The Trinity College Dublin's Impact on the Historiography of the Irish Rebellion of 1641

By Aleena Estes

On October 22nd, 1641, Irish Catholics began a massacre against English Protestants who settled in Ireland. This is known as the Irish Rebellion of 1641. Scholars have widely speculated the number of deaths ranging from 40,000 to a staggering 600,000.[1] This one event and the way the English perceived it would heavily influence the history of Ireland. The English would use the slaughter of their settlers to justify their reconquest of Ireland and the harsh penal laws that they put into place.[2]

This, however, is only how the English remembered the Rebellion; it is not factual.[3] It is true that Catholic rebels captured important locations in Northern Ireland and that there was violence during that winter. The exact number of deaths from the Rebellion may never be known.[4] That is not because the Rebellion's causalities were so high, but because it is difficult to catalog the deaths that officials recorded. Many English settlers died of exposure or starvation. Some went missing and some were murdered by rebels in cold blood.[5] These specifications were of no importance. The fact that Protestants were dying, coupled with the horrible accounts gathered by commissioners, was enough to propagate the massacre myth.[6]

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[1] Aidan Clarke, "The 1641 Depositions," in *Treasures of the Library, Trinity College Dublin*, ed. Peter Fox. (Dublin: The Royal Irish Academy, 1986), 111. In 1642, a clergyman from Tyrone claimed that rebels killed 145,000 Protestants. In 1646, John Milton noticed that the number only counted the Ulster providence rather than all of Ireland, so he multiplied the number by four, the number of providences in Ireland, giving him a total of 600,000. Estimations reduced as scholars realized that contemporary accounts were out of proportion to the Protestant population. In 1754, David Hume reasoned that there were 40,000 deaths.

[2] John Gibney, "Protestant interests? The 1641 rebellion and state formation in early modern Ireland," *Historical Research*, no. 84 (2011): 69, accessed November 17, 2019, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2281.2009.00536.x.

[3] Clarke, "1641 Depositions," 120.

[4] Micheál Siorchú Ó and Jane Ohlmeyer, "Introduction" in *Ireland: 1641: Contexts and Reactions,* (Manchester, New York: Manchester University Press, 2013), 1.

[5] Aidan Clarke, "The 1641 Massacre" in Ireland:1641, 38 and 49.

[6] Ibid., 49.

A memory is something that is recalled from the past whether it is by an individual or group, which is known as collective or social memory. John Gibney stated that "if 'memory' in this context simply refers to a pattern of remembrance, it does not automatically mean that such a pattern reflects the reality of what is being remembered. Such 'memory' could also refer to a particular representation of the past; or as [T.W.] Moody put it, a myth."[7] Because social memory does not necessarily reflect the truth of the memory, it can be equated to a myth. This is the definition I will use when I refer to myths.

Almost all the primary information about the Rebellion comes from the 1641 depositions housed at Trinity College Dublin (TCD). In December of 1641, the Dublin government commissioned a group of eight clergymen led by Henry Jones to record verbal statements from Protestant refugees. These statements, totaling at over 19,000 pages, are the authoritative source on what happened during the Rebellion.[8] The depositions are the most important source for the Rebellion because they were the direct testimony of people who witnessed it. These depositions originally cataloged the losses suffered by the refugees and inquired about known murders.[9] It was this information that led to the creation of the massacre myth and its memory.

The Rebellion has been a source of controversy for three centuries. Throughout the centuries, some English have argued that the Irish were barbarous and needed to be strictly governed, citing stories of the Rebellion as evidence. Naturally, the Irish argued that the English had blown the Rebellion out of proportion and that the English people were suppressing them

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[7] John Gibney, "Walter Love's 'Bloody Massacre': An Unfinished Study in Irish Cultural History, 1641–1963," *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy. Section C: Archaeology, Celtic Studies, History, Linguistics, Literature*, 110C (2010): 219-220, accessed November 17, 2019, www.jstor.org/stable/41473667. See also T.W. Moody, 'Irish history and mythology," in Brady, *Interpreting Irish history,* 71-86.
[8] Clarke, "The 1641 Depositions," 112.
[9] Ibid., 113

unfairly.[10] While the English used the Rebellion stories heavily, the main source of information, the depositions, have not. It is true that arguing parties often cited them, but very few had directly accessed them.[11]

The public never had access to the depositions and because of that, scholarship on the Rebellion barely relied on the depositions themselves. Instead, authors had to rely on the snippets that few other authors publicized. Portions of the depositions were quoted throughout popular works such as Henry Jones' *Remonstration* in 1641, a report created at the end of his first commission, and Sir John Temple's *The Irish Rebellion…* in 1646. However, these quotes were often extreme examples that were not common among the rest of the depositions. A notorious deposition speaks of a pregnant woman being murdered by rebels who cut out her unborn children and threw their bodies into a ditch.[12] As readers only had access to these extreme stories, it led them to assume that all the depositions contained such horror stories.[13] It would not be until 2010, when TCD finished digitizing the depositions and posted them online, that the depositions would be directly sourced by all researchers.

Scholarship in the late twentieth century relating to the Rebellion focused on the truth of the Rebellion and how the English misused the depositions for propaganda. Only a few historians, such as the ones mentioned in this paper, were able to look directly at the depositions, but most sources before 2010 focused on other seventeenth-century publications. Early twenty-first century scholarship began to examine the memory of Irish history, but it was not until the release of the TCD project that the memory of the Rebellion became a focus. Irish historians

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[10] Toby Barnard, "Crises of Identity among Irish Protestants 1641-1685." *Past & Present*, no. 127 (1990): 57, accessed November 17, 2019. https://www.jstor.org/stable/650942; Gibney, "Walter Love's 'Bloody Massacre,'" 223
[11] Clarke, "The 1641 Depositions," 111.
[12] All deposition quotations were taken from the online transcripts provided by Trinity College Dublin at http://1641.tcd.ie. MS 836, fols 007r-007v.
[13] Clarke, "The 1641 Depositions," 112.

have focused on the facts of the Irish Rebellion of 1641 and how they were used selectively for propaganda by English Protestants to further the divide between Protestants and Catholics in the seventeenth century, but after Trinity College Dublin finished the 1641 Depositions Project in 2010 and granted scholars access to the depositions, scholarship has started to focus on the memory and perception of the Rebellion itself.

Overview of the Literature

The current literature on the 1641 Rebellion examines the impact of the rebellion and the effects it has caused. A major effect of the Rebellion was the strong emergence of sectarian polemics in the seventeenth century. Scholars can analyze the origins of the Rebellion's effects and help us understand just what created sectarian divides and how the citizens of both Irish nations can overcome the obstacles they have created. Indeed, one of the goals of the TCD project "was to counteract the traditional sectarian accounts of 1641."[14]

Sectarian conflicts still play a major role in Ireland today. The island was full of violence between Irish and English citizens during the late twentieth century, a time period known as The Troubles. The ceasefire only occurred in 1998. Many participants and survivors of the violence are still alive and fear that it may reoccur, especially with the current debate of the effects Brexit will have in Ireland.[15] Naomi McAreavey hopes that understanding the perspective of sectarian violence can help us learn how memory affects the current state of affairs in Ireland.[16]

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[14] John Gibney, "The Most Controversial Documents in Irish History?" *History Ireland* 19, no. 1 (2011): 18, accessed November 17, 2019. www.jstor.org/stable/41000255.
[15] Bill Neely, "Northern Ireland's violent past looms over last-ditch Brexit talks," October 13, 2009, https://www.nbcnews.com/storyline/brexit-referendum/northern-ireland-s-violent-past-looms-over-last-ditch-brexit-n1065101.
[16] Naomi McAreavey, "Portadown, 1641: Memory and the 1641 Depositions," *Irish University Review* 47, no. 1 (2017): 29, accessed November 17, 2019. https://doi.org/10.3366/iur.2017.0254.

Once the depositions became available to people all over the world, scholarship began to look beyond the propaganda effects. Scholarship now goes further to look at the effects the perception and memory of the Rebellion have had. Researchers can now look directly at the depositions and compare them to previous literature about the Rebellion. They can see how accurate or inaccurate information was, which they can further compare to memory culture influenced by the Rebellion. For example, McAreavey examines how the memory of Portadown, an infamous event of the Rebellion where Catholics stripped and drowned Protestants in a freezing river, creates a sense of solidarity among loyalists in Ulster. More than 350 years have passed since the event, and it is still commemorated with memorials and parades. The memory of Portadown is so important to loyalists that one group compared to the Holocaust.[17]

Scholarship Before the Project, 2010

The literature before 2010 focuses mostly on how the English exploited atrocity stories of the Rebellion, which mostly come from the depositions, especially for sectarian purposes. The effects of these stories may seem like the memory of the Rebellion, but they are different. Before the TCD project, scholars examined how the stories were used and the effects they created. After the project, scholars began to examine how memories of those effects influenced history. The importance of memory slowly developed during the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, but it was not the focus yet. To fully understand how memory came to the forefront, we must examine how memory gained attention.

Walter D. Love was a leading historian who shed new light on how the scholars and propagandists used the depositions to recount the history of the Irish Uprising of 1641. He

[17] Naomi McAreavey, "Building Bridges? Remembering the 1641 Rebellion in Northern Ireland," *Memory Studies* 11, no. 1 (2018): 104, accessed November 17, 2019. https://doi.org/10.1177%2F1750698017736841.

focused on how the myth of a massacre began. His focus was on the "representation rather than the reality" of the massacre.[18] He was the first historian to write about the historiography of the Irish Rebellion.[19] Sadly, he died before his work was finished. John Gibney reconstructed his research by using the notes he left behind. This allows current and future researchers to utilize Love's research.

In 1966, Love published an essay titled "Civil War in Ireland: Appearances in Three Centuries of Historical Writing." This highly influential essay has been sourced by almost every author mentioned in this paper.[20] His goal was to illuminate the "indiscriminate darkness" of Ireland in the 1640s.[21] He stated that no one else had attempted to research the development of historical writing of the event.[22] Instead of relying on primary sources to prove or disprove the rebellion stories, he looked at how the sources themselves were flawed and could not be effectively used to argue one way or the other. Previous scholarship had cited the works of John Temple or Henry Jones, popular primary sources used for the rebellion.[23] In his essay, Love stated that these sources were not meant to prove nor disprove the Rebellion because each source had its own purpose and context thus making it a poor source to base a conclusion on.[24]

Another major contribution to Rebellion scholarship is M. Perceval-Maxwell's 1978 essay "The Ulster Uprising of 1641 and the Depositions." Historians, such as John Gibney, TC

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[18] Gibney, "Walter Love's 'Bloody Massacre,'"228.
[19] Ibid., 224.
[20] Barnard, "Crises of Identity," 49; Clarke, "1641 Depositions," 120; Gibney, "Protestant Interest,"68; M. Perceval-Maxwell, "The Ulster Rising of 1641, and the Depositions," *Irish Historical Studies* 21, no. 82 (1978): 146, accessed November 17, 2019. https://www.jstor.org/stable/30005655.
[21] Walter Love, "Civil War in Ireland: Appearances in Three Centuries of Historical Writing," *Emory University Quarterly* 22, (1966): 57, accessed November 17, 2019.
[22] Gibney, "Walter Love's 'Bloody Massacre,'" 218.
[23] Clarke, "The 1641 Depositions," 112.
[24] Love, "Civil War in Ireland," 69.

Barnard, and Joseph Cope have cited this piece of scholarship in their own work.[25] Maxwell believed that the depositions had been properly used at times in the past, but not often enough. This led to his claim that the depositions were not fully utilized as a historical source. In order to uncover the truth of the Rebellion and prove that the depositions could be used as a historical source, he looked directly at them.[26] By analyzing them, Perceval could determine what was truly recorded and prove that despite the stories created by misinterpretations, they were still a valuable source for understanding the Rebellion. Other scholars would use the depositions as historic sources once the TCD project was released.

Aidan Clarke, the editor for the TCD project, furthered this research by producing the first analysis of the depositions before the project's completion in his 1986 essay, "The 1641 Depositions." Not only does he explain how the depositions came to be and their structure, but he also examined why and how they were misused. After a complete analysis of the depositions, he concludes that the depositions by themselves cannot prove that a massacre occurred in the first year commissioners recorded.[27] His work is akin to Love's approach to the depositions. While Love looked at how the Rebellion myth came to be, Clarke looked at how authors used the depositions to create the massacre myth and furthered the divide between Protestants and Catholics. Joseph Cope continued to study the depositions. He, along with TC Barnard, looked at the ways Protestants exploited the atrocity stories of the Rebellion. Each author focused on how the Rebellion myths were used by Protestants to gain sympathy and aid from England as well as how the rift between the Protestants and Catholics deepened.

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[25] Gibney, "Walter Love's 'Bloody Massacre'," 67; Barnard, "Protestant Interests," 50; Joseph Cope, "Fashioning victims: Dr. Henry Jones and the plight of Irish Protestants, 1642," *Historical Research*, no. 74 (2001): 372 and 380, accessed November 17, 2019. https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2281.00133.372

[26] Perceval-Maxwell, "The Ulster Rising of 1641," 147.

[27] Aidan Clarke, "The 1641 Depositions," in *Treasures of the Library, Trinity College Dublin*, ed. Peter Fox. (Dublin: The Royal Irish Academy, 1986), 120.

In 2001, Cope published an essay titled “Fashioning Victims: Dr. Henry Jones and the Plight of the Irish Protestants, 1642.” In it, he placed a large emphasis on Henry Jones’ report, *Remonstrance,* claiming scholars had not given proper attention to the clergyman. He acknowledged other scholar’s works, such as Love, Barnard, and Clarke. He points out that Clarke’s earlier mentioned essay, “The 1641 Depositions,” analyzed Jones’ report, but the analysis was not complete. Indeed, Jones did gather reports on the rebels’ intentions. Most scholars agree on that, including Clarke, but Cope claims that scholars often ignored Jones’ real goal. Cope feels that Clarke ignored Jones’ main goal which was to gain sympathy from the English. He explained that Jones used firsthand accounts to shape his agenda and his organization strictly divided Protestant victims from Catholic perpetrators. His report is a prime example of how the depositions were used to divide the two groups. [28]

Barnard’s work is similar in many ways. His 1990 essay, “Crises of Identity Among Irish Protestants 1641-1685,” he makes use of Jones’ work and the effects it had on sectarian ideologies, such as the creation of an “Irish Protestant martyrdom.”[29] However, he looked at other contemporary sources to understand the hostile divide, including the notorious work of Sir John Temple, possibly the first piece of literature to suggest a massacre.[30] He used these propaganda pieces to understand the effects of sectarian ideology.

Most of the scholarship listed above does not look at Rebellion myths, aside from Walter Love and Aidan Clarke. Love was a pioneer in the field of Rebellion memory while Clarke was the first person to create a detailed analysis of the depositions. Maxwell utilized the depositions to understand the reality of the event while Cope and Barnard examined how the myths impacted

[28] Cope, “Fashioning victims,” 373 and 374.
[29] Barnard, "Crises of Identity," 51.
[30] Love, “Civil War in Ireland,” 59.

Anglo-Irish relations. It is obvious that Rebellion memory had a place in the conversation at the time, but it was not in the foreground of the conversation. It should be noted that all the above-mentioned historians had access to the depositions. However, access is not what caused the development of scholarship on Rebellion memory. Once a large audience developed after the completion of the TCD project, a whole new group of researchers could join the debate. The widespread availability let scholars collaborate on their work and bring fresh eyes to the depositions.

The Trinity College Dublin 1641 Deposition Project

The TCD project began in 2007 and ended in 2010. It conserved, digitized, and published the 1641 depositions online for anyone to access. The project was a collaboration between Trinity College Dublin, the University of Aberdeen, and the University of Cambridge. Professional scholars analyzed the deposition manuscripts and transcribed the words for future digitization. Some of the historians mentioned in this paper worked directly on the project, namely Aidan Clarke and Micheál Ó Siochrú.

Scholars can now discover new information thanks to the TCD project. More scholars can access the depositions than ever before with each bringing unique skills with them. They can collaboratively discover what the text reveals. More researchers can now create a new body of scholarship now that they are analyzing the depositions. The project has permitted researchers to access previously restricted documents allowing them to make direct analyses that reveal new theories.[31] Researchers can directly read the depositions and figure out what is reality and what is a myth. This was not possible before the project's completion unless the scholar had access to

[31] Ó Siorchú et al., in Ireland: 1641.

the TCD manuscript archive. The information gathered from the depositions can be compared to previous scholarship concerning the depositions. Now that scholars can reveal facts and myths, it is possible to see how people misunderstood past research and propaganda. Scholars can also analyze the effects of those mistakes. Researchers from different fields can also utilize the depositions, such as "literary scholars, historical geographers, political scientists and political theorists, international lawyers, social psychologists and healthcare professionals who work with victims of trauma in the modern world." [32]

Scholarship After the TCD Project, 2010

After 2010, a conversation arose about the role the Rebellion plays in Irish memory. Major participants include John Gibney, Micheál Ó Siochrú, and Naomi McAreavey. Gibney continued Walter Love's historiography research which has proven useful to the discussion of memory. Long-time historians Ó Siochrú and Aidan Clarke, who published work before the TCD project was completed, have developed their own scholarship to address memory. The project has had a major impact on Rebellion scholarship.

Gibney is a major player in early modern Irish scholarship. His most interesting project was his recreation of Walter Love's work. Love was unable to publish his research so Gibney brought the revolutionary's work to life. Gibney's own work has focused mostly on the Rebellion. His 2013 book, *Shadow of a Year*, scrutinized the multiple perceptions and remembrance of the Rebellion and the effect is played in sectarian ideology. He admitted that Love was his inspiration.[33] McAreavey points out that he could further analyze the role these

[32] Gibney, "The Most Controversial Documents," 19.
[33] John Gibney, *The Shadow of a Year: The 1641 Rebellion in Irish History and Memory* (Madison, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2013), 18.

perceptions played in memory, but she does not deny that his work is important to the current debates.[34]

Ireland: 1641: Contexts and Reactions, is a collection of essays Micheál Ó Siorchú edited along with Ohlmeyer. These essays used the depositions as a comparison to other disciplines such as geography, anthropology, and religious studies. In this book, Aidan Clarke made another contribution to the historiography of the Rebellion. He does not address Rebellion memory, but he analyzed how the myth of a massacre was created. He points out that it is important to understand what exactly the meaning of a massacre is. The contemporary language used the word to describe more than just mass killings. It was also meant to describe a horrific death. Clarke claimed that there is no evidence that there were mass murders. While there were deaths attributed to the Rebellion, there was not a significant number of people who were ruthlessly killed.[35]

This essay does not seem to fit in with other works that have been published within the last 10 years, as he does not state that his goal was to understand Rebellion memory. However, not everything important to the discussion of memory must blatantly use the term "memory." Clarke sought to prove that the scholarship used to determine how many people were killed during the Rebellion has no solid evidence. He was trying to understand how the myth came to be, why it is false, and how have the sources been misused. In other words, he was trying to find out how the memory of a bloody massacre began.

Ireland: 1641: Contexts and Reactions is a prime example of how the TCD project encouraged collaboration. Ó Siorchú and Ohlmeyer wrote the introduction providing the

[34] Naomi Mcareavey, "The Shadow of a Year: The 1641 Rebellion in Irish History and Memory by John Gibney." *Renaissance Quarterly* 68, no. 1 (2015): 300. Accessed November 17, 2019. https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/681360.
[35] Clarke, "The 1641 Massacre," 38 and 49.

background and importance of analyzing the depositions. It does not directly focus on Rebellion memory, but it does explain why memory is so important. In the chapter, Ó Siorchú states that "studying these past occurrences of atrocity and massacre…will enable our understanding of the present to be more fully informed." Even the president of Ireland in 2010, Dr. Mary McAleese, hoped that interrogating the past could help build bridges between all Irish people, Protestant and Catholic.[36]

Naomi McAreavey points out that there is a growth of scholarship about the Rebellion's memory and lists *Shadow of a Year* and *Ireland: 1641: Contexts and Reactions* as contributions to the discussion.[37] While other scholars discuss the memory, she directly ties it to current affairs. Her 2018 essay, "Building Bridges? Remembering the 1641 Rebellion in Northern Ireland," linked the importance of Rebellion memory to loyalists in Northern Ireland. The foundation of some of these groups, such as the Orange Order, is based on the memory of Portadown, an event Loyalists have memorialized for over 350 years.[38] The memory of the Rebellion is a major part of present-day Irish history and the TCD project allows researchers to examine how the effects of Rebellion memory on the present and how to resolve the issues it has caused.

The Effects of the TCD Project

Now that the depositions have been digitized, almost every publication dealing with the Rebellion has sourced them. No longer do researchers need to rely on snippets to gather information from the people who were at the Rebellion. Now scholars can access witness

[36] Ó Siorchú and Ohlmeyer, "Introduction," 8-12.
[37] McAreavey, "Portadown", 16 and McAreavey, "Shadow of a Year", 301.
[38] McAreavey, "Building Bridges," 103.

statements directly and compared them to the sources that relied on the depositions. We can now see how the English misused the depositions to enflame Rebellion myths. Researchers can focus on how the myths were created and used. Understanding the creation and use of myths can lead to understanding the roots of sectarian ideology and possibly dismantle them for a more positive future. This is why the depositions are so important.

The TCD project has benefited Rebellion scholarship and its understanding. It offers access to anyone who wishes to use it. Wide access to the depositions allows people to analyze how previous scholars and propagandists misused the depositions. Researchers can compare the works of propagandists and the depositions to see how propagandists exploited the depositions to create sectarian divides. Understanding the foundation of this divide may help end such hostilities. Former president of Ireland, Dr. Mary McAleese, along with loyalist politician Ian Paisley spoke of bettering the future by understanding the past more clearly.[39] It has been stated throughout this paper that Rebellion memory has played, and continues to play, a major role in loyalist identity. If a major loyalist politician can shake hands with a nationalist politician and look towards a promising future thanks to the TCD project, its importance cannot be underplayed.

Before the TCD project, researchers mainly wanted to know the truth of the Rebellion. Knowing the reality of what happened was key to recognizing the effects of misunderstanding the Rebellion. Propagandists utilized Rebellion myths to justify harsh policies towards the Irish Catholics.[40] One can argue that without these myths, major sectarian divides might not exist.

[39] Ó Siorchú and Ohlmeyer, "Introduction," 11 and 12.
[40] Gibney, "Walter Love's 'Bloody Massacre,'" 223.

Once the TCD project was completed, scholars began looking at the memory of the Rebellion and how it has affected history

Research on the Rebellion proved to be difficult before the TCD project. While there were plenty of primary sources to access from the seventeenth century to analyze the Rebellion, the firsthand accounts of the events were in the TCD archives. This limited the depth and accuracy of older scholarship.[41] The only way to use the direct words of the witnesses was to use excerpts that contemporaries, like Henry Jones and Sir John Temple, had published. All other primary sources were interpretations of the excerpts or propaganda based on the excerpts. The literature published by contemporaries was perfect for analyzing how authors used the as well as subsequent responses and how those responses impacted Anglo-Irish relations. However, there was no way to look at the depositions and compare them to the claims made in the literature, unless one had access to the TCD archives.

Conclusion

Scholarship on the 1641 Rebellion has evolved drastically since the completion of the TCD project. For centuries, the English used myths of the Rebellion to justify their conflict with the Irish. Historians tried to settle the debate by uncovering the reality of the Rebellion. They also tried to understand the effects of these myths. Beginning with Walter Love, a small

[41] Clarke, "The 1641 Depositions," 111; Gibney, "Bloody Massacre,'" 224.

conversation began about the origins of these myths. A slow interest in the myths emerged in the late twentieth century. The completion of the TCD project caught the attention of researchers from all fields. Early modern Irish historians began to understand the truth held within the depositions. They realized just how wrong, or right, the memories were.

More people than ever can access these important documents and analyze them for research or curiosity. The TCD project offers hope for the future. Now that the foundation of sectarian hostilities is being examined, it is possible to disestablish the damaging structure. The scholarship has already begun moving forward to end sectarian divides, but it has not been fully utilized. Hopefully, once scholars have completely analyzed the depositions, they can use their findings to break down the wall dividing Irish and English.