cornelius, as Rector of Navan from 1765–1818. He published *Memoir of a Map of Ireland* (1792) and *The Diocese of Meath* (1797). He was also one of the eighty-eight founding members of the Royal Irish Academy. Beaufort was reputedly a lively contributor to Irish antiquarian studies. See C.C. Ellison, *The Hopeful Traveller: The Life and Times of Daniel Augustus Beaufort* (Kilkenny, 1987), for a fond biography. 50 T. Newenham, *A View of the Natural, Political, and Commercial Circumstances of Ireland*, p. xv. 51 *Ibid.*, p. xvi. 52 *Ibid.* 53 *Ibid.*, p. xv. 54 *Ibid.*

the extreme. Its communication is open and direct with England, France, Spain, Portugal, the coast of Africa, the East-Indies, South-America, the West-Indies, the United States of America, Newfoundland, Hudson's-bay, Greenland, &c ... Its communication with the rest and least valuable part of the world is, upon the whole, neither more circuitous, nor more difficult than that of other European countries, with many of those places which the ordinary pursuit of extended and diversified commerce requires their traders to visit. It seems destined by nature to be the great emporium of the commodities of Europe and America; and indeed of those of almost every maritime country upon the surface of the globe.⁵⁵

Newenham views Ireland no longer as a simple asset of the British archipelago, but rather as an impossibly advantaged realm within the world economy. Within this 'chart of the world' Ireland is read as a repository of sumptuousness and excess, its position guaranteeing it links to the Orient and Africa, as well as to the New World. By conjuring up an image of seafaring plenitude, with the country cross-hatched by the traffic of international trade, Newenham presents as productive a future for Ireland as might be imagined. Ireland is central to the British Empire, then, but also to European capitalism. For a text that was written less than ten years after the deaths of 30,000 people in the 1798 Rebellion, such writing says much about the need to emphasize the benefits of Union in the early 1800s.

In examining the statistical surveys, histories and antiquarian research of nineteenth-century Ireland one is struck by how often the subject of British ignorance of Ireland is aired. The country is described as unknown and uncharted, its language appears to have a wildly preposterous lineage, its customs are as little understood as the far reaches of Christendom, its inhabitants constitute an ethnographically rich – if politically unstable – community. While high-level interest in Ireland may be linked to the broader imperial project, in which information-gathering disciplines and societies supplemented the agencies and armies of state, such developments were formed by the culture of Unionism also. Knowledge was about fact gathering, but also about using facts, and the success and relevance of writers such as Newenham and Fraser rested chiefly on their epistemological appreciations of the country. Such data-collecting developments, in other words, found a ready role in the consolidation of empire, but for many writers such inquiries were a necessary part of promoting the Union of Great Britain and Ireland. More than that, they absorbed an historically recalcitrant neighbour within a culturally accessible matrix. For too long Ireland's geographically proximate, yet ideologically fractious, presence threatened Britain. As a region within a newly established polity, however, it was felt that as part of a broader configuration it could be finally pacified. Ironically, Irish 'difference' was to be generally acknowledged, but within the parameters and culture of the Union.