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Where have all the wolves gone?

Kieran Hickey

One of the interesting aspects of doing research on any topic is the fascinating material you come across, often not directly related to what you are looking for but terrifically interesting in its own right. From both my early days as a student and from my climate history research I became vaguely aware that there had been real wild wolves in Ireland right up until late medieval times. Wolves, apparently, had survived longer in Ireland than in England, Wales or Scotland. This fact absolutely fascinated me and, being aware that very little had been done on native Irish wolves before, the germ of a little side-research project began to take shape at the back of my mind. It was my intention from the outset simply to gather as much information as I could on the subject to see where it would lead me. For the first four years I just gathered information as I came across it and stuck it in a folder, telling no one, almost embarrassed to admit to my newfound interest in wolves. This extra research also kept me amused while trawling through vast numbers of history volumes looking for climate references to Ireland. Nearly ten years later I am still at it—so much for a little side-project to keep me amused. In the beginning I expected to get no more than a hundred references to wolves in Ireland, possibly a few more if I was lucky. The current total is over 500 and still rising. The initial avenues of investigation have broadened out in a variety of ways that I could never have even imagined when I first started out.

A number of questions dominated my thinking from the very start of the project. These were very simple but, given the nature of the evidence available to me, not very easy to answer. The first issue was how many wolves were likely to have existed in Ireland at any one time, and where they were located. Was I going to be dealing with a small number of wolves isolated in a few remote corners of Ireland, or were they much more widespread than that? Secondly, I wanted to establish why they had died out in Ireland. In particular, I wanted to know the





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factors that contributed to their demise and whether I could clearly identify the very last date at which a native Irish wild wolf was recorded.

Two publications were of immense use to me when I first started out on this quest. The first was a book (probably long forgotten) by J. E. Harting called *British animals extinct within historic times*, written in 1880. In this great work there is a large section devoted to wolves, including Irish wolves. This provided me with a range of material on which to start my work.

The second publication, by James Fairley, a former Professor of Zoology at NUI Galway and still going strong, was entitled *An Irish beast book: a natural history of Ireland's furred wildlife*. Indeed, Professor Fairley has published a number of very important books of bibliography on the subject of Irish wild mammals, including wolves, in addition to other books on Irish wild mammals and a whole range of other publications.

But, as the wolves might say—yes, there is an Irish tradition for talking wolves too—enough of the preamble; where is the meat in the story? Just to indicate the range of evidence available on the subject of wolves in Ireland I will give you a few brief examples under the headings of archaeology, folklore, place-names and history.

Archaeological evidence

There is no doubt that wolves have been present in Ireland for at least 20,000 years; we know this because of the dating of wolf bones found in a number of caves throughout the country, where they were preserved in the cave-floor sediments. Unfortunately, few of these caves have been scientifically excavated and only a small number of the bones have been radiocarbon-dated to determine their age. These caves, however, have given us a great insight into the animals that were present during the last Ice Age at a time when the ice sheets only covered the northern two-thirds of the country; this period, known as the Midlandian, ended around 13,000 years ago. These animals included the giant Irish elk (now extinct), reindeer, bears and other mammals no longer found in Ireland.

There is no doubt that during the great era of ringfort-building, between about AD 500 and 1000, many were constructed primarily for the protection of domestic animals during the night, to prevent them from being taken by raiders but also to protect them from wolves. In County Tyrone, according to Allen, where wolves were such a plague in Cromwell's time (during the mid-seventeenth century), they even raided the stone enclosures made to protect sheep. This practice of bringing animals in at night is still carried on in many



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Pl. 16—A wolf approaches a sheep-pen as the shepherd sleeps in this illustration from a thirteenth-century bestiary (reproduced by kind permission of the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, England).

countries in Eastern Europe, for example, where there remains a significant wolf population and therefore a continuing threat to the domestic animals (Pl. 16).

Folklore

Wolves play a very important role in Irish folklore, myth and legend. Stories about encounters with wolves are relatively common; many early Irish saints seemed to attract wolves with ease. Other accounts tell of the use of wolf parts as medicine and charms against evil and ill health. Wolves were generally considered to be evil creatures associated with the devil, hence the depiction of a wolf in the Book of Kells (Pl. 17).

In the realm of medicine there are a number of bizarre concoctions, involving different wolf body parts and even wolf dung, for treating a variety of illnesses. For example, the wearing of a band of wolfskin like a girdle was considered a preventative for the falling sickness (epilepsy). Pickering records that hanging a wolf's tail over a barn door would keep other wolves away, whereas, more bizarrely, eating a dish of wolf meat will prevent a person from seeing ghosts, and sleeping with a wolf's head under the pillow will ward off nightmares.

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Pl. 17—The wolf from f. 76v of the eighth-century *Book of Kells* in the Library of Trinity College, Dublin (reproduced by kind permission of the Board of Trinity College, Dublin).

Discomfort aside, I should think that anyone who sleeps with a wolf's head under their pillow is more likely to have nightmares.

There is even a strong werewolf tradition in Irish folklore. One of the most surprising folklore aspects was the belief that a man and woman from the barony of Ossory, lying predominantly in County Kilkenny, became wolves for a period of seven years, and this helps to explain beliefs in such supernatural creatures as werewolves. I mentioned talking wolves earlier and there are a surprisingly large number of references to this phenomenon. O'Flaherty notes that the *Annals of Clonmacnoise* for the year AD 688 record a reference to a wolf speaking with a human voice. Similarly, in his *Life of Molaise*, also known as St Laisren, Kenny notes that, some 50 years after the saint's death, amongst other strange occurrences was a wolf heard to speak with a human voice, to the horror of all.

Even today some curious customs survive from a time when wolves were ever present. One such custom relates to funerals at the Gate Cemetery, Ogonnelloe, Co. Clare. This cemetery, medieval in date, is walled and located in the centre of a field. The mourners carry the coffin around the cemetery and place it at intervals on the ground outside the walls, so that the wolves would not know where the corpse was finally buried. This tradition suggests the rather gruesome possibility and perhaps real fear (in the past) that wolves might disturb freshly



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dug graves in their search for food. In western Scotland many graveyards were on offshore islands for the same reason.

Place-names

A considerable number of place-names in Ireland are associated with wolves. A few of these are in English, e.g. Wolf Island in Lough Gill, Co. Sligo (Fig. 1). The vast majority, however, are 'hidden' in Irish place-names. This is because there are



*Fig. 1—
Location map of
the English-
language wolf
place-names in
Ireland
(drawing by Dr
Siubhán
Comer).*





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a number of Irish words for wolves, including *Mac-tire* ('son of the country'— e.g. the townland of Isknamateera in County Kerry) and *faolchu* ('evil hound'— e.g. Feltrim Hill, Co. Dublin), and numerous place-names contain *breagh* (wolf) and its variations, e.g. Breaghy (wolf plain/field) in Drumcree, Co. Armagh, and Breaghva (wolf plain/field) in Kilrush, Co. Clare. So far I have discovered that over twenty of the 32 counties of Ireland have place-names linked to wolves. There are even a few surnames associated with wolves in Ireland, including O'Connell, originally a County Kerry name that translates as 'strong as a wolf'.

Historical

There is a vast array of historical documentary information relating to wolves in Ireland. The first, inscribed in ogham (an early form of writing using a simple alphabet composed of lines and notches, dating from between the fourth and seventh centuries) on standing stones, overlap with references in the earliest monastic annals, dating from the sixth and seventh centuries, and other accounts that record the presence of native wolves right up to the end of the eighteenth century. These sources include lists of animals found in Ireland in the monastic annals; Brehon laws (ancient Gaelic legal system); legislation and bounties; early natural histories and descriptions of the country; descriptions of wolf encounters, the hunting of wolves, wolf attacks on farm animals and, more rarely, on humans; and letters and diaries. This historical evidence suggests that wolves occurred throughout the island of Ireland, and no part of it is without some reference to them. Below are a selection of the several hundred historical references to wolves in Ireland to give you an idea of the sorts of encounters that occurred between humans and wolves.

In the eighth century the monk Nennius, describing the wonders of Ireland, states that, with the exception of the mouse, the wolf and the fox, Ireland was not inhabited by any noxious animals.

The wolf was considered the principal predator of livestock, particularly lambs and calves. As a result, wolf-hunting was considered a public duty: according to a ninth-century Brehon law-text, a client must hunt wolves once a week.

The Annals of Connacht for 1420 state that many persons were killed by wolves in that year (Kelly 1997).

In a written description of Ireland compiled for Sir John Perrot, the lord deputy of Ireland, in January 1584 it was suggested that leases for tenants should include provision for the trapping and killing of what were described as ravening and devouring wolves, and this was to be done with traps, snares or other devices.





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Lord William Russell, lord deputy of Ireland, records in his diary that on 26 May 1596 he and Lady Russell went wolf-hunting at Kilmainham, which at that time was quite close to Dublin city, although it would now be considered very much part of the central city area.

In a letter dated to 1611, Roger Braben of Kinalmeaky, Co. Cork, writes of matters largely concerning his horse stud, but also states, as a matter of fact, that one of his colts had been killed by a wolf.

It is stated in the description attached to the Down Survey map of Ballybay, Co. Offaly (1655–6), that few sheep were kept in that barony on account of the prevalence of wolves.

In 1698 the stock book of William Conyngham in County Down notes that a two-year-old from his herd of black cattle was killed by a wolf, without any indication that the incident was particularly remarkable.

In 1710 or 1714 (depending upon author) a last presentment was made by Brian Townsend to the grand jury in County Cork for killing wolves (i.e. to claim the bounty).

One of the last wolves in Ireland was killed near Louisburg, Co. Mayo, in 1745.

It is asserted by many persons of weight and veracity that a wolf was killed in the Wicklow Mountains as recently as 1770.

How did wolves survive in Ireland in the historical period?

Wolves survived in Ireland up to the end of the eighteenth century owing to a number of factors. The first of these was the extensive wilderness areas that existed around the island at least until 1700. These included extensive mountain ranges and large forests with few human inhabitants. Ireland's human population in the 1600s was probably around 1.5 million. So there were extensive areas for wolves to hunt and breed, unaffected or only lightly affected by human interference.

The Irish evidence suggests that pack sizes were small, probably consisting of no more than the dominant breeding pair and one or two other adult wolves, a few juveniles and that year's cubs. This small pack size was an adaptation to the relative scarcity of large mammals such as deer and the absence of farm animals in many of the forest and mountain areas. Wolves are opportunistic feeders and will eat just about anything, including insects, worms, rodents, fish and crabs, in addition to carrion of any type. Interestingly, like urban foxes today, there is evidence to show that wolves were skulking around the outskirts of Dublin city and Cork city scavenging for food. In a letter dated 1698, for example, Herbert





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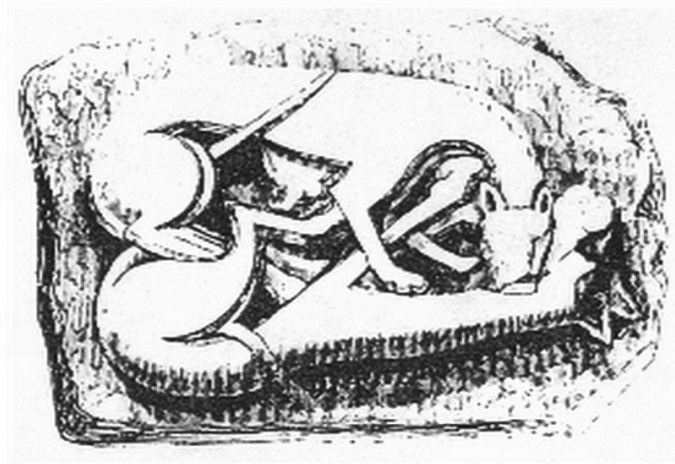


Fig. 2—Illustration of an ancient carved stone in bas-relief from Ardnaglass Castle, Co. Sligo, supposedly depicting a dog attacking a wolf (from Webber 1841).

notes that one J. Howel, an alderman of Cork city, states that wolves were still present in his locality but that they were now considered as game and as a diversion as opposed to noxious and hateful. This also indicates that their numbers were in significant decline in this area at the time.

Remarkably, and somewhat sadly, no wolf skeletons, heads or skins seem to have survived from the time when they were part of Ireland's landscape. In addition, there are almost no illustrations of wolves from Ireland, and all that we know about what they looked like comes from a few scattered references and a number of ecclesiastical and other carvings allegedly showing wolves. One possible exception to this is an ancient carved stone in rude bas-relief from Ardnaglass Castle, Co. Sligo (Fig. 2). According to Fairley, this supposedly depicts a dog attacking a wolf. The carved stone was presented to the Royal Irish Academy in 1841 by Mr Charles Webber and is said to commemorate the destruction of the last wolf in Ireland. The stone, however, appears to be medieval in date and therefore pre-dates the destruction of the last wolves in Ireland by a number of centuries.

Population estimates

Based on a number of indirect sources of evidence and information that we have at our disposal, it is possible to make a rough estimate of wolf population numbers in Ireland over several periods. The first approach is to examine the



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records of trade and export of wolfskins from Ireland. The murage charter of 1361 for Galway city, for instance, lists the taxable commodities in full. Included in it, among many other things, are wolfskins. This indicates that wolfskins were seen as a common enough commodity to be worth listing in a tax charter. The evidence of the export trade comes primarily from the port books of key Irish trading ports like Bristol. The Bristol accounts alone show an average of between 100 and 300 wolfskins exported from Ireland [per year?] throughout the 1500s. Most astonishingly, in the tax year 1558–9 a high figure of 961 wolfskins were exported from Ireland into the port of Bristol alone. This indicates a very substantial wolf population in Ireland throughout the 1500s.

DOES
THIS
MEAN
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300
PER
YEAR

The second approach uses a habitat availability assessment based on the landscape and a human population assessment of Ireland for the period in and around 1600, equating this with the requirements of a wolf pack in terms of territory and food resources. At this time there were still large tracts of wilderness areas, including forest and mountains, ideally suited for wolves. It is estimated, based on an average pack size of between five and ten individuals, that these areas could have supported a wolf population of between 400 and 800 individuals.

The third approach was to look at the figures paid out for bounties. It is interesting to note that in 1653 the Cromwellian government set bounties of £6 for a female, £5 for a male, £3 for a hunting juvenile and 10s. for a cub. These were very substantial amounts of money at the time. The records for payment of only two bounties have survived, however, and these date from 1649–56 and from 1655 or 1665 (date not legible).

In the first, the sum of £3,847 5s. is enumerated for bounties for all of Ireland, and this was paid out between July 1649 and November 1656, a period of seven and a half years. This represents an average annual payment of £513, indicating a wolf kill of between 200 and 400 individual animals. Clearly, to sustain this loss the actual population of wolves must have been considerably larger than this, possibly between 600 and 800 or more individuals.

In the second bounty figure, a total payment of £243 5s. 4d. was made for wolves killed in the counties of Galway, Mayo, Sligo and parts of Leitrim alone. Unfortunately no breakdown of the numbers of animals is given, but it can be assumed that the figure represents a mixture of females, males, juveniles and cubs, as it is likely that wolves would have been hunted pack by pack. This figure can be taken to represent a wolf kill of between 75 and 150 wolves and indicates a significant wolf population in this part of the country—bearing in mind that this area represents less than 25% of the land mass of Ireland.

Putting all these sources of information together, it is clear that Ireland had a very significant wolf population during the 1500s and early 1600s, possibly well in excess of a thousand individuals. By the mid-1600s it was probably less



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than a thousand, and a rapid decline followed throughout the late 1600s and 1700s until the last one was dispatched, most likely in the year 1786. You can imagine my amazement to discover that wolves were once so widespread in Ireland and my delight at being able to estimate their numbers with relative confidence.

Causes of extermination

The extermination of the wolf from the Irish landscape resulted from a number of factors. These include significant landscape change, in particular the loss of most of the remaining tracts of native oak forest, and the encroachment of farming activity into areas not previously involved in agriculture during the late 1600s and 1700s, with the resulting growth in population. The areas in which wolves could breed undisturbed would have been significantly reduced, intensifying the pressure on the existing wolf population.

A major role was also played by legislation and bounties, in particular those of the Cromwellian government in Ireland in the 1650s. The new settlers from England and Scotland were horrified to discover that there was a significant wolf population in the country and perceived this as a serious threat to themselves and their livestock. In some of the literature at this time Ireland is even referred to as 'Wolf-land'. Very substantial bounties were introduced for wolf kills, and this led to the systematic hunting of wolves and their clearance from areas around the country, until at last large areas were devoid of wolves throughout the latter half of the 1600s. A number of professional wolf-hunters even came to Ireland to help carry out the extermination. In 1653 Captain Edward Piers was granted land in County Meath on condition that he destroy fourteen wolves over five years or forfeit £100 annually—a very considerable sum.

By the early 1700s the wolf population in Ireland was in terminal decline and probably confined only to a few small isolated areas, well away from human interference. The very last reference to the killing of a wolf in Ireland for which I have clear evidence occurred in 1786. There are a few references to wolves stretching up to 1810, but these have proved very difficult to authenticate and it is most likely that the dates are erroneous.

The last authenticated date for the killing of a wolf in Ireland, therefore, is 1786. This occurred on Mount Leinster, Co. Carlow, after a farmer had a number of sheep killed by a lone wolf, which was subsequently hunted down and killed by the wolfhounds of John Watson of Ballydarton, Co. Carlow.

As a result of the long history of wolves in Ireland there is an enormous wealth of evidence of their existence. Much of this has been overlooked in the past, partly because some of the material is hidden in early Irish sources and is



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therefore not readily accessible to some researchers but also on account of the scattered and incidental nature of the information. This includes evidence from a wide variety of sources, including archaeology, folklore, place-names, monastic annals and a great number of other later historical documentary data. Of course, the existence of a specially bred Irish wolf dog or wolfhound is itself evidence of a significant wolf population stretching back thousands of years.

This brief article perhaps gives a small flavour of the information accumulated on wolves and is part of my ongoing research into the natural and cultural history of wolves in Ireland, which will be published shortly as a book. A few short publications have come out on the topic so far, however (Hickey 2000; 2003; 2005). I would hope that, like Harting in 1880 and Fairley in 1984, someone will come along in a hundred years' time and say that Hickey's stuff on wolves is very interesting, though, no doubt, they will also comment that it's a shame he missed out on so much material—such is the nature of research. Obviously, any references to wolves in Ireland that you can bring to my attention will be greatly appreciated.

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