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Too rough for verse? Sea crossings in Irish culture

Claire Connolly

Turbulent Waters

Memories of Oliver Cromwell's bloody Irish campaigns were long-lived. In the late 1930s, as part of a national project run by the Irish Folklore Commission, a school girl named Annie Morgan of Coaghill, Williamstown, County Galway, heard this account from John Gaffey, a forty one year old farmer: 'When Cromwell died the earth refused to take him. Three times and each time the corpse was found near the grave. At last the people decided to throw him into the Irish Sea between England and Ireland. They did so and the part of the sea that Cromwell was thrown into, is rough the hottest day in Summer'.[1] Some of these details are repeated in another story that tells 'how Cromwell died in Ireland and was buried there, but the Irish soil rejected his body and the coffin was found on top of the grave each morning. Finally, it was thrown into the sea and sank down between Dublin and Holyhead, thereby causing that part of the Irish sea to be very turbulent ever since'.[2]

These stories understand the waters between Ireland and Britain as fomented by violent conflicts. They are a reminder of how the Irish Sea shapes a connection with an expansionist Britain, from the early modern period onwards. But even as conditions at sea are given a political explanation, we see the makings of a more intimate history of rough weather. To consider sea crossings in Irish culture is to encounter both certainty — enduring environmental realities experienced over centuries — and unpredictability, as weather events set plans awry and made haphazard work of history. Across the centuries, a great mass of people (soldiers and adventurers, landlords and migrant workers, businessmen, students, members of parliament) and goods (letters, books, wine, weapons, live cattle) moved between the islands. Individual experiences, sometimes colourful, sometimes mundane, can be found in disparate sources—state documents, inventories of goods, memoirs, diaries and correspondence. Composed of stories that can be retrieved, at least in part, culture offers a special kind of archive of Irish sea crossings: richly textured, patterned, often voicing the views of elites but sometimes able to give us the trace of ordinary lives. To track such perspectives is to move with history itself, as crossing the Irish sea became a necessary, even routine, aspect of colonial modernity — so indelibly present in Irish and British history as to be almost invisible to us, barely marked , difficult to locate as a distinct cultural phenomenon — though that is just what I attempt here.

The Irish sea has a singular and resonant place in a shared British and Irish imagination and the simple question of its power both to connect and to divide has commanded political and cultural attention for centuries. A ninth-century Irish poem reminds us of the realities of life an island surrounded by water, battered by waves that can carry invaders to its shores or keep them at bay:

> Is acher in gáith innocht
> Fu fuasna fairrgae findfholt
> Ní agor réimm mora minn
> Dond láechraid lainn ua Lothlind.[3]

Frank O'Connor translated this early Irish poem as 'The Viking Terror':

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[1] 'In the Penal Times'. The Schools' Collection, Volume 0013, Page 098, Dúchas.ie https://www.duchas.ie/en/cbes/4591091/4589775/4615416. For help and advice given during research for this essay, I am grateful to Angela Bourke, Patricia Coughlan, Alex Davis, R.F. Foster, Breandán MacSuibhne, Diarmuid Ó Giolláin, Finola O'Kane, William Laffan and Tony Lewis.

[2] Sean Ó Súilleabháin (ed.), *Folktales of Ireland* (London, 1966), 283-4.

[3]

> Since tonight the wind is high,
> The sea's mane a white fury
> I need not fear the hordes of Hell
> Coursing the Irish Channel.[4]

The voice is that of a monk safe indoors, enjoying a brief respite from sea-borne Viking attacks. A powerful evocation of violent weather on the Irish sea, the poem expresses enduring environmental realities that include: the prevailing south westerly winds that blow across open water; persistent strong tidal currents that are whipped up by the winds, meaning that unusually steep waves break in deep water; numerous sandbanks along the east coast between Dublin and Wexford and on the Welsh coast around Anglesey leading to the wreck of many ships. These conditions are currently worsening, as climate change brings more frequent storms.

As unquiet as the Irish Sea

Jane Ohlmeyer describes the century that followed the Cromwellian plantation in terms of 'making Ireland English'. Turbulent seas ensued, and so did a new politics. But the process was hardly a smooth one: Ohlmeyer describes seventeenth-century state formation as 'haphazard, messy and clumsy'. Among the 'random accidents' that she lists are accidents of fertility, birth and death alongside 'human attributes like ambition, determination, greed and snobbery'.[5] 'Political geography' also features on her list and we could consider the impact of the weather on the Irish sea as another kind of accident affecting the wider 'anglicizing agenda' (*ibid.*). Yet given that the rough waves of the Irish sea are tossed up by currents whose actions have endured across millennia, perhaps their role is better understood as decisive, even determined?

One way of writing about the Irish Sea was to deny its roughness, as if to refute the suggestion that Ireland was not ready for incorporation into empire, a 'strange country' resistant to improvement and exploitation. Such a defensive formulation began to emerge in the seventeenth-century, even as Cromwell's body started to churn up the sea. The earliest natural history of Ireland (authored by Gerard Boate, in 1652), has a chapter entitled 'The Irish Sea not so tempestuous as it is bruited to be'.[6] Boate was a Dutch physician who went over to Ireland with Cromwell and died shortly after. From about 1644, he had been gathering information about the topography and environment of Ireland from his brother Arnold, resident in Ireland, and Samuel Hartlib gathered the notes and published it in 1652.

Discussing 'the Nature of the Irish Sea, and of the Tides which go in it', Boate explains

> THAT part of the Irish sea which divideth Ireland from Great Britain, is very much defamed both by ancient and modern writers, in regard of its boysterousness and tempestuousness, as if it were more subject to storms and raging weather than any other, and consequently not to be passed without very great danger. (*ibid.*, 28-9)

So strong is this association, reports Boate, that it is a 'common proverb' to say 'as unquiet as the Irish sea'. Yet that proverb is immediately met with a rejoinder from Boate who goes via some of the earliest sources (Richard Stanyhurst and his annotations of Giraldus Cambrensis) to show us that 'The Irish sea is quiet enough, except when by high winds it is stirred, so as not only in the summer, but even in the midst of winter people do pass it to and fro'. ' True it is that some ships do perish

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[4] Frank O'Connor, 'The Viking Terror', *Kings, Lords and Commons: an Anthology from the* Irish (London, 1962), 45. In a note to the poem, O'Connor compares ninth-century Ireland to London during the blitz: 'we waited for a moonlit night to sleep safe in our beds'. Lothlind / Lochlainn (in the genitive) means Scandinavia.

[5] Jane Ohlmeyer, *Making Ireland English* (New Haven, CT, 2012), 476.

[6] *A Natural History of Ireland in Three Parts, by Several Hands* (London, 1652), 28.

upon this, but the same happeneth also upon other seas, who are all subject to the disaster of tempests and shipwracks' (*ibid.,* 29). Working through a kind of proto-Irish sea archive while also calling up 'daily experience' for evidence of the sea's quietness, Boate insists that the Irish sea is scarcely rough at all, and that if it is rough, well, then it is no rougher than other seas.

Boate's *Natural History* is representative of the new scholarship about Ireland that took shape after the Cromwellian revolution. As Toby Barnard has suggested, improving projects such as Boate's *Natural History* can be connected to later organizations such as the Dublin Philosophical Society, the Royal Dublin Society, the Physico-Historical Society and the Royal Irish Academy, on to the Ordnance Survey itself.[7] All represent the ways in which knowledge about Irish environments was shaped by colonialism and revolution. Boate's *Natural History* of Ireland constituted 'a detailed brochure for would-be planters and investors. Its observations were inseparable from a wider colonial project of conquest and colonization that saw 'about 40 per cent of Ireland' become the property of 'fresh Protestant owners' (*ibid*.). The scientific language of improvement underpinned a process whereby Catholic proprietors were assigned to history, part of 'the largest single shift in land ownership anywhere in Europe'.[8]

Where such language meets the sea it is instrumental – in the mode of survey or inventory, listing possibilities for resource exploitation or extraction. Margaret Cohen notes in her study of *The Novel and the Sea* that, in the early modern period, the sea is associated with the plain style characteristic of the mariner's craft; hostile to metaphors and literary grace notes, more concerned with present dangers than 'aesthetic grandeur'.[9] For her, the wider cultural change towards the 'sublimization of the sea' begins with *Paradise Lost*, where Milton used the threats and dangers that faced mariners 'to model the kind of empowered agency that strives to go beyond the limits, to the point of overthrowing God' (*ibid*., 108). Cohen's observations about changing cultural patterns of representation serve to point us towards perhaps the best known literary inscription of the rough waters of the Irish seas, albeit to a poem that is hardly Irish: Milton's 'Lycidas', in which 'the Author bewails a learned Friend, unfortunatly drown'd in his Passage from *Chester* on the *Irish* Seas, 1637'.

A young student at Cambridge, Edward King was drowned when the ship on which he was travelling from Chester to Dublin was wrecked off the North Wales coast. The route taken by King — along the Dee estuary, west around Anglesey and into the Irish sea — was one often chosen by travellers between Britain and Ireland in the seventeenth century. The silting up of the Dee estuary in the seventeenth century meant that the route gradually fell out of favour. Another possibility was to go further overland through North Wales and Snowdonia and across the island of Anglesea to Holyhead. But in the days before Thomas Telford's early nineteenth-century modernization of the route, the going was rough and dangerous, dependent on quick moving tides and the shifting sands at Conwy and Menai (Fig. 1).

We now benefit, as John Kerrigan has remarked, from scholarship that returns Milton's 'Lycidas' 'to North Wales and the Irish sea'.[10] In the late 1990s, a scholarly map attempted to pinpoint the exact location of the sinking of King's ship, based on research into stage times, tide tables and weather history (Fig. 2). We need not reduce Milton's poem to the limits of such detailed empirical research in order to appreciate that that when Edward King boarded a ship in Chester, he placed himself at the mercy of the 'the remorseless deep', imagined in 'Lycidas' as closing over King's body. Milton

[7] T.C. Barnard, 'The Hartlib Circle and the Cult and Culture of Improvement in Ireland', in *Samuel Hartlib and Universal Reformation: Studies in Intellectual Communication,* ed. Mark Greengrass, Michael Leslie & Timothy Raylor (Cambridge, 1994), 281-297 (281-2).
[8] Mícheál Ó Siochrú*, God's Executioner: Oliver Cromwell and the Conquest of Ireland* (London, 2008), 248.
[9] Margaret Cohen, *The Novel and the Sea* (Princeton, NJ, 2013), 42-45.
[10] John Kerrigan, *Archipelagic English: Literature, History and Politics, 1603-1707* (Oxford, 2008), 227.

conjures a negative geography of the Dee estuary, which opens out to the rough coastline of north Wales and Anglesea. In the poem, Milton reimagines the dead young man as a kind of watery spirit:

> Henceforth thou art the Genius of the shore,
> In thy large recompense, and shalt be good
> To all that wander in that perilous flood.[11]

In analysing the poem's geopolitics, Lawence Lipking has read 'Lycidas' as a poem that 'blends personal grief with a sense of how much the country has lost': 'Milton puts himself on the map by mourning for Britain'.[12] Lipking interprets the poem in terms of an assertion of English dominance over the seas and goes so far as to read Milton's spirit who guides the shore as a kind of border guard, in charge of 'keeping out and keeping in', policing 'all that wander in that perilous flood' (*ibid*., 213).

Among the volume of memorial poems on King's death (with 'Lycidas' as the final item) is one from which I have taken the title of this chapter. John Cleveland's 'Upon the Death of Mr King' (1638) snipes at the rigid quantitative metre of the Latin poems in the memorial volume: 'The sea's too rough for verse; who rhymes upon't, / With Xerxes strives to fetter th' Hellespont' (ll. 10-11). The reference is to Herodotus: when a bridge built by the Persian ruler Xeres over the Hellespont (the modern Dardanelles) was destroyed by a storm, the emperor ordered his men to give the sea three hundred lashes and sank a pair of shackles in the sea.

The legendary idiocy of any effort to limit the sea's power allows Cleveland to make of King's drowning a modishly elaborate set of metaphors for writing, water and 'grief's hydrography' (l. 8). Treating the sea in a style of strained conceit, the poem ends with the suggestion that the sea makes islands of all the university men, who must toss their books and allow their eyes to fill with water:

> We'll issue 't forth, and vent such elegies
> As that our tears shall seem the Irish Seas,
> We, floating islands, living Hebrides.[13]

The rocking horse rhythm of the poem stands in contrast to Milton's broken lines and Cleveland all too neatly rounds off his effort with the treble rhyming of elegies, seas and Hebrides.

Waiting in Holyhead

A royalist propagandist who found in the Irish sea the material and the rhythms of poetic loss and gain, Cleveland never himself made the journey from which he conjured so many literary arabesques. With Jonathan Swift, though, we come to a writer who knew this crossing well. In September of 1727, he embarked on a return trip to Ireland, still riding high on the success of *Gulliver's Travels* (1726) but anxious for news of Stella (Esther Johnson) who lay dangerously ill in Dublin. It is probably a measure of Swift's worry for her fate that he turned away from Chester, where he encountered a delayed boat, and pursued instead the risky mountainous overland route in hope of boarding a packet at Holyhead. There he encountered bad weather, costly inns and a long wait, only arriving in Dublin in early October. Stella died four months later. The two poems that Swift wrote in Holyhead, along with the journal he composed there over his seven day stay, express

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[11] Milton, 'Lycidas', ll. 183-185, in Robert Cummings (ed.), *Seventeenth-Century Poetry: An Annotated Anthology* (Oxford, 2000), 310.
[12] Lawrence Lipking, 'The Genius of the Shore: Lycidas, Adamastor, and the Poetics of Nationalism', *PMLA,* 111.2 (1996): 205-221 (205).
[13] John Cleveland, 'Upon the Death of Mr. King', ll. 52-54, in Cummings, *op. cit.*, 345-357.

memorable and eloquent rage at being trapped 'in the worst spot in Wales under the very worst circumstances', as he put it in the 'Holyhead Journal'.[14]

Swift was stuck in Holyhead because of the weather but he was also trapped inside a densely bound knot of contingent circumstances. Anglo-Irish elites were at once reliant upon the sea and regularly subject to bad weather. Prevailing south-westerly winds mean ships are to this day more commonly stuck in Welsh rather than Irish ports and readers may well have composed their own Holyhead journals, text messages or tweets. An enraged and frustrated Swift tried to write his way out of his circumstances and his poem 'Holyhead. Sept. 25. 1727', uses images of wind and tide to convey not so much restless movement of the sea but rather the confinement imposed upon an impatient passenger:

> Lo here I sit at Holy Head
> With muddy ale and mouldy bread
> All Christian vittals stink of fish,
> I'm where my enemies would wish.
> Convict of lies is every Sign,
> The inn has not a drop of wine
> I'm fastened both by wind and tide,
> I see the ship at anchor ride.
> The Captain swears the sea's too rough,
> He has not passengers enough.
> And thus the Dean is forc'd to stay
> Till others come to help the pay.[15]

In Holyhead, Swift also wrote a poem with the title 'Ireland', which begins: 'Remove me from this land of slaves, / Where all are fools, and all are knaves' (*ibid*., 330-332). The loathed Welsh port would become an ironic last recourse from bondage in his imagination: on the 21st of October, 1735, he wrote to Alexander Pope 'as one going very fast out of the world', saying that 'my flesh and bones are to be carried to Holy-head, for I will not lie in a country of slaves'.[16]

Swift's seemingly accidental focus on Holyhead (he had meant to travel via Chester, just as Edward King did) now seems propitious, given the later history of the Welsh sea port as a key node in the nineteenth-century infrastructure of travel.[17] With the Union, improvements to the harbour and approach roads became a matter of some importance. The South Stack lighthouse was built in 1808, to guide packets in and out of the harbour and a connection between Holyhead and Howth, meant that ships could avoid the stretch of rocky Welsh coast encountered on a journey from Liverpool or Parkgate. In 1815, the Scottish engineer Thomas Telford was commissioned to survey and improve the Holyhead Road, setting in motion one of the first great infrastructure projects of nineteenth-century Britain. Telford built his suspension bridge over the Menai Straits (the first such iron suspension bridge in the world, completed in 1826) and greatly improved the road. From the 1830s, competing railway companies started to run from Holyhead to London. There were also a number of attempts to create a railway connection from London to Dublin and to the west of Ireland, which would link up with the trans-Atlantic steamship business. We can trace the significance of Holyhead in this new infrastructure in some famous twentieth-century Irish remarks about the Welsh port:

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[14] Jonathan Swift, 'Holyhead Journal, 1727' in Herbert Davis (ed.), *The Prose Works of Jonathan Swift,* ed. Herbert Davis (14 vols; Oxford, 1939-1968), 5: 207.
[15] Swift, *Complete Poems*, ed. Pat Rogers (New Haven, CT, 1983), 329-330 (ll. 1-12).
[16] Swift, *Correspondence*, ed. Harold Williams (vol. 4: 1732-1736; Oxford, 1965), 408. Swift died in 1745
[17] On accident and circumstance, see Michael Rosenblum, 'Swift's "Holyhead Journal" and Circumstantial Talk in Early Modern England', *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 30.2 (1996): 159-172.

these include Stephen Dedalus's opinion that 'the shortest way to Tara is *via* Holyhead' and Frank O'Connor's suggestion that 'an Irishman's private life begins at Holyhead'.

The introduction of steam on the Irish sea was a key development. From May 1821, the steam ships 'Lightning' and 'Meteor' began to carry the mail between Holyhead and Kingstown (previously, until the departure of George IV from the port in 1821, known as Dunleary, and renamed Dun Laoghaire by the Free State in 1920). The journey became a somewhat more straightforward matter, part of what Margaret Cohen calls the 'routinization' of the sea in the transition from sail to steam.[18] A journey from London to Dublin that could take up to four days before Thomas Telford's road improvements became a matter of some forty or so hours, though experiences could still vary widely. Later, improvements in steam technology and new rail lines reduced the journey still further so that ten or twelve hours, with a four hour sea crossing, came to seem normal. More broadly, these technological changes were part of the post-Union opening up of Ireland, which is also the fortification of Ireland: steam ships berthed in new extended and recently fortified harbours to connect with a more extensive stage coach network, military roads and later rail links.

The visit of George IV to Ireland in 1821, the second year of his reign, can be seen as a pivot moment in the story I am telling and its traces are preserved on both sides of the sea. At Holyhead, a George IV arch (also known as the Triumphal Arch or Admiralty Arch) was erected in 1822-3, marking the northern terminus of Telford's road as well as the recent visit of the King. George IV's arrival in Howth and departure from Kingstown were also recorded in both places: his tiny footsteps were chiselled in granite at Howth harbour while a memorial to his departure from Dun Laoghaire was erected in 1823 (as depicted in an engraving by George Petrie from 1828, Fig. 3). In William Thackeray's notorious description, the monument consisted of 'A hideous obelisk, stuck upon four fat balls, and surmounted with a crown on a cushion – the latter were no bad emblems perhaps of the monarch in whose honour they were raised'.[19]

Meanwhile a painting, 'George IV on board the "Lightning", the first Post Office Steam Packet to Dublin, 12 August 1821' (Fig. 4), was commissioned to mark the king's departure from Holyhead. The king had intended to travel across the sea on the royal yacht, the 'Royal George', only to meet bad weather and rough winds on the Welsh coast. Instead he and his party transferred to the steam-packet 'Lightning' and set sail on 7 August 1821. Just right of the centre of the painting, the mail boat can be seen with Holyhead harbour and the height of Caer Gybi visible in the distance, to the left of the image. The 'Lightning' is shown in starboard broadside with smoke issuing from the funnel, illuminated by bright light, with the King and his group just visible on deck. We can see the 'Royal George' with its fluttering royal standard to the left, flanked on the far left by the other steam-packet, the 'Meteor'. Both the 'Lightning' and the 'Meteor' lie flat on the waves, firmly quelling the sea's action, while the older ships are tossed up by the waves. The transition from sail and steam is strongly marked: the painting is framed by the image of a frigate in bow view, receding into darkness as it fires a farewell salute, signalling the end of an era.[20]

Sea sickness

If the painting makes purposeful history of windy weather, its story rides roughly over the continuing realities of slow crossings in bad weather, which remained the experience of sea passengers throughout the age of steam. Daniel Maclise's evocative sketch of passengers aboard the ship *Severn* as it makes its way from Cork to Bristol tells a different story (Fig. 5). A familiar genre scene is transformed by Maclise's unusual choice of a shipboard location, while his attention to slumped bodies and hunched shoulders vividly captures the passengers' plight.

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[18] Cohen, *op. cit.,* 179.

[19] William Thackeray, *The Irish Sketchbook* (Gloucester, 1990), 3.

[20] Cf. also https://collections.rmg.co.uk/collections/objects/12111.html

Such a predicament was often described in travel writing. John Gamble, a retired Army surgeon with literary ambitions, offers a vivid account of the bodily realities of travel in his *Sketches of History, Politics and Manners, Taken in Dublin and the North of Ireland, in the Autumn of* 1810. In 1810, Gamble crossed from Liverpool to Dublin (a distance of about forty leagues, he tells us, on a crossing that lasted 'something more than twenty six hours'). The weather was 'for once' kind and the passage 'favourable'. But as he crossed the waters caressed by 'breezes, soft as the breath of Love', 'wafted […] gently to the Emerald Isle', Gamble could not resist the chance to share with readers the more normal experience of travel along this 'rough and lofty coast along which our vessel glided'.[21]

This is the same rocky coast on which the ship bearing Edward King to Dublin foundered, its reputation as 'one of the worst hazards of the Atlantic crossing' secured by its 'baffling combination of havens and hazards'.[22] The combination of strong tides and a shallow coastal sea bed made navigation tricky. Here is Gamble: 'The whole of this coast is dangerous, even to a proverb; and many sea captains have declared they felt more anxiety in going from Holyhead to Liverpool, than in their passage from the West Indies to England' (Gamble in Mac Suibhne, *op. cit* ., 17).

Gamble is quick to move from the proverbial dangers of the coastline to the bodily realities of life on board: 'I would recommend every person who goes to sea for the first time to keep upon deck as much as possible; it is the most effectual method of avoiding sickness, and if at length he is obliged to yield to it, the tone and refreshment which the pure and cold air has given him shortens in duration, and weakens in violence.' Failing that (surely familiar) protection, Gamble recommends that '[w]hen a person is compelled by sea-sickness to quit the deck and betake himself to his berth, he should stretch himself as much at length as possible, with his head low and firmly pressed to the pillow, endeavouring to lose all motion of his own, and to accommodate himself to the ship's. Wine or spirits is bad; though, of the two, the latter diluted with water is preferable. The drink I would recommend is a highly-taken bottled porter, soda or seltzer water.' Lest there be any doubt of suffering from 'this nauseous disease', Gamble's list continues, finally ending with the suggestion of 'a small opiate plaister, applied to the pit of the stomach', the precursor perhaps to modern motion sickness tablets (*ibid*., 17-18).

Gamble's frankness sounds an unfamiliar note, however. More common is the kind of brisk advice offered by Mrs Delany, to her friend Mrs Dewes in April 1753, in advance of a crossing to Dublin:

> Don't apprehend anything from the sea. It is a disagreeable element to deal with, but it never hurts me any longer than whilst I am on board, and though I must confess, and I fear you will find whenever you make me happy by coming here, that a *ship is a most unpleasant thing*, yet the happiness it is to convey me to is a full amends for a few hours distress, and the passage is *seldom more* than *forty hours*, and often not much more than half that time.[23]

Even as she puts the unpleasantness of the ship to one side, Mrs Delaney's comments open up an improving vision of the Irish sea with roots in Boate's natural history. The writings of Maria Edgeworth continues these contradictions of connection and disconnection, most particularly in her novels, where time and tide so often neatly align to serve the needs of her plot. But Edgeworth herself was all too familiar with rough sea crossings. A letter in 1791, addressed from an inn in Holyhead, reports that 'a thirty-three hours' passage' has left the family sick and sorry:

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[21] Quoted in Breandán MacSuibhne (ed.), *John Gamble, Society and Manners in Early-Nineteenth Century Ireland* (Dublin, 2011), 16-17.

[22] Ivor Wynne Jones, *Shipwrecks of North Wales* (Newton Abbot, 1978), 20, 92; cited in J. Karl Franson, 'The Fatal Voyage of Edward King, Milton's Lycidas', *Milton Studies* 25 (1989): 43-67 (50).

[23] *The Autobiography and Correspondence of Mary Granville, Mrs. Delany: With Interesting Reminiscences of King George the Third and Queen Charlotte*. *Edited by the Right Honourable Lady Llanover* (3 vols; London, 1861), 3: 225

'all the sick pale figures around me with faint voices send their love to you and my uncle'.[24] Yet, in other letters, the family seem to make a kind of improving fiction of the crossing, discussing the motion of light on the water and making observations:

> When the sea was calm, I never was more entertained than with watching the various curiosities of sea manners, sea views & the ship; which by the by was as clean as any room at Edgeworthstown. [25]

Sea views

A striking example of the literary efforts to tame rough water in the name of 'sea manners' and 'sea views' comes from Gerald Griffin's tale, 'The Half-Sir', one of the *Tales of the Munster Festivals* (1827). Griffin grew up on the banks of the Shannon, the son of middle-class Catholic parents with an older brother who served in Canada with the army. Griffin went from journalism in Limerick to a rickety life as a jobbing journalist in London. In his Munster tales, Griffin writes powerfully about the dramatic effects of the Atlantic waves on the west coast of his birth, but in relation to the Irish sea he is curiously keen to minimize its effects. In the following passage, a very slight agitation at sea is placed in relation to the confusion on shore as a varied group gather to embark from Dublin for London.

> The morning was a still and beautiful one – and the face of the bay, agitated only by the bulk of its own waters into that leaping undulation which we cannot describe otherwise than by referring the reader (in defiance of the imputation of a common-place affectation) to Claude Lorrain's embarkation pictures, looked clear and glassy green. The pier was crowded with passengers who were waiting to see their effects safely stowed before they took their own places in the vessel, with clamorous jingle-men and ragged, half-starved porters; members of the exiled parliament made up for the winter campaign; and adventurers of every description, who devoutly believed that gold and fame grew like blackberries upon hedges every where but in poor Ireland – and who, if they did not actually suppose that the houses in London were tiled with pancakes, and the streets paved with wedges of gold — yet would have staked their existence that something very good must be had there or so many people would not be constantly going and *never* returning; and lulled their hearts with the delicious promise of a delusion quite as vain, if not so palpably absurd, as that above alluded to of poor Whittington.[26]

Griffin's effort to find a visual correlative for the 'leaping undulation' of Dublin Bay leads him into a strange point of comparison. Claude's painting (Fig. 6) picks up on a story in Old Testament, concerning the visit of the Queen of Sheba to King Solomon in Jerusalem. His embarkation from a port that looks Italian rather than African, allowing Claude to exploit the capacity of an invented location to explore the play of light and sun on water and buildings. The imagined connection between these Mediterranean blues and the dull waters of Dublin Bay seems rather improbable and yet the strict linear perspective and neat symmetries of the image can be seen to impose a kind of willed neoclassical order on the chaos that Griffin describes. The narrative charts the confusion of the passengers destined for likely disappointment in London (just what Griffin himself had experienced), even as the 'clear and glassy green' of the ekphrastic image smooths over such uncertainty.

The visual record yields further evidence of taming of the sea and the creation of perspective. John Laporte's view of Dublin Bay from Clontarf, from the topographical collection of George III (Fig. 8) , is

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[24] Maria Edgeworth to Mrs Ruxton, 1791, in *Life and Letters of Maria Edgeworth*, ed. Augustus Hare (2 vols.; London, 1893), 1:17.
[25] Charlotte Edgeworth to Mary Sneyd, 25 Sept. 1802. National Library of Ireland MSS 10166-7.
[26] Gerald Griffin, *Tales of the Munster Festivals* (3 vols.; London, 1827), I: 347-368

typical of the effort of eighteenth-century views of Dublin to present a 'wholly positive' image of the sea.[27] The power of the tide and the surge of water in the bay is reflected in the building of fortifications designed to secure newly reclaimed land from the effects of the sea. Finola O'Kane has shown how the bay to the east of the city played a crucial role in securing Dublin's maritime identity in the eighteenth century, with extensive land reclamation enabling the city's 'swivel to the east'. O'Kane reads Laporte's image as part of a wider effort 'to place the city in a wide maritime and economic context', suggestive of its incorporation into empire and readiness for trade.[28]

But even as rough waves were kept at bay, these images tell their story. We can locate evidence of the bay's notorious storms in the depiction of the long ramparts in William Ashford's 'The Royal Charter School from Clontarf' (Fig. 9), built to save the shoreline from being washed away. James Arthur O'Connor's atmospheric 'A View of Irishtown from Sandymount' (c. 1823, Fig. 10) maintains a delicate visual balance between the developing city and the distant bay. The ships, visible only by their topmost sails, are held at a distance by harbour walls, while a prominent church spire announces the onward march of urban development in Irishtown and Ringsend, urban villages belonging to the Fitzwilliam estate. The central group are arranged on sandy soil, near a makeshift structure for boats, at rest (or at play) under looming clouds, while lapping waves reclaim the land for the sea. Central to the painting, the ramparts not only divide land from sea but remind viewers of the wider history of land reclamation central to the success of the Fitzwilliam estate.[29]

An accomplished draughtsman as well as a talented painter, O'Connor left Ireland for London in 1822, sketching and seeking out new commissions but always displaying his remarkable talent for 'intimate, local scenes' such as this Dublin one.[30] O'Connor's Romantic style of painting has been connected to his 'enforced emigration' from Ireland and his 'View of Irishtown from Sandymount' might be seen to use the relationship between sea and land to express wider uncertainties, reminders of crossings that are shadowed by death and loss, haunted by psychological uncertainty (*ibid*., 397).

These are ideas that gather into a distinctive body of writing towards the end of the nineteenth century, from which point we can clearly discern something like the psychologization of the sea crossing and the beginning of an exploration of the affective power of rough waves. Such a possibility is darkly shadowed forth in Griffin's predictions of poverty in London and given a more concrete expression in Anthony Trollope's *Phineas Redux*. At the start of that novel, Phineas's potentially 'perilous' return to London and the challenges of parliamentary life are presented in terms of the responsibility of a man for his own self: a cumbersome 'possession', a man's self might however might be shed, half way across the Irish sea:

> Doubtless there is a way of riddance. There is the bare bodkin. Or a man may fall overboard between Holyhead and Kingsto[w]n in the dark, and may do it in such a cunning fashion that his friends shall think that it was an accident. But against these modes of riddance there is a canon set, which some men still fear to disobey.[31]

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[27] Finola O'Kane, *William Ashford's Mount Merrion: The Absent Point of View* (Tralee, 2012), 22.
[28] Finola O'Kane, 'The City of Dublin', https://www.bl.uk/picturing-places/articles/the-city-of-dublin
[29] Ashford, a leading Irish landscape painter at the start of the nineteenth century, had received a commission from Viscount Fitzwilliam for a series of views that depicted the Mount Merrion estate and managed 'the absent point of view' (as per Finola O'Kane, op. cit. *Wiliam Ashford's Mount Merrion*) and her 'Dublin's Fitzwilliam Estate: A Hidden Landscape of Discovery, Catholic Agency and Egalitarian Suburban Space', *Eighteenth-Century Ireland,* 31 (2016): 92-116.
[30] Nesta Butler, 'James Arthur O'Connor', in *Art and Architecture of Ireland 2: Painting 1600-1900* , ed. Andrew Carpenter et al. (New Haven, CT, 2015), 395-398 (396).
[31] Anthony Trollope, *Phineas Redux* (London: Penguin: 2003), 8.

In Trollope's account of Phineas's 'revolvings', the young man 'walked up and down the long pier of Kingsto[w]n harbour', wondering 'what might not London do for him?' The question resonates with a longer history of Irish writers and artists for whom emigration was experienced as a necessity at once financial, professional and emotional. Trollope's account of Phineas's plight recalls such tragic stories as the death of W.B. Yeats's uncle, the stockbroker Robert Corbet. An agent for the Royal Exchange Assurance Company, who sold off bankrupt estates after the Famine on behalf of Encumbered Estates Court, Corbet ran into money problems and committed suicide by jumping off the Holyhead mailboat in 1870. His death, as R.F. Foster remarks, 'brings together all the emblems signifying the decline of an Ascendancy elite'.[32]

Yeats explored the maritime aspects of family history in his novel, *John Sherman* (1891), a book that is notable for its depiction of John Sherman's travels on the Irish Sea. From its opening evocation of homeland experienced beside a Sligo river and through its strange scenes of homesickness at sea, the short novel seems to call up an ethical relationship to place that depends on apprehension of the sea. As London becomes 'a reef' whereupon his protagonist is cast away, the oceanic identity of Britain's imperial capital comes into view.

John Sherman leaves the fictional town of Ballah (a kind of Sligo) to travel Liverpool on the steamer the *Lavinia*: a 'cattle boat' which his mother has insisted that he must take to save money. On deck, John Sherman listens to squealing pigs and sits in close proximity to an old woman and the geese she is bringing to market in Liverpool. His own state of suffering is realized in close relation to the human and nonhuman environment that surround him: he writes a letter describing his 'desolation' as he watches puffins sleeping on the waves: 'each one of them had its head tucked in a slightly different way. "That is because their characters are different", he thought.'[33]

Charles Stewart Parnell and sea storms

The history of travel continued to develop in this period. With the intensification of railway system, the increased frequency of sea crossings and a new infrastructural density came a kind of writing that itself works to build connections from sea crossings to discourses of identity. The life story of Charles Stewart Parnell provides particularly fruitful material through which to think about the different many aspects of my narrative, connecting up as it does routine journeys back and forth across the sea, infrastructural innovations and affective connections over water.

Even in death, Parnell was fated to make a final passage across the Irish sea. In 1891, the year in which Yeats's novel was published, his coffin was conveyed from Brighton to Willesden, before being carried on the Euston to Holyhead train and on to Dublin by on steamer from Holyhead, accompanied by Parnellite members of parliament. In *King of the Great Clock Tower*, Yeats wrote of how on that 'stormy October morning' he had 'gone to Kingsto[w]n Pier to meet the Mail Boat that arrived about 6 a.m. […] expecting a friend, but met what I thought much less of at the time, the body of Parnell.'[34] The friend was Maud Gonne, who, as R.F. Foster explains, was returning from Paris to Dublin via Holyhead, devastated following the death of her child. Onlookers, seeing her dressed in deep mourning, assumed Gonne was one of the Parnell funeral party.[35]

Parnell's body travelled a route with a family as well as a political history. His great uncle, Sir Henry Parnell, had chaired the Holyhead Road commission that backed Telford's plans and enabled his remarkable works. There is also a personal history, as told by Katherine O'Shea, who recounts Parnell's 'great love for sea storms' in *Charles Stewart Parnell: His Love Story and Political Life*. In that book, she tells a dramatic story concerning rough waves, though the body of water in this case

[32] R.F. Foster, *W.B. Yeats: A Life* (2 vols; Oxford, 1997), 2: 9.
[33] W.B. Yeats, *John Sherman*, in Id., *Collected Works,* ed. Richard J. Finneran (New York, 1991), 12: 58-59.
[34] Quoted in A. N. Jeffares, *A New Commentary on the Poems of W. B. Yeats* (London, 1984), 333-35.
[35] Foster, *op. cit*., 2: 115-116.

is the English channel. In 1887, while the *Times* forgeries were being investigated and just after the election of Capt O'Shea in Galway in 1886, Parnell and Katherine O'Shea took an end terrace house in Brighton — number 10 Walsingham Terrace. In her account of those months, they spent their time walking and riding on the Downs while he also continued to travel over and back to Ireland for shooting. In Brighton, Parnell occupied himself with minerealogy and amateur engineering, including a plan 'to invent a vessel which would so cut through the water as to obviate any sensation of the motion of the waves'. [36] (Before he met O'Shea, Parnell been known to seek relaxation from the stresses of Parliament by playing with a boy's train set).[37]

Katharine O'Shea describes the 'thing' he invented as like 'a treble torpedo-boat' and reports: 'He had no training in mechanics, nor did he know anything of shipbuilding or engineering, except such information as he obtained from the various books he read for amusement at rare intervals — but these models he made, and tried off the under-deck of the Chain Pier at Brighton, were extraordinarily ingenious.' Built in 1823, the Chain Pier at Brighton was designed to facilitate packet boats destined for Dieppe, part of the same modernizing moment as the works over which Henry Parnell had presided.

Concerning Parnell's model 'treble torpedo-boat', O'Shea offers a striking story concerning 'one rough, stormy day' at the Chain Bridge, looking out at the English Channel. Together, the couple 'tried the "float," though it was useless to do so, as the waves shattered the slight thing against the pier before Parnell could sink it to the required depth'. As the pair 'stood looking out at the great waves — so near, and shaking the whole pier-head in their surge', Parnell picked up his lover, held her 'clear over the sea' and threatened to jump:

> Had I shown any fear I think he would have done it, but I only held him tight and said: 'As you will, my only love, but the children?' He turned then, and carried me to the upper deck, hiding my eyes from the horrible roll and sucking of the sea beneath our feet.[38]

A 'near *Liebestod'* as Foster suggests, Katharine O'Shea's story brings not only a personal story but a political one to a ringing climax, invoking as it does the political necessity of sea journeys, the emotional content carried on the waves and the recurrent undertow of the material history of travel crossings.[39]

The meaning of such crossings formed part of the political discourse of political independence. Making the case of a form of self-government for Ireland, Gladstone drew on Henry Grattan, who had opposed the Union in 1800 on the grounds that the Irish sea made for inevitable separation even as threats from overseas demanded a secure connection: Ireland, he wrote 'hears the Ocean protesting against Separation, but she hears the sea likewise protesting against Union; she follows, therefore, her physical destination, and obeys the dispensations of Providence when she protests, like the sea, against the two situations'.[40] Gladstone's speech introducing the Government of Ireland Bill (the First Home Rule Bill) in 1886, echoed Grattan's image of the country itself listening to the sound of waves that carried a message of division and dependence both: in his version, Ireland 'hears the ocean protesting against separation, but she hears the sea protesting against union'.[41]

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[36] Katharine O'Shea, *Charles Stewart Parnell: His Love Story and Political Life* (2 vols.; London, 1914), 2: 210.
[37] Paul Bew, 'Charles Stewart Parnell', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography:* http://www.odnb.com. Date accessed: 24.4.2019.
[38] O'Shea, *op. cit.,* 152, 154.
[39] R.F. Foster, 'Mrs O'Shea's *Parnell*' in *Paddy and Mr Punch: Connections in Irish and English History* (London, 1995), 123-128 (p. 135).
[40] *Speech (at Length) of the Rt Hon Henry Grattan in the Irish House of Commons, against the union with Great Britain* (London, 1800), 16.
[41] H.C.G. Matthews (ed.), *The Gladstone Diaries*, *January 1881 to June 1883* (Oxford, 1990), 10: cxxx.

Independence in 1922 brought one kind of answer to these political questions, but the sea continued to speak of entangled relationships and difficult crossings.

Crossed lives

Where political history teaches us to think about the sea as a source of either opportunities (discovery, commerce, empire) or threats (invasion scares that continued into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries), this chapter has sought to trace more intricate cultural patterns. Katharine O'Shea's story about her lover's model ship afloat under the Chain Bridge shows how a dramatic account of the affective energies of the sea could resonate within and disturb a political narrative. In the century that followed the death of Charles Stewart Parnell, cultural representations of the sea's waves continued to express intimate, troubled histories. And even in the period after political independence in 1922, the Irish sea remained a resource for writers who wished to explore experiences of identity, belonging and gender.

In this final section of this chapter, I move to a poem that seems to explore, inhabit and amplify Grattan and Gladstone's image of a double-tongued sea. Belfast-born poet Louis MacNeice has been described by Terence Brown as a poet who 'interiorised the machine age' in his writing of travel by road, rail and sea.[42] MacNeice was intimately familiar with 'the bloody boat home',[43] and section sixteen of his *Autumn Journal* (1939) develops that poem's drama of the divided self via a powerful image of rough waves. A certain knowledge as to the roughness of the sea seems to enable a politically curious and open exploration of the crossing of possibilities and positions:

> Why do we like being Irish? Partly because
> It gives us a hold on the sentimental English
> As members of a world that never was,
> Baptised with fairy water;
> And partly because Ireland is small enough
> To be still thought of with a family feeling,
> And because the waves are rough
> That split her from a more commercial culture;
> And because one feels that here at least one can
> Do local work which is not at the world's mercy
> And that on this tiny stage with luck a man
> Might see the end of one particular action.
> It is self-deception of course;
> There is no immunity in this island either;
> A cart that is drawn by somebody else's horse
> And carrying goods to somebody else's market.
> The bombs in the turnip sack, the sniper from the roof,
> Griffith, Connolly, Collins, where have they brought us?
> Ourselves alone! Let the round tower stand aloof
> In a world of bursting mortar!
> Let the school-children fumble their sums
> In a half-dead language;
> Let the censor be busy on the books; pull down the

[42] Terence Brown, '"What am I doing here": Travel and MacNeice' in Edna Longley and Fran Brearton (eds.), *Incorrigibly Plural: Louis MacNeice and his Legacy* (Manchester, 2012), 72-84 (73).
[43] Louis MacNeice to Anthony Blunt, 13 July 1929. The letter is written from on board the SS *Patriotic* (Belfast Steamship Company Limited). Jonathan Allison, *Letters of Louis MacNeice* (London, 2010), 208.

Georgian slums;
Let the games be played in Gaelic.[44]

Expressed in rough quatrains and employing varying line lengths, MacNeice's question, 'Why do we like being Irish?' initiates a sequence of questions that seem to feel their way over and back across the sea, exploring the turbulent boundary between 'Irish valedictions and maledictions', as Edna Longley puts it.[45]

The question of the roughness of the waves lends formal shape to 'the restless currents and eddies of MacNeice's thought' while the proverbial roughness of the water gives material substance to the forms of division enacted within this poem.[46] Where the first question occupies an orderly twelve lines, the second question covers thirteen, thus breaking equilibrium. To be drawn into the vibrating questions of this section of *Autumn Journal* is to experience the daily flow of thought characteristic of this long poem as a surging and receding of possibilities. The movement of the poem itself imitates the action of the waves: not an easy movement back and forth between opinions but rather expression of contradictory possibilities as wavelike disturbances, an organised disturbance brought to bear on a state of rest. The division expressed by the poem's two questions enacts a split but also keeps faith with the wider aims of *Autumn Journal* as a poem that 'synthesises the loose ends of the 1930s into a personal and communal psychodrama', creating 'the effect of salvaging some prospects for the future from the wreck of the past'.[47]

Autumn Journal may well mark the end of one particular kind of poem about rough waves, with literature increasingly shaped by the possibility of air travel. Written in 1968, Welsh poet Harri Webb's 'Return Visit' opens with the view of Dublin from the airport bus and offers the mordant reminder that 'One damp green country / Is much like another'.[48] There are also poems that reframe the crossing via the view from overhead, including Austin Clarke's enigmatic meditations on a personal absence (a separation from a lost lover) from a short lyric from 1960 with the telling title 'Menai Strait'. Rather than confine itself to the well-worn route via Holyhead, the poem offers an aerial perspective on a remembered lover, who returns via a vivid memory of sail and steam: 'But now that absence comes back / Over cloud-gap, Wales under wing-tip, / Tunnel, funnel, forgotten, / Fire-shovelled knots of slack'.[49] In Clarke's poem, the relationship between the past and the present state of the relationship is remade in that between the mailboat and air travel, with a lost world of sea crossings making an insistent return. His trio of words ('Tunnel, funnel, forgotten') echo in Thomas Kinsella's 'Handclasp at Euston' from 1960: 'Wales, / Wave and home; I close my eyes.'[50]

But rough crossings refuse to remain in the past. They live on in cultural memory even as developments in transport have reframed them as history. Austin Clarke once more captures this process in oblique lines from a long autobiographical poem entitled 'The Hippophagi': 'Weather reports / Lay bare our soul in ancient ports'.[51] That laying bare of the soul was to play a key part of the social history of twentieth-century Ireland, where emigration via the mail boat remained a reality both routine and inevitable: what Clair Wills refers to as 'the fated and determined nature of the emigrant's story'.[52] Edna O'Brien captures the impress of the journey over these rough waves when Cait and Baba set sail from Dublin to Liverpool at the end of her novel, *The Lonely Girl* (the

[44] Louis MacNeice, *Autumn Journal* (London: Faber and Faber, 2012), p. 52-53.
[45] Edna Longley, *Louis MacNeice: A Critical Study* (London, 1988), 57.
[46] Glyn Maxwell, 'Turn and Turn Against: *Autumn Journal*' in Edna Longley and Fran Brearton (eds.), *Incorrigibly Plural: Louis MacNeice and his Legacy* (Manchester, 2012), 171-189 (172).
[47] Longley, op. cit. *Louis MacNeice*, 59.
[48] Harri Webb, 'Return Visit', in Id., *Collected Poems* (Llandysul, 1995), 94.
[49] Austin Clarke, 'Menai Strait', in Id., *Collected Poems* (Manchester, 2008), 227.
[50] Thomas Kinsella, 'Handclasp at Euston', in Id., *Moralities* (Dublin, 1960), 14.
[51] Austin Clarke, 'The Hippophagi', in Id., *Collected Poems*, 233-239.
[52] Clair Wills, *The Best are Leaving: Emigration and Post-War Irish Culture* (Cambridge, 2015), 173.

second in *The Country Girls* trilogy, later filmed as *Girl with Green Eyes*). A pregnant friend asks Cait to send abortion pills from England, a reminder of the many women in twentieth- and early twenty-first century Ireland whose terminations were 'pushed out of sight on the Liverpool boat'.[53] As the two young women leave Ireland on board the 'Hibernia', the ship itself seems to share and embody their lonely plight:

> Baba waved a clean hanky, and we leaned on the rails and felt the ship move and saw the dirty water underneath being churned up.
> 'Like a hundred lavatories flushing', Baba said to the foamy water as the seagulls rose up from their various perches along the rails and flew, slowly, with us. [54]

Further out to sea, Baba prepares for life in London by doling out seasickness tablets 'in case we puke all over the damn ship': 'If I'm sick, 'twill spoil everything, Baba said as she burped, and then put a hand towel over her new dress, for safety's sake' (*ibid*.).

I have been describing a phenomenon that is possessed of both highly public and quietly intimate meanings; crossing centuries, countries and lives in diffuse, extensive and varied patterns. Yet it is also true that the crash of the rough waves of the Irish sea has been condensed and crystallised within compelling metaphors. In Elizabeth Bowen's *The Last September* (1929), Lois draws on the remembered miseries of the sea crossing to feed an 'inner blankness': 'She was lonely, and saw there was no future. She shut her eyes and tried — as sometimes when she was seasick, locked in misery between Holyhead and Kingstown — to be enclosed in a nonentity, in some ideal no-place, locked and clear as a bubble'.[55] *The Last September* reimagines seasickness as a kind of negative freedom, allowing the past to invade the present via the intense image of a 'no-place' on board ship. As with Swift's suggestion of burial in Holyhead, Bowen finds in the sea's roughness a form of miserable release from both isolation and connection: sickness as strange resource, turbulent waters remade in painful memory.

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[53] Mary Holland, 'An Issue the Liverpool Boat can't Carry Away', *Irish Times*, 25 June 1986; quoted in Lindsey Earner-Byrne and Diane Urquhart, *The Irish Abortion Journey* (Basingstoke, 2018), 80. See also Lindsey Earner-Byrne, 'The Boat to England: An Analysis of the Official Reactions to the Emigration of Single Expectant Irishwomen to Britain, 1922-1972, *Irish Economic and Social History Journal*, 30 (2003), pp. 52-70.
[54] *The Country Girls Trilogy and Epilogue* (London: Penguin, 1988), 374.
[55] Elizabeth Bowen, *The Last September* (London: Vintage, 2015), 89.