

Propaganda & observation in medieval and early modern times

Gerald of Wales: Norman views on Ireland and the Irish

Gerald of Wales

Gerald of Wales (Giraldus Cambrensis) wrote *The History and Topography of Ireland* around 1200. In it he contrasts the beauty of the island and the richness of its fauna with the barbarity of its inhabitants.

Gerald (c.1146-1223) was a cleric and belonged to the powerful Norman family, the Geraldines, who played a key role in the Norman invasion of Ireland. He was born in the castle of Manorbier in Pembrokeshire (Dyfed) and became Bishop of St David's. He spent many years trying to establish an independent Welsh archbishopric. He made his first visit to Ireland in 1183. In 1184 he joined the entourage of King Henry II and came with it to Ireland in 1185. He made third and fourth visits in 1199 and 1204 respectively.

This account is the result of his visit in 1185. It is the source for virtually all we know about Ireland in the Middle Ages except for a few sparse chronicle accounts. Gerald himself boasted that he used no written sources to compile the first two parts of his account but admits that for the third part he is indebted to unhelpful chronicles for a little information.

Gerald claimed that his account was superior to previous accounts of Ireland because he went to see the country for himself. 'Neither would it be strange if these authors sometimes strayed from the path of truth, since they knew nothing by the evidence of their eyes, and what knowledge they possessed came to them through one who was reporting and was far away. For it is only when he who reports a thing is also one that witnessed it that anything is established on the sound basis of truth.'

Biases and reactions

Gerald clearly wished to please his master, Henry II, by justifying the invasion as a civilising mission. Nevertheless, there is no reason to suppose that he was not genuinely shocked by the deviant aspects and apparent laxness of the Irish Church or by the barbarity of the Irish in general. As he put it, 'There are some things which, if the exigencies of my account did not demand it, shame would discountenance their being described. But the austere discipline of history spares neither truth nor modesty.'

The barbarism of the Irish mainly consisted in looking and behaving differently from them. Instead of cropped hair, neat beards and short cloaks, the Irish sported flowing locks and beards. They wore shirts and long mantles and - though Gerald is a little vague on the subject - no breeches, going barefoot and bare-legged. Their horsemanship and their fighting methods were equally 'unNorman'. He was particularly wary of the Irish use of the axe.

Gerald was equally damning about Irish 'laziness' in failing to till the soil, describing a pastoral society in which milk and butter were all-purpose staple foods.

Shaping English attitudes

Gerald was very influential in determining English attitudes towards Ireland and the Irish in subsequent centuries. His biases and misconceptions, as well as his accurate observations, passed into the central literary tradition in England. What is more, no opposite view was expressed. Nobody, English or Irish, provided a comparable counterweight. The result that English stereotypes of Ireland and the Irish emerged, heavily conditioned by Gerald's low view of the Irish and Irish culture, though he made an exception in the case of Irish music.

The most widely used published version is *The History and Topography of Ireland by Giraldus Cambrensis*, translated with an introduction by J. J. O'Meara, Dolmen Press, 1982 (Penguin Classics, 1982). The following extracts were taken from the British Library CR-Rom, 'Medieval Realms', Turpin Distribution Services Ltd, Blackhorse Road, Letchworth, Herts SG6 1HN.

1. Irish people's character and customs, 1183-1185

Gerald praises the Irish as nature made them, but sees them as uncultivated and lazy. He was himself Welsh and therefore Celtic like the Irish.

They are a wild and inhospitable people. They live on beasts only, and live like beasts. They have not progressed at all from the primitive habits of pastoral living.

While man usually progresses from the woods to the fields, and from the fields to settlements and communities of citizens, this people despises work on the land, has little use for the money-making of towns, condemns the rights and privileges of citizenship, and desires neither to abandon, nor lose respect from, the life which it has been accustomed to lead in the woods and countryside.

They use the fields generally as pasture, but pasture in poor condition. Little is cultivated, and even less sown. The fields cultivated are so few because of the neglect of those who should cultivate them. But many of them are naturally very fertile and productive. The wealth of the soil is lost, not through the fault of the soil, but because there are no farmers to cultivate even the best land: 'the fields demand, but there are no hands'. How few kinds of fruit-bearing trees are grown here! The nature of the soil is not to be blamed, but rather the want of industry on the part of the cultivator. He is too lazy to plant the foreign types of trees that would grow very well here.

The different types of minerals too, with which the hidden veins of the earth are full, are not mined or put to any use, precisely because of the same laziness. Even gold, of which they are very desirous - just like the Spaniards - and which they would like to have in abundance, is brought here by traders that search the ocean for gain.

They do not devote their lives to the processing of flax or wool, or to any kind of merchandise or mechanical art. For given only to leisure, and devoted only to laziness, they think that the greatest pleasure is not to work, and the greatest wealth is to enjoy liberty.

The people is, then, a barbarous people, literally barbarous. Judged according to modern ideas, they are uncultivated, not only in the external appearance of their dress, but also in their flowing hair and beards. All their habits are the habits of barbarians. Since conventions are formed from living together in society, and since they are so removed in these distant parts from the ordinary world of men, as if they were in another world altogether and consequently cut off from well-behaved and law-abiding people, they know only of the barbarous habits in which they were born and brought up, and embrace them as another nature. Their natural qualities are excellent. But almost everything acquired is deplorable.

2. Irish people's appearance, 1183-1185

Gerald of Wales appreciated the natural gifts of the Irish people but considered them to be uncivilised. Ireland had little contact with the rest of Europe and so the people seemed old fashioned in their dress and manners.

But although they are fully endowed with natural gifts, their external characteristics of beard and dress, and internal cultivation of the mind, are so barbarous that they cannot be said to have any culture.

They use very little wool in their dress and that itself nearly always black - because the sheep of that country are black - and made up in a barbarous fashion. For they wear little hoods, close-fitting and stretched across the shoulders and down to a length of about eighteen to twenty-two inches, and generally sewn together from cloths of various kinds. Under these they wear mantles instead of cloaks. They also use woollen trousers that are at the same time boots, or boots that are at the same time trousers, and these are for the most part dyed.



3. Scribe making an Irish illuminated manuscript, 1183-1185

The scribe must be a monk for he wears the tonsure (the centre of his head is shaved). He does not wear the dress of most orders. Instead of a long tunic he has a short one with a cowl over a pair of trousers. These differences seemed very important to people at the time. He holds a short rod in his left hand so that he can use it to steady his right hand, which holds his quill pen. Perhaps the book he is writing is The Book of Kells, the most famous Irish illuminated manuscript. There is also a picture of a falconer and his birds on the left of the page.

4. **Choosing and crowning an Irish king**

Used to the system of primogeniture, Gerald was horrified by the Irish system of electing a king from among members of the ruling clan was anathema to Gerald, - 'a new and outlandish way of confirming kingship and dominion'. He also found distasteful the celebration at the coronation with its free consumption of mare 's flesh.

There are some things which, if the exigencies of my account did not demand it, shame would discountenance their being described. But the austere discipline of history spares neither truth nor modesty.

There is in the northern and farther part of Ulster, namely in Kenelcunill, a certain people which is accustomed to appoint its king with a rite altogether outlandish and abominable. When the whole people of that land has been gathered together in one place, a white mare is brought forward into the middle of the assembly. He who is to be inaugurated, not as a chief, but as a beast, not as a king, but as an outlaw, has bestial intercourse with her before all, professing himself to be a beast also. The mare is then killed immediately, cut up in pieces, and boiled in water. A bath is prepared for the man afterwards in the same water. He sits in the bath surrounded by all his people, and all, he and they, eat of the meat of the mare which is brought to them. He quaffs and drinks of the broth in which he is bathed, not in any cup, or using his hand, but just dipping his mouth into it round about him. When this unrighteous rite has been carried out, his kingship and dominion have been conferred.



5. **The Irish form of Christianity**

Gerald was genuinely shocked by what he saw as the deviant aspects and apparent laxness of the Irish Church - by the Irish ignorance of the rudiments of the Faith.

Although since the time of Patrick and through so many years the Faith has been founded in the island, and has almost continuously thrived, it is, nevertheless, remarkable that this people even still remains so uninstructed in its rudiments.

This is a filthy people, wallowing in vice. Of all peoples it is the least instructed in the rudiments of the Faith. They do not yet pay tithes or first fruits or contract marriages. They do not avoid incest. They do not attend God's church with due reverence. Moreover, and this is surely a detestable thing, and contrary not only to the Faith but to any feeling of honour - men in many places in Ireland, I shall not say marry, but rather debauch, the wives of their dead brothers. They abuse them in having such evil and incestuous relations with them. In this (wishing to imitate the ancients more eagerly in vice than in virtue) they follow the apparent teaching, and not the true doctrine, of the Old Testament.

6. **Western islanders of Ireland, 1183-1185**

The Western Isles of Ireland have always been rather remote, with their own traditions. Gerald believed that they had not been converted to Christianity, but he was wrong as there are Christian monuments on the islands. They did in fact have a rich early Christian tradition. Gerald found it convenient to claim that they had not been converted as it supported his arguments in favour of Norman occupation.

Moreover, although all this time the Faith has grown up, so to speak, in the country, nevertheless in some corners of it there are many even still who are not baptized, and who, because of the negligence of the pastors, have not yet heard the teaching of the Faith.

I heard from some sailors that one time during Lent they were driven by the force of a storm to the northern and unsearchable vastnesses of the sea of Connacht. At length they put in under a fairly small island. They could scarcely keep their position there, even though they threw out their anchor and used ropes of triple thickness and even more. The storm abated within three days and the sea and the weather became calm again. They saw not far away what appeared to them to be land that was completely unknown to them.

Shortly afterwards they caught sight of a small skiff putting out from the land toward themselves. The boat was narrow and oblong, made of wickerwork and covered on the outside with sewn hides of animals. There were two men in the boat who were altogether naked except for broad belts of the raw hides of animals which they had tied about their waists. Their hair was very long and flaxen, coming down and across their shoulder, as is the Irish manner, and covering most of their bodies. When they had found out from them that they were from some part of Connacht, and spoke the Irish language, they took them on board the ship. They on their part, began to wonder at everything they saw as if it were new.

They said that they had never before seen a big ship made of wood, nor the trappings of civilization. When they were offered bread and cheese to eat they did not know what they were and refused them. They said that they fed only on meat, fish, and milk. They did not usually wear clothes, but sometimes in great necessity they used the hides of animals. They asked the sailors if they had any meat for a meal on board, and when they were told that it was not allowed to eat meat during Lent, they know nothing about Lent. Nor did they know anything about the year, nor the month, nor the week, and they were

completely ignorant of the names of the days of the week. When they were asked if they were Christians and baptized, they replied that they had as yet heard nothing of Christ and knew nothing about him.

And so they departed and took with them one piece of bread and a cheese, so that they might show to their own people as a wonder the kind of food that other peoples used.

7. Warfare in Ireland

The unmounted Irish without armour were no match for the chain-mailed and mounted Norman knights.

They go naked and unarmed into battle. They regard weapons as a burden, and they think it brave and honourable to fight unarmed. They use, however, three types of weapons - short spears, two darts (in this they imitate the Basclenses), and big axes well and carefully forged, which they have taken from the Norwegians and the Ostmen, about which we shall speak later. They are quicker and more expert than any other people in throwing, when everything else fails, stones as missiles and such stones do great damage to the enemy in an engagement.

8. War by other means - 'vices and treachery'

Gerald's account showed the distrust of the newcomer for the ways of the natives who adopted their own strategies for dealing with the foreigners other than open warfare.

Above all other peoples they always practise treachery. When they give their word to anyone, they do not keep it. They do not blush or fear to violate every day the bond of their pledge and oath given to others although they are very keen that it should be observed with regard to themselves. When you have employed every safeguard and used every precaution for your own safety and security, both by means of oaths and hostages, and friendships firmly cemented, and all kinds of benefits conferred, then you must be especially on your guard, because then especially their malice seeks a chance. For they feel that because of your reliance on your safeguards you are not on the watch. Then at last they resort to the arts of evil and their accustomed weapons of deceit, so that, taking an opportunity of your feeling of security, they may be able to injure you when you do not expect it. You must be more afraid of their wile than their war; their friendship than their fire; their honey than their hemlock; their shrewdness than their soldiery; their betrayals than their battle lines; their specious friendship than their enmity despised. For this is their principle: 'Who asks of an enemy whether he employs guile or virtue?' These are their characteristics: they are neither strong in war, nor reliable in peace.

9. The axe

The favourite Irish weapon was the axe, about which Gerald was extremely wary.

From an old and evil custom they always carry an axe in their hand as if it were a staff. In this way, if they have a feeling for any evil, they can the more quickly give it effect. Wherever they go they drag this along with them. When they see the opportunity, and the occasion presents itself, this weapon has not to be unsheathed as a sword, or bent as a bow, or poised as a spear. Without further preparation, beyond being raised a little, it inflicts a mortal blow. At hand, or rather, in the hand and ever ready is that which is enough to cause death. From the axe there is always anxiety. If you think that you are free from anxiety, you are not free from an axe. You admit a risk, if you admit an axe, and are free from anxiety.

10. Music in Ireland, 1183-1185

Gerald obviously enjoyed Celtic music and must have known it from his boyhood in Wales. He saw music as one of the greatest achievements of the Irish people and mentions its influence on Scotland and Wales. He also hints that many of the Normans did not appreciate the subtlety of Irish music.

It is only in the case of musical instruments that I find any commendable diligence in the people. They seem to me to be incomparably more skilled in these than any other people that I have seen.

The movement is not, as in the British instrument to which we are accustomed, slow and easy, but rather quick and lively, while at the same time the melody is sweet and pleasant. It is remarkable how, in spite of the great speed of the fingers, the musical proportion is maintained. The melody is kept perfect and full with unimpaired art through everything - through quivering measures and the involved use of several instruments - with a rapidity that charms, a rhythmic pattern that is varied, and a concord achieved through elements discordant. They harmonize at intervals of the octave and the fifth, but they always begin with B flat and with B flat end, so that everything may be rounded with the sweetness of charming sonority. They guide so subtly from one mode to another, and the grace notes so freely sport with such abandon and bewitching charm around the steady tone of the heavier sound, that the perfection of their art seems to lie in their concealing it, as if 'it were the better for being hidden. An art revealed brings shame.'

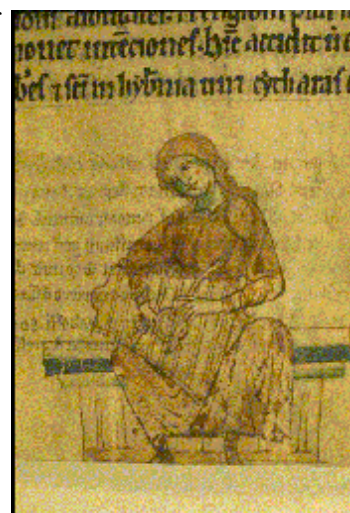


Hence it happens that the very things that afford unspeakable delight to the minds of those who have a fine perception and can penetrate carefully to the secrets of the art, bore, rather than delight, those who have no such perception - who look without seeing, and hear without being able to understand. When the audience is unsympathetic they succeed only in causing boredom with what appears to be but confused and disordered noise.

One should note that both Scotland and Wales, the former because of her affinity and intercourse, the latter as it were by grafting, try to imitate Ireland in music and strive in emulation. Ireland uses and delights in two instruments only, the harp, namely, and the timpanum. Scotland uses three, the harp, timpanum, and the crowd. Wales use the harp, the pipes, and the crowd. They also use strings made of bronze, and not from leather. In the opinion, however, of many, Scotland has by now not only caught up on Ireland, her instructor, but already far outdistances and excels her in musical skill. Therefore people now look to that country as to the fountain of the art.

11. Irishwoman playing the harp, 1183-1185

The harp was a popular instrument in the Middle Ages and came in a variety of shapes and sizes. This woman is playing a psalter which she holds on her lap and plucks the strings with a plectrum. For a psalter this was usually a quill.



12. Irish climate is good for you, 1183-1185

Gerald wanted to promote the advantages and attractions of Ireland and the other Celtic countries above those of the East, which had become popular through the Crusades. He sounds a bit like a modern tourist board!

This is the most temperate of all countries. Cancer does not here drive you to take shade from its burning heat; nor does the cold of Capricorn send you rushing to the fire. You will seldom see snow here, and then it lasts only for a short time. But cold weather does come with all the winds here, not only from the west-north-west and north but also equally from the east, the Favonius and the Zephyr. Nevertheless, they are all moderate winds and none of them is too strong. The grass is green in the fields in winter, just the same as in summer. Consequently the meadows are not cut for fodder, nor do they ever build stalls for their beasts. The country enjoys the freshness and mildness of spring almost all the year round.

The air is so healthy that there is no disease-bearing cloud, or pestilential vapour, or corrupting breeze. The island has little use for doctors. You will not find many sick men, except those that are actually at the point of death. There is here scarcely any mean between constant health and final death. Anyone born here, who has never left its healthy soil and air, if he be of the native people, never suffers from any of the three kinds of fevers. They suffer only from the ague and even that only very seldom.

This indeed was the true course of nature; but as the world began to grow old, and, as it were, began to slip into the decrepitude of old age, and to come to the end, the nature of almost all things became corrupted and changed for the worse.

There is, however, such a plentiful supply of rain, such an ever-present overhanging of clouds and fog, that you will scarcely see even in the summer three consecutive days of really fine weather. Nevertheless, there is no disturbance of the air of inclemency of the weather such as inconveniences those that are in health and spirits, or distresses those that suffer from nervous disorders.

13. Agriculture and trade in Ireland, 1183-1185

Gerald describes Ireland as a land of milk and honey and tries to explain differences between what he has seen and what earlier authors had written. He points out that an eye-witness account, like his, is preferable because it has a basis of truth.

The island is rich in pastures and meadows, honey and milk, and wine, but not vineyards. Bede, however, among his other praises of the island says that it is not altogether without vineyards. On the other hand Solinus says that it has no bees. But if I may be pardoned by both, it would have been more true if each of them had said the opposite: it has no vineyards, and it is not altogether without bees. For the island has not, and never had, vines and their cultivators. Imported wines, however, conveyed in the ordinary commercial way, are so abundant that you would scarcely notice that the vine was neither cultivated nor gave its fruit there. Poitou out of its own superabundance sends plenty of wine, and Ireland is pleased to send in return the hides of animals and the skins of flocks and wild beasts. Ireland, as other countries, has bees that produce honey; but the swarms would be much more plentiful if they were not frightened off by the yew-trees that are poisonous and bitter, and with which the island woods are flourishing. It is possible, of course, that in Bede's time there were, perhaps, some vineyards in the island; and some people say that it was Saint Dominic of Ossory who brought bees into Ireland - and that was long after the time of Solinus.

Neither would it be strange if these authors sometimes strayed from the path of truth, since they knew nothing by the evidence of their eyes, and what knowledge they possessed came to them through one who was reporting and was far away. For it is only when he who reports a thing is also one that witnessed it that anything is established on the sound basis of truth.

Assessing the value of Gerald of Wales as evidence

History Junior Certificate History. Revision Handbook by E. Gray, The Educational Company, 0-86167-513-4, 32-3

Castle, church and city

Here is a description of Irish people in the middle ages. It was written by a Norman, Gerald of Wales. He visited here in the 1180s and reported back to the English king, Henry II. Read it and answer the questions that follow.

Although the Irish are fully endowed with natural gifts, their external characteristics of beard and dress, and internal cultivation of mind, are so barbarous that they cannot be said to have any culture. They use very little wool in their dress and that itself is nearly always black ... and made in a most barbarous fashion. For they wear little hoods, close-fitting and stretched across the shoulders ... Under these they wear mantles instead of cloaks. They also use woollen trousers that are at the same time boots ... and these are for the most part dyed ... They regard weapons as a burden and they think it is brave and honourable to fight unarmed. They use, however, three types of weapon - a short spear, two darts ... and big axes, well and carefully forged ...

They are a wild and inhospitable people ... They do not devote their lives to the processing of flax or wool or to any kind of merchandise or mechanical art. For given only to leisure and devoted only to laziness, they think that the greatest wealth is to enjoy liberty.

(Quoted in Maurice Sheehy, *When the Normans came to Ireland*, Cork, 1975)

- (i) From this description, pick out and write down ;in your own words, **three** items of medieval Irish dress.
..... (3x1)
- (ii) Using the information given here, list **three** weapons used by an Irish soldier.
..... (3x1)
- (iii) What, in Gerald’s opinion, did the Irish consider ‘the greatest wealth’?
..... (1)
- (iv) Did Gerald like the Irish? Pick out two statements to support your answer.
 - (a) (2)
 - (b) (2)
- (v) Do you think he would be a reliable source about life in medieval Ireland? Give **two** reasons for your answer.
.....
..... (2x2)