

THE SPATIAL HUMANITIES

David J. Bodenhamer, John Corrigan, and Trevor M. Harris,
editors

TROUBLED GEOGRAPHIES

A SPATIAL HISTORY OF RELIGION
AND SOCIETY IN IRELAND

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INDIANA UNIVERSITY PRESS

Bloomington &
Indianapolis

This book is a publication of

Indiana University Press
Office of Scholarly Publishing
Herman B Wells Library 350
1320 East 10th Street
Bloomington, Indiana 47405 USA

Telephone orders 800-842-6796

Fax orders 812-855-7931

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Manufactured in China

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Gregory, Ian N.

Troubled geographies : a spatial history of religion and society in Ireland / Ian N. Gregory, Niall A. Cunningham, Paul S. Ell, C. D. Lloyd, and Ian G. Shuttleworth.

pages cm. — (The spatial humanities)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-253-00966-1 (cloth : alk. paper)

— ISBN 978-0-253-00973-9 (pbk. : alk. paper)

— ISBN (invalid) 978-0-253-00979-1 (ebook)

1. Human geography—Ireland. 2. Ireland—Ethnic relations. 3. Ireland—Religious life and customs. 4. Ireland—Social life and customs.

I. Title.

GF563.G74 2013

304.209415—dc23

20130164

1 2 3 4 5 18 17 16 15 14 13

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The research that produced this book was funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council/Economic and Social Research Council's Religion and Society Programme under grant AH/F008929/1 "Troubled Geographies: Two Centuries of Religious Division in Ireland." It benefited from additional support from the British Academy under grant SG090803 "The Presbyterian Church in Ireland, 1871–2001." Our sincere thanks go to Malcolm Sutton for allowing us to use his database of deaths during the Troubles and to Martin Melaugh (University of Ulster) for making the data so available to us. Many of the census data used have been taken from L. A. Clarkson, L. Kennedy, E. M. Crawford, and M. E. Dowling, *Database of Irish Historical Statistics, 1861–1911* (computer file) (Colchester, Essex: UK Data Archive [distributor], November 1997, study number 3579); and from M. W. Dowling, L. A. Clarkson, L. Kennedy, and E. M. Crawford, *Database of Irish Historical Statistics: Census Material, 1901–1971* (computer file) (Colchester, Essex: UK Data Archive [distributor], March 1998, study number 3542). Our thanks go also to Elaine Yeates and others at the Centre for Data Digitisation and Analysis, Queen's University Belfast, for additional work on these and related datasets. Census data for the Republic of Ireland for 1981 to 2002 were provided by the Central Statistical Office, Ireland. Access to the grid square data for Northern Ireland were provided by the Census Office of the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency. Their use in this analysis benefited from Economic and Social Research Council grant RES-000-23-0478. Spatial data on Belfast's peacelines were downloaded from the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Office website <http://www.nisra.gov.uk/geography/default.asp12.htm> (23 September 2011). Many of the color schemes used benefited from input from [ColorBrewer.org](http://www.colorbrewer.org), <http://www.colorbrewer.org> (23 September 2011).

Even today, more than a decade after the Belfast or Good Friday Agreement, which marked an end to the Troubles, the visitor to Northern Ireland cannot help but be struck by the interplay between religion, ethnonational identity, politics, history, and geography. Protestant areas are demarcated by the Union Flag (the flag of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, formerly the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland), backed up by red, white, and blue curbstones and murals representing events such as the Battle of the Boyne and the Siege of Derry. Protestantism is seen as synonymous with the politics of unionism and loyalism, which have the union with Great Britain and loyalty to the British Crown as their core tenets. Orange parades further emphasize the links—Orangemen march to church in a symbolic way that makes explicit the links between the religion, politics, history, and, most controversially, territory. So too in Catholic areas, except the flags are those of the Republic of Ireland, the curbstones are green, white, and orange, and the murals tend to focus on the sufferings and tribulations of the Gaelic Irish population from the Norman Conquest all the way through to the recent Troubles.¹ Catholicism is seen as synonymous with Irish nationalism and republicanism, which have sought to remove British influence from Ireland.

Religion and territory thus are explicitly linked, a link that has at worst led to killing, arson, and other forms of violence aimed at establishing or protecting territorial control. While these are the most overt and unpleasant expressions of the impact of religious geography on Ireland, spatioreligious processes—the way in which religion and geography become intertwined with each other and a range of broader factors within society—have a long tradition. Recent work by Alexandra Walsham has drawn attention to this link, seeing religious space in Ireland as a sort of theological palimpsest constantly being written and overwritten by competing Catholic and Protestant imaginings of the past.² The idea of a more substantive link between geography and religion underpins the political ideologies of nationalism and unionism, which have shaped the island of Ireland since the Famine. The ways in which religion, society, and geography have evolved to shape Ireland over the past two centuries are the major themes that this book will explore in detail. It is important, however, to establish what we mean by religion. In this context it does not refer to religious practice, including acts of worship, church attendance, and systems of belief; instead, it is primarily concerned with religious identity, a person's background and the community with which that person identifies. As the opening paragraph makes clear, religion is often tied up with a wide variety of other factors in society, particularly ethnonational identity and politics, but also economic opportunity and a range of other issues affecting almost every aspect of a person's life.

This intermingling of geography, religion, and the wider society is not new. Protestantism arrived in Ireland in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries with the *plantations*, whose aim was to “plant” specific areas with English Protestants, loyal to the Crown, to defend English influence from the threats posed by indigenous Catholics. This took place against the backdrop of the wider European struggle between Protestant England and Catholic Spain and France. The plantations were focused on certain key strategic areas, including colonial Dublin and its historic sphere of influence known as the Pale, parts of Munster and the midlands, and west Ulster. Around the same time, Scottish Presbyterians arrived in large numbers in east Ulster, reflecting long-term economic and cultural links between southern Scotland and Ulster rather than the processes of large-scale, organized colonization.

The plantations laid the foundation for the fusing of religion, identity, politics, and geography, and as [chapter 2](#) will describe, many of the spatioreligious patterns that were laid down in this period have shaped, and been reshaped by, the processes that ran through nineteenth- and twentieth-century Ireland. These processes can be divided into two types. At one extreme there have been the short-term shocks—periods of intense violence or trauma that led to sudden upheavals. At the other there are the longer-term, more gradual processes associated with economic and social development.

The most obvious trauma was the period of violence from the Easter Rising in 1916 to Partition and the civil war in the early 1920s. The geographical legacy of this was the division of the island into the mainly Catholic Republic of Ireland—or the Irish Free State, as it was first called—and the predominantly Protestant Northern Ireland. As [chapter 6](#) will identify, in this period religion, politics, and identity came together to tear the island in two. However, the resulting formal division of the island left both parts with significant populations of the “other” religion, and in some places in the north these minorities made up the majority of the population. In modern Northern Ireland this has had tragic consequences. The twentieth century’s second period of violent trauma, described in the last chapters of the book, was the three decades of the Troubles, which have left Northern Ireland two communities—defined by both religion and politics—as separated as they have ever been, emotionally as well as geographically. The so-called peace lines are the most obvious physical legacy of this period. These are high, ugly, concrete walls that scar Belfast’s urban geography in their attempt to keep the two communities apart—a physical manifestation of a much deeper divide.⁴ In what is now the Republic, however, there have been fewer such problems, and the much smaller Protestant minority has generally coexisted in relative harmony with their Catholic neighbors.

These two periods of violence are not the only traumatic processes to have affected the geography of Ireland over the past two centuries. The Great Famine of the late 1840s was the last major famine in western Europe, and its effects have been profound in both the short and long term. [chapter 3](#) describes how, prior to the Famine, Ireland’s population was increasing rapidly, as was typical of most nineteenth-century western countries. [chapter 4](#) moves on to describe how the Famine caused the population to crash from over eight million to less than six million as a consequence of death and emigration. Stagnation followed such that the population recorded by the 1841 census is still the largest ever population of Ireland, a situation that is virtually unique in western countries, where populations have typically increased dramatically since the early nineteenth century. Geography, religion, and politics are also part of the story of the Famine. It was perceived to have disproportionately affected Catholic areas in the west of the island, and the British government’s response, or lack of it, to the unfolding tragedy, combined with the indifference of absentee landlords, did much to stimulate movements for agrarian reform and Home Rule.

As well as these shocks, Ireland has been affected by the more gradual but nevertheless highly significant processes that affected other western European countries over these two centuries as the island developed from an agrarian society to a postindustrial one. Urbanization, industrialization, suburbanization, and deindustrialization have all played their parts in shaping modern Ireland. Again, these processes have had marked spatial patterns and have had impacts on—and been impacted by—religion, identity, and politics in ways that are distinct from other parts of Europe. [chapter 5](#) describes how, during the nineteenth century, Belfast, located in the Protestant heartland of northeast Ulster, grew from almost nothing to become the largest city on the island. Its economy, based on shipbuilding, textiles, and other manufacturing industries, was firmly tied into the economy of Britain and the wider British Empire. Much of the rest of the island did not industrialize or urbanize. As a result, rural population pressures could not be absorbed by rapidly growing Irish cities and we

instead absorbed by the cities of Britain and North America. The extent to which these trends have been shaped by religion is, at best, controversial, although the importance of the “Protestant work ethic” has been argued for.⁵ These trends have, however, undoubtedly shaped religious geography and with them a host of related themes. The rapid growth of Belfast led to a large influx of both Catholic and Protestant migrants into the city, leading to its complex sectarian geography. Economic marginalization of Catholics and discrimination against them in the shipyards in particular helped foster resentments. The linkage of Belfast into the wider British economy was important in promoting unionism and the opposition to Home Rule, particularly among the Protestant elite.

More generally, as identified in both [chapters 5](#) and [7](#), long-term processes have resulted in the population becoming increasingly concentrated in the towns and cities of the east coast at the expense of the west and center of the island. This has led to Catholics and Protestants living in close proximity, which has sometimes, but not always, led to conflict. For much of the twentieth century the economic success of Northern Ireland and the stagnation of the Free State/Republic’s economy exacerbated this conflict, with Belfast being economically and demographically the dominant center for much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

The later twentieth century, however, saw a dramatic transition. As described in [chapter 8](#), in the last decades of the twentieth century the Republic moved to open its economy and went through a period of rapid industrialization, followed by an even more rapid and spectacularly successful move to a service-based economy. By the end of the twentieth century the Celtic Tiger had become the fourth richest country in the world.⁶ Over the same period, as [chapters 9](#) to [11](#) describe, Northern Ireland’s traditional manufacturing industries went into steep decline. Efforts to replace them were undermined by the Troubles, the conflict between Catholics and Protestants that erupted in the late 1960s. The resulting violence not only was a human tragedy but did much to undermine Northern Ireland’s attempts to reinvent itself as a postindustrial society, meaning that by the end of the twentieth century the Republic had the strong economy, while the north stagnated and declined.

This book is thus concerned with how a geography laid down in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries led to an amalgamation of religious conviction, ethnonational identity, and political opinion that shaped the geographies of Ireland through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and continues to shape it in the twenty-first century. We will explore how religious geographies have shaped and been shaped by broader changes in Ireland’s economy and society in terms of both the short-term shocks and the long-term processes.

The Sources: Ireland’s Censuses

The census is an excellent source for exploring socioeconomic geographies and how they change over time. As with many other countries, Ireland took censuses for most of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Unlike most other countries, however, Ireland has included data on religion as part of its census since 1861, an indicator that religion was, and remains, of more interest in Ireland than elsewhere. The first census of Ireland was taken in 1821, and censuses were repeated decennially until 1911. After Partition, the pattern becomes slightly more complicated. The next census, in 1926, took place on both sides of the border. In 1936 there was a census in the Free State, while in Northern Ireland a comparable, but more limited, census took place in the following year. After World War II the Free State took a further census in 1946, while Northern Ireland held off until 1951, resulting in the largest discontinuity between the two. Fortunately, after this the dates of the two censuses merged again to take place in 1961, 1971, 1981, and 1991. The final census used in this book occurred in 2006.

in Northern Ireland and 2002 in the Republic. Thus we have census data for the island covering most of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries available for intervals of every ten to fifteen years and broadly comparable north and south. The bulk of these statistics from 1821 to 1971 have been digitized as the Database of Irish Historical Statistics, allowing a reexamination of the patterns that they contain.⁷

Censuses contain a wealth of spatial information because they are organized using administrative units such as districts and counties. For the nineteenth century the *barony* was the principal administrative unit used in the Irish censuses. There were around 330 baronies (the exact number depends on the date), with an average population of around twenty thousand. From 1901 baronies were replaced by urban and rural districts, otherwise known as county districts. Although there were a similar number of these, their arrangement was significantly different from baronies, as they explicitly separated urban areas from their rural hinterlands. Data for urban and rural districts continued to be available throughout the twentieth century. Although more detailed data are sometimes available at, for example, the parish or townland level, these are rarely consistently available in digital form, so before 1971 the bulk of the sources for this book are used at the barony and urban and rural district levels. From 1971 for Northern Ireland data are available using a unique arrangement of grid squares. These squares have sides that are 1 km long in rural areas and 100 m long in urban centers such as Belfast. This allows us to explore this period in Northern Ireland with much more detail than in the remainder of the country. One problem, however, is that some data are only available for the thirty-two counties of Ireland, robbing them of much of their geographic detail. The counties, in turn, aggregate to four provinces—Ulster, Connaught, Leinster, and Munster—that are too aggregate for statistical reporting but are useful for geographical description. The main administrative geographies are shown in [figure 1.1](#).

Although the details vary slightly, in general, census data on religion consist mainly of the total Catholic, Church of Ireland (part of the Anglican Communion), and Presbyterian populations. Data on minor religions such as other Protestant groups and Jews are sometimes also available; however, the three main groups provide the overwhelming proportion of Ireland's population. In 1911, for example, only 3 percent of the population did not profess to be either Catholic or from one of the two main Protestant denominations. Unfortunately, data on religion are not always available with the level of detail that would be desirable. Digital data from the censuses of 1871 to 1901 only provide statistics at the county level, and from 1971 censuses in the Republic stopped subdividing the Protestant population into Church of Ireland and Presbyterians at local levels, perhaps reflecting the declining demographic importance in the distinction between the Protestant groups in this part of Ireland. It is important to note that the census records the religion that individuals professed to. It is thus a measure of religious identity rather than religious practice.

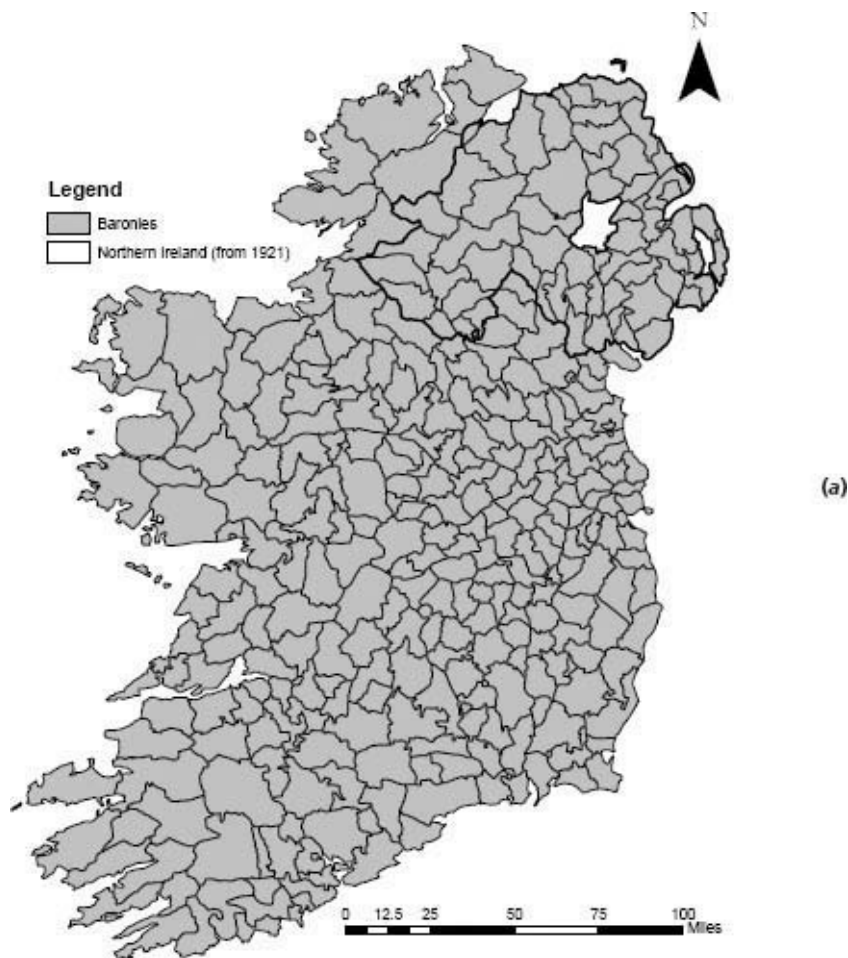
A final problem is that the census did not start collecting data on religion until 1861, meaning that there is no information on the pre-Famine period. This problem is partly resolved through the use of the 1834 Commission, which examined "the state of religion and other instruction in Ireland." The Commission provides similar data to the later censuses but is only available in digital form using the Church of Ireland's dioceses, of which there were thirty-two but whose arrangement is significantly different from that of the thirty-two counties.

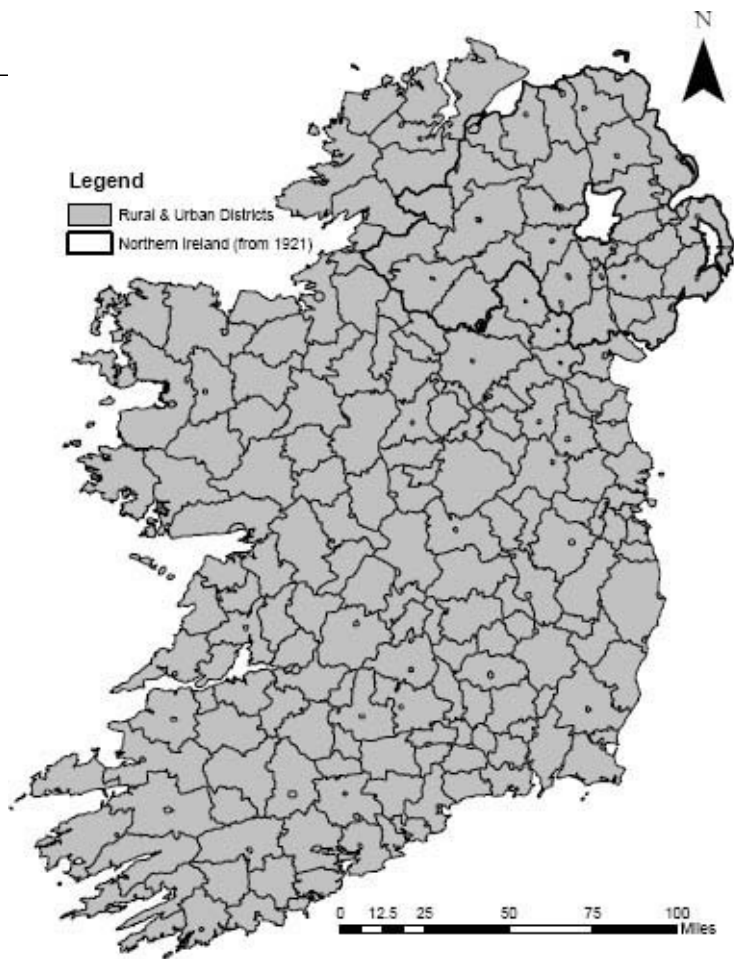
The Methods: GIS and Spatial History

The census and the 1834 Commission thus provide us with spatially detailed pictures of religion and

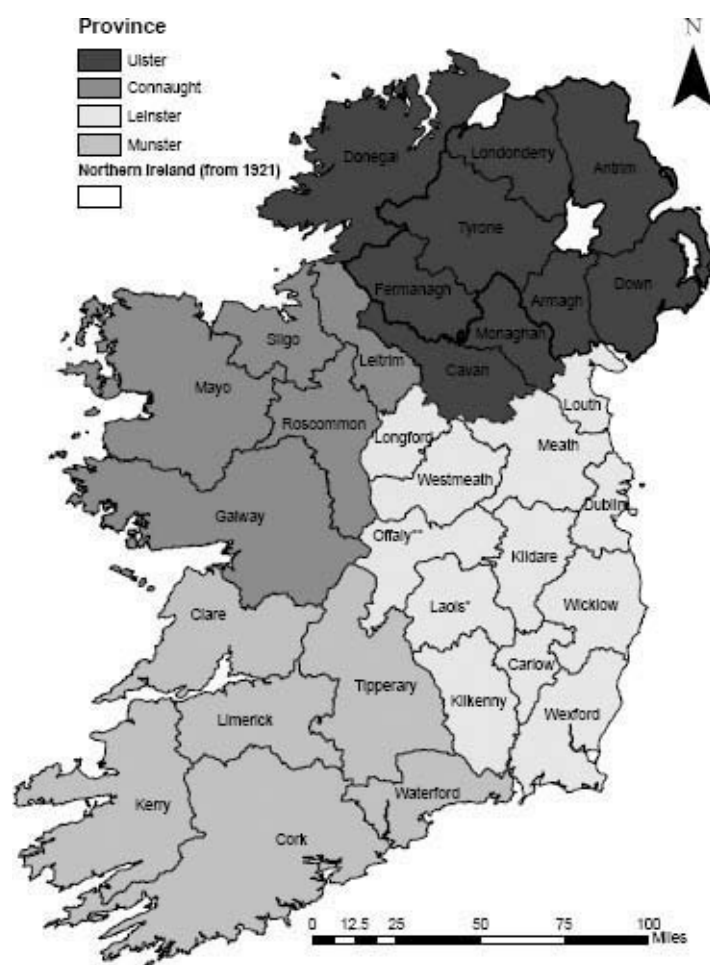
range of other social indicators in Ireland through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Modern technology, in the form of a Geographical Information System (GIS), provides us with new methods of exploring these data. A GIS combines data such as the statistics included in the census with the boundaries for which those data were published. This provides a number of advantages for historical research.⁸ First, it allows the data to be mapped quickly and easily. Second, it allows data from different sources to be integrated with each other based on *where* they are located. In this book extensive use is made of a technique called *areal interpolation*, which allows the impact of changing boundaries to be removed so that data from several dates can be compared using the same set of administrative boundaries.⁹ The third advantage is the ability to make use of analytic techniques that explicitly include location within them.¹⁰

Fig. 1.1. The main administrative geographies of Ireland showing (a) baronies, (b) rural and urban districts, and (c) counties and provinces. Note that before Partition * Laois and ** Offaly were called Queen's County and King's County, respectively.





(b)



(c)

Beyond these technical advantages, the use of a GIS stresses the importance of space and geography to the historian. This has led to recent calls for the creation of a new field called *spatial history*.¹¹ The

overlap between history and geography in the form of historical geography has a long tradition. What makes spatial history distinct is that it is a form of historical geography that is enabled by, and also limited by, the use of a GIS and other related technologies. These technologies provide tools that allow the researcher to explore space and time in ways that are far more detailed and far more effective in summarizing large amounts of data than has previously been possible. The challenge is to take these tools and use them to create narratives of the different ways in which change occurs in different places at different times.¹³ This is important in Ireland because, as we will see, the way that space interacts with religion and other factors is central to an understanding of the ways in which the island has developed. Spatial patterns and how they change are complex, so more traditional historical geographies have been limited in their ability to make full use of the spatial and temporal data available to them. Although a GIS does much to help us overcome this limitation, the sources that we use are numeric and aggregate; thus, while they are excellent for describing patterns and how they change, these sources are more limited in their ability to provide separations.

A Spatial History of Ireland

The book primarily covers the period from 1821 to 2001/2002, the first and last censuses for which data are currently available for the whole island, although [chapter 2](#) sets the scene by discussing the much earlier geographies of the plantations. Despite the dates being defined by data availability, there are also strong academic justifications for using them. The period from 1821 to 1841 relates to the pre-Famine period, when, superficially at least, population trends in Ireland were similar to those found elsewhere in what was then the United Kingdom. 2001/2002 provides what may well turn out to be the end of a major chapter of Irish religious history on both sides of the border. In the Republic the labor demands of the Celtic Tiger meant that a country famous for its emigration was about to open its borders to an influx of emigrants from eastern Europe and elsewhere who did not conform to the ethno-religious identities of the indigenous population. The 2000s would also see the Catholic Church embroiled in scandals that may further weaken its hold in Ireland and increase the secularization that is already happening. In Northern Ireland the Belfast or Good Friday Agreement of 1998 marked the end of thirty years of conflict, despite the fact that the negotiations and—to a far lesser extent—acts of violence have continued. This has meant that Northern Ireland's economy has had the opportunity to begin to revitalize; however, the two communities remain in many ways as divided as ever. Again, secularization and immigration are beginning to have impacts on the religious divide, impacts that were not present through the previous two centuries.

In writing this history we have tried to bridge the gap between the traditional historical narrative stressing the chronology of events, and an atlas format. Atlases are good at presenting geographic patterns in an attractive way but tend to do this at the expense of a coherent narrative.¹⁴ This book's narrative is concerned with the spatial patterns of religion and society and how these have changed, but it is told using a larger number of maps and other diagrams than would be expected in a historical monograph. In this way it stresses the importance of geographical as well as temporal change.

While a GIS is well suited to producing the maps that form the backbone of this approach, paper is not good at publishing it. Page size, a lack of full color, and a lack of interactivity all limit what can be achieved in a traditional book format. A book, however, still has certain advantages, not least that many people would still prefer to read a page than a screen. For this reason we have compromised between book and electronic formats. This book contains a full narrative account illustrated with many maps in color. The electronic version provides the same maps plus additional resources.

Most of the maps we use include the border between Northern Ireland and the Republic/Free State. This is partly for orientation purposes but also because one of the key themes of this book is how Ireland evolved to the position it is in today. The border was defined by the religious, social, and economic geographies that preceded it and has helped to redefine and reinforce these geographies ever since. It thus seems sensible to include it on maps that predate its existence in part to show that even in northern parts of the island appear different from the rest, there is rarely a simple relationship between these patterns and modern political divisions.

The chapter structure of the book and of the electronic supplement is identical. [chapter 2](#) describes the plantation geographies; [chapter 3](#) talks about the pre-Famine period, establishing the relationships between the religious geographies of this period and the plantation geographies and exploring the broader trends in Irish society at the time with an emphasis on population growth and agricultural change. [chapter 4](#) explores in detail the impact of the Famine, particularly the period from 1841 to 1861. [chapter 5](#) then examines the trends—economic, political, and religious—that increasingly divided the island between 1861 and 1911. [chapter 6](#) looks in detail at the period between 1910 and 1922, exploring how a movement for Home Rule led so suddenly to the partition of the island into two parts along explicitly religious lines that were also related to the political and economic divides on the island. [chapter 7](#) continues to explore the island as a whole, looking at how it became increasingly divided through much of the twentieth century between an economically successful Northern Ireland and the Free State (later the Republic), which was stagnating economically and demographically. The last few decades have seen a complete change in fortunes for both parts of the island. The Republic became one of Europe's most dynamic economies as the Celtic Tiger, as described in [chapter 8](#). Northern Ireland, of the border, however, saw dark times, as the manufacturing industries on which the economy depended went into decline, and the Troubles led to over 3,500 deaths between July 1969 and December 2001 in politically motivated violence that was often explicitly sectarian in character. Three chapters are devoted to this, one looking at socioeconomic change in Northern Ireland, one looking at violence in Northern Ireland during the Troubles, and the final one focusing on Belfast as a microcosm of both the Troubles and the wider processes in action at the time.

What becomes apparent is that an understanding of how Ireland developed over the past two centuries requires an understanding of the major themes that have shaped it, economy, society, politics, and religion being prevalent among them. Time is also clearly important, as recognized by the chronological chapter structure. Time brings with it long-term trends—industrialization and urbanization, deindustrialization and counterurbanization, and short-term shocks such as the Famine, Partition, and the onset of the Troubles. Time also brings the past—history with its lessons, identities, resentments, and prejudices—and the future—its plans that succeed and fail to greater and lesser extents. Geography, however, is of critical importance, as space is where all of these forces occur, develop, and interact. There is not just one story of Irish religion and society over the past two centuries, there are many interweaving stories of how the many aspects of religion and society have interacted together in different ways, at different times, in different places. The story of the north is different from the story of the south, and the story of the east is different from the story of the west. The major cities, Dublin and Belfast, are different from each other and from the towns and the countryside. These places themselves—north, south, east, west, city, town, and countryside—are not static but constantly evolving, both shaping and shaped by the themes of society and religion.

This book therefore tells the major narratives of religion and society and how they have changed Ireland and changed Ireland over the last two hundred years. The aim in writing it has been to identify the main stories that the major different places have to tell. Given the limitations of a text, however,

is impossible to tell all the stories of all the places. We hope that the accompanying maps and electronic resources allow readers to explore these stories in more detail for themselves.

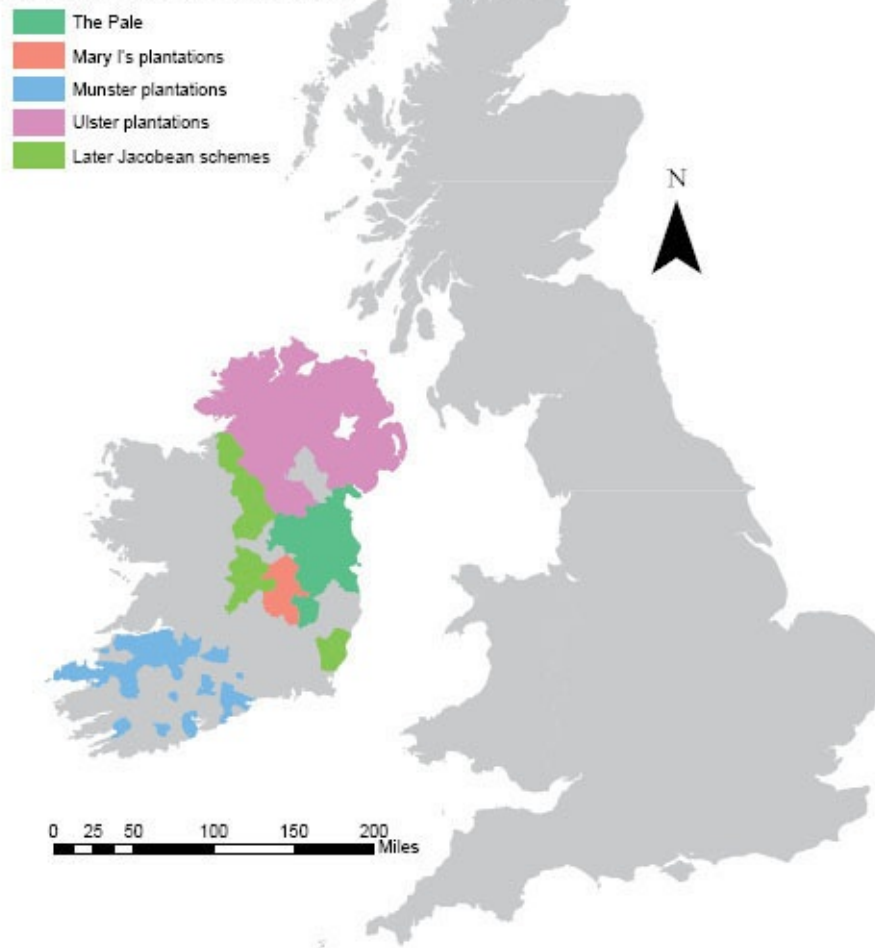
The major plantations of Ireland, which were put in place during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, were an attempt, or a series of attempts, to establish a Protestant population from England and Scotland in Ireland. This occurred for both political reasons—Protestant England was worried about the threat that Catholic France and Spain could pose through Ireland—and economic ones, particularly due to the close trading ties between southwestern Scotland and northeastern Ireland. The plantation period is outside the temporal range of this book, and the sources on which much of the remainder of the book is based do not exist for this time. We have, however, included a brief description of the events that occurred and the geographies that they established, since, as [chapter 2](#) will describe, their legacies lasted until the early nineteenth century and therefore provide the foundations of much of what was to follow. Indeed, the events of this period left spatioreligious patterns that continue to have an influence to this day.

[Figure 2.1](#) summarizes, in general terms, the geographies of the major plantations of Ireland. Major plantations were established in the Pale—the area around Dublin—and in Ulster. There were more sporadic attempts to create plantations in Munster, and no attempt was made to plant western parts of Ireland. As we will see, early nineteenth-century geographies still showed concentrations of Protestants in Ulster, the Dublin area, and west Cork, along with very low concentrations of Protestants in the west. Many of these patterns persisted to the end of the twentieth century. There are also some clear differences, as some of the areas that were planted, particularly in parts of Munster and some of the later Jacobean schemes, now have very small Protestant populations. Explaining the continuities and changes requires an understanding of the geographical and social impacts of the plantations, as they are, in many ways, the origins of the divisions and interdependencies that will be discussed in much of the rest of the book.

Phrases like “the plantation of Ireland” and depictions like [figure 2.1](#) are in many ways misleading. They imply that the process of colonization was an organized, long-term plan with clear, overarching objectives that resulted in neatly contained spatial areas. The plantation system was anything but neat—it was more often reactive than proactive, it was disorganized and incoherent in its approach, and the geographies that it left were often disjointed and contested. Changing priorities, circumstances, and values over time mean that it is impossible to view the process of colonizing Ireland as methodologically and ideologically consistent.¹ This inconsistency of approach and impact goes a long way to explaining Ireland's contemporary religious geographies and has resonated down through the centuries.

Fig. 2.1. Major plantation schemes and areas of English/British influence in Ireland in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries.

Major plantations and areas of English/British influence in Ireland



Background

The late medieval/early modern period marked a fundamental turning point in Anglo-Irish relations. Prior to the reign of Henry VIII, English control of Ireland had been a largely nominal affair. Power had been exercised through Crown representatives who were members of the aristocratic elite known as the “Old English.” The Old English were the descendants of the Norman families who had moved into Ireland in the late twelfth century, the first serious attempt at Ireland’s colonization. Over the centuries, successive English monarchs had become increasingly suspicious of the motives and loyalties of Old English families, such as Munster’s House of Desmond, as they became not only more powerful but also progressively more Gaelicized in their attitudes and behavior, intermarrying with influential native Irish families.²

Concerns about the adoption of the Irish language and modes of dress may have been superficial, but when the Earl of Desmond became directly involved in the internal vicissitudes of English politics by supporting the ill-fated House of York during the Wars of the Roses, his action indicated to the reigning Tudor monarch, Henry VII, that Ireland presented a significant threat to English security. His son, Henry VIII, regarded lordship of Ireland as part of his birthright and believed that if he did not exercise his right of inheritance, it was possible that one of the more powerful earls would try to wrest it from him.⁴ This is precisely what happened when “Silken Thomas,” the son of the ninth Earl of Kildare, rebelled in 1534, an act that led Henry VIII to declare himself king of Ireland eight years later and signaled the beginning of a much more aggressive English colonial posture in Ireland.⁵

The subsequent process of plantation, which started in the mid-sixteenth century, must be understood not only in the context of the potential threat of instability that successive monarchs

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