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## discussion article

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### **Archaeology, conflict and contemporary identity in the north of Ireland. Implications for theory and practice in comparative archaeologies of colonialism** *Audrey J. Horning*

#### **Abstract**

Current trends in historical archaeology emphasize the centrality of capitalism and colonial discourse in examining commonalities in the archaeologies of fictive worlds such as the British Atlantic. Yet far from informing archaeological practice, overly simplistic incorporation of postcolonial and neo-Marxian approaches in comparative archaeologies can actually impede our ability to disentangle the complexities of the early modern colonial experience in a socially relevant fashion. While the disparate colonial settlements of the Atlantic share a recognizable material culture as physical testament to the overarching impact of European expansion, contemporary implications and memories of colonial entanglements vary wildly. A critical consideration of the role of overtly theoretical approaches in developing a nuanced archaeology of the early modern period in the north of Ireland, where the construction of present-day identities is firmly rooted in dichotomous understandings of the impact of British expansion in the 16th and 17th centuries, raises broader questions about our responsibilities in addressing conflict and in redressing the disjuncture between espousing and practising theoretically informed archaeology.

#### **Keywords**

Northern Ireland; identity; early modern comparative colonialism; North America; public archaeology; politics

#### **Introduction**

Conflict lies at the very heart of the fragile and fragmented contemporary identities of Northern Ireland. The often fraught interactions of native Irish, English and Scots during the 17th-century Plantation period, when English control was made manifest through the importation ('plantation') of British settlers, yielded a history which has been used, abused and in general vastly oversimplified to support the modern division of society into two 'traditions': Roman Catholic (nationalist), self-identifying heirs of the 'original' Gaelic population, and Protestant (unionist) – self-identifying heirs of the Planters and of Cromwell's settlers, victorious under King William at the Battle of the Boyne in 1690. The dichotomy is all-pervasive, as illustrated by the equal-opportunities form mandatory for most employment in the province. This

seemingly innocuous piece of bureaucratic record-keeping declares on its first page that ‘most of us in Northern Ireland are seen as either Roman Catholic or Protestant’. Prospective employees are then instructed to ‘indicate your community background by ticking the appropriate box’. The only choices provided are Protestant, Catholic or neither. Beneath the ‘neither’ box is an ominous statement: ‘if you do not complete this section’ a determination will be made based upon the answers given to other questions. Furthermore, if the ‘neither’ box is ticked, you are required to provide the name of your primary school – which, in Northern Ireland, would almost invariably be either a ‘controlled’ (mainly Protestant) or a ‘maintained’ (mainly Catholic) school. As a dual Irish and American citizen raised in the United States but practising archaeology on both sides of the Atlantic, there seems no appropriate box for me to tick. An entirely separate question on the same form deals with religion. Only in Northern Ireland can one be either a Protestant Jew or a Catholic Muslim.

Northern Ireland is a paradoxical place which, depending upon who you ask, is not wholly Irish, but not exactly British; it is not colonial, but it is not yet postcolonial. The challenges for an informed and socially relevant archaeology of the early modern period are not inconsequential. The archaeology of the 17th century has often been perceived by the public and professionals alike as relevant only to a contemporary Protestant identity, rendering the native Irish seemingly invisible while serving as a tangible reminder of deep-seated cultural conflict. Yet these sites contain a wealth of material evidence underscoring the close, if undeniably complex, nature of relations between and within groups of natives and newcomers. Archaeologists working on Plantation-period and later sites can and do contribute to a long-overdue revision of Ulster’s troubled history, but are doing so while operating in a world marked by political uncertainties with Plantation-era roots. As such, the relatively young discipline of Irish post-medieval or historical archaeology actually has much to contribute to the better-established practices of post-medieval archaeology in the United Kingdom and of historical archaeology in North America, where the present-day implications of the colonial past seem less immediately resonant and, with the exception of the growing self-reflexivity in the practice of African American archaeology (see, for example, Blakey 1998; Epperson 2004; Franklin 1997; Orser 2004b; Wilkie 2003), are still seldom acknowledged.

### **Background: Plantation-period Ireland**

From the Anglo-Norman invasions of the 12th century, the English Crown endeavoured to retain control over portions of Ireland through maintaining English settlements governed by English law. In the 16th century the Reformation and fears of Spain prompted increased involvement. Protracted warfare and a policy of planting English settlers on forfeited land ultimately culminated in the overthrow of the native Irish political system during the reign of Elizabeth I. The policy of plantation was extended to the north of Ireland in the aftermath of the Nine Years War (1594–1603) when the 1607 ‘flight of the earls’ of Tyrone and Tyrconnell resulted in the forfeiture of the six counties of Armagh, Cavan, Coleraine, Donegal, Fermanagh and Tyrone

to the Crown. Plans for an ‘Ulster Plantation’ were drawn up to replace the native population with loyal British subjects. To fund this scheme, King James VI and I coerced the livery companies of London into underwriting the effort, repaying the companies with grants of land in the newly created County Londonderry (Canny 2001; Moody 1939; Robinson 1984). In the same year that the Crown gained control over Ulster, the inauspicious seeds of England’s first permanent New World colony were planted on the swampy Jamestown Island, just inland from the Chesapeake Bay in what is now eastern Virginia.

The close, if hardly straightforward, connections between the English (later British) settlement of North America and the plantations in Ireland were noted by scholars based in North America prior to the development of critical comparative studies of colonial processes in the ancient as well as the modern world (e.g. Gosden 2004; Lyons and Papadapolous 2002; Stein 2005). Anthony Garvan (1951) was the first to explicitly consider the similarities between Ulster Plantation villages and those of New England, John Cotter (1958) referenced the Ulster settlements in his pioneering excavations at Jamestown, while Noël-Hume (1982) rekindled interest in comparative archaeologies of Ireland and the Chesapeake in his popular account of the short life (1618–22) of the enclosed settlement at Wolstenholme Towne on the James River in Virginia. Yet understandings of early modern British colonialism in the two lands, including the role of archaeology in its study and public presentation, and the influence of postcolonial theory on its interpretation, could hardly be more divergent.

### Post-medieval archaeology in Ireland

The archaeological study of Ireland’s post-medieval heritage was pioneered in Northern Ireland, as the politics of the 20th century mitigated against a similar development in the republic (Donnelly and Horning 2002). Nationalist sentiment within the new state associated the medieval with British colonialism, thus prior to the 1980s southern archaeologists principally focused upon the prehistoric and the early Christian and early medieval periods (O’Conor 1998). If the archaeology of the medieval period could be so readily discriminated against, then what hope was there for archaeological remains associated – rightly or wrongly – with more recent British activity? Northern Ireland, conversely, remained a part of the United Kingdom, where its archaeologists were influenced by the development of post-medieval archaeology in Britain in the 1950s and 1960s, and where some monuments of Plantation, such as the walls of Derry, retain a symbolic if divergent importance to unionist and nationalist publics. Perhaps the most positive recent development is the establishment of the Irish Post-Medieval Archaeology Group (IPMAG) in 1999, yet acceptance of post-medieval archaeology in Ireland remains impaired by the false belief that it merely represents the archaeology of the British (Horning and Ó Baoill 2001; Brannon and Horning 2005). To support the notion that somehow all of the archaeology of the last 500 years relates only to one cultural identity echoes 16th- and 17th-century English depictions of Ireland as a barren land peopled by natives who left no impact upon the landscape and are therefore invisible in its archaeology.

Few archaeologists receive formal academic training in the history, material culture or architecture of post-1550 Ireland. While Irish academic engagement with the period is on the rise, more research projects have been undertaken by North American scholars, who approach Ireland's post-medieval past from the perspective of anthropologically based historical archaeology, but often lack a nuanced understanding of the local and lived implications of their research as well as of ongoing debates within Irish historiography. For example, in exploring commonalities between the colonial experiences of Jamaica and of Ireland, Delle endeavours to 'outline a spatial theory which can be used to compare the material culture of colonial episodes in disparate temporal and spatial contexts' (Delle 1999, 115) but avoids the politically charged debate over whether or not it is even appropriate to view Ireland as a colony, as explored below. By not referencing the debate, Delle cannot explain the liminal position of Northern Ireland's contemporary Protestant community within his theoretically sophisticated yet ultimately monolithic model of British colonialism. Similarly, his description of the Great Famine in the 1840s as 'one of the more infamous episodes in British colonialism' (Delle 1999, 108), analogous to the 1867 military execution of hundreds of Afro-Jamaicans, clearly resonates with North American audiences infused with the potent memory of Famine-era immigration, but offers little to Irish scholars wearied by decades of often acrimonious wrangling over the Famine blame game (Foster 2002; see Kinealy 2005 for a contrasting view).

### **Irish identity and postcolonial theory**

Contemporary Irish identity is a topic which has not suffered a lack of attention in the fields of literary criticism, history, social anthropology, sociology and psychology – not to mention political satire. Of late, the rise in standards of living, growing societal secularization, and extensive urban redevelopment precipitated by the Celtic Tiger economy have sparked a soul-searching deconstruction of 'Irishness' in the booming republic (paradoxically accompanied by its Riverdance-fuelled international commodification). While Declan Kiberd (1997, 81) celebrates the Irish as 'the first English-speaking people... to attempt a programme of decolonisation', Ireland's active participation in the European Union, albeit principally as an economic beneficiary, has encouraged other scholars to reject the colonial model of Irish history and thus the efficacy of postcolonial approaches (see Ruane 1992 for an early discussion of this trend). Instead, the establishment of the Republic of Ireland is situated squarely within models of European state development, with any discussion of Ireland as postcolonial bluntly dismissed by historian Liam Kennedy (1996, 175) as 'nonsense strutting on theoretical stilts'. Kennedy acerbically derides the contributions of postcolonial theorists to understandings of Irish history: 'like jackdaws to shiny objects, literary and cultural critics seem to be drawn to labels and packaging' (1996, 179). Comparing conditions in Ireland with conditions in India, Pakistan, colonized regions of Africa, the Philippines and Malaysia, Kennedy empirically demonstrates that the Irish experience in the 19th and 20th centuries is best understood in a European rather than colonial context. Kennedy is correct for criticizing the ahistorical tendencies of cultural

theorists. Yet despite his quantitative approach to disproving Ireland's status as postcolonial, perceptions of colonialism remain paramount in the construction of contemporary identities. Any denial of a colonial past does not play very well in Northern Ireland, a place that some would argue has not yet attained the dubious status of 'post-colonial' in a chronological sense, let alone 'postcolonial' in a cultural sense.

Discourse over colonialism in the north of Ireland is problematic and politicized, with decolonization a central platform of Sinn Féin and Republican ideology. Yet labelling present-day Ulster Protestants as colonizers denies the diversity and complexity of unionist identities, and imparts a worrying degree of essentialism to the construction of Protestant identity. Inherent in the majority of works on Irish postcolonial identity is the assumption that the historical and contemporary experiences of the Catholic nationalist community can be read as articulating with notions of the subaltern (e.g. Garner 2004; Graham and Kirkland 1999; Kiberd 1997; ideas based upon Gramsci 1971 and further refined and critiqued by Spivak 1988). Paradoxically, however, present-day Northern Irish Protestants also view themselves in a subaltern position. As noted by Máiréad Nic Craith (2002), the contemporary division of society 'aims to provide legitimacy for two distinct traditions each believed by the other to be still intent on marginalisation of the said other'. While the truly distinct nature of the two traditions is open to question, it is clear that in terms of self-perception, both communities view themselves as constituting a threatened minority. So in addition to heeding Spivak's (1988) caution that the very act of imagining the subaltern carries a risk of objectification, the identification of any community as somehow more subaltern than another constitutes a political statement and takes us no closer to appreciating the three-dimensionality of past human experience.

There is little doubt in my own mind that the Ulster Plantation, building on the Munster Plantation and the less overtly colonial 16th-century plantations in Laois and Offaly,<sup>1</sup> can be best understood as a colonial venture (see also Smyth 2000). In my own research, I have drawn numerous parallels between the processes and material expressions in the Chesapeake and in Ulster (Horning 1995; 2006), and have found some value in considerations of early modern British expansion in light of an emergent capitalist world system (see Mrozowski 1999 for a useful example). Despite my interest in the comparative analysis of British colonialism, I would not go so far as to agree with James Dunkerly that 'Ireland is really an American country located in the wrong continent' (cited in Fagan 2003, 112), nor do I consider the inevitability of unequal social relations inherent in the capitalist world system (e.g. Delle 1999; Orser 1996) to be the most salient means of approaching and seeking understanding of the individual and community experiences of those caught up in the broader processes of European expansion. Finally, I do not accept at face value the simplistic parallel characterizations of Gaelic Irish and native Americans peddled by commentators in the late 16th century, while at the same time I recognize that the similarities in rhetoric speak to the importance of 'othering' inherent in the early modern colonial process (as most recently discussed in Gosden 2004).

By contrast, scholars such as Raymond Gillespie (1993) and Nicholas Canny (2001) reject the efficacy of comparisons with North America, rightly

critiquing politically derived Nationalist postcolonial rhetoric for obscuring the complexities of identity formation and the overtly self-aware actions of Irish and Old English elites in the 16th and 17th centuries. An excellent case in point is the life of Hugh O'Neill, Gaelic chieftain, English earl, politician and strategist par excellence. Best known as the talented if ultimately unsuccessful leader of Irish forces during the Nine Years War, O'Neill was raised in the English Pale, lived in England from the age of nine to the age of eighteen, was honoured with the title of Earl of Tyrone by Queen Elizabeth in 1585, yet chose to be inaugurated as the O'Neill (traditional Gaelic title) at Tullahogue, Co. Tyrone, in 1595 (McCavitt 2002; O Fáolain 1942). To my mind, recognizing the agency of such transcultural actors, skilled in the translation and mediation of multiple identities, does not negate the validity of a comparison with North America, rather it enhances the comparability. Consider Virginia's Wahunsonacock, Powhatan Indian paramount chief, so politically savvy in his dealings with the early 17th-century English settlers at Jamestown that scholars are only beginning to recognize the extent of control the Powhatan wielded over the early colonists, an exercise of native power intentionally masked in colonial transcripts (Gallivan 2003a; Williamson 2003).

Recognition of the ability of the O'Neill and the Powhatan to penetrate the boundaries of seemingly oppositional cultures and engage in 'diplomacy' clearly articulates with the writings of Bhabha (1994) and resonates with the stress on ambiguity which characterizes some postcolonial writings. However, more static treatises (e.g. Delle 1999; Klingelhofer 2003) on colonialism and archaeology in Ireland presume a binary opposition between colonizer and colonized (not unlike the two-traditions model) which offers little to considerations of the complexity of Irish identities. In Stephen Howe's estimation (2000, 10), 'the dominant . . . effect of analysing Irish history in purely colonial terms, and viewing the Northern Ireland conflict as a colonial one, has been to wish away the complex historical ambiguities of identity-formation on the island, and especially in the north'. In actuality, it is precisely the ambiguous structures of colonialism in the 16th and 17th centuries which gave rise to the ambiguities of identity formation. Models which do allow for the fluid dynamism of identity and interaction precipitated by the colonial experience provide an alternative of real social relevance.

### **Irish archaeology and the postcolonial crisis**

So how are Ireland's few historical archaeologists dealing with the implications of this postcolonial or post-we-were-never-colonial identity crisis? On the face of it, not at all. Public interpretation of Plantation-era sites is principally reliant upon general interest in the archaeological process, while the majority of papers presented at IPMAG conferences are descriptive, quantitative and processually grounded. Even the decision to use the term 'post-medieval' by IPMAG could be construed as an overt rejection of the purportedly global approach of Americanist historical archaeology. Global historical archaeology is itself an imperfect effort that seldom advances beyond proclaiming the all-pervasive impact of capitalism as a heuristic device, which permits a worryingly uniform interpretation of vastly divergent archaeologies at the expense of locally contextualized interpretation.

The failings of global historical archaeology aside, my growing concern over the disjuncture between theory and practice in Irish archaeology was sparked by the decision of my colleagues on the IPMAG conference committee to decline an explicitly theoretical paper proposed by Tadhg O’Keeffe of University College Dublin in 2002 in favour of more grounded, data-driven submissions. In a nutshell, the majority opinion was that ivory-tower academics have no concept of the daily realities of the battle for post-medieval archaeology being waged in the myriad trenches slicing their way through the country in advance of the Celtic Tiger. What good would jargon-laden, theoretical mumbo-jumbo be to folks still struggling to learn the difference between creamware and pearlware in a country where ‘post-medieval pottery’ is deemed an adequate term for cataloguing or, more often, a great reason to bring in the bulldozers?

This divide between the practice of theoretically driven historical archaeology and hands-on post-medieval archaeology in Ireland is similarly reflected in the United Kingdom. Frustrated by what they perceive as a lack of theoretical awareness in traditional post-medieval archaeology, marked as it is with an emphasis upon rigorous studies of material culture, increasing numbers of British archaeologists have explicitly rejected the term ‘post-medieval archaeology’, instead exploring the potential of a global historical archaeology. Decamping from the British Isles and joining North American counterparts in the Caribbean or Africa provides a swift if potentially disingenuous solution to the constraints of a university rating system perceived as devaluing local and regional research. While postcolonialism readily and inevitably informs indigenous research agendas in the Caribbean and in many African nations, where heritage and particularly evidence of resistance to colonial powers is of prime importance to the development of national pride, the legacy of colonialism is no less discernible or arguably significant in the crumbling 18th-century ports and racially divided 21st-century cities of Britain. Should historical archaeologists have a greater responsibility to the archaeology of their own backyards? Is the lack of interest solely due to the Research Assessment Exercise, or is it more threatening or just more difficult to pursue these issues closer to home? If so, is this because there is as yet no coherent research agenda or policy guiding the treatment of post-medieval deposits in Britain, or is it because the legacies of colonialism within the colonial core are presumed to be either too muted or too sensitive to address?

In Ireland the very few people who might call themselves ‘theoretical’ historical archaeologists are either visiting North American scholars who find the troubled past of modern Ireland a readily fertile ground for addressing postcoloniality, or they are university-based researchers who are well-versed in theory but prioritize its application in map and building analyses, lacking the time and funding for more extensive, publicly visible archaeology. In the worst-case scenario, anywhere, theoretically driven archaeology that is not rooted in place, space and the present becomes merely a compelling mental exercise where the researcher frames and maintains control over the meaning of the past by distancing him- or herself physically from its living and breathing legacy, supporting the principal of multivocality but eschewing its very difficult application.



It is very easy to bemoan the apparent rejection of theory by Irish post-medieval archaeologists. On reflection, however, the proffered rejection masks a more complicated practice. Compared to the soul-searching mental gymnastics performed by other Irish social scientists in the shelter of their university offices, the work of field archaeologists is physical and visible, and occurs very much within the contemporary world. Despite the general popularity of texts on Irish history,<sup>2</sup> ordinary Catholic folks living up the Falls Road in West Belfast are unlikely to flock to their local library to check out books with engaging titles like *Deconstructing Ireland* (Graham 2001) to learn how their psyches have been subverted by the ‘nationalist cult of martyrdom’. Similarly, ordinary Protestants up the Shankill Road probably will not be reading about their damaged postcolonial Protestant triumphalist psychologies in their morning paper. These same individuals, however, may find themselves standing side by side and staring into a muddy trench next to the wall of a ruined planter castle, wondering what its trowel-wielding occupants are actually doing. Given the blatant, mutually exclusive uses of the Irish past by sectarian organizations, one would expect that such public interest in Plantation-period archaeology would be lacking. Surprisingly, however, media reports on heritage from 1989 to the present suggest that the situation is not so bleak. Fully 28% of archaeological news reports relate to post-medieval sites, a percentage greater than that of post-medieval excavations (media reports on file, Environment and Heritage Service, Belfast).

Few archaeologists dare to draw immediate links between past and present for fear of losing the attention of this audience, often choosing to privilege the archaeological process or local history in site interpretation. To judge from responses to a questionnaire I sent out to colleagues, this approach is intentional, sensible and sensitive; with one respondent arguing that Plantation archaeology should ‘be presented to break down barriers, resolve misinterpretations, [and] engage people from all sections’.<sup>3</sup> One archaeologist reported opposition to his excavation of a planter castle located in a nationalist community. Through treating the site as part of local history, greater respect and understanding was achieved even as the broader implications were left unexplored. In this scenario, subverting the divisive and often essentializing themes of colonialism in favour of local connections to the site should not be construed as an uncritical public archaeology, but instead as a sensible and arguably self-reflexive method of ensuring participation while allowing for a deeper analysis of meaning than would be possible if present-day social dichotomies were simplistically imposed upon the archaeological record and its interpretation. What better way to introduce concepts like syncretism or even creolization in the formation of Irish identities than by allowing coeval participation in interpretation?

### **Out of the impasse? Archaeology and public discourse in Northern Ireland**

A theoretically informed yet responsible and publicly engaged archaeology has much to contribute to the future of cultural understanding on the island. The university sector must begin to participate in the evolution of a coherent, socially sensitive, theoretically aware research strategy, but will not do so until





**Figure 1** Filming by Ulster Television at Movanager.

issues of archaeology and Irish identity become more than fodder for articles and lectures, and not until the approach of field archaeologists is recognized for its pragmatism and its potential for encouraging cross-community dialogue – surely a theoretically informed approach if ever one existed?

During the 1999 Movanager Village Project, an excavation at an abandoned 17th-century Londonderry Plantation village, schoolchildren and adults from both communities, along with the media, were invited to consider archaeological evidence of significant interaction between native Irish inhabitants and British settlers (figure 1). One of the more notable findings was evidence for a partially earthfast Irish vernacular dwelling exhibiting a subrectangular plan, central open hearth and swept floor located within the village (Horning 2001). Material culture found in association with this structure included English border ware and North Devon gravel-tempered utilitarian ceramics alongside handbuilt Irish everted rim ware. The discovery of an Irish house form and material culture within a Plantation village does not necessarily mean that there were Irish living in the village (in contradiction of official regulations), nor does it mean that the English and Scots settlers were somehow less themselves by association with unfamiliar material culture – but the physical traces do allow for a more substantive discussion of the complexities of everyday life in colonial situations. The proximity of the interactions between English and Irish in rural settlements such as Movanager are difficult to codify, but are hinted at in the blend of archaeological materials. In an isolated colonial outpost, economic levelling and the necessities of everyday life likely increased both interaction and material accommodation. While religious differences and proffered identities ensured intolerance, hostility and legislated separation, local identities increasingly shifted through such shared experiences. This

process was inevitably rooted at the bottom of the socio-economic ladder, most marked at places like Movanager where the business of the day for both natives and newcomers was likely more practical than political.

Nearby, archaeology provided the means for a community to renegotiate the significance of the physical traces of plantation through the excavation and restoration of Bellaghy Bawn, a fortified 17th-century castle overlooking a planter village on lands granted to the Vintner's Company of London by James VI and I. Through public outreach led by government archaeologists Nick Brannon and Thomas McErlean in the early 1990s, locals who had never set foot within the bawn, still perceived as Protestant territory, embraced the project as relevant to their past and, more importantly, to their future. Bellaghy Bawn now houses the Seamus Heaney Centre, with exhibits, a library and rooms for community use. The poetry of Heaney pervades the site and channels the visitor's experience, shifting Bellaghy Bawn from a contested, exclusively Protestant bastion to a relatively uncontested celebratory space dedicated to a local literary hero. Arguably this use of the site subverts historical complexity and infers a lack of willingness to critically engage with the past. Yet this conscious, locally determined reimagining of the bawn's appropriate function, coupled with the multiplicity of meanings inherent in the physical and spatial realities of the site, exemplifies the dynamism which characterizes colonial entanglements. In its very existence, Bellaghy Bawn tells us as much about those who lived outside its protection as it tells us about those who sheltered within its walls, after the fashion of Martin Hall's hidden transcripts (Hall 2000; his analyses based on James Scott 1992). Unless Bellaghy was particularly unique in terms of the other London company villages, interactions between English, Scottish and Irish individuals would have taken place on a daily basis in and around the settlement. Indeed, it was the familiarity and seeming normality of relations between natives and newcomers which provided infallible cover for the rebels who sought to overturn the social, economic and political order during the 1641 Rebellion, underscoring the subversion or 'sly civility' (Bhabha 1994) often inherent within daily practice in colonial situations.

Another project which directly challenges the immutability of the two-traditions model is centred upon the enigmatic site of Goodland, situated on a cliff above Murlough Bay in County Antrim. Here a remarkable cluster of more than a hundred earthen houses and relic field systems lie atop an extensive Neolithic occupation. Recent re-evaluation and archaeological survey suggests that rather than being booley huts associated with the practice of seasonal transhumance, as long believed, the houses mark a permanent 17th-century Highland Scottish village (Horning 2004; Horning and Brannon 2004). Twentieth-century sectarianism has long subjugated awareness of these Roman Catholic Scots who arrived as part of the Ulster Plantation. Yet had this site been devoid of earlier archaeological deposits it would not have been deemed important enough for scheduling as a protected ancient monument. A single season's ploughing of the fertile soils which gave Goodland its name would have erased much of the visible remains. Even the landowner himself, while very supportive of the survey project, expressed surprise that the most visible element of this site – the houses – could be of

any 'value' at all. A deep connection to the land and a general respect for monuments of the past are characteristics shared by much of the population of Northern Ireland, making dialogue about even the most contested sites a relatively simple task to initiate. Such dialogue is not an end in itself, but the starting point of an uncertain process which will ultimately be controlled by the willingness of participants to reconsider deeply rooted memories in favour of the seedlings of potentiality.

The museums sector has also become proactive in encouraging a reconsideration of dichotomous histories. Educational programmes are intentionally cross-community-based, with recent exhibits by the Ulster Museum deliberately controversial. *ICONS of IDENTITY* employed symbolically charged materials from the two traditions to explore the construction of identity. The recent *CONFLICT* exhibit consciously situated discussions of violence in Irish history in the context of the Troubles (figure 2). The ability of the exhibit to spark an engaged response, if not true dialogue, is attested to by the wildly divided opinions scribbled on comment cards, with visitors variously describing the exhibit as 'biased and one-sided', 'balanced and truthful', and 'unnecessarily' provoking division. Moving beyond the relatively static nature of a provocative exhibit, other projects are challenging communities not only to explore, but also to define their own local heritage. The Causeway Museum Service Outreach Project (based in Coleraine) aims to 'build community engagement with local heritage, encouraging a positive sense of ownership and identity', by facilitating a range of disparate community organizations such as Age Concern, the Freemasons and local schools as they consider the significance of local heritage and explore those aspects which they deem to be most important ([www.colerainebc.gov.uk](http://www.colerainebc.gov.uk)).

### **Beyond the border**

The north of Ireland is not the only locale where archaeology of the recent past can make a significant contribution to contemporary understandings of Irish history. Moving beyond the Plantation period, the physical legacy of the 18th century to the 20th is fast disappearing in the onslaught of development. Principally associated with times of discord and poverty, few seem to mourn the passing of the urban and rural vernacular. Even emotive survivals such as the Deserted Village of Slievemore, where the shells of drystone-built byre houses dot the southern slopes of the highest mountain on Achill Island in Co. Mayo, inspire discomfort and disinterest as they conjure received memories of a shameful past.

One misty, inevitably cool evening in late July of 2004, students of the Achill Archaeological Field School found themselves pinned to their stools outside Gielty's Pub by a very angry, and admittedly inebriated, local resident. Through the haze of tobacco smoke (banished to the out-of-doors), this young man accused the students, mainly American, of committing atrocious acts of disrespect towards his ancestors. 'Leave them be', he insisted, 'you have no right. You are not from here, you don't understand'. Although he left unconvinced by the students' fervent explanations and not the least mollified by another pint, the episode forced the students to become more self-reflexive about their own participation in archaeology. The chinks in self-confidence



Figure 2 CONFLICT brochure, Ulster Museum.



**Figure 3** Visitors at the Deserted Village, Slievemore.

which followed this first challenge to their integrity and authority were partially repaired three weeks later, when the first ever Open Site Day attracted nearly 150 people (figure 3). While the vast majority of visitors were not from Achill, enough local folk did turn up to allow for some substantive discussions of the site, its meaning and the role of archaeology in returning some colour to what has become the monochrome history of Famine-era Ireland (McDonald and Horning 2004).

From an ethical, professional, legal and pedagogical standpoint, archaeology in the 21st century must incorporate a significant degree of public involvement. How to achieve a balance between telling people about their past from the outmoded and privileged standpoint of a supposedly objective scientist, and permitting the public to control the conduct and results of archaeological investigation, is not a simple task. Sites such as the evocative landscape of the Deserted Village lure many visitors who read their expectations and understandings of the past into and onto the physical traces of that past. Received national memory is a powerful force, and ruins carry influence. The geographers' false pursuit of the 'timeless Irish peasantry' (as critiqued by Whelan 2000) has become blended with lashings of politically inspired postcolonial vitriol castigating the British for the deaths of 'subaltern' Irish during the Famine. I believe that the lives of the long-dead occupants of Slievemore are worth more than a muting footnote in an endlessly grim recounting of economic and social imbalance in a burgeoning capitalist world system. In an oft-cited passage from *The wretched of the earth*, Frantz Fanon (1965) wrote 'colonialism is not satisfied with merely holding a people in its

grip and emptying the native's brain of all form and content. By a kind of perverted logic, it turns to the past of the people, and distorts, disfigures, and destroys it'. I would argue that the uncritical application of a postcolonial theoretical framework – one that highlights the oppression of nameless rural Irish and celebrates the 1916 Rising and the 'overthrow' of British colonial structures – also runs the risk of 'distorting, disfiguring, and destroying' what we purportedly seek to understand.

### **Contextualizing early modern colonialism in Ireland and North America**

While historical archaeology in Ireland is looking towards American historical archaeology as it continues to develop, all scholars dealing with the material legacy of British expansion would be well advised to reflect upon Irish practice and contemporary concerns. What lessons can be learned from approaches to the interpretation of conflict in Northern Ireland? Very different cultural perceptions of history govern public archaeology in Northern Ireland and North America. The teaching of history in Northern Ireland, as discussed by Keith Barton (2000, 5), 'makes no attempt to present a connected historical narrative related to the development of modern Northern Ireland, the United Kingdom, or the Republic of Ireland; it includes few people or events instrumental in creating the country of which students are a part.' History is synchronic rather than diachronic, providing students with a broad world view if no understanding of how they got to their place in the world today. Despite curricular reform, the reification of dichotomous identities is rendered normative by the continued maintenance of religiously segregated schools, with only 4% of the province's children enrolled in integrated education (Barton and McCully 2003, 108). Furthermore, the teaching of history as disconnected from the present reinforces this dichotomous identity structure. In Barton and McCully's estimation, 'the disavowal of identity in the history curriculum has helped maintain separate communities with no shared sense of purpose and few resources for constructing any common notion of belonging' (Barton and McCully 2003, 123).

Yet approaches to the teaching and interpretation of history that are consciously linked to contemporary identity creation are equally problematic. American history teaching, for example, is narrowly diachronic, all events lined up in an ethnocentric march towards global democratic hegemony, packaged in a metanarrative of progress linking past and present. Twenty-first century Americans are the way they are because of the actions of the nation's forefathers and, occasionally, foremothers. Heritage is aggressively marketed, particularly in eastern Virginia, where mortality-conscious upper middle-class retirees are lured back to their metaphorical national roots, buying up cookie-cutter McMansions in Williamsburg subdivisions with names like *Heritage Landing* and *Patriot Place* (figure 4). Nearby, only the very imaginative can come away from an unguided walk around Jamestown with an enhanced understanding of the complexities of 17th-century life. Visitors can rub the bronze hands of a Pocahontas statue, view the ongoing excavation of the 1607 James Fort, and nod in agreement with the emotive words of pioneering historical archaeologist Ivor Noël-Hume: 'Few archaeologists are privileged to excavate ground so close to the heart of a nation. But the thrill of discovery



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**Figure 4** Advertisement for a gated community in Williamsburg, Virginia.

inevitably is tempered with awe by the magnitude of the responsibility' (APVA 1994). Despite recent appearances to the contrary, the United States is hardly a nation whose character is dependent upon a mythical white male colonial utopia or its patriarch John Smith. Such a presentation denigrates not only the history of the majority of Virginians, white and black, male and female, rich and poor; but also the past of Virginia's Indians.

Virginia's First People, described in the 17th century in terms analogous to the 'wild Irish', have been so effectively written out of the ongoing narrative of Virginia history in an act of symbolic annihilation that the most important issue for the tribes today, according to Nansemond Chief Barry Bass, is 'educating the general public that Virginia Indians still exist' (Waugaman and Moretti-Langholtz 2000, v). Until its recent, unrelated closure, the popular archaeological exhibit located at the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation's Martin's Hundred archaeological museum still employed as its centrepiece a (replica) cleaved skull of an English settler killed in the Powhatan uprising of 1622 (figure 5; see Brown and Chappell 2004 and Singleton 1993 for exhibit critique). Imagine the response if a similarly uncritical approach was applied to presentations of the deaths of British settlers at the hands of Irish rebels in 1641, or to the subsequent killing of Irish families at Drogheda and Wexford by Cromwell's soldiers in 1649. One significant advance in the incorporation of Virginia's First People into historical narratives is a collaborative project between Indians, archaeologists and private landowners in investigating the site of Werowocomoco, the seat of Chief Powhatan (Gallivan 2003b). To what extent the events planned for the 2007 anniversary of the settlement of Jamestown will take into account native perspectives remains to be seen.





**Figure 5** Exhibit from the Winthrop Rockefeller Museum, Carter's Grove, Williamsburg, purporting to illustrate the violent death of an English colonist at the hands of a Powhatan Indian. As noted by Brown and Chappell (2004), 'this combination of objects is fabricated and based on no spatially related physical evidence found at the site'.

An official state advisory body, the Virginia Council on Indians, has stepped back from involvement in the Jamestown 2007 project, leaving the decision for involvement up to the eight state-recognized tribes and their leaders. Several of the tribes are viewing the upcoming anniversary as a means to highlight their continued struggle for federal recognition, as recently noted by Rappahannock Chief Anne Richardson (Virginia Indian Tribal Alliance for Life 2006):

I feel it will be an international embarrassment if Virginia celebrates the 400th anniversary of the establishment of the first permanent English settlement in America, and our government fails to recognize the Virginia Indian tribes that made it possible. The United Kingdom honors us as sovereign nations, but our own country does not.

The gulf between academic understandings of colonialism and public presentations of the colonial era in North America only seems to be widening and is not likely to narrow in the current political climate. Is this the fault of the public who flock to 'patriotic' destinations like Colonial Williamsburg? Or is it the fault of American archaeologists, so accustomed to the implicit value of colonial period sites, or perhaps so dismissive of public intelligence, that the complexities of colonial and postcolonial experiences are seldom overtly addressed in a public forum? More recently, discussions of the colonial process in the Chesapeake have begun to focus on creolization. Dan Mouer (1993) and others (Mouer *et al.* 1999) have introduced a view of the 17th century

as one characterized by significant discourse, as reflected in the Chesapeake pipe, that most quintessential creole artefact with its characteristic motifs which can be read as discursive yet familiar objects for smokers of African, Indian, Caribbean and European descent. This view of the colonial process intersects neatly with Chris Gosden's (2004) recent assertion, based on the scholarship of Homi Bhabha, that 'colonial encounters cause the dissolution of values on all sides, creating new ways of doing things in a material and social sense'. This relatively 'positive' view of the creativity of the colonial encounter is often far more palatable than that presented by Carmel Schrire (1996, 6) for South Africa (whose 'vision of the colonial exchange system is colored by violence, pain, and death'), despite ample evidence for conflict in the Chesapeake. A significant challenge is posed by the need to acknowledge the unresolved violence of the colonial encounter in the Chesapeake while decentring bloodshed in understandings of colonialism and Irish history.

### Concluding thoughts

While historical archaeology in Ireland has yet to shift from being predominantly descriptive, there are clear lessons for the 'theoretically' more developed discipline of historical archaeology in North America. Public interpretations of British colonial archaeology have not significantly divorced themselves from nationalistic presentations despite the interests of individual archaeologists. Why? Because the very nature of American preservation, linked to National Register criteria, relies upon so-called national significance. In Northern Ireland there is now active discussion over the preservation of the built heritage of the Troubles, for example army bases, the Maze Prison and Free Derry Corner. As in the power-sharing executive, a balance will undoubtedly be struck over association, with preservation of perceived unionist monuments matched by perceived nationalist monuments. What if Americans were to approach preservation by consciously addressing the conflict and ambiguity inherent in the colonial encounter and its ever-present legacy? What is the point of continuing to excavate at symbolically charged sites such as Jamestown, if it is not to add to our knowledge through challenging accepted histories? And to engage the public in the debate?

History may appear to be black and white in Northern Ireland today, yet the present-day population echoes the oft-denied cultural complexity of its past, with growing numbers of immigrants from eastern Europe, Asia and the Caribbean all leaving a mark on the built heritage of the province. Developing a theoretically sound and publicly inclusive archaeology which reintroduces these individuals to the contested landscape of Irish identity is not a simple or straightforward process, yet the dividends for Ireland, north and south, and for historical archaeologies of colonialism more generally, are too substantial to ignore. Matthew Johnson recently observed that 'we have all been very good at tracing the influence of politics on archaeology, but strikingly poor at making our archaeology address contemporary political debates' (Johnson 2003, 29). The challenge is not just to address contemporary political debates in the comforting shelter of Contemporary and Historical Archaeology in Theory (CHAT), Theoretical Archaeology Group (TAG) and World Archaeological Congress (WAC) conferences, armoured

with the broader unintelligibility of our hard-won and often impenetrable jargon, but in the communities where it truly matters. Recognizing and balancing our responsibilities to both the past and the present must become a fundamental and defining element of the emerging discipline of Irish post-medieval archaeology – a discipline and an approach which has as much to contribute to as it has to learn from Americanist historical archaeology.

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### Note

- <sup>1</sup> The initial plantations in Laois and Offaly began under Edward I and permitted the granting of leases to Gaelic Irish and to old English (Catholic descendants of the Anglo-Norman settlers of the 12th century). Plans for the Munster Plantation, begun after a protracted war ended in 1583, aimed to exclude the Gaelic Irish and most of the old English.
- <sup>2</sup> As evidence, consider the success of publishers such as Wordwell, Ltd of Bray and the worldwide distribution from Kenny's Bookshop in Galway.
- <sup>3</sup> Questionnaire and responses in the possession of the author; respondents' names protected by request. Twenty Northern Ireland scholars with experience in post-medieval archaeology were polled in 2001.

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## Capitalism, colonialism and the 'tropical' paradigm in Ireland

*Neal Ascherson*

On a first reading of this paper, I thought Audrey Horning might have crossed wires and contradicted herself. Is the weakness of much historical archaeology its deficit in theory-building, or is it, in contrast, a reluctance to emerge from theoretical analysis into a locally focused public archaeology which engages with contemporary political debates?

On pages 188–89, for instance, she acutely criticizes the Irish Post-Mediaeval Archaeology Group (IPMAG) for its concentration on 'descriptive, quantitative and processually grounded' research, at the expense of 'explicitly

theoretical' approaches. Many British archaeologists, she adds, are frustrated by the same narrowness in their own post-medieval archaeology, and often decamp to the postcolonial world to enjoy the freedoms of 'a global historical archaeology'. At the end of the paper, however (p. 200), Horning – in a wonderful outburst – denounces those who prefer radical talk indoors to discomposing encounters with the public. 'The challenge is not just to address contemporary political debates in the comforting shelter of Contemporary and Historical Archaeology in Theory (CHAT), Theoretical Archaeology Group (TAG) and World Archaeological Congress (WAC) conferences, armoured with the broader unintelligibility of our hard-won and often impenetrable jargon, but in the communities where it really matters'.

A second reading, though, shows that this contradiction is trivial. Horning's central point is that historical archaeology, in places where colonialism took place or is popularly believed to have taken place, has to acknowledge ambiguity, and expound it to the public. To do so, it must escape both from simplistic theories of colonialism, driven usually by teleological nationalism with a dash of 'vulgar-Marxist' spice about the capitalist impact, and from the fear of inflaming authority by challenging with new interpretations official and/or popular versions of recent history.

A full taxonomy of colonialisms would make a fat book. Horning is limiting herself to historical archaeology in sites of 'plantation' – to put it crudely, places where incoming groups of one culture have been settled in the territories of another culture. These 'plantations' have usually involved the use of force, explicit or implicit. They generally lead to the subordination of the indigenous inhabitants by measures which can range from dispossession, expulsion, massacre or enslavement down to mere dependency. They tend to leave behind them two distorted narratives, one about 'manifest destiny' or the rights of 'civilization' over 'barbarism', the other a sustaining victimology of wrongs and slights. Northern Ireland displays both, in abundance. And both stories have an interest in suppressing or ignoring evidence of ambiguity – the reality of marginal mixing or even interdependence between 'settlers' and 'natives'. Horning offers two telling examples: the excavation of an Irish vernacular house in the middle of the Plantation settlement of Movinagher, and the 'symbolic annihilation' in contemporary Virginia of the part played by Native Americans in making the Jamestown colony possible.

Horning has much to say about America. She discusses the incorporation of the 1607 English settlement at Jamestown into a 'national' metanarrative of progress. And she criticizes American scholars who obscure the complexities of Ireland's past by imposing on it a crude, global-historical discourse of repressive colonialism. But I feel that this preoccupation misses some other fruitful perspectives.

If we are talking about what historical archaeology can do in a context of plantation colonialism (whether that term is locally used or not), then recent European history is rich in opportunities for research. For example, Poland over the last 400 years has both experienced and undertaken many colonizations of this type. Among them were the Scottish trading settlements along the Vistula (established under royal protection, and without violence), the 19th-century Bismarckian plantations of German Protestant settlers in

conquered western Poland, the Polish ex-soldier villages planted to dominate ethnic Belorussians after 1918 and the vast movement of Polish settlers after 1945 into farms and cities from which most (not all) Germans had been expelled. All these events generated the patterns which interest Horning: the mutually exclusive narratives of the self-justifying newcomers and of the dispossessed, the obliteration of multiple experience in favour of a single nationalist version of history, the ambiguities as settler and 'native' – supposedly at daggers drawn – conspired at the margins to subvert official identities. Most significantly, there has been the gradual emergence in recent years of curiosity about 'how it really was before we came', expressed in a new wave of Polish fiction about their German predecessors and in the beginnings of an 'open' public archaeology of buildings, land use and cemeteries.

Episodes like these proliferate in central and eastern Europe, as they do in the history of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union. So my question to Audrey Horning is this: why is such an immense historical resource of 'plantation' experience apparently ignored in the Western discourse of colonialism? Could it be that British and Irish historians – and archaeologists – are confused by the thought of colonizations which often had little and sometimes nothing to do with the development of capitalism? If that is the case, then it would be absurd – as absurd as the attempt to shoehorn postcolonial Ireland into categories devised by American academics to fit the experience of Jamaica, Bengal or Ghana. Did Ireland go through a colonial experience? Of course it did – several of them. But, even though they were inflicted by a conqueror which became a global imperium, they were experiences better understood as European than through transoceanic or 'tropical' paradigms...

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**On finding focus** *Charles E. Orser, Jr.*

Few observers could argue with the proposition that archaeology has dramatically changed in the past couple of decades. Perhaps tacitly or even unknowingly adopting one of the central tenets of critical archaeology, archaeologists everywhere have learned to expand their audiences and to consider the contemporary meanings of their interpretations. Members of descendant communities and other stakeholders now commonly demand a role in the retelling of history. The 1930s view of 'every man [*sic*] the historian' has become 'every person the archaeological interpreter'. Archaeology is no longer the sole purview of the ivory tower and the detached, absent-minded archaeologist. The days of sitting quietly in a well-appointed laboratory measuring potshards are largely gone. Only the best-funded, venerable of practitioners has this luxury today.

The current understanding of archaeology as public project and open discourse has placed new responsibilities on archaeological practitioners.

Nowhere do archaeologists feel the pressures more than in locales around the globe that have experienced colonialism, including in today's partitioned Ireland.

Questions that stress the tension between past and present are perfectly pertinent to the practice of today's archaeology. It must be noted, however, that the call for a conscious temporal linkage is nothing new in archaeological thought; its reasoning extends to the radical praxis of critical archeology and the realization of archaeology's unique ability to examine the roots of the capitalist project. What is new today is that the archaeology of the 21st century incorporates notions of reflexivity as a matter of course; paradoxically, however, many of the most recent calls for reflexivity deny its revolutionist roots. A careful reading of the current trend indicates that a certain segment of today's archaeological community seeks to revise the notion of reflexivity to eliminate its epistemological foundation. They wish to tame the concept to a degree that it has little meaning beyond 'self-conscientiousness'. The term has become normalized in a manner analogous to 'agency', which, being robbed of its true meaning, has come to mean any and all human action.

A dominant question that has developed, of course, is how temporal linkage is to be effectuated, particularly by historical archaeologists examining the modern world. The issue is deceptively simple. We can easily acknowledge, practically by rote, that today's archaeologists have commitments to engaged stakeholders. But how are we to identify these people and, more importantly, how should we incorporate their world views into our interpretations? Perhaps an even more basic question is this: *should* we even incorporate *their* views in *our* archaeology? Archaeologists, even modern-world archaeologists, are a long way from resolving such questions. Maybe such inherently political interrogations cannot even be resolved. Faced with this reality, the central issue thus becomes one of perspective. When we consider the often emotionally charged subjects of colonialism and colonial impacts (which may last for decades), how are we to know our audience? In the case of Ireland, the identification is absolutely germane because so much of the modern populace was profoundly affected by eviction, removal and transportation. How do we even know where to find the audience?

Since 1994 I have spent every summer excavating the homes of Irish tenant farmers evicted during the late 1840s. Six cabins excavated to date had all been consciously erased from the landscape by the evictors. No picturesque ruins exist to show their locations. The people and their dwellings were deliberately made invisible, and the erasers were good at their work.

Despite the invisibility of the houses themselves, many of the evictees' direct descendants are known, have found one another and have created a network of interaction and comradeship. Some have even travelled to Ireland to view the excavations of their family's ancestral homes. These people are inherently problematic, however. Are they, Americans by citizenship, excluded from being designated the descendant community because they currently live outside Ireland? Should they be consulted over issues of preservation and heritage interpretation? Conversely, should their views on such matters have greater weight than those of local people who, though living in the area, actually have no long-term historical connection to the people who once lived there? Who are the rightful stakeholders?

Questions such as these are not trivial to today's archaeology. If we conclude that diasporic individuals – and particularly those who did not wish to leave their homes and occasionally fought armed battles with the authorities to stay – have no claim on the heritage of their donor country, then we tacitly support the metanarrative of transtemporal nationalism. If we propose that the evicted descendants do have heritage rights, then are we guilty of promoting the metanarrative of globalism? Either way, to deny the salience of global movements of large numbers of people, as part of a process that has been repeated throughout the world, we overtly support the inherent rights of nationalism in our effort to promote a liberalized interpretation. In the effort to be 'liberal pluralists' we actually deny some people their historical due. The subtext here is powerfully subtle: the acknowledgement of postcolonial thought actually subverts the very foundation of that thought. Rather than being emancipatory, it is confining.

For archaeological interpretation specifically, the central danger of this approach is that it includes a quiet return to archaeological particularism in the guise of being opposed to an adherence to metanarratives. The current turn in neoliberal archaeological thought promotes the unique nature of particular sociohistorical moments to express social complexity. Hugh O'Neill and Wahunsonacock present obvious episodes where colonial encounters expose situational nuances and vitiates global processes. So far, so good; these are indeed evocative examples. These two historical individuals were truly unique in every way, but the same can be said for every human being that has ever lived. The two biographies are different, but can we really support the argument that superordinate British officials failed to racialize the two men into the same basic category as subordinate? To deny the power of global (in this case, transcontinental) structures of thought and practice is to argue for the uniqueness of every circumstance of social inequality that has ever been enforced. This approach has the potential to eliminate from archaeological enquiry topics of struggle and conflict within inherently unequal hierarchical structures. An associated danger is to naturalize the power of domination, to level a socio-historical playing field that was designed to be terribly and forever slanted.

Neoliberal, centrist archaeologists have always sought to mischaracterize global historical archaeology. They have raised objections to the archaeological investigation of capitalism, claiming that it constitutes a metanarrative and thus is off-limits. The recognition of overarching schemes and designs is somehow anathema to serious archaeological research in the postprocessual era. But this perspective ignores that one stated goal of global historical archaeology is to practise an archaeology that has relevance today. Accordingly, who can reasonably deny that the capitalist project, and its corollary globalization (now often more aptly termed 'glocalization'), is relevant to all continents and is inherently 'colonialist' (or economically imperialist) in design?

The issue of the palatability of colonial encounters simply becomes a matter of what interpretation to present. The obverse of this question forces us to consider what interpretation to mask. Archaeologists who have turned their attention to creolization, the seemingly positive side of cultural engagement, have usually performed a sleight-of-hand subterfuge. They have



slyly substituted the tired perspective of the culture area of Wissler for the whole-cultural, albeit now blended, pattern of Kroeber. Colonial history thus becomes the melting pot that scholars of immigration jettisoned years ago. In their effort to argue for a benign acculturation – where no one loses – they have denied the resisters and have eliminated the symbolic violence of enforced contact. Why would members of descendant communities who still feel the ideological sting of displacement, racism and cultural bigotry ever wish to decentre the pain their people have suffered? The calculated jeer of the ‘victim culture’ has the same ideological roots as the ‘culture of poverty’, and archaeologists of the 21st century should not buy into its perverse programme.

Most Irish historical archaeologists probably have not thought seriously about conflict and identity as a practical matter. The members of the Irish Post-Medieval Archaeology Group have probably not really rejected global historical archaeology; most members probably have not even thought about it. That the group chooses to present data-driven papers is undoubtedly a measure of the recent practice of modern-world archaeology in the republic. I suspect that the focus on learning the difference between creamware and pearlware mimics the state of all other historical archaeologies (including that of the United States) when they were founded. One must know how to recognize creamware before knowing how to interpret its presence. It also must be noted that although historical archaeology has been practised in the north of Ireland for a much longer period, it also has been determinedly atheoretical in approach.

One of the encouraging elements of archaeological practice is that individual researchers have every right to pursue the discipline as they see fit. Those who refuse to examine the large-scale structures that created and re-create modern history will be able to pursue their research unmolested. Those who prefer to investigate glocalization will proceed to research the past in terms that make sense to them. Other archaeologists may wish to tackle only intercontinental connections. The discipline today is large enough for all perspectives, with each practitioner interpreting the past to the audiences of their choosing. For the past three decades I have unapologetically staked my claim with the dispossessed and the erased, and I have sought to use archaeology as a tool for explaining the development of today’s modern world. My hope is that today’s neoliberal archaeology – with its apologies, half-truths, misreadings and misrepresentations – is merely a fad whose time has briefly come but is now disappearing.

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**Colony or conflict zone?** *Sandra Scham*

Audrey Horning has a lot to say about the abuses of overarching theory in archaeology. Her most cogent critiques, directed at the rather careless

application of postcolonial theory to the archaeology of Northern Ireland and the failure of that theoretical model to deal effectively with the complex and fragmented identities of this continually embattled society, spoke powerfully to my own experience. The intellectual currency of colonialism and postcolonialism is becoming as rapidly devalued as that of domination and resistance. This is not to say these concepts have no merit – only that they suffer from overuse and a persistent lack of nuanced examination.

The practice of archaeology in Northern Ireland has always represented to me, on the surface, a potential source of comparison to the archaeology of Israel and Palestine, which is my own field. Horning's article has convinced me of the perils inherent in such analogies but I was, nonetheless, intrigued by our similarly frustrating experiences with the kind of superficial assessments that conflict situations seem to inspire, even among academics. Media coverage appears to be the driving force behind these rather presumptuous views. While I was living in Jerusalem, I remember receiving an e-mail from a fellow academic in the United States chiding me for 'not really knowing what the situation was like in Israel' – by which she meant that I did not entirely agree with her assessment based upon stories in the *Washington post*.

The confusion of political views with analysis is unfortunately receiving too much encouragement in anthropology and archaeology these days. Consequently, if you do archaeological work in the Middle East you are likely to spend a lot of time discussing postcolonialism, and mostly not by choice. Before being asked to contribute to panels focusing on postcolonialist approaches, I have never found an organizer who even questioned whether or not the Israeli and Palestinian conflict truly reflected a postcolonial situation. Historically the correct answer may be 'yes' if you consider that this region was once under the British Mandate. That, however, is seldom the 'colonialism' that such individuals have in mind.

The idea of Israel as a 'colony' in the Middle East (Abu el-Haj 2001; Massad 2000) has perhaps not appealed to as many scholars as the idea of Northern Ireland as a colony. Israel's domination of Palestine certainly invites such assessments, however (Scham 2003). Unfortunately this rather handy notion is negated by the fact that there is no 'core' to this 'periphery'. Perhaps at its inception one might argue that Israel was a 'colony' of Europe but there has always been a discernible lack of allegiance to the mother country among its citizens – most of whom are of Middle Eastern and not European origin in any event. Israel as a colony of Europe makes less sense than Northern Ireland as a colony of Britain. This is not a political observation – just as Horning's perspective clearly has nothing to do with what may or may not be her views on the conflict. Rather it is a plea for understanding the nature of history in a complex region with fragmented identities.

In the realm of practice, Horning is even more critical of the value of postcolonial archaeology. Proponents, of course, will point out that it is interpretation and framework that are at issue here but that is precisely the problem that this article elucidates. A postcolonial perspective on the material culture of Northern Ireland, Horning suggests, could potentially mischaracterize or, worse, ignore a vital part of the region's past. The fact that postcolonial critique first developed as a literary genre (Alter 1998; Bhabha

1992; 1994) should give us some pause in enthusiastically applying these ideas to archaeology. The literature of the colonized can ‘speak back’ to the literature of the colonizer (Spivak 1990; Bakhtin 1981) in a way that material culture will not ‘speak back’ to our categorizations of it, however wrongheaded. There is no real discourse to be achieved here.

The author asserts that the archaeology of Plantation-period Northern Ireland (17th and 18th centuries) suffers from a surfeit of inappropriate comparisons and contexts. She brings up the thorny issue of identity in pointing out that the north of Ireland is not Ireland in the sense that there is a consensus of understanding of the past – nor is it similar to that other great experiment in 16th- and 17th-century British colonization, North America. While the potential for comparing the two has been explored by several archaeologists (Orser 1996; Delle 1999), Horning finds that such comparisons obscure ‘the complexities of identity formation’ (p. 188).

Identity, a sometimes insidious and often ill-defined driving force in archaeology, stands as a check against the imbalance wrought by the overapplication of theory. In Horning’s view, Irish identities are complicated. Truth be told, all identities are complicated, particularly when one enters the realm of public archaeology. Presumed relationships between present communities and the remnants of past ones are based upon the slimmest of pretexts – yet they have a strong emotional draw that we, as archaeologists, neither manufacture nor control. Horning’s characterization of the Protestant and Catholic contest for subaltern status in Northern Ireland reminded me rather pointedly that battles for subalternity, at least in the media, can be as common in conflict situations as battles for hegemony. As a consequence, archaeologists working in such places may find that the quest for historical victimhood is as significant to a community as the quest for historical supremacy. This is perhaps a point that is better understood about Northern Ireland than about Israel and Palestine. Nevertheless, there are vestiges of subalternity that are inherent in the Israeli consciousness about the past that mirror those of Palestinians (Scham 2003).

In her conclusion the author cites Johnson’s criticism that archaeologists ‘have all been very good at tracing the influence of politics on archaeology, but strikingly poor at making our archaeology address contemporary political debates’ (Johnson 2003, 29). I would, however, beg to differ with Johnson on the specific practice of archaeology in current zones of conflict. The study of conflict in the social sciences may be multifaceted and theoretical, but the fact of conflict is invariably rooted in real geography. Sites and places are both the subjects and the scenes of conflict and because sites and places are what archaeological fieldwork is all about, archaeology in a conflict zone becomes a political statement in itself.

In Belfast, Baghdad, Afghanistan, Jerusalem and any number of other such locations around the world, it seems that every incident related to archaeology addresses contemporary political debates, and indeed political debates return the favour. From the shoot-outs in the Byzantine Church of the Nativity, to the bombardment of the Old City of Nablus by the Israeli Army, to the American destruction of Babylon – there are so many fields that were memorialized in advance of the battles fought on them.

**Starting as we mean to go on. Why we need a theoretically informed historical archaeology in Ireland** *Tadhg O’Keeffe*

Dr Horning’s paper touches issues of fundamental importance both to contemporary Ireland as a place of historically rooted cultural contestation and to the discipline of historical archaeology in Ireland. It has a core message: archaeologists can blunt some of those sharp edges of cultural-political division that originated in Plantation-era settlement by revealing how historical sites that seem on the surface to belong on one or other aggrieved side in the island’s history are susceptible to more nuanced, and arguably more legitimate, interpretations.

I wish at the outset to endorse the anti-essentialism that underpins implicitly this argument for less divisive but still accurate archaeological interpretations. Those people of medieval or Plantation-period Ireland whom we regard as quite distinctive in their politico-religious identities (and for whom we use the exact same terms, such as ‘English’ and ‘Irish’, over a period of many centuries) were not always correspondingly distinctive or isolated in the daily activities to which the archaeological record uniquely bears witness. On the contrary, politically essentialized polarizations of identity between the 12th and 16th centuries were often counterbalanced, and even undermined, by creolizations at the level of cultural practice (see O’Keeffe 2004, 3–5). The point should not need to be argued among archaeologists. That the assemblages from Movaghan and Bellaghy are capable of a pluralist reading should not surprise us.

Moving on from this, I want to address separately two particular issues that feature in Dr Horning’s paper: postcolonialism and Ireland, and the tension between theory and practice in Irish archaeology.

**Lost in the post**

Readers of Dr Horning’s paper might not be aware that Ireland was only embraced by the postcolonial fraternity a decade ago, even though its history of colonization and independence has long been known. Back in the poverty-stricken early 1980s, when the *Daily telegraph* (a right-wing English newspaper) famously asserted that the only thing keeping it out of the Third World was the weather, Ireland was conceivably the very epitome of the postcolony as later defined by Achille Mbembe (2001). Yet the island and its literature were largely excluded from the construct until the early 1990s. In the mid-1990s the first of a major series of postcolonial readings of the island’s modern literary canon appeared (Kiberd 1995). The postcolonial interpretation then spread from the literature to other aspects of Irish culture, and the Republic of Ireland was quickly established internationally as a singularly important postcolony. Although there are good grounds for disputing the appropriateness of a label that, by its very nature, regards the

republic as having a closer kinship with India and Zimbabwe than with Great Britain, critical thinking about many aspects of contemporary culture in southern Ireland over the past decade has been informed by postcoloniality. The impact of this on southern Irish perceptions of Northern Ireland awaits full analysis, but I suspect that that impact has been negative – Stephen Howe’s assertion that ‘Irish cultural critics have failed to engage in any way with the politics and culture of Unionism’ (2000, 139) is surely supported by the non-representation of the explicitly British landscapes of Northern Ireland in the *Atlas of the Irish rural landscape* (Aalen, Whelan and Stout 1997), a volume that comes, I believe, from within the postcolonial stable.

Let me turn now to archaeology and make some general points about postcolonialism. Archaeologists have long been talking about colonialism but hardly ever talk explicitly about postcolonialism, even though those colonized people and places that are of archaeological interest have invariably entered a temporally defined postcolonial phase. Matthew Johnson’s recent advocacy of archaeologies of/for Europe that are ‘contrapuntal’ and relocate the margins in the centre (2006) may kickstart a more systematic engagement with this particular ‘-ism’. But I wish to suggest that postcolonialism is problematic for the historical archaeologist at the two scales at which the discipline operates – the global and the local – and that it therefore requires particularly careful negotiation. Thinking globally (and I agree with Charles Orser that we should), the fact that archaeology is a product of Western intellectual culture, and is conceivably therefore a colonial exercise in its own right, might raise certain moral issues, especially in the post-9/11 era; there are parts of the world, or rather people within the world, about which or about whom it might even be said that an archaeology of postcoloniality is a contradiction in terms. Thinking locally, which is the more critical scale for us, postcolonialism is far more problematic. In its crudest manifestation, which is to give voice to the suppressed victims of colonization, it involves an essentializing of ‘native’ and ‘colonist’ identities. Postcolonialism arguably requires, as part of its own political rationale, some degree of rejection of the idea that both ‘natives’ and ‘colonists’ are transformed (and therefore become postcolonial?) at the very moment of contact.

Ireland is a local context within the larger global context. Those general doubts that I have articulated about archaeology and postcolonialism at a local level are doubled-up in its case. Although often as bloody, Ireland’s colonial history is different from that of many other parts of the world. Being the white-skinned (and, from the late 1800s, English-speaking by choice) next-door neighbours of Britain, its inhabitants never belonged in the same category as the many people across the world around whom the British wrapped their imperial arms, or at whom they pointed their imperial arms. The relationships between the two islands and their peoples were always more complex. We need to be cognizant of that.

I suggest that historical archaeologists in Ireland move away from colonialism and focus instead on class divisions. Let me simply illustrate the point by commenting briefly on the Great Famine of the mid-1800s. The colonial/postcolonial model identifies this as a tragedy of Catholic Ireland for which the British, with their laissez-faire policy, are largely to blame. Yet,

while the poor communities of western Ireland were gearing up to eventual catastrophe as potato blight came and went during the 1820s and 1830s, the middle-class Catholics of the south-east of Ireland were prospering. Their support for Daniel O’Connell’s repeal movement was because they desired political representation, not because they wanted to unyoke the British and help the impoverished communities of the west (see Whelan 1988). Class bonded Catholics in south Leinster and east Munster with their Protestant neighbours; class divided those same Catholics from their co-religionists and compatriots in the west. Class explains far more about this period and others than colonialism. It is in danger of getting lost in the post.

### **Theory in Irish historical archaeology**

The archaeological study of the ‘historical’ (post-15th-century) past is now a big deal in Ireland, but the development of this field has not been entirely painless. There has been a certain tension between those archaeologists who describe this field as ‘post-medieval archaeology’ and see their mission as recording and explaining normatively its material, and those who describe the field as ‘historical archaeology’ after the American model and insist that, because its material and its interpretations are part of the constitution of the modern and contemporary world, it is fundamentally an ideologically reflexive and politically strategic practice. Dr Horning alludes to the rejection by IPMAG in 2002 of my paper – for the record, I have reused its title as the main title here – as a manifestation of that tension.

I have insufficient space here to explore the complexities of what seems to be an almost old-fashioned clash between theorists and non-theorists/anti-theorists (pragmatic empiricists, anybody?), so I will simply express my own view.

What we are really seeing being played out in this debate in Irish historical/post-medieval archaeology is simply, I think, the widening rupture between Irish archaeology’s two general cultures of capital, one of information and one of knowledge. I regard this rupture as fundamentally between ‘the profession’ and the academy, with the archaeologists of the former operating in rescue contexts and confident in their normative interpretation of the data they collect, and the archaeologists of the latter (who are much less numerous) operating in research contexts and endlessly grappling with complexities of meaning. Although this seems a very crude polarization, misrepresenting both parties, it is not inaccurate. The reason why I describe that rupture as widening in Ireland is because professional archaeology, funded by the still-buoyant Celtic Tiger economy, continues to generate massive amounts of data at precisely the same time as many academy-based archaeologists are challenging traditional views of the constitution and primacy of data. The irony at the heart of this tension is that the academy in Ireland, so conservative up to the early 1990s that the new archaeology and postprocessualism were effectively banned from its taught curricula, has actually become the locus of radical thinking. The archaeologists who are least comfortable with the left-leaning, almost anti-establishment, American concept of historical archaeology tend, in my experience anyway, to be the ‘hands-on’ archaeologists whose engagement with the public is immediate and

personalized, and whose professional practices and identities are therefore very obviously embedded in contemporary culture and its inequalities.

Those archaeologists who describe themselves as ‘hands-on’ will of course argue – as Dr Horning suggests some did in discussing and rejecting my IPMAG paper – that neo-Marxian reflections are really no use when the bulldozers are looming and material still remains to be recovered, or when contract-times are running down and reports have to be completed. One can understand the fetishization of data in such rescue conditions. But I wonder if we can turn this argument on its head. Let me be devil’s advocate here. Is it possible that the profession’s approach in Ireland to archaeological data collection and its normative analysis is not really being determined by external economic forces at all? Could it be that this culture of archaeology had, because of its reluctance to think outside the box about data and its value, already transformed itself into an industry of scientific scavenging, and that the intimidatory presence of bulldozers sometimes reflects the value that it has put on itself?

The main point that I want to make is that there can be no rapprochement between these two ‘camps’, or no connection made between the two cultures, that is not an engagement with theory at some level. At some stage the sheer volume of archaeological data being generated in Ireland will necessitate a step back into reflection, not on data management but on data value. Enter theory.

Even though she clearly desires to remain neutral as she delineates for contemporary, culturally contested, Ireland an archaeology that is ‘theoretically informed yet responsible and publicly engaged’ (p. 190), Dr Horning’s manifesto reads as a classic of American-style historical archaeology in its political aims. It demands a theoretical awareness from those to whom it is directed. I think that her ‘solution to the impasse’ (as described with respect to Movanager, Bellaghy and Achill Island) is not actually a brokered compromise between two factions but is a clear message to the anti-theory brigade: start thinking about theory.

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## **Focus found. New directions for Irish historical archaeology**

*Audrey J. Horning*

In 1999 the Irish Post-Medieval Archaeology Group (IPMAG) was established by a diverse group of Northern Ireland archaeologists and heritage professionals, drawn from the commercial, government, museum and university sectors. The aims of the organization, discussed at length at the group’s inaugural conference held in Belfast in February of 2001, include (one) undertaking initiatives to raise the profile of post-medieval archaeology within the whole of Ireland, (two) fostering greater contacts between those



individuals engaged in researching the archaeology, history and culture of post-1550 Ireland and (three) lobbying for increased academic attention to be paid to the period within Irish universities. That the organization has made progress in approaching these aims is clear, as acknowledged by Tadhg O'Keefe: 'the archaeological study of the "historical" (post-fifteenth-century) past is now a big deal in Ireland'. IPMAG conferences have been held in conjunction with academic institutions (Queen's University, Belfast, 2001; Trinity College, Dublin, 2002; University of Ulster, 2004; University College, Cork, 2006), public institutions (Ulster Museum, 2003), and commercial archaeology companies (Aegis Archaeology, Ltd, Limerick, 2005).

Since the rejection of Dr O'Keefe's paper for the second conference, which sparked my own concerns about a possible divide in Irish historical/post-medieval archaeology, he has (by invitation) presented papers and served as discussant in three other conferences, significantly contributing to a broadening of approaches. The true nature of the tension between theoretical and field archaeology is revealed in a review of the 2005 Contemporary Historical Archaeology and Theory (CHAT) conference, held in Dublin and hosted by Dr O'Keefe, recently published in the IPMAG newsletter. The reviewer (Myles 2006) described the content of one paper as 'lost behind a discourse in the language common to those who engage daily with matters of theory as a central tenet of their professional lives, a language which, quite frankly, alienates others . . . it is certainly not the language of inclusion.' Note that the reviewer explicitly did not condemn the intellectual content, but rather the means of presentation, as per my (to quote Neal Ascherson) 'wonderful outburst' about our 'hard-won and often impenetrable jargon' (p. 201). While acknowledging the tension between approaches, I remain more optimistic than either Dr O'Keefe or Professor Orser that there exists no stark divide between 'them that do' and 'them that think about doing.'

Neal Ascherson is correct in pointing out the fact that I knowingly contradicted myself in my discussion article – and that the point of the piece lies in that contradiction. I do not believe that non-academic Irish archaeologists are simpletons enlisted in an 'anti-theory brigade' (p. 211). I must query Professor Orser's assertion that most 'Irish historical archaeologists probably have not thought seriously about conflict and identity as a practical matter' (p. 205). Negotiating conflict and identity can be a daily, practical reality in Northern Ireland. In terms of archaeological practice, 'field' archaeologists often act in an overtly self-aware and self-reflexive fashion, cognizant of the contradictions inherent in the contemporary capitalist practice of archaeology and the problematic relationship between past and present in modern Ireland, even if many are unversed in the 'proper academic' means of expressing those concerns.

Moving on to more substantive issues than the debatable divide between theory and practice, I'd like to pick up on Sandra Scham's commentary as regards the conduct and role of archaeology in zones of conflict. Just as she is reluctant to draw too many comparisons between the Middle East and Northern Ireland for fear of over-simplifying complex histories, I too am reticent to speak about the practice and presentation of archaeology in Israel and Palestine, but find myself in complete agreement with her 'plea for

understanding the nature of history in a complex region with fragmented identities' (p. 206). I would also hazard a guess that the experience of conducting public archaeology in areas of conflict, which she rightly describes as inherently political, has the effect of sharpening one's understanding of relevance through the immediacy of practice. The approach tendered by Professor Scham and Dr Adel Yahya in addressing conflicting narratives in Israeli and Palestinian histories similarly holds promise for Northern Ireland:

it is necessary, appropriate and legitimate for both sides to nurture and maintain their own narratives. Israeli and Palestinian history is so intertwined and so built upon certain perceptions of the other, that it is incumbent upon the two sides to make the effort to understand the narrative of the one in the context of the other (Scham and Yahya 2003, 402).

It seems to me that this type of approach transcends the essentialism inherent in both popular sectarian and academic class-based analyses of Irish history. Rather than force-fitting victimhood (or denying victimhood, as per Professor Orser's concern) such an approach is not only pragmatic (as reflected in the work of many field archaeologists) but also holds much promise for future cultural understanding rooted in a deeper appreciation of the complexities of the past.

Who should participate in this process? Professor Orser raises the difficult issue of how we identify 'stakeholders', and, once they are identified, 'how should we incorporate their world views into our interpretations?' (p. 203). In an earlier publication (2004a, 174) he states that 'adding the Diasporic Irish to the contemporary equation increases the complexities of community-sensitive archaeological interpretation', noting that 'the descendant community encompasses a global cohort of thousands of people who were forcibly evicted from their homes as a direct result of landlord power'. He rightly acknowledges the existence of competing narratives of Irish history, but seems to suggest that only those descendants of the 'forcibly evicted' rural poor can be classified as 'authentically' Irish American or 'authentically' rooted in Ballykilcline, his study area. Considering the interests of Irish Americans (however narrowly defined) in assessing communities of interest for Irish historical archaeology is not inherently bad practice, and I am indeed sympathetic to Orser's desire to transcend both national and global metanarratives. Yet Irish Americans already approach Irish history from a position of privilege such that their considerable economic power in terms of tourist dollars (and the International Fund for Ireland) invariably influences the presentation of heritage in Ireland, a presentation that generally articulates with a nationalist reading. Irish history as a long chronicle of exploitation and deprivation reifies ideas of America as the promised land. Irish Americans 'returning' to Ireland invariably seek that which is no longer there, and that which may never have been there. Irish history has become a commodity, principally bought and sold in the global capitalist marketplace (see Graham 2001, 149 for a discussion of authenticity and the role of the United States as 'a consumer and a producer of Irishness'). To prioritize the interests of the purchasers of this commodity strikes me as contradictory to Professor Orser's stated manifesto to defend the oppressed of the modern world.

Consciously stepping away from the relevance of America to Irish heritage practice and Irish history, I am particularly interested in Neal Ascherson's suggestion that a more nuanced understanding of the convoluted relationship between Ireland and colonialism may be found in comparison with 20th-century colonization in eastern Europe. Viewed in this context, the seeming anomaly between a colonial Ireland and a European Ireland may pale into insignificance. I am also intrigued by his suggestion that the histories of these nations have been wilfully ignored by historical archaeologists because of the absence of capitalism, so central to the discourse of modern world archaeologists that it (capitalism) has been declared the 'subject matter' of historical archaeology (Matthews, Leone and Jordan 2002, 109).

Professor Orser fears the opposite. He accuses 'neoliberal, centrist archaeologists' of declaring discussions of capitalism 'off-limits': 'The recognition of overarching schemes and designs is somehow anathema to serious archaeological research in the postprocessual era' (p. 204). When I wrote that 'I believe that the lives of the long-dead occupants of Slievemore are worth more than a muting footnote in an endlessly grim recounting of economic and social imbalance in a burgeoning capitalist world system' (p. 195), I was not denying the existence of that system or questioning its validity as a topic of study. My concern was about how a narrow focus on capitalism in reference to individual sites or regions plays out in identical fashion, with the presence or absence of material culture discussed only in relation to that system. A dearth of material culture becomes indicative of the inequities of the system, while the presence of an array of commodities becomes evidence of conscious resistance to the system. The capacity of the archaeological record to surprise is lost. The nuances of internal dynamics are lost. Why dig at all, if we already know the answers to our questions? Why not ask other questions – questions that consider the micro as well as the macro; questions that address the ways in which individuals, families and communities negotiate their relations with one another (as well as broader economic and political structures) on a daily basis?

I acknowledge the caution that an overemphasis on individual agency and individual lives is more indicative of contemporary world views than necessarily accurately indicative of the actions and beliefs of people in the past, but at the same time I think we need to do a much better job of acknowledging the humanity of people in the past if we choose to emphasize structure. Certainly Professor Orser is absolutely correct in noting that 'superordinate British officials' (p. 204) would have categorized Hugh O'Neill and Wahunsonacock as inferiors, no matter how we today seek and find evidence for their individual 'agency'. Indeed, it is the way in which actors such as the Ulster leader and the Powhatan leader were themselves aware of being racialized that the story of colonial encounters becomes more interesting, if indeed less straightforward. We must not denigrate the capacity of the archaeology to inform us about every level of past human experience, from the deeply personal and intimate to a larger-scale awareness of the material impact of capitalist-driven class inequities.

On the issue of class, I find myself in general agreement with Tadhg O'Keeffe when he notes the disinterest of prosperous Catholic families in the

south-east in the fate of Famine-starved westerners. Today, class arguably unifies working-class Northerners across the sectarian divide in their economic struggles, while the children of middle- and upper-class families can grow up in the leafy suburbs of south Belfast believing themselves to be free of the ‘historical baggage’ that continues to spark tension in contested spaces elsewhere in the city. Yet the majority of these middle-class children continue to attend de facto segregated schools just as do their working-class counterparts. One school may be better funded, and all may endeavour to implement a balanced curriculum, but in their continued separate existence they provide foundations for sectarian rather than class identities, identities which trump and thereby mask any class-based, economic disparities. Like the question of capitalism, it all comes back to the issues we want to address, and to the questions we choose to ask. Yes, there are serious class issues to be addressed in Northern Ireland – but not until we find some way to disentangle the threads of myth and misunderstanding that obscure class-based commonalities.

For me, simply chronicling economic injustice does not provide answers to my questions about why people persist in maintaining oppositional identities that are rooted in constructed histories. Simply declaring these narratives historically invalid because they contradict class-based analysis denies the potential of archaeology to assist in the process of reconciliation. In Northern Ireland, such an archaeology must be a public archaeology involving local communities with representatives from across the sectarian divide. Following the model of Scham and Yahya in acknowledging the strength of historical narratives should help us in ‘finding focus’ for an engaged Irish historical archaeology.

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