

An imperial harbinger: Sylvester O'Halloran's *General history* (1778)

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ABSTRACT. *This article investigates the antiquarian response to the opportunity for Irish Catholic relief during the Anglo–American crisis and views Sylvester O'Halloran's General history as an innovative attempt to initiate Irish Catholic participation in the British empire predicated on a historic and current fittingness. The London publication of the General history indicated that this work was directed at an audience outside of, as well as within, Ireland. An investigation of the subscription-list confirms that that audience consisted of members of Britain's political élite and successful émigré Irishmen in the service of European Catholic powers. The narrative analysis, when compared with its principal sources, Keating's seventeenth-century Foras feasa ar Éirinn and the twelfth-century Lebor gabála Érenn, shows that O'Halloran altered his source materials to construct an historical picture of a Milesian maritime empire. O'Halloran's argument for Catholic inclusion in the British empire was twofold. He altered his source material to suggest an ancient parity with the contemporary British empire to demonstrate an Irish historical fittingness for an imperial role, while his subscription-list confirmed a current aptitude. This argument was directed at and partly endorsed by another section of the subscription-list, London's political élite.*

Sylvester O'Halloran, a Limerick surgeon and Irish language scholar, published his *General history of Ireland* in London in 1778.¹ It was the year of Gardiner's Relief Act (1778), the first significant repeal of penal restrictions on Irish Catholics, when British ministers, alarmed by the Franco–American Treaty and the extension to Europe of the war with the American colonies, hoped to meet the challenge by recruiting in Scotland and Ireland.²

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¹ Sylvester O'Halloran, *A general history of Ireland* (2 vols, London, 1778). This article draws on Claire E. Lyons 'Sylvester O'Halloran's *General history* (1778): Irish historiography and the late eighteenth-century British Empire' (Ph.D. thesis, National University of Ireland, Galway, 2011). For a biographical account of O'Halloran see J. B. Lyons, 'Sylvester O'Halloran (1728–1807)' in *Irish Journal of Medical Science*, nos. 449–50 (1963), pp 217–32, 279–88.

² As discussed in Robert Burns, 'The Catholic relief act in Ireland 1778' in *Church History*, xxxii (1963), pp 181–206.

The influence of the security needs of the newly-extended British empire of the post-1763 period on Catholic relief politics in Ireland and elsewhere has attracted some attention,³ but not its influence on Irish antiquarian writing, which became overtly political in the mid-eighteenth century as agitation for the repeal of penal restriction on Irish Catholics increased.⁴ Sylvester O'Halloran's *General history* was an innovative attempt to initiate Irish Catholic participation in the late-eighteenth-century British empire, and engage London, as the metropolitan seat of empire, directly in Irish Catholic relief politics. This approach prefigured a significant turning-point in how Ireland's Catholic intellectual élite agitated for Catholic relief, an agitation not directly addressed to London until the 1790s.⁵

The approach to the *General history* adopted in this article will be one which deploys a three-pronged strategy, focusing on the significance of the place of publication, the composition of the subscription-list and the imperial resonance of the narrative of the *General history*. The London publication of the *General history* indicates that this work, unusually for an Irish antiquarian publication, was directed at an audience outside of, as well as within, Ireland. The analysis of the subscription-list confirms that that audience consisted of successful émigré Irishmen in the service of European Catholic powers and members of Britain's political élite. The analysis of the narrative of the *General history* shows that O'Halloran modified his source materials to construct an historical picture of a Milesian maritime empire. While inference is necessarily at work in some of the conclusions reached, the argument presented will be that O'Halloran's inclusion of successful Irish émigrés was in order to demonstrate current Irish suitability for a British imperial role, and was in sympathy with Britain's imperial need to access Irish soldiery at this political juncture, while his assertion of a Milesian empire in Ireland was intended to demonstrate an Irish historic fittingness as imperial agents. This message was received, and partly endorsed, by another section of the subscription list, that drawn from Britain's political élites.

³ Thomas Bartlett, '“A weapon of war yet untried”: Irish Catholics and the armed forces of the crown, 1760–1830' in T. G. Fraser and Keith Jeffery (eds), *Men, women and war: Historical Studies XVIII* (Dublin, 1993), pp 66–85; idem, 'The Catholic question in the eighteenth century' in *History Ireland*, i, no. 1 (Spring, 1993), pp 17–21; Robert Kent Donovan, 'The military origins of the Roman Catholic relief programme of 1778' in *Hist. Jn.*, xxviii (1985), pp 79–102.

⁴ The political and intellectual environment which shaped the writing of Irish histories is serviced by a wide historiography: Clare O'Halloran, *Golden ages and barbarous nations: antiquarian debate and cultural politics in Ireland, c.1750–1800* (Cork, 2004); Bernadette Cunningham, *The world of Geoffrey Keating: history, myth and religion in seventeenth-century Ireland* (Dublin, 2000); Colin Kidd, 'Gaelic antiquity and national identity in enlightenment Ireland and Scotland' in *English Historical Review*, cix (1994), pp 1197–1214; Jacqueline Hill, 'Popery and Protestantism, civil and religious liberty: the disputed lessons of Irish history 1690–1812' in *Past and Present*, no. 118 (1988), pp 96–129; eadem, 'Convergence and conflict in eighteenth-century Ireland' in *Hist. Jn.*, xlv (2001), pp 1039–1063; Joep Leerssen, *Mere Irish and Fíor Ghael: studies in the idea of Irish nationality, its development and literary expression prior to the nineteenth century* (Amsterdam, 1986).

⁵ Éamonn O'Flaherty, 'The Catholic convention and Anglo-Irish politics, 1791–3' in *Archivium Hibernicum*, xl (1985), pp 26–7.

I

The first distinctive feature of the *General history* is its London publication, the only London first edition among O'Halloran's works.⁶ Neither Charles O'Connor (1710–91), nor John Curry (d.1780), the other two leading Catholic antiquarians of this period published major works in London.⁷ The more usual practice for the Irish-based author, Catholic or Protestant, was to publish first in Dublin, followed by a later London reprint,⁸ due to commercial resistance to publishing works on Irish history in the London book-market.⁹ John Curry's failed attempt to publish his *An historical and critical review of the civil wars in Ireland* in London three years earlier is a case in point.¹⁰ O'Halloran also faced considerable difficulties in ensuring a London publication for this work. Failing to engage the interest of a London bookseller, he had to publish the book himself using the labour-intensive and time-consuming self-publication by subscription method of publication. That the project entailed a degree of financial risk, as the author would have provided the initial capital to fund the publication process, highlights O'Halloran's commitment to the project. Why did O'Halloran decide to publish this particular work in London?

Within the context of an article which investigated the difficulties eighteenth-century authors faced in publishing works on Irish history, Toby Barnard has made two points regarding the London publication of the *General history* that are of interest here. Firstly, he is of the opinion that O'Halloran decided to publish in London having failed to find the necessary two hundred subscribers in the Limerick hinterland; a London publication would attract a wider clientele and greater profit for the author. Secondly, Barnard states that O'Halloran also realised that it was in London 'that prejudice had to be overcome if the legal restrictions on Catholics were to be relaxed'.¹¹ Certainly a London publication would attract a more wealthy clientele as 'in Dublin – as elsewhere – the wealthy customer usually preferred the London edition to any other.'¹² However, O'Halloran had successfully published two previous works by subscription and in each case had attracted more than two hundred subscribers.¹³ It seems

⁶ This comprises four major medical works, two major and two minor antiquarian works; for a full list see Lyons, 'Sylvester O'Halloran's *General History*', p. 67.

⁷ Curry's pamphlet, *Remarks on certain passages in Dr Leland's history of Ireland*, was published in London at the author's own expense, at a cost of £7.10s. : Walter Love, 'Charles O'Connor of Belanagare and Thomas Leland's "philosophical" history of Ireland' in *Irish Historical Studies*, xiii (1962), p. 22.

⁸ Thomas Leland's three-volume *History of Ireland*, published in Dublin and London the same year, was an exception. The copyright was bought by the Dublin publisher, Moncrieffe: Robert B. Sher, *The Enlightenment & the book: Scottish authors & their publishers in eighteenth-century Britain, Ireland & America* (Chicago and London, 2006), pp 500–01, note 90.

⁹ Toby Barnard, 'Writing and publishing histories in eighteenth-century Ireland' in Mark Williams and Stephen Paul Forrest (eds), *Constructing the past: writing Irish history, 1600–1800* (Woodbridge, 2010), pp 95–112.

¹⁰ Love, 'Charles O'Connor of Belanagare', pp 19–20.

¹¹ Barnard, 'Writing and publishing histories', p. 102.

¹² Mary Pollard, *Dublin's trade in books, 1550–1800* (Oxford and New York, 1989), p. 116.

¹³ Sylvester O'Halloran, *A complete treatise on gangrene and sphacelus; with a new method of amputation* (Limerick, 1765) secured 206 subscribers and O'Halloran,

unlikely that O'Halloran would undertake an arduous London publication for extra profit. He had a successful medical practice in Limerick city and was not dependent on his writings for income. The fact that he could indulge his non-profit-making antiquarian interests testifies in some measure to his financial security. However, Barnard's second point would agree in substance with the reading presented here. O'Halloran's London publication was an attempt to engage an imperial audience for this particular work.

London was, after all, the metropolitan seat of the British empire whence imperial affairs were administered, more especially with a centralisation of power in the British parliament, and a shift in power away from the colonies, underway in the post-1763 period, as efforts were made to consolidate and reorganise a newly-extended empire and cope with the ethnic, religious and legal diversity of its newly-won territories.¹⁴ The resulting security needs of a Britain with limited population reserves – with its obvious implications for military strength¹⁵ – meant opportunities for Catholic relief that had not, hitherto, existed. The decision in favour of the Quebec Act of 1774, which granted religious toleration to the Catholics of Quebec, was, as Jacqueline Hill has demonstrated, essentially a pragmatic one, arising from issues of military and imperial security.¹⁶ If a radical step for a nation whose central identity was, arguably, not only Protestantism, but Protestant opposition to Popery,¹⁷ it was a necessary one, and set an imperial context of opportunities for Catholic relief more generally which was the setting for the London publication of the *General history*.

The more immediate political setting of composition and publication of the *General history*¹⁸ was the outbreak of war between Britain and her American colonies in 1775, which would set in train a series of events that would lead to the first significant repeal of penal restrictions on Irish Catholics. The possibility that France would side with the American colonists was strong, leaving Ireland vulnerable to a French invasion, perhaps accompanied by disaffection among the Irish Catholic population. The American War was monitored with anticipation and celebration by lower-class Catholics who

An introduction to the study of the history and antiquities of Ireland (Dublin, 1772) 213 subscribers.

¹⁴ P. J. Marshall (ed.), *The Oxford history of the British empire*, ii: *The eighteenth century* (Oxford, 1998), p. 8; idem 'Britain and the world in the eighteenth century, I: Reshaping the empire' in *R. Hist. Soc. Trans.*, 6th ser., viii (1988), pp 1–18; idem, 'Britain and the world in the eighteenth century, iv: The turning outwards of Britain', *ibid.*, xi (2001), pp 1–15; Linda Colley, *Britons: forging the nation 1707–1837* (4th ed., New Haven, 2009), pp 103–5. For changes in the management in the Irish parliament to facilitate tighter control from London see Thomas Bartlett, *Ireland: a history* (Cambridge, 2010), pp 172–4.

¹⁵ Linda Colley, *Captives: Britain, empire and the world, 1600–1850* (2nd ed., New York, 2004), pp 4–9.

¹⁶ Jacqueline Hill, 'Religious toleration and the relaxation of the penal laws: an imperial perspective, 1763–1780' in *Archivium Hibernicum*, xlv (1989), p. 103.

¹⁷ Colley, *Britons*, pp 18–20, 54; David Armitage, *The ideological origins of the British empire* (Cambridge, 2000), p. 195.

¹⁸ Sylvester O'Halloran, *Ierne defended: or, a candid refutation of such passages in the Rev. Dr Leland's, and the Rev. Dr. Whittaker's works, as seem to affect the authenticity and validity of antient Irish history. In a letter to the Antiquarian Society* (Dublin, 1774), pp 34–5.

hoped that British defeats would strengthen the hand of the Bourbon powers and lead to restoration and reversal of the Revolution settlement.¹⁹ On the other hand, a section of Ireland's Catholic élite,²⁰ amongst whom were O'Halloran's fellow antiquarians, Charles O'Connor and John Curry, 'gave uncritical support for the ministry's American policies throughout this period' in expectation of some measure of Catholic relief as a reward for their loyalty.²¹ Early in 1775, the leading Catholic landlord, Lord Kenmare, offered to raise 1,900 troops for the king's service in America.²² The same summer, a committee representing Catholic gentlemen and merchants, and headed by Lords Fingall and Trimblestone and John Curry, offered to raise funds for 'encouraging recruits to enlist for his Majesty's Service'.²³

There is only one reference to the American situation in the *General history*. Here O'Halloran made clear his pro-British, anti-American position, and his opinion of the 'modern Americans,' who 'fought only to destroy the fostering hand that protected and raised' them.²⁴ It is not an improbable conjecture then, that his political alignment, which could benefit Ireland, was a motivating factor in the London publication of the *General history*. O'Halloran had, it seems, originally planned a Dublin publication for this work,²⁵ but in late 1775 he altered his plans and made contact with the Scottish-born publisher, John Murray, to arrange a London publication for the work.²⁶

That O'Halloran's London publication was an attempt to engage an imperial audience can be further supported by reference to the narrative of the *General history*. Although O'Halloran's historical timeframe was from the earliest period to the twelfth century, he frequently inserted digressions which were contemporary and political in direction, two of which, totalling ten pages, focused on penal restrictions on Irish Catholics.²⁷ O'Halloran argued that, after the *Treaty of Limerick* (1691), when the 'bold and restless spirits' had departed, there existed an opportunity for tranquillity and prosperity to be restored to 'the peaceable sons of Ireland'.²⁸ The Irish parliament, however, instead of 'conciliatory acts', or 'labouring to make the horrors of war be forgot', but rather acting out of a 'zeal for religion', concentrated its energies to 'convert and reform their new subjects, by penal laws', and 'make wilful obstinate recusants feel the utmost force of them!'²⁹ O'Halloran described the Protestant Irish parliament that had enacted penal legislation as 'pretended

¹⁹ Vincent Morley, *Irish opinion and the American Revolution, 1760–1783* (Cambridge, 2002), pp 106ff.

²⁰ For the persistence of Jacobite sentiment amongst the Catholic élite see Éamonn Ó Ciardha, *Ireland and the Jacobite cause, 1685–1766: a fatal attachment* (Dublin, 2001).

²¹ Morley, *Irish opinion*, pp 132–4, 169.

²² Burns, 'Catholic relief act', p. 183.

²³ *Ibid.* See also Nicholas Canny, 'Irish resistance to empire? 1641, 1690 and 1798' in Lawrence Stone (ed.), *An imperial state at war: Britain from 1689 to 1815* (London, 1994), pp 288–321.

²⁴ O'Halloran, *General history*, i, 271.

²⁵ O'Halloran, *Ierne defended*, pp 34–5.

²⁶ John Murray to Sylvester O'Halloran, 3 Feb. 1776 (National Library of Scotland, John Murray letter-book 1775–7, MS 41901).

²⁷ O'Halloran, *General History*, i, 97–9; ii, 165–71.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, ii, 167.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, ii, 168.

Irish friends' and the 'most determined enemies to Britain', their legislation having served to swell the armies of France, thereby strengthening the arm of Britain's arch-enemy.³⁰ O'Halloran's discourse here seems intended to bypass the parliament of Ireland and to bring the issue of Catholic relief into the imperial arena, presided over by the British parliament. In fact, in his argumentation he has reversed the polarity of the prevailing line of reasoning used to justify penal legislation on Irish Catholics as a security threat, by directing attention instead towards the Protestant parliament of Ireland, on which he lays sole blame for constituting the threat to the national security of both Ireland and Britain.

II

The second distinctive feature of the *General history* is the location and profile of its subscribers. The analysis of the subscription-list revealed three major groupings: Irish émigrés in the service of European Catholic powers, a British political élite and an Irish subscriber group. Barnard viewed this list, amongst others, as an indication of O'Halloran's social networking reach,³¹ but it carries further, political, significance. While the presence of an Irish subscriber group in a work on Irish affairs is to be expected, the substantial representation from Ireland's military and commercial diaspora, and from among British political élite, warrants investigation for two reasons. Firstly, because such a profile is not revealed by a search of subscription lists for works of like genre and period, Catholic or Protestant.³² Secondly, their appearance comes at a moment of opportunity for Catholic relief which could prove beneficial to both groups. What significance can be attached to this event, and what was the public and political profile of these particular subscribers?

There are seventy-seven subscribers in the Irish émigré group. This figure represents 66.3 per cent of the overseas subscriber group of 121, or 16.1 per cent of the overall subscriber figure of 479. There are two distinct major sub-groups within the Irish émigré grouping: thirty-four military subscribers (44.2 per cent of the émigré grouping) and twenty-seven subscribers from the commercial émigré class (35.1 per cent). The significance of these figures only increases when the difficulties of collecting overseas subscribers are taken into account. The lack of individuals involved in politics and government is only apparent: the militarisation of administration in Bourbon Spain, meant that military and civil administration duties were not totally separate areas, and resulted in exceptional Irish soldiers being promoted to civil administration positions,³³ O'Halloran subscribers among them.³⁴ In Spanish terms, foremost was the Nantes-born lieutenant-general Ricardo Wall (1694–1778), who was virtually a 'Spanish prime minister' during the reign of Charles III, and

³⁰ Ibid., i, 98–9.

³¹ Barnard, 'Writing and publishing histories', pp 102–3.

³² Lyons, 'Sylvester O'Halloran's *General History*', pp 130–3. There is one exception, Lord Courtenay (1744–88), who subscribed to both O'Halloran's *General history* and to his *Introduction*.

³³ Óscar Recio Morales, *Ireland and the Spanish empire, 1600–1825* (Dublin, 2010), p. 182.

³⁴ For a complete list of Irish émigré subscribers see Lyons 'Sylvester O'Halloran's *General History*', pp 160–4.

continued to enjoy royal patronage throughout his life.³⁵ One of the many Irishmen that Wall helped elevate to power, and another O'Halloran subscriber, was Alexander O'Reilly (1723–94), born in Baltrana, Co. Meath, elevated to the rank of count for his services to the Spanish crown in 1770, and appointed military governor of Madrid and, in 1780, governor of Cádiz.³⁶ The military subscribers also included a strong Jacobite element. The Duc de Fitz-James (Charles de Fitzjames, 1712–87), was a grandson of the Stuart king, James II, by his illegitimate son, James Fitz-James, (1670–1734).³⁷ Francois-Jacques Walsh de Serrant (1704–82) was created Comte de Serrant by Louis XV in 1754/5, received a commission in the regiment of Clare in 1760, and in 1784 was made Maréchal de Camp.³⁸ Don Felix O'Neil, major-general and commandant-general of Galicia and inspector-general of the Spanish infantry, had joined the Irish Brigade in 1744, and was sent to Scotland in 1746 where he fought at Culloden and remained with Charles Edward after the defeat.³⁹ Also listed is the leading Jacobite Count Arthur Dillon (1750–94), colonel of the family's proprietary regiment from the death of his uncle, Theobald, 7th Viscount Dillon, in 1691.⁴⁰ Moreover, O'Halloran's subscription list contains the names of twenty-two high-ranking military officers representing the Irish regiments of Ultonia and Hibernia who were in the service of Spain at this period.⁴¹

There is also a substantial representation from Ireland's *émigré* merchant class in this list, with twenty merchants from Cádiz, six from Málaga and one from Ferrol included. In the eighteenth century, the Irish were the dominant group among the British population of Cádiz, and amongst the wealthiest were the Cádiz Irish merchants, who were slightly more affluent than their counterparts at Málaga.⁴² The Murphy family of Cádiz owned more ships than any other Irish merchants, operating twenty vessels trading between Spain, the rest of Europe and the Indies;⁴³ Edward and Barnard Murphy were

³⁵ Recio Morales, *Ireland and the Spanish empire*, pp 238–9. See also Diego Téllez Alarcia, 'Ricardo Wall, the forgotten minister of the eighteenth century' in D. M. Downey, and J. C. MacLennan (eds), *Spanish–Irish relations through the ages* (Dublin, 2008), pp 137–48.

³⁶ Samuel Fannin, 'Alexander "Bloody" O'Reilly: "a monster of fortune"' in *History Ireland*, ix, no. 3 (Autumn, 2001), pp 26–30.

³⁷ For the Fitz-James social circle in Paris, and other family information, see Julietta Adam, 'Society in Paris' in *North American Review*, cl (1890), pp 490–504.

³⁸ Mary Hayden, 'Prince Charles Edward and his Irish friends' in *Studies*, xxiii (1934), pp 103–4.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, pp 100–1.

⁴⁰ For Dillon's military career, see Richard Hayes, *Irish swordsmen of France* (Dublin, 1934), pp 115–16. For the prestige of the Dillon family at French court see Louis M. Cullen, 'Apotheosis and crisis: the Irish diaspora in the age of Choiseul' in Thomas O'Connor and Mary Ann Lyons (eds), *Irish communities in early-modern Europe* (Dublin, 2006), pp 6–31.

⁴¹ W. S. Murphy, 'The Irish Brigade of Spain at the capture of Pensacola, 1781' in *Florida Historical Quarterly*, xxxviii, no. 3 (Jan. 1960), p. 219.

⁴² María Begoña Villar García, 'Irish migration and exiles in Spain: refugees, soldiers, traders and statesmen' in O'Connor and Lyons, *Irish communities*, p. 196.

⁴³ Samuel Fannin, 'The Irish community in eighteenth-century Cádiz' in Thomas O'Connor and Mary Ann Lyons (eds), *Irish migrants in Europe after Kinsale, 1602–1820* (Dublin, 2003), p. 147.

O'Halloran subscribers. So were Power and Langton from the Cádiz trading house of Carew, Langton and Power which was amongst the wealthiest in the city. Another O'Halloran subscriber, John Galway, owned substantial property in Cádiz and in the surrounding countryside.⁴⁴ Both William Terry of Málaga, a port of call for European–African and Atlantic traffic, and Dominic Terry of Cádiz, were subscribers, the latter also heavily involved in the public affairs of Cádiz, as royal representative in council affairs.⁴⁵ Another O'Halloran subscriber involved in public office was Thomas Quilty of Málaga, an alderman.⁴⁶ The subscription list of the *General history* thus included some of the most iconic military figures and some of the wealthiest merchants from Ireland's émigré community.

There were only two other Irish-Catholic antiquarians that could possibly have drawn on this émigré support, Charles O'Connor and John Curry. There is no evidence that they chose to do so. The reason for this may lie in O'Connor's assertions of Catholic loyalty, which were central to his case for Catholic relief. O'Connor believed that continued declarations and demonstrations of Catholic loyalty would gradually argue Irish Protestants out of their prejudices.⁴⁷ His approach could be considered an insular one, centred on finding accommodation for Irish Catholics within the Protestant state. His historical works focused on the political sophistication of early Irish government and deliberately excluded references to military exploits, which he felt reinforced the stereotyped barbaric image of the Irish.⁴⁸ References to Irishmen prominent in the armies of the traditional enemies of Britain would not complement this approach. Moreover, O'Connor would likely have viewed such an association as counter-productive, as more likely to inflame rather than soothe Protestant fears surrounding the Catholic issue in general, an attitude shared by the Catholic Committee of which he was a founder and leading member.⁴⁹ In contrast, O'Halloran championed the European and military element of early Irish history and origins, and showed no reluctance whatsoever in valorising Irish military achievements, either in the distant past, or the present.⁵⁰

It is not altogether surprising then to note that these émigré subscribers did not appear by chance in the *General history* subscription-list. A comment in the *Hibernian Journal* confirms that O'Halloran wrote to Ireland's French and Spanish military diaspora soliciting their support in the form of subscription for his *General history*.⁵¹ Moreover, in the 'Preliminary Discourse' to this

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 140.

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 143. See also Kevin Terry, 'Terrys in Latin America of Cork origin' in *Irish Migration Studies in Latin America*, vii, no. 3 (Mar. 2010), pp 381–6.

⁴⁶ Fannin, 'The Irish community in eighteenth-century Cádiz', p. 141.

⁴⁷ Patrick Delury, 'Ex conflictu et collisione: the failure of Irish historiography, 1745–1790' in *Eighteenth-Century Ireland/Iris an dá chultúr*, xv (2000), pp 27–8.

⁴⁸ Charles O'Connor, *A dissertation on the first migrations, and final settlements of the Scots in North-Britain; with occasional observations on the poems of Fingal and Temora* (Dublin, 1766). Clare O'Halloran makes the point that O'Connor had been less careful in his earlier work: O'Halloran, *Golden Ages*, p. 111.

⁴⁹ R. D. Edwards (ed.), 'The minute book of the Catholic Committee, 1773–92' in *Archivium Hibernicum*, ix (1942), p. 55.

⁵⁰ O'Halloran, *Ierne defended*, pp 8–10.

⁵¹ Crito, 'To the conductors of the Hibernian Journal', in *Hibernian Journal: or, chronicle of liberty*, 14 Oct. 1778, p. 1.

work, O'Halloran stated that Sir James Aylmer, colonel of the regiment Ultonia,⁵² had collected over one hundred subscribers in Spain on his behalf. This would suggest that the composition of the subscription-list was, to a certain extent, a result of deliberate orchestration by the author, and could be viewed as an extension of the political message which informed his narrative. This position does not suggest that the author handpicked each individual subscriber; what it does suggest is that the overall composition of the subscription-list was his creation, and indicates the imperial, rather than the insular direction of his discourse. It is unlikely that O'Halloran would have solicited this émigré support if he was attempting to impress an Irish Protestant audience. For Ireland's Protestant ascendancy class, this parade of an alternative Catholic aristocracy 'in waiting', holders of a what could be considered more legitimate land-title claims in many instances, would have been alarming.⁵³

The British imperial assessment of the situation as the war in the American colonies advanced and a possible French invasion of Ireland loomed was one where it was felt that the Irish nobility and merchants would remain loyal to Britain, but that the Catholic masses, with nothing to lose, would support a French invasion of Ireland.⁵⁴ Recruitment had not been successful and desertion numbers were high. The numbers in regiments on the Irish establishment had now fallen to below 9,000 and they had to be reinforced.⁵⁵ Within this context, the inclusion in O'Halloran's subscription-list of those representing a proven military resource and a successful commercial sector was a timely reminder of resources that could perhaps be utilised, in exchange for a small measure of Catholic relief. In fact, O'Halloran's strategy here, albeit on an élite and international level, was an extension of, and perfectly in tune with those earlier schemes of the Catholic élite, mentioned above, to raise Catholic troops for the American War. These offers of support were made to Britain via the Dublin parliament.⁵⁶ What is distinctive about O'Halloran's approach is its direct appeal to Britain.

There is support for this reading within the text of the *General history*. In a digression on penal legislation O'Halloran, drawing a contrast between the effects of the inclusive policy pursued by the Milesians towards their defeated enemies and the opposite conduct pursued since the Revolution (1688),⁵⁷ implied that had not the 'cruel hand of oppression' (penal legislations) being applied by the Irish parliament, Irish soldiery would not have left 'their *fire-sides and households-gods*, to seek protection in foreign climates, and fight the battles of the enemies of their country'.⁵⁸ In other words, O'Halloran implied that if penal restrictions had not been imposed, and the Irish émigrés allowed

⁵² Harmon Murtagh, 'Irish soldiers abroad, 1600–1800', in Bartlett and Jeffery (eds), *Military history of Ireland*, p. 296.

⁵³ Protestant insecurity in Ireland centred on two issues primarily, land title and status: Niall Ó Ciosáin, *Print and popular culture in Ireland, 1750–1850* (Houndmills, 1997), pp 171–84.

⁵⁴ Morley, *Irish opinion*, p. 276.

⁵⁵ For recruitment difficulties, *ibid.*, pp 141ff, 258.

⁵⁶ Burns, 'Catholic relief act,' pp 183–4.

⁵⁷ This point was raised in one of the reviews of this work: 'O'Halloran's history of Ireland, concluded' in *Monthly Review*, lx (1779), p. 99.

⁵⁸ O'Halloran, *General history*, i, 97.

to integrate and strengthen the kingdom, as per Milesian policy, they would now, the logical inference is, be fighting in the ranks as part of the British imperial armed forces, for ‘their country’ (Britain) and not, as with many of those émigrés on the subscription-list were at this period, in the service of Catholic European powers. He further added ‘How happy for Ireland; what millions of money, and thousands of lives might have been saved to Britain, had such principles of *equity and sound policy* governed Irish counsels for eight years past!’⁵⁹ O’Halloran’s grievance was not with the conquest of Ireland by the English *per se*, but with the manner of the conquest and how the defeated Irish were subsequently treated.

O’Halloran’s argument, that the exclusion of Irish Catholics had proved detrimental to the security of Britain and Ireland, was current amongst some members of the Protestant ascendancy élite. During the debates on Gardiner’s Relief Act in the Irish House of Commons, an O’Halloran subscriber, William English, argued that penal restrictions had driven ‘soldiers and statesman’ from ‘our native shores’.⁶⁰ Another O’Halloran subscriber, the pro-repeal M.P. John Scot, drew attention to Irish élite soldiery on the continent:

Look a little into the History of Europe, & see if my observation is justified. who are the names that have figur’d? they are Exiles of Ireland and are extoll’d as Heroes in every Country. Bring back those persons that have made other Countries great, ... Bring, Sir, from Spain a man honoured by all the people of that Country, ... that distinguishes himself as the first character in Europe, an Exile from this Country – Wall.... You are injured by an Army on the Continent, that Army commanded by the Marshal Biron. Look thro’ every Country in Europe, & see if the people you have banished have not been the Coriolani of those Countries.⁶¹

Whether these Irish émigrés would have agreed with O’Halloran’s identification with Britain is doubtful, and his description of French and Spanish service as fighting ‘the battles of the enemies of their country’ is a little startling. Dillon’s regiment had demanded the privilege to be the first regiment sent to America to fight the British.⁶² However, the opportunity to serve in the British army would have been welcomed by many Irish career soldiers in pursuit of advancement and promotion.⁶³ Although barred officially from serving in the British armed forces until 1793, in the 1780s, the British army received applications from Irish Catholic officers serving in continental armies, seeking to transfer to the British army.⁶⁴ O’Halloran’s argument is contemporary and potent. The British empire’s constant need for soldiers had led to a remarkable *volte face* in respect of Scotland and her once largely

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 98.

⁶⁰ Sir Henry Cavendish’s notes on debates in the Irish House of Commons, 1776–83, pp 28–9 (25 May 1778) (Library of Congress, Washington DC, Ms.62–4531; N.L.I. microfilm pos. 7003–5).

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 18 June 1778, p. 206.

⁶² Hayes, *Irish Swordsmen*, pp 115–16.

⁶³ Louis M. Cullen, ‘Catholic social classes under the penal laws’ in T. P. Power and Kevin Whelan (eds), *Endurance and emergence: Catholics in Ireland in the eighteenth century* (Dublin, 1990), p. 75.

⁶⁴ Bartlett, ‘A weapon of war’, p. 71.

Jacobite Highlands, which had come to be viewed not as an expensive nuisance, but as 'the arsenal of the empire'.⁶⁵ O'Halloran does not draw this comparison with Scotland specifically, but the example would have been difficult to ignore as issues of imperial security now provided a similar importunity for Ireland to replace, or at least, compliment Scotland, in this regard.

The British subscriber group contained a total of forty-four subscribers, including thirty-four members of the nobility (77.2 per cent of this group) and twenty-one individuals with significant political influence, either in the British House of Commons or House of Lords (47.7 per cent) in both the Whig and Tory parties.⁶⁶ Among the most notable of those listed were Charles Watson-Wentworth, marquis of Rockingham,⁶⁷ and his right-hand man, William Cavendish-Bentinck, duke of Portland, both of whom would head Whig ministries.⁶⁸ Sir George Savile is particularly important within the Irish context as on 14 May 1778 he introduced a Catholic relief bill (forerunner of Gardiner's Irish Relief Act) in the British House of Commons.⁶⁹ A further Whig magnate among the subscribers was William Cavendish, duke of Devonshire, lord treasurer of Ireland and governor of Cork from 1766 to 1793.⁷⁰ Charles James Fox, who would hold the post of foreign secretary in Rockingham's administration in 1782, later to form a coalition with Lord North in 1783, was listed,⁷¹ as was John St. John, M.P. for Eye, a relative of Lord North, and a constant supporter of the North administration.⁷² Edmund Burke, M.P. for Bristol, Catholic sympathiser and O'Halloran correspondent was a subscriber⁷³ and so was Sir Robert Spencer,⁷⁴ brother of the duke of Marlborough, and an M.P. in the British House of Commons for a total of forty years.⁷⁵

⁶⁵ Colley, *Britons*, p. 132.

⁶⁶ For a complete list of British political subscribers see Lyons, 'Sylvester O'Halloran's *General History*', pp 136–8.

⁶⁷ S. M. Farrell, 'Wentworth, Charles Watson-, second marquess of Rockingham (1730–1782)', in *Oxford D.N.B.* Rockingham headed two short ministries, in 1765–6 and 1782.

⁶⁸ David Wilkinson, 'Bentinck, William Henry Cavendish Cavendish-, third duke of Portland (1738–1809)', in *Oxford D.N.B.*

⁶⁹ John Cannon, 'Savile, Sir George, eighth baronet (1726–1784)', in *Oxford D.N.B.*; Lewis Namier and John Brooke, *The history of parliament: the House of Commons 1754–1790* (3 vols, London, 1985), iii, 460–1.

⁷⁰ Devonshire did not have major political ambitions and refused cabinet office three times, even during the regency crisis in 1788–9: Michael Durban, 'Cavendish, William, fifth duke of Devonshire (1748–1811)' in *Oxford D.N.B.*

⁷¹ Charles James Fox is listed as 'Hon. Charles Fox' in O'Halloran's list. See L. G. Mitchell, 'Fox, Charles James (1748–1806)' in *Oxford D.N.B.*

⁷² Namier & Brooke, *History of parliament*, iii, 400–1; G. Le G. Norgate, 'St John, John (1745/6–1793)', rev. S. J. Skedd, in *Oxford D.N.B.*

⁷³ Paul Langford, 'Burke, Edmund (1729/30–1797)' in *Oxford D.N.B.*; Namier & Brooke, *History of parliament*, ii, 145–53. For O'Halloran's correspondences with Burke, see Sylvester O'Halloran to Edmund Burke, 1 Aug. 1778 & 15 Sept. 1783 (Sheffield Archives, Wentworth Woodhouse Muniments, WWM/BK P1/1089).

⁷⁴ Namier & Brooke, *The history of parliament*, iii, 460–1.

⁷⁵ The Duke of Marlborough, also a *General history* subscriber, retired from political office in 1766, but remained an influential figure in electoral terms due to his influence in the boroughs of Woodstock, Oxford and Heytesbury and in the county of Oxford: G. Le G. Norgate, 'Spencer, George, fourth duke of Marlborough (1739–1817)', rev. Stephen M. Lee, in *Oxford D.N.B.*

If O'Halloran's intent was to activate an imperial interest in his *General history*, and the message it contained by virtue of the London publication of this work, the unparalleled representation from the British political élite in the subscription-list would indicate that his message had been received. This position does not suggest that these British élite figures had any interest in a history of Ireland told from the traditional perspective *per se*, but rather, as this author has suggested elsewhere, a more likely explanation for their appearance can be found in the immediate political context of a desire on the part of the British government to encourage passage of Gardiner's Relief Act in Ireland by demonstrating British parliamentary support for the measure.⁷⁶ The political focus of Catholic antiquarian writing at this period was to agitate for repeal of penal restrictions on Irish Catholics. Subscriber support in this list could suggest support for removal of penal restrictions on Irish Catholics, at this particular juncture at least. The point here is that the presence of a British-based Protestant political élite in the subscription list of an Irish-Catholic author, presenting a traditional view of Irish history, and one that challenged the established Protestant world view, is unprecedented. On the other hand, to find British-based subscribers in, for example, the subscription-list to Temple's *Irish Rebellion*, republished for the seventh time in 1766, is not surprising,⁷⁷ given that Temple's work lent historical support to the position of the Protestant ascendancy in Ireland, and was republished frequently, especially at times of threat.⁷⁸

III

The third distinctive feature of the *General history* is the imperial resonance of its narrative. Based primarily on the defence of Gaelic civilisation, the main purpose and political intent of works such as the *General history*, Charles O'Connor's *Dissertations*, or, John Curry's publications on the 1641 Irish Rebellion, was to challenge the pejorative view of the Irish disseminated in the dominant Anglophone historiography which legitimised the exclusion of Irish Catholics from the political nation, and to diffuse the heat in the politico-religious debate.⁷⁹ The *General history* was also part of the quest to provide Ireland with a 'philosophical' history, as David Hume had done for England and William Robertson for Scotland.⁸⁰ Moreover, it sought to redeem Irish

⁷⁶ Claire E. Lyons, 'Playing Catholic against Protestant: British intervention in Catholic relief in Ireland 1778' in *Eighteenth-Century Ireland/Iris an dá chultúr*, xxviii (2013), 116–35.

⁷⁷ John Temple, *The history of the general rebellion in Ireland; raided upon the three and twentieth day of October*. (7th ed., Cork, 1766) [first published, 1646].

⁷⁸ Leerssen, *Mere Irish and Fíor Ghael*, p. 385; Maureen Wall, *Catholic Ireland in the eighteenth century: collected essays of Maureen Wall*, ed. Gerard O'Brien, (Dublin, 1989), pp 119–20.

⁷⁹ Charles O'Connor, *Dissertations on the antient history of Ireland: wherein an account is given of the origine, government, letters, sciences, religion, manners and customs, of the antient inhabitants* (Dublin, 1753); idem, *Dissertation on the first migrations ...*; John Curry, *A brief account from the most authentic protestant writers of the causes, motives, and mischiefs, of the Irish rebellion, on the 23rd day of October 1641* (Dublin, 1747); idem, *An historical and critical review of the civil wars in Ireland, from the reign of Queen Elizabeth, to the settlement under King William ...* (2 vols, Dublin, 1775).

⁸⁰ Sylvester O'Halloran, 'Proposals for printing by subscription a general history of Ireland' (Essex Record Office, Chelmsford MS D/DL C53), p. 1; David Hume, *The history*

antiquity from the publications of James Macpherson and the ensuing Ossianic scandal.⁸¹ The use of arguments from history/pseudo-history as a political statement, or restatement, of Ireland's past at critical periods, was not a novel occurrence. The twelfth century produced the monastic compilation, *Lebor gabála Éirenn*, which was primarily a defence of immemorial rights of possession against the Norman invasion.⁸² The seventeenth century witnessed Keating's reconstructed version of the ancient Irish past, *Foras feasa ar Éirenn*, which was primarily a defence of the Stuart dynasty and Catholicism.⁸³ What was important for Keating, and reflected the political climate of his time, was a need to establish the parity of Ireland's kings with their British and Saxon counterparts.⁸⁴

The political context within which O'Halloran was writing was different again, one which witnessed the post-1763 consolidation of the British empire. In response O'Halloran introduced the concept of a Milesian empire, rather than a Milesian kingdom, into his narrative, the first such use in this type of literature. Eighteenth-century usage of the term 'British empire' could include the notion of Britain and her overseas possessions as one body politic overseen by the imperial parliament in London, the meaning which it will be accorded here, and an understanding which can be identified in eighteenth-century Ireland.⁸⁵ Within this context, O'Halloran's *General history* attempted to demonstrate that Ireland's 'Milesian empire' had welded the sceptre of an extended empire in Britain and parts of Gaul in the pre-Roman period, until, finally, in the sixth century, it lost its last colony (the Albanian Scots), and was, thereafter, confined to the island of Ireland.⁸⁶ The reason for this alteration, it can be suggested, was to demonstrate that the Irish had an historic suitability for an imperial role, which complemented a current suitability as imperial agents, as suggested by the inclusion of Irish émigrés in the subscription list.

In other ways, too, the influence of a British imperial context on O'Halloran's reconstruction of the Irish past can be demonstrated. Within Gaelic historiography, the origin of the Gael in Scythia, their subsequent

of England from the invasion of Julius Caesar to the accession of Henry VII (8 vols, London, 1762); William Robertson, *History of Scotland* (2 vols, London, 1759).

⁸¹ For further discussion on Macpherson and Irish historiography see David Thomson, *The Gaelic sources of Macpherson's Ossian* (Edinburgh, 1952); Howard Gaskill, *Ossian revisited* (Edinburgh, 1991); Clare O'Halloran, 'Irish re-creations of the Gaelic past: the challenge of Macpherson's Ossian', in *Past and Present*, no. 124 (1989), pp 69–95.

⁸² *Lebor gabála Éirenn: the book of the taking of Ireland*, ed. R. A. S. Macalister (5 vols, Dublin, 1938–56).

⁸³ Geoffrey Keating, *Foras feasa ar Éirinn: the history of Ireland*, ed. David Comyn and P. S. Dinneen (4 vols, Dublin, 1902–14).

⁸⁴ Cunningham, *World of Geoffrey Keating*, pp 141–2.

⁸⁵ For examples in printed texts see *An appeal to reason and justice on behalf of the British constitution and the subjects of the British empire*, (London, 1778) for the concept of one imperial body politic, and where the British House of Commons is accepted as being the 'Virtual Commons of all the British Empire' (p. 9); William Bertie, *The earl of Abingdon's two late speeches in the House of Lords, upon the affairs of Ireland: with his lordship's celebrated bill upon the same occasion* (London, 1782), pp 11, 13, 16. For Irish usage see George Ogle and Barry Yelverton, both 4 Aug. 1778, in *Cavendish's parliamentary diary*, pp 215–16.

⁸⁶ O'Halloran, *General history*, ii, 83–4.

migrations and final conquest of Ireland, had always formed an integral part of the narrative of origin, from its first textual manifestation in *Lebor gabála Érenn*. This tradition was replicated over time by subsequent Gaelic antiquarians. In the process, certain core elements of the tradition became conventionalised, and carried a special significance in defining the dominant meaning of the traditional narrative.⁸⁷ A comparison of O'Halloran's account with the traditional narrative to identify where his account deviates from the accepted norm in light of the eighteenth-century political context makes it apparent that he introduced both structural and terminological changes into his account of the early Irish past.

Firstly, O'Halloran made three significant alterations to the migratory routes of the early ancestors of the Irish. According to Keating, the territory of Scythia and the birthplace of the eponymous ancestor of the Gael, Phaenius, King of Scythia, was located in the interior of Asia, with access to the Mediterranean via a Scythian river called the Tanais.⁸⁸ *Lebor gabála* also places Scythia in northern Asia.⁸⁹ O'Halloran located Scythia on the Syrian coast and claimed that:

Every circumstance and every fact that can be collected, unite in fixing it [Scythia] on the Syrian coast bordering the Mediterranean, and to be the ancient Phoenicia, so renowned in history.⁹⁰

By moving the location of Scythia to the Syrian coast, and identifying it as the site of ancient Phoenicia, and Phaenius, the eponymous ancestor of the Gael, as the King of Phoenicia, O'Halloran linked the narrative of early beginnings with an historically significant and ancient empire.⁹¹ Phoenicia was not only a geographical location but a highly emotive and succinct political concept, and one that could be readily understood by a reasonably well-read eighteenth-century audience. The claim of the Phoenicians to supremacy in navigation, commerce, arts and the sciences before other nations was well documented.⁹² To strengthen his argument O'Halloran compared the customs, mode of worship and language of the Phoenicians and the Gael, and concluded that the Gael were the ancient Phoenicians.⁹³ They were called Phenians from Phaenius: '*Phaeni o Phaenius adbhearta, brigh gan dochta*'.⁹⁴ According to

⁸⁷ 'Traditional narrative' here refers to Keating's *Foras feasa* and the *Lebor gabála*. Though these are not the only traditional sources, they provide a valuable basis for comparison with O'Halloran. There are three redactions and a verse account for most events in the *Lebor gabála*, and the approach adopted here is to use the version that provides the most useful account of events.

⁸⁸ Keating, *Foras feasa*, ii, 31.

⁸⁹ *Lebor gabála*, i, 37, 39.

⁹⁰ O'Halloran, *General history*, i, 40.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 41.

⁹² Antoine Yves Goguet, *The origin of laws, arts, and sciences, and their progress among the most ancient nations. Translated from the French of the President de Goguet ...* (3 vols, Edinburgh, 1761); William Blennerhassett, *A new history of England, from the time that the Phoenicians first landed in this island, to the end of the reign of King George I* (6 vols, Newcastle upon Tyne, 1751).

⁹³ O'Halloran, *General history*, i, 44–7.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, i, 43. A similar comment appears in *Foras feasa*, ii, 20, and *Lebor gabála*, i, 165, but no linkage is made with ancient Phoenicia.

O'Halloran's narrative, the Milesians who invaded Ireland in the year A.M. 2736⁹⁵ were direct descendants of the ancient Phoenician Empire.⁹⁶ This is the first link in the chain which will provide the early ancestors of the Gael with an imperial past and is confirmed in the text:

After such proofs and such illustrations of times so extremely remote, will any candid man of letters deny the truth of our early records? Will he any longer refuse us the use of letters, when it appears to demonstration, that the very father of letters, of arts and of sciences was our great ancestor? Will he deny us the use of ships, when it becomes evident, that the first inventors of ships, and of navigation, were our *great ancestors*?⁹⁷

The second alteration O'Halloran made to the traditional narrative provided a link between the Gael and the Carthaginian empire. O'Halloran submitted that *Gaothluigh Mheadhonacha*, which previous Gaelic antiquarians had taken to mean Gothland/Gothia,⁹⁸ referred in fact to Getulia on the North African coast bordering on Carthage.⁹⁹ O'Halloran claimed that both Carthage and Numidia were very early inhabited by Phoenician colonies, and identified this early Carthaginian colony as the Gael under the leadership of Laimh-fionn in A.M. 2279.¹⁰⁰ The Laimh-fionn colony remained in this area for approximately 280 years and as they were a 'commercial' and 'a warlike people', O'Halloran argued that they would have 'planted colonies', and formed regular settlements there.¹⁰¹ He further argued that the place names surrounding Carthage corresponded 'exactly to the ancient Irish language' which strengthened his hypotheses. For example, he reckoned 'the plain surrounding Carthage was called Magaria; and *mugh* is Irish for a plain'; the harbour of Carthage was called Cohon, and '*cuan* is Irish for an harbour'; Cirta he derived from the Irish for city which is *cathair*, and Carthage, he derived from *cathair* and *oghe*, a maiden city.¹⁰² Although the Carthaginian empire did not rise to prominence until some time after this period, approximately A.M. 3350, based on O'Halloran's assertion of a Phoenician colony under Laimh-fionn in the area around Carthage, it would seem to follow that at least a portion of the Carthaginian empire were direct descendants of this earlier Laimh-fionn colony.¹⁰³ According to O'Halloran then, not only were the Gael a branch of the ancient Phoenician empire, they were also the progenitors of the great Carthaginian empire. Phoenicia and Carthage provide major anchor points in O'Halloran's narrative of origins, and forged a direct link between the Irish ancestors and two major ancient maritime trading empires of the Mediterranean.¹⁰⁴

⁹⁵ A.M. dates refer to the year of the world, while A.C. refers to years after the birth of Christ.

⁹⁶ O'Halloran, *General history*, i, 49.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 52–3.

⁹⁸ Keating, *Foras feasa*, ii, 35; *Lebor gabála*, ii, 23.

⁹⁹ O'Halloran, *General history*, i, 83.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 83–4.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 85.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 85–6.

¹⁰⁴ O'Halloran argues for a close affinity between Ireland and Carthage to explain Irish participation in the Punic wars: O'Halloran, *General history*, i, 138–9, 143–4, 168.

Thirdly, according to the traditional narrative, although there are some variations as to specifics, the migratory route of the Gael included a trip to the land of the Amazons on the Caspian Sea, a journey north to the Rhiplean mountains, a trip to Britain and back, a visit to the island of Gothland and the land of the Goths, in addition to a short sojourn on the island of Sicily.¹⁰⁵ All of this O'Halloran omitted, instead prioritizing the maritime nature of their expansion. From their departure point at Phoenicia, as they worked their way through the Mediterranean, sailing past the Pillars of Hercules to Corona, from where they eventually sailed to Ireland, their expansion route was by sea. Maritime expansion was a concept which was easily translated into eighteenth-century terms for a British empire viewed primarily as a maritime trading nation.¹⁰⁶ What was important for O'Halloran as regard the early migrations, was to reconstruct an ancient Milesian imperial past, in an embryonic or potential state, at least, to underpin his assertion of a Milesian empire in Ireland at a later date.

To provide historic evidence for the existence of a Milesian empire in Ireland, O'Halloran referred to the speech of the English delegate at the Council of Constance (1414–18).¹⁰⁷ According to O'Halloran, English advocates seeking voting rights as an independent nation at the Council of Constance claimed that as 'Europe was divided into four empires ... the Roman, the Constantinopolitan, the Irish and the Spanish' they were entitled to rank as a nation as they were a 'branch of the [Irish] empire' by virtue of Henry V's being monarch of Ireland.¹⁰⁸ In his first antiquarian work, *Insula sacra*, O'Halloran had referred to the Council of Constance, but there he had used the term 'free kingdom' and not 'empire'.¹⁰⁹ Two years later, in his *Introduction*, he again referred to the Council of Constance, but this time he substituted the term 'empire' for 'kingdom'.¹¹⁰ The notion of Ireland's ancient imperial status, based on the assertion of the delegate at the Council of Constance, is present in the *Introduction* but only briefly stated (it filled only half a page), and was argued for more strongly and at greater length in the *General history*, where it filled four times more text, and was a vital component in directing the narrative. The insertion of the term 'empire' was a deliberate fabrication on O'Halloran's part. If indeed the English delegates made such a claim, and even this is in doubt, the term 'kingdom' and not 'empire' was used.

Additionally, O'Halloran argued for equivalence between the term '*ard rí* high king' and the term 'emperor'. In the *General history*, O'Halloran stated that Ireland's kings or 'monarchs may truly rank as emperors, being the

¹⁰⁵ *Lebor gabála*, ii, 69, 71; Keating, *Foras feasa*, ii, 32–7.

¹⁰⁶ Armitage, *Ideological origins*, pp 100–24; David A. Bauch, 'Maritime strength and Atlantic commerce: the uses of a "grand marine empire"' in Stone (ed.), *An imperial state at war*, p. 186.

¹⁰⁷ For an account of this Council and the various arguments as to the voting rights of particular nations, and the suggestion that the English delegate's comments were fabrication see Aubrey Gwynn, 'Ireland and the English nation at the Council of Constance' in *R.I.A. Proc.*, xlv part C (1939/40), pp 183–233.

¹⁰⁸ O'Halloran, *General history*, ii, 68–9.

¹⁰⁹ Sylvester O'Halloran, *Insula sacra: or, the general utilities arising from some permanent foundation, for the preservation of our antient annals demonstrated, and the means pointed out*. (Limerick, 1770), p. 30.

¹¹⁰ O'Halloran, *Introduction*, p. 159.

sovereigns of kings'.¹¹¹ Following from this assertion, O'Halloran addressed Ireland's high kings of the traditional narrative in the more contemporary style of emperor, which significantly altered the resonance of his history. For instance; 'Eochaidh the son of Muireadhach ... was proclaimed emperor';¹¹² 'Roderic O'Connor last emperor of Ireland';¹¹³ 'Conal-Claon made emperor'.¹¹⁴ All matters relative to the high king were, subsequently, prefixed with the term 'imperial' in his narrative. The armies of the reigning monarch are everywhere referred to as either 'the imperial army' or the 'imperial troops', and exist as a constant refrain throughout the narrative, impressing on the reader the 'imperial' status of Ireland.¹¹⁵ For example, Colman-Rimhidh 'defeated the imperial troops in the bloody battle of Sleamhna';¹¹⁶ a 'most bloody battle is fought at Cuildreimhne; the imperial army is defeated with great slaughter'.¹¹⁷ Miscreants were also placed 'under the ban of the empire' as in A.C. 118, when Eochaidh king of Leinster was 'put under the ban of the empire' by the monarch Tuathal,¹¹⁸ or in A.C. 154, when the monarch Con proposed putting Criomthan king of Leinster 'under the ban of the empire'.¹¹⁹ O'Halloran does not make clear whether this meant expulsion from imperial territory or punishment.

Irish claims to an ancient glorious past were ridiculed by the British periodical review literature, and the concept of a Milesian empire, as O'Halloran must have been aware, would have been incomprehensible for his intended audience.¹²⁰ To bridge this gap in understanding, it appears, O'Halloran positioned the Roman empire, a concept which was familiar to his audience, as the Other against whom the excellence of his Milesian empire was given authority in his narrative. Keating also stated that no other people in Europe had been 'more valiant than they, [Irish] for contending with the Romans for the defence of Scotland'.¹²¹ Keating's references to the Roman empire are brief, but he emphasised that Ireland was never occupied or threatened by any foreign power, even the Roman one. However, the Roman Empire, or Ireland's engagements with the Romans, is not a central concern of his narrative.¹²² Much of O'Halloran's descriptions concerning encounters with the Romans was very much of his own conjecture, and highlights the contemporary direction of his narrative in constructing a powerful military past for Ireland. O'Halloran may well have hoped that the juxtaposition of the Milesian and Roman empires in his history, would engage the ear of a British elite audience, who were fully conversant with the latter at least.

¹¹¹ O'Halloran, *General history*, ii, 68.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, i, 288.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, v–vi.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, ii, 98. Also, *ibid.*, 19, 105.

¹¹⁵ For imperial troops, *General history*, i, 109, 289; ii, 84, 99, 314. For imperial army, *ibid.*, i, 172, 174, 194, 195, 233, 264; ii, 71, 99, 182, 226, 260, 262, 263, 265, 313, 314.

¹¹⁶ O'Halloran, *General history*, ii, 84.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 71.

¹¹⁸ O'Halloran, *General history*, i, 223.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 232.

¹²⁰ 'An introduction to the study of the history and antiquities of Ireland. By Sylvester O'Halloran' in *Critical Review*, xxxix (1773), pp 198–202; 'An introduction to the study of the history and antiquities of Ireland', in *Monthly Review* xlix (1773), pp 193–202.

¹²¹ Keating, *Foras feasa*, i, 7.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 17.

The link between Rome and Ireland is established early in O'Halloran's narrative account of the Milesian invasion of Ireland by paralleling the similarities in the establishment of both dynasties. The last battle fought by the Milesian invaders with the Damnonii, for the kingship of Ireland, was at Taitiu. The decisive point in this engagement, according to O'Halloran, was the fight between the commanders of the opposing armies: the three sons of Milesius and the three sons of Cearmada of the Damnonii. At this point in the narrative, O'Halloran interjected to comment that 'the fate of Ireland now, like that of Rome in the days of the Horatii, hung on the swords of these contending brothers!'¹²³

For the well-read eighteenth-century reader, the story of the dispute between the city of Rome (Horatii) and Alba Longa (Curatii), was a familiar reference from Livy's accounts of the history surrounding the foundation of Rome, which like the Milesian account, was the story of three brothers, in this instance, fighting on behalf of their cities.¹²⁴ The Horatii (Romans) were successful, as were the Milesians. The reason O'Halloran highlighted the similarity between these two encounters was to establish in the minds of his audience an equivalence between the significance of both events. By establishing a link between the foundation of the Milesian empire and the Roman empire, or at least with one of the many stories surrounding the foundation of the Roman empire, he was attempting to transfer some of the significance and iconic resonance that surrounded the Roman event to the Milesian event, by linking it to Rome and the story of the Horatii and Curatii. There is no similar reconstruction of this battle in the traditional narrative. The *Lebor gabála* simply states that at the battle of Taitiu 'there fell the three kings and the three queens of the Tuatha Dé Danann'.¹²⁵ Keating's account read 'The sons of Cermad were defeated by the sons of Milidh'.¹²⁶

Equally striking as a demonstration of Ireland's past military power was the manner in which O'Halloran attributed the ebb and flow of Roman power in Britain to unrest or peace in Ireland. For example, in A.C. 137, unrest in Ireland during the reign of Tuathal 'accounts well for the Romans extending their bounds, as they did at this time, in Britain'.¹²⁷ In A.C. 221, 'The distress and confusions occasioned by this revolution in favour of Mac Con, will well explain why Severus extended the Roman arms in Britain'.¹²⁸ O'Halloran appears to be suggesting that the military power of the Milesian empire was such that it could have broken Roman power in Britain, if the conditions in Ireland had been right. In A.C. 183, O'Halloran commented that so successful were Conaire's attacks against the Romans that 'had his reign lasted longer the Roman power over that country would have been totally annihilated'.¹²⁹ Moreover, O'Halloran conjectured that in A.C. 367, the Irish monarch Criomthan, styled 'monarch of Ireland and Albany, and leader of the Franks and Saxons' headed the coalition of states against the Romans on the

¹²³ O'Halloran, *General history*, i, 96.

¹²⁴ Livy, *The early history of Rome, books 1–4 of the Ab Urbe Condita* trans. B. O. Foster, with introduction by Mathew Peacock (New York, 2005), pp 33–5.

¹²⁵ *Lebor gabála*, v, 61.

¹²⁶ Keating, *Foras feasa*, ii, 95.

¹²⁷ O'Halloran, *General history*, i, 225.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 249.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 242.

continent known as the 'Saxon League' and, moreover, joined with the Picts and Saxons and broke through the Roman wall, 'carrying desolation through all her British provinces'.¹³⁰ Taking the pursuit a step further, the monarch Niall of the Nine Hostages, pursued the Romans onto the continent.¹³¹

In contrast, the *Lebor gabála* statement regarding Niall was sparse, 'Níall Noí-giallach took the kingship of Ireland and of the Western World for a space of twenty-seven years'.¹³² In Keating's account of Niall there is no mention of pursuing the Romans, 'Níall ... sent a fleet to Brittany in France ..., for the purpose of plundering that country ...; and it was in this captivity that they brought Patrick ...'.¹³³ Keating's concern here is not with Niall's European forays, but in noting that this was the king who first brought Patrick and, by extension, Christianity, to Ireland. Irish encounters with the Roman empire act as a counterpoint in O'Halloran's narrative to demonstrate to his contemporary audience the power and influence of his alleged Milesian empire, and by extension, the historic suitability of the descendants of this empire as imperial agents.

Another innovation that O'Halloran introduced into his narrative was the idea that troops from Ireland aided the Carthaginians during the Punic wars.¹³⁴ Although this assertion does not provide supporting evidence for the existence of a Milesian empire, it does present the argument that the Irish are capable of aiding the contemporary British empire by supplying troops, as they have done previously for another empire, the Carthaginian empire:

I think, we may reasonably conclude, that the Carthaginians procured powerful assistance from Ireland, as well as from Spain and Gaul, in their wars with the Romans: nor do I think I should be censured of rashness, if I were to offer a conjecture that the *Sacred Cohort*, ... was a select body of Irish troops, whose fidelity and intrepidity could be always depended on, ...; if in these days of *distress and persecution*, which followed the Reformation the Irish kept up a large body of troops in the service of Spain, as we know they did in the reign of Elizabeth, and long after. And if, since the year 1691, a most respectful corps has been kept up both in France and Spain, ...; why doubt the probability and possibility of their lending their troops to the Carthaginians in days of splendour, ...? Nay I persuade myself, that it was a useful piece of state policy in the victorious prince, to engage a restless military in foreign wars, to preserve domestic tranquillity¹³⁵

The above extract is a useful example of the subscription-list complementing the text of the *General history*. Firstly, attention is drawn to the military accomplishments of the French and Spanish subscribers in the subscription-list. Secondly, the military success of this group retrospectively verifies the

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 291–2.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 298.

¹³² *Lebor gabála*, v, 349.

¹³³ Keating, *Foras feasa*, ii, 375.

¹³⁴ O'Halloran's conjecture is based on a comment by Corinthian mercenaries at Syracuse, found in Plutarch's life of Timoleon: *Plutarch's lives*, ed. A. H. Clough (5 vols, Boston, 1859), ii, 132.

¹³⁵ O'Halloran, *General history*, i, 155–6.

existence of a similar mercenary military body in the Carthaginian army. O'Halloran's linkage of an historical and current military aptitude, in this brief digression, creates the impression of a continuous historical stream of Irish military ability. His message reads like a manifesto for Irish participation in empire: the Irish inherently make good imperial soldiers, and to 'preserve domestic tranquillity' this type of martial spirit is best put to use in war. The linkage in this short extract, between a past and current military aptitude, represents in microcosm the core argument presented here. The aim of the *General history* was to showcase Ireland's current and historic readiness for an imperial role.

In conclusion, this paper has attempted to demonstrate that the *General history*, inclusive of its place of publication and composition of its subscription-list, was a work shaped and informed by the opportunity for Catholic relief during the Anglo-American crisis, marking its publication as the most politically potent and pragmatic work from an eighteenth-century Irish antiquarian. By situating the appeal for Catholic rights in the imperial rather than in the insular context, and attempting to engage the interest of the British empire directly in Irish Catholic relief by demonstrating an Irish historic and current suitability for imperial service, O'Halloran broadened the discussion base of Catholic relief politics and internationalised Ireland's potential. A similar strategy would not be employed by the Catholic Committee until 1792, when a new mood of militancy permeated Catholic agitation for relief, under the leadership of John Keogh.¹³⁶ In this regard, O'Halloran has to be credited as the first antiquarian to recognise the political significance of the newly-extended British empire in relation to Ireland and Irish affairs. His virtue lay in recognising that in the final analysis it was the imperial parliament in London, and not the Dublin parliament, that would make the final decision in relation to Irish Catholics. O'Halloran embraced the imperial project, and could be viewed as a harbinger of a later empire-wide Irish participation in the British empire on an administrative and officership level. In fact, the imperial careers of O'Halloran's sons are emblematic of an outward-looking context for O'Halloran's thoughts. His second son, John, was a captain in Colonel Brown's regiment of American Loyalists and secretary to the governor of the Bahamas.¹³⁷ His youngest son, brigadier-general Joseph O'Halloran spent over fifty years in British service in India and on his eventual return he received a knighthood from William IV.¹³⁸

The *General history* reads like an Irish manifesto for participation in empire; however, it is not possible to say whether his work was ever used in this way. Catholic numbers into the British army did increase after 1778, and Irish Catholic officers also began to receive commissions into the British army,

¹³⁶ O'Flaherty, 'Catholic Convention', pp 14–34.

¹³⁷ John was secretary to the governor of the Bahamas by 1787, when he was so listed in the subscription-list to John Ferrar's *The History of Limerick* (Limerick, 1787), of which he ordered thirty copies. John was granted three hundred acres on Long Island in December 1787, and a further five hundred acres in January 1788. He was a peace commissioner, a member of the Committee of Correspondence and a very active member of the General Assembly there: Lyons, 'Sylvester O'Halloran (1728–1807)', p. 279.

¹³⁸ H. M. Chichester, 'O'Halloran, Sir Joseph (1763–1843)', rev. Roger T. Stearn in *Oxford D.N.B.*

although this was still strictly illegal.¹³⁹ In the 1830s, there were more Irishmen than Englishmen in the British army, and between 1825 and 1850, forty-eight per cent of all troops in the Bengal army were Irish.¹⁴⁰ However, there is some evidence to suggest that the *General history* may have been used in the manner intended, as a documented account of Irish fittingness for inclusion, by another diaspora some sixty years later. There was only one edition of the *General history*. However, there was substantial demand for this work in the Irish-concentrated centres of New York and Boston in the nineteenth century where it enjoyed a long publication history. Between 1845 and 1887 the *General history* was republished in full eight times as part of larger historical works on Ireland.¹⁴¹ In the New World, the Irish demonstrated their fittingness for inclusion predicated on their military reputation, as they had done in the Old World.¹⁴² The wider influence of this work in providing a literary support framework, around which the Irish/America diaspora constructed their political identity, has yet to be assessed.

¹³⁹ Bartlett 'A weapon of war yet untried', p. 71.

¹⁴⁰ Keith Jeffrey, 'The Irish military tradition in the British empire' in idem, *An Irish empire?: aspects of Ireland and the British empire* (Manchester, 1996), p. 94.

¹⁴¹ Sylvester O'Halloran and William Dolby, *The history of Ireland, from the invasion by Henry the second to the present times ...* (New York, 1845); Sylvester O'Halloran and William Dolby, *Complete history of Ireland; from the earliest times* (New York, 1846); Sylvester O'Halloran and William Dolby, *The history of Ireland: from the invasion by Henry the second to the present times ...* (New York, 1850); Sylvester O'Halloran and William Dolby, *A history of Ireland, from its first settlement to the invasion ...* (Boston, 1881); Sylvester O'Halloran and A. M. Sullivan, *The pictorial history of Ireland: from the landing of the Milesians to the present time* (New York, 1887); Sylvester O'Halloran, A. M. Sullivan and P. D. Nunan, *The pictorial history of Ireland: from the landing of the Milesians to the present time* (Boston, 1884) [republished in 1887 and 1900].

¹⁴² David Power Conyngham, *The Irish Brigade and its campaigns* (New York, 1861).