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Round table: Decolonising Irish history? Possibilities, challenges, practices

Caoimhe Nic Dháibhéid, Shahmima Akhtar, Dónal Hassett, Kevin Kenny, Laura McAtackney, Ian McBride, Timothy G. McMahon and Jane Ohlmeyer*

ABSTRACT. *The nature of Ireland's place within the British Empire continues to attract significant public and scholarly attention. While historians of Ireland have long accepted the complexity of Ireland's imperial past as both colonised and coloniser, the broader public debate has grown more heated in recent months, buffeted by Brexit, the Decade of Centenaries and global events. At the same time, the imperatives of social movements such as Black Lives Matter and Decolonising the Curriculum have asked us to reflect on the assumptions, hierarchies and norms underpinning the structures of society, including the production of knowledge and the higher education system. This round table brings together scholars from diverse disciplinary and methodological backgrounds to examine the prospects, possibilities and challenges of what decolonising Irish history might mean for our field. It sets these discussions within broader frameworks, considering both the relationship of Irish historical writing to postcolonial theory and the developments in the latter field in the last twenty years. It also reflects on the sociology of our discipline and makes suggestions for future research agendas.*

In the wake of the Black Lives Matter protests, global social movements demanding racial justice have captured our attention. 'Decolonising' the curriculum, the museum and the very fabric of public space have become central elements of a vibrant and challenging global debate.[1] Readers of *Irish Historical Studies* will undoubtedly be aware that Irish history sits in a complicated position in relation to questions around decolonising the curriculum, with the nature and extent of

* *Caoimhe Nic Dháibhéid, School of History, University of Sheffield, c.nicd@sheffield.ac.uk; Shahmima Akhtar, Department of History, Royal Holloway University, shahmima.akhtar@rhul.ac.uk; Dónal Hassett, Department of French, University College Cork, donal.hassett@ucc.ie; Kevin Kenny, Department of History, New York University, kevin.kenny@nyu.edu; Laura McAtackney, Department of Archaeology and Heritage Studies, Aarhus University, laura.mcatackney@cas.au.dk; Ian McBride, Hertford College, University of Oxford, ian.mcbride@history.ox.ac.uk; Timothy G. McMahon, Department of History, Marquette University, timothy.g.mcmahon@marquette.edu; Jane Ohlmeyer, School of Histories and Humanities, Trinity College, Dublin, ohlmeyej@tcd.ie.*

[1] Athinangamso Nkopo, Brian Kwoba and Roseanne Chantiluke (eds), *Rhodes Must Fall: the struggle to decolonise the racist heart of empire* (London, 2018); Dalia Gebrial, Kerem Nişancıoğlu and Gurminder K. Bhambra, *Decolonising the university* (London, 2018); Kerry Pimblott, 'Decolonising the university: the origins and meaning of a movement' in *Political Science Quarterly*, xci, no. 1 (2019), pp 210–16; Priyamvada Gopal, 'On decolonisation and the university' in *Textual Practice*, xxxv, no. 5 (2021), pp 1–27.

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British colonisation, shifting conceptions of 'whiteness', Irish emigrant experiences and participation in the British imperial project all posing difficult questions to be untangled. On the one hand, Ireland experienced a long period of colonisation by England and later Britain — this process began, with varying degrees of brutality, in 1169 but accelerated rapidly during the conquest and colonisation of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. From this perspective, Ireland has frequently been called 'England's first colony', and Irish people and Irish society were highly racialised by the English, and later British, state. This has had lingering and serious consequences to this day — not least in attitudes towards the Irish language and Gaelic culture, and for the position of Northern Ireland within the United Kingdom. On the other hand, many parts of Irish society were heavily implicated in the expansion of the English, later British, Empire in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, with all its attendant brutalities, including the trade in enslaved people. After the Act of Union in 1801, Ireland was formally part of the United Kingdom (although many colonial trappings were retained), Irish men served in the British Army, British Navy and colonial administrations, and Irish people continued to migrate in large numbers to the Anglophone world. Whether Irish history can achieve a 'decolonised curriculum' is not a straightforward matter. Commonly-held assumptions and definitions around 'whiteness' do not neatly fit; as we know, in Irish history 'white' is a concept with a long and problematic history which reflects a wide spectrum of identities.

The above pen-picture of the apparent contradictions inherent in unpacking Ireland's complicated position within the British Empire draws on decades of scholarship interrogating Ireland's imperial and colonial experience. Major works by Nicholas Canny, Kevin Kenny and Stephen Howe, among others, provided the foundation on which rich seams have developed, including by the contributors to this round table, much of which is referenced below.[2] At the same time, the relatively limited impact of postcolonial theory in Irish historical writing for much of the last thirty years should be acknowledged.[3] Irish literary scholars, including Seamus Deane and Joe Cleary, were more open to such perspectives (perhaps reflecting a greater openness to theory *tout court*), and have developed a distinctively Irish version of postcolonialism.[4] The gap between literary and historical approaches may have appeared wider than it really was, in particular as the 'revisionist' debates raged in the 1980s and 1990s. Recent efforts to bring the two disciplines into a more constructive dialogue can only enhance public understanding of our complicated imperial and colonial past. In a marked change from earlier debates, the present intellectual moment is characterised by fruitful and open interdisciplinary dialogue, as well as dialogue across and within historical sub-fields.

[2] Nicholas Canny (ed.), *The Oxford history of the British empire*, vol. 1: *The origins of empire: British overseas enterprise to the close of the seventeenth century* (Oxford, 1998); Kevin Kenny (ed.), *Ireland and the British Empire* (Oxford, 2004); Stephen Howe, *Ireland and empire: colonial legacies in Irish history and culture* (Oxford, 2000). See also Keith Jeffery (ed.), *An Irish empire? Aspects of Ireland and the British Empire* (Manchester, 1996); Terence McDonough (ed.), *Was Ireland a colony? Economics, politics and culture in nineteenth-century Ireland* (Dublin, 2005); Daniel Sanjiv Roberts and Jonathan Jeffrey Wright (eds), *Ireland's imperial connections, 1775–1947* (Basingstoke, 2019).

[3] James Livesey and Stuart Murray, 'Post-colonial theory and modern Irish culture' in *I.H.S.*, xxx, no. 119 (1997), pp 452–61.

[4] Clare Carroll and Patricia King (eds), *Ireland and postcolonial theory* (Cork, 2003).

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But how can that be done? And why now? In part, this round table responds to a global moment, as long-standing campaigns for racial justice and a more meaningful reckoning with empire, in all its forms, have been amplified by social media and by the sharp inequalities laid bare by the Covid-19 pandemic. But this conversation also takes place at a particular juncture in Irish society. In the twenty years since the last sustained airing of the 'was Ireland a colony' debate, Ireland has changed. Since the turn of the twenty-first century, Irish society has grown enormously more diverse, as economic prosperity, globalisation and European enlargement brought inward migration from Africa, Asia and Eastern Europe. Simultaneously, the collapse of the Celtic Tiger, followed by a decade of austerity, has produced a reckoning of its own in Ireland, with major political consequences. The political landscape, along with the fortunes of previously dominant political blocs, is being redrawn. Alongside these economic and political transformations, there have been parallel changes in socio-cultural norms in Ireland. Successful campaigns for social justice — particularly around women's reproductive rights and LGBT rights — have played a large part in Irish society's self-fashioning. Ongoing campaigns for ethical treatment of refugees, for migrants' rights, for redress for survivors of Ireland's carceral past and for housing rights continue. Returning anew to the examination of difficult questions underpinning the experiences of Irish people both as subjects of and participants in British imperial expansion has a different tenor in 2021, as the outworkings of empires old and new continue to buffet and shape Ireland. All of this has, of course, been sharpened by Brexit. For some, the uncertainty visited upon what appeared to be settled constitutional arrangements in Northern Ireland by the decision of the U.K. government to leave the European Union in a 'harder' manner than might have been expected merely underscored the lingering (post)colonial nature of Ireland's political structures, north and south. For others, the neo-imperial character of the European Union itself has been rendered more visible by the migrant crisis in the Mediterranean. As a 'new', self-consciously liberal, possibly more radical and increasingly multicultural Irish society has emerged from the upheavals of the first twenty years of this century, returning to examine the history of Ireland and empire produces a different set of questions, and perhaps different sorts of answers. This conversation approaches that history from the vantage point of 'decolonising', a diverse and fluid concept which, as will be seen below, means different things to different people. While the heterodox nature of Ireland's entanglement with empire is familiar scholarly territory, 'decolonising Irish history' is necessarily both reflexive and outward-facing, encompassing the sociology and structures of our own discipline and its wider public history. It also will require thinking critically and openly about our history curricula at second and at third level. What sort of history is taught in Irish universities? How does it relate to the history taught at second level? And who is doing the teaching? What image is presented to the public, to our students and to ourselves of who an Irish historian is and what it is that they research?

This round table does not present all of the answers to these questions but represents the beginning of a dialogue around these subjects. We bring together in conversation scholars working on these questions from diverse methodological, disciplinary and period perspectives, including archaeology and heritage, postcolonial studies, imperial history and intellectual history. We have come together as scholars of Ireland and the Irish diaspora, across the seventeenth, eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries, to explore the contours and complexities of Ireland's imperial and colonial pasts. Our conceptualisation of empire is expansive: many contributors are expert in the British Empire and the role of Irish people

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therein, but others draw on French, Danish and Habsburg Empires, ranging from the seventeenth to the twentieth centuries. We, thus, emphasise that empire is malleable, contingent and shifting, that colonised peoples make different sorts of pragmatic accommodations within imperial structures and that these structures, even if formally dismantled, have lingering after-effects. Our collaboration here originated in a successful event hosted by T.O.R.C.H. (The Oxford Research Centre for the Humanities) Oxford in November 2020, and builds on many challenging, exciting and enriching exchanges on social media.[5] The conversation, thus, extends what is becoming a vibrant scholarly and popular debate with major implications for the shape, content and agendas of Irish history, the composition of the Irish historical profession, the way we teach our students and the relationship of Irish historians with the Irish history public.

Caoimhe Nic Dhabhéid and Ian McBride (convenors)

1. *What does 'decolonising Irish history' mean to you?*

Jane Ohlmeyer: The first thing that we need to do is recognise that for 700 years Ireland formed part of an English, then British, imperial system. Then, we need to reflect — through the eyes and perspectives of contemporaries — on what this meant for Irish people, their lived experiences and the choices they faced. How did entanglement with imperialism shape Irishness at home and abroad, and how did this change over time? What does it mean to be Irish at the turn of the twenty-first century? It is not about judging: it is about understanding and having an informed and respectful debate and discussion.

As well as being acutely aware of the challenges of the present, I am also very conscious of the limitations of the past and of the dangers of over-relying both on English-language archives and on the experiences of the English empire. We need to make every effort to interrogate available evidence in whatever form and language. Written records — state papers, legal and taxation records, surveys, correspondence, diaries, pamphlets and treaties — all offer insights, as does material culture and visual sources, such as portraits, engravings, maps and architecture. Works of poetry, prose and performance, help to recapture emotions and more nuanced senses of identity in early modern Ireland. I may be an empirical historian but I have a deep appreciation of the insights offered by the related disciplines of literature but also of anthropology, archaeology, geography, gender and legal studies, and digital humanities.[6]

Ian McBride: For me, 'decolonising history' expresses the goal of freeing ourselves from the Eurocentric narratives and concepts that have confined our understanding of the past. It means confronting the structural blindness that has enabled Western historians to ignore the injustices, exploitation and destruction caused by empire. Its intellectual genealogy would include Eric Williams's *Capitalism and slavery* (1944), Eric Wolf's *Europe and the people without history* (1982) and

[5] The T.O.R.C.H. event is available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4iB1GOtppRs. All cited websites accessed 12 July 2021.

[6] Explored at length in my 2021 Ford Lectures, available at https://www.rte.ie/history/2021/0304/1201023-ireland-empire-and-the-early-modern-world-watch-the-lectures.

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Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978). What's different about current debates is not intellectual novelty or creativity but the sense of political urgency created by contemporary racial prejudice and violence.[7] The stubborn persistence of racial inequality has long prompted claims that the Western liberal tradition has been structurally encoded, from its pre-Enlightenment origins, to restrict full personhood to white Europeans.[8] Irish historians must contribute to the reassessment of that tradition.[9] The project of decolonising Irish history immediately splits into two halves. Empire has usually been portrayed as something that was done to Ireland, whereas historians of the last twenty years or so have shown that empire was something the Irish did to other peoples. The long eighteenth century, the period that most fascinates me, is central to both storylines.[10] It was the century of dispossession, the penal laws and anglicisation; it also witnessed the extraordinary impact of the sugar plantations of the Caribbean on Europe. It was during the Ascendancy era that the economic growth of Belfast, Limerick, Galway and especially Cork was stimulated by trade with the West Indies and that some of their richest inhabitants — such as Richard Hare of Cork or Waddell Cunningham of Belfast — were directly involved in the slave trade.

Kevin Kenny: In a generic sense, 'decolonisation' might be taken to signify the process through which a body of knowledge — in this case, a form of historical understanding — is liberated from received wisdom and reconstituted on new terms. The idea of decolonising *Irish* history derives from Ireland's entanglement with the British Empire. But the challenge for me, as an Americanist, is to connect this idea to the history of the Irish in the United States. In my specialty field of U.S. immigration, how historians explain the status of the Irish has implications for how they approach the history of other groups, some of whom are also seeking to 'decolonise' the past, but in distinctively American ways. Much of this effort takes place at the curricular level in individual institutions.[11] But in January 2018 the editor of the *American Historical Review*, Alex Lichtenstein, unveiled an ambitious program of 'Decolonizing the *AHR*' — the flagship journal of the historical profession in the United States. How, he asked, could the journal 'rectify decades of exclusionary

[7] Much of the recent literature is concerned with teaching practice rather than research: Meleisa Ono-George, 'Beyond diversity: anti-racist pedagogy in British history departments' in *Women's History Review*, xxviii, no. 3 (2019), pp 500–07.

[8] Charles W. Mills, 'Racial liberalism' in *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America*, cxxiii, no. 5 (Oct. 2008), pp 1380–97.

[9] There is a separate question about the appropriate moral tone to adopt: contrast Christopher A. Bayly, 'Moral judgment: empire, nation and history' in *European Review*, xiv (2006), pp 385–91, with Richard Drayton, 'Where does the world historian write from? Objectivity, moral conscience and the past and present of imperialism' in *Journal of Contemporary History*, xlvi, no. 3 (2011), pp 671–85.

[10] Ian McBride, *Eighteenth-century Ireland: the isle of slaves* (Dublin, 2009).

[11] See, for example, John Rosinbum, 'Decolonizing the US History survey: integrating Native voices through digital history' in *Perspectives on history: the newsmagazine of the American Historical Association* (summer 2018) (https://www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/summer-2018/decolonizing-the-us-history-survey-integrating-native-voices-and-experiences-through-digital-history); University of Massachusetts, 'Teaching Native American histories' (http://teachnativehistories.umass.edu/); National History Center: An initiative of the American Historical Association, 'Decolonization resource collection: Americas' (https://nationalhistorycenter.org/decolonization-resource-collection-americas/).

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practice, during which women, people of color, immigrants, and colonized and indigenous people were effectively silenced as producers of scholarship and subjects of historical study?' Decolonising the journal, Lichtenstein wrote, would require 'more than a well-intentioned commitment to "diversity", which consists primarily of adding extra flavors to the stew'. It would require 'changing the recipe altogether'. If these were lofty goals, Lichtenstein had practical tactics in mind to achieve them. Among other measures, he expanded the size of the editorial board and moved toward defining board positions thematically and topically rather than by traditional geographical or chronological criteria. And he asked board members to serve as '*AHR* ambassadors' attending forums such as the Berkshire Conference of Women Historians, the Native American and Indigenous Studies Association, the Association for the Study of African American Life and History, and the National Association of Chicana and Chicano Studies, where they would address attendees, explain *A.H.R.* submission procedures and encourage submissions.[12]

Shahmima Akhtar: 'Decolonising' is a term increasingly heard in the twenty-first century. Its meaning and usage vary depending on context and form but it is principally applied to uncovering, interrogating and dismantling Britain's imperial legacy as evidenced in our curriculums, our institutions and our built environment.[13] Decolonising in these spaces refers to the act of visibilising the remnants of the British Empire that continue to influence our current existence. 'Decolonising Irish History' specifically refers to accepting that Irish history has been subject to the legacies of empire, in terms of the questions that have been asked by historians, the research projects that have been funded and the historical work that has been produced. The process of decolonising seeks to increase the ethnic and religious diversity of the discipline of Irish history, thereby inviting new questions to be asked by those from multiple backgrounds.[14] Further, decolonising in all its forms requires accepting uncomfortable truths; an important one being recognition of Ireland's role in the British Empire. Historians such as Barry Crosbie and Jane Ohlmeyer have made inroads on the topic of Ireland's role in India during the height of the British Empire.[15] Overall, decolonising needs to straddle intellectual and

[12] Alex Lichtenstein, 'Decolonizing the *AHR*' in *American Historical Review*, cxxiii, no. 1 (2018), pp xiv, xvi.

[13] See, for example Jason Arday, 'Why we need Black History in UK schools' in *History Workshop Journal*, (2020) (https://www.historyworkshop.org.uk/why-we-need-black-history-in-uk-schools/); Eleanor Newbigin, 'What does it mean to decolonise History teaching and research at SOAS?' in *History Workshop Journal* (2019) (https://blogs.soas.ac.uk/decolonisingsoas/2019/02/28/history-workshop-what-does-it-mean-to-decolonise-history-teaching-and-research-at-soas/); Jonathan Saha, 'The RHS Race, Ethnicity & Equality Report: a response to critics' in *History Workshop Journal* (2018) (https://www.historyworkshop.org.uk/the-rhs-race-ethnicity-equality-report-a-response-to-critics/); Olivette Otele, 'Bristol, slavery and the politics of representation: the Slave Trade Gallery in the Bristol Museum' in *Social Semiotics*, xxii, no. 2 (2012), pp 155–72; Caroline Bressey, 'Seeing colour in black and white: The role of the visual in diversifying historical narratives at sites of English heritage' in *Critical Social Policy*, xxxii, no. 1 (2012), pp 87–105.

[14] See Royal Historical Society, 'Race, ethnicity & equality in UK History: a report and resource for change' (Oct. 2018) (https://royalhistsoc.org/racereport/), p. 8.

[15] Barry Crosbie, *Irish imperial networks: migration, social communication and exchange in nineteenth-century India* (Cambridge, 2012); Jane Ohlmeyer, 'Eastward enterprises: Colonial Ireland, Colonial India' in *Past & Present*, ccxl (2018), pp 83–118. See also

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structural agendas to create a transformed discipline that allows for multiple voices from varied backgrounds, evidencing a plurality of Irish histories.

Tim McMahon: Decolonising Irish history will take place unevenly and by no means unidirectionally. The process already has involved reconciling the tensions between the apparent binary of being either colonised or coloniser and the reality that people on the island were both/and — that is, colonised and colonisers. That insight has been a part of the literature on Ireland and Empire since at least the early 2000s but its implications remain incompletely understood.[16] Too often — whether in studies of individual imperial actors or in accounts about Irish engagement overseas — we focus on how these actors worked to support or undermine empires because, again, such a binary suits the 'or' position rather than the 'and'.[17] Inherent in both positions is the recognition that Irish people utilised their place within empires to build careers beyond Ireland. If one thinks only in terms of the Anglo-Irish relationship or of the British Empire, then one is locked in a colonised perspective that ignores other engagements. In reality, as we know, Irish people participated in multiple European empires aside from the British one, and the actions and interactions of these people must be included in discussions of Ireland's imperial worlds.[18] Finally, although anti-colonial activists in Ireland and elsewhere engaged in mutually beneficial observation and exchange in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, other Irish men and women actively colonised, settled and managed territories. These actions included ongoing involvement in troubled imperial possessions into the mid twentieth century. Decolonising Irish history, therefore, must involve untangling the racial and religious hierarchies through which the Irish manoeuvred as Europeans among other colonised peoples.[19]

Alix Chartrand, 'The evolution of British Imperial perceptions in Ireland and India *c.*1650–1800' (Ph.D. thesis, University of Cambridge, 2019), and Andrew McKillop, *Human capital and empire: Scotland, Ireland, Wales and British imperialism in Asia, c.1690–c.1820* (Manchester, 2021).

[16] For example, see McDonough, *Was Ireland a colony?*; Jane Ohlmeyer, 'A laboratory for empire? Early modern Ireland and English Imperialism' in Kenny (ed.) *Ireland and the British Empire*, pp 27–60; J. C. Bender, 'Ireland and Empire' in Richard Bourke and Ian McBride (eds), *The Princeton history of modern Ireland* (Princeton, NJ, 2016), pp 342–60.

[17] On imperial lives, see Oonagh Walsh (ed.), *Ireland abroad: politics and professions in the nineteenth century* (Dublin, 2003); David Lambert and Alan Lester (eds), *Colonial lives across the British Empire: imperial careering in the long nineteenth century* (Cambridge, 2006). For a critical intervention that does seek to make deeper claims, see Howe, *Ireland and empire*.

[18] See Joe Cleary, 'Amongst empires: a short history of Ireland and empire studies in international context' in *Éire-Ireland*, xlii, nos 1–2 (spring/summer 2007), pp 11–57; Christopher Shepard, 'Irish journalists in the intellectual diaspora: Edward Alexander Morphy and Henry David O'Shea in the Far East' in *New Hibernia Review*, xiv, no. 3 (autumn 2010), pp 75–90; T. G. McMahon, Michael de Nie and Paul Townend (eds), *Ireland in an imperial world: citizenship, opportunism, and subversion* (London, 2017), pp 4–5.

[19] For example, see Michael Holmes and Denis Holmes (eds), *Ireland and India: connections, comparisons, contrasts* (Dublin, 1997); Tadhg Foley and Maureen O'Connor (eds), *Ireland and India: colonies, culture and empire* (Dublin, 2006); Kate O'Malley, *Ireland, India and Empire: Indo-Irish radical connections, 1919–1964* (Manchester, 2008); K. L. Shonk, Jr., 'The shadow metropole: the varieties of anticolonialism in Ireland, 1937– 68' in McMahon, de Nie and Townend (eds), *Ireland in an imperial world*, pp

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Dónal Hassett: The great anti-colonial theorist Frantz Fanon famously described decolonisation as a 'programme of complete disorder'.[20] If we are serious about decolonising Irish history, we need to move beyond the metaphorical to embrace fundamental and difficult change. It seems to me that there are two distinct but interrelated fronts in any campaign for radical reform. Firstly, we need to reimagine how history is conceived of and structured within the Irish academy. The very limited number of scholars working within history departments in Ireland who specialise in (or even teach, outside of their specialism, on) the history of countries shaped by the experience of, resistance to and enduring legacies of colonialism, is a significant obstacle to efforts to challenge Eurocentric modes of studying the past. Of course, the shortage of resources endemic to the sector means change will come (and is coming) very slowly here. Greater efforts on the part of institutions to facilitate and expand interdisciplinary collaboration in research and teaching would allow scholars and students of history in Ireland to further benefit from the existing (often historically-minded) expertise on multiple facets of colonialism and its legacies in other parts of the academy. Where possible, priority should be given to inviting (and appropriately remunerating) speakers working on the history of, and particularly in the academies of, post-colonial countries in the Global South whose voices are so absent from historical discourse here. A decolonised Irish history should pay as much attention to scholarship produced in Cape Town, Cairo, Delhi and Dakar as it does to research from the former colonial metropole, especially the august institutions of Oxford and Cambridge.

Secondly, within the broader field of Irish history, there is a need for a reassessment of and reengagement with postcolonial and related theories. The entanglement of postcolonial theory with the partisan historiographical divides that long defined Irish history did produce interesting and valuable scholarship but, at least in my view, the attendant political controversies sold short its potential as a new mode of thinking about colonial pasts and presents, on this island and overseas.[21] Although we have seen an increasing willingness from scholars in the field to teach and engage with postcolonial theory and related critical theories, we have some way to go before we can say that the field more broadly has managed to detach these theories from their mobilisation in past historiographical arguments specific to the field of Irish history.[22] The specific chronologies of engagement with postcolonial theories within Irish history (but not Irish studies more broadly) have also seen an over-concentration on the totemic figures of postcolonial theory (Said, Fanon, Spivak, Bhabha) and an under-engagement with more recent literature and

265–82. On post-independence engagement in imperial management and policing, see Helen O'Shea, *Ireland and the end of the British Empire: the republic and its role in the Cyprus emergency* (London, 2015); and S. W. Gannon, *The Irish Imperial Service: policing Palestine and administering empire, 1922–1966* (London, 2019).

[20] Frantz Fanon, *The wretched of the earth* (New York, 1963), p. 36.

[21] To my mind, the best interrogation of this historiographical debate can be found in Gearóid Ó Tuathaigh's chapter 'Exemplar, outlier, impostor? A reflection on Ireland and the discourses of colonialism' in Róisín Healy and Enrico Del Lago (eds), *The shadow of colonialism on Europe's modern past* (Basingstoke, 2014), pp 36–53.

[22] Seán Donnelly's recent excellent thesis shows the potential of interrogating what if any insights postcolonial theory can bring to Irish history without rehashing the tired debates of the 1980s: Séan Donnelly, '"Conservative-minded revolutionaries"? Treatyite political thought and the intellectual formation of the Irish Free State, 1891–1932' (Ph.D. thesis, Teesside University, 2019).

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praxis.[23] Any effort to 'decolonise' Irish history as a field must, for example, engage with 'decolonial' theory and practice, a vibrant and rapidly expanding field developed, in large part, by scholars working in the Global South.[24] It seeks to expose the ways in which European epistemologies, that have always been both reflective and constitutive of colonial logics, have suppressed and delegitimised other modes of understanding, analysing and representing the world, past and present. Where Ireland sits in this framework is a challenging line of enquiry but one that has the potential to offer new and exciting insights into Irish history and its relationship to contemporary society.

Laura McAtackney: The discussion on decolonising Irish history is not only more compelling now than it has ever been — it is also more necessary. As Dónal notes, shifts in the academy have encouraged increasing openness to decolonial theory and practices, but there is also greater awareness of how the past remains alive in the contemporary world. In the Irish context, we are simultaneously moving to the endpoint of a Decade of Commemorations that has shown that our understandings of the past are shaped by the types of questions we ask and who has the power to ask them in the present (especially notable has been the focus turning to the previously underrepresented women).[25] Black Lives Matter is not just a slogan associated with the U.S. or U.K. but its underlying sentiments have real meaning in our increasingly diverse and multicultural society. In May 2020, Black Irish people initially shared on social media their many stories and experiences of exclusion and racism in Ireland in response to George Floyd's death in Minneapolis, U.S.A., but this became even more poignant after the death of George Nkencko in

[23] Evi Gkotzaridis's extensive account of historiographical disputes in Ireland mentions only Said and Fanon, with no other leading postcolonial or related theorist from the Global South referenced: Evi Gkotzaridis, *Trials of Irish history: genesis and evolution of a reappraisal, 1938–2000* (London, 2006). The same is true of Brendan O'Leary's recent *A treatise on Northern Ireland, Vol 1: Colonialism* (Oxford, 2019). In both texts, discussions on historiography interpreted postcolonial theory through the prism of other influential Irish writers such as Conor Cruise O'Brien and Declan Kiberd, a feature that seems strikingly present in the broader historiography. Even mainstream figures like Achille Mbembe, Mahmood Mamdani and Chandra Talpade Mohanty have had limited resonance in historical writing about Ireland, though this is less the case in other fields. Recent projects and initiatives exploring the coloniality of our public education and heritage have tended to look primarily towards examples in Global North contexts, especially the U.K., with much less engagement with the theory and praxis emerging from spaces like Senegal, South Africa, Kenya and India.

[24] Gurminder K Bhambra's article 'Postcolonial and decolonial dialogues' in *Postcolonial Studies*, xvii, no. 2, (2014), pp 115–21, provides a good overview of contemporary debates in post-colonial and decolonial thought, with references to the major works of decolonial thinkers such as Walter Mingolo, Aníbal Quijano and María Lugones. Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni's recent article offers a good summary of where the debate around these issues currently lies in one of the main centres of decolonial thought, South Africa: Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 'The dynamics of epistemological decolonisation in the 21st century: towards epistemic freedom' in *Strategic Review for Southern Africa*, xl, no. 1 (2020), pp 16–45.

[25] Una Mullally. 'Why women have risen to the top in 1916 lore', *Irish Times*, 28 Mar. 2016 (https://www.irishtimes.com/opinion/una-mullally-why-women-have-risen-to-the-top-in-1916-lore-1.2588986).

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Clonee, Ireland, in December 2020.[26] Any attempts to decolonise Irish history must explicitly engage with our contemporary as well as historic context; it must recognise that the contemporary Irish nation is multicultural and how we think about Irish history needs to broaden. This recognition should include radical discussions about the overhauling of history curricula so that Irish history has at its heart entanglements with wider European colonialism (and its continued repercussions now), recognising the structural racism inherent in our institutions in Ireland, including our higher education system, and divorcing the study and practice of Irish history from presumed historic Irish affinity.

2. *How is your approach shaped by your own positionality?*

Shahmima Akhtar: I have worked on equality, diversity and inclusivity initiatives in the discipline of history with the Royal Historical Society and Institute of Historical Research. Being a British Bangladeshi historian, I am keenly aware of the lack of diversity in the historical academy, and have been engaged in projects on an institutional and discipline level to rectify the fact that history academic staff in the U.K. are less diverse than history and philosophy student cohorts, with 93.7 per cent of history staff drawn from white backgrounds, and only 0.5 per cent black, 2.2 per cent Asian and 1.6 per cent mixed.[27] My own interest in Irish history comes from a desire to explore how marginalised communities authenticate and curate their own selfhood in public spaces. I look specifically at how Ireland represented itself at world's fairs in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, since exhibitions were a formative platform for the Irish to create their own identities to mass audiences.[28] At varying moments in history and in response to political and national change, Ireland was presented as a unified Protestant unionist country or else a technologically advanced nationalist Catholic vista — to varying audience responses in Ireland, Britain and the United States. Further, I explore how certain Irish entrepreneurs sustained visions of an Irish whiteness by developing an Irish brand that relied on marketing the white Irish women as personifying the Irish nation.[29] This research uncovers the multitudinal ways that Irish contemporaries formed their individual and communal heritage across two centuries. A reflexive awareness of one's own positionality and the ways in which it sustains our historical approach is central for historians — no one is objective and the questions we ask of our historical subjects, indeed, our own interest in the past, is shaped by our subjectivities.

Dónal Hassett: I come to this debate as a historian based in a language department and whose studies and research have always taken place in a multilingual context. Encouraging multilingualism within the field is essential to decentring Anglophone experiences, whether that is within Ireland itself, within the diaspora or within the

[26] https://www.facebook.com/BlackandIrish.

[27] Royal Historical Society, 'Race, Ethnicity & Equality in UK History', p. 8.

[28] Shahmima Akhtar, 'Radical Object: Ballymaclinton' in *History Workshop Online* (2020) (https://www.historyworkshop.org.uk/ballymaclinton/). Shahmima Akhtar, 'A Cultural History of Irish Identity on Display' in *Historical Transactions Blog* (2019) (https://blog.royalhistsoc.org/2019/07/31/irish-identity-on-display/).

[29] Shahmima Akhtar, *Exhibiting Irishness: empire and identity, 1851–1970* (forthcoming, Manchester, 2023).

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broader colonial world. It is also essential to facilitating cross-colonial comparisons with other European empires and with other former colonial territories. Here we should continue to encourage students to combine history with the study of language, including the Irish language, and make a concerted effort to promote the use of heritage languages in research by Irish students of migrant origin. Alongside this academic positionality is my personal status as a white Irish man. This has allowed me, an expert in a different field, to intervene with relative ease in debates within Irish history. I am not so sure that the same access has been afforded to non-Irish colleagues working in historical studies but outside the field of Irish history. This is an area in which we must do better.

Jane Ohlmeyer: I have been working on aspects of Ireland and Empire for nearly thirty years — from my early work on the MacDonnells of Antrim and my contribution in 1998 to *The Oxford History of the British Empire*, to my collaborative work with Richard Ross and Phil Stern on anglicisation in and through the law, and another project on women and sexual violence with Rosemary Byrne and Stephanie McCurry.[30] My 2021 Ford lectures attempt to bring together all of these threads as they look at Ireland and Empire through the lens of early modernity.

On a more personal note, my lived experiences of empire have sharpened my historical curiosity and informed my writing. I was born in Kitwe in Zambia (then a British protectorate named Northern Rhodesia). My father — an Ohlmeyer, originally from Lithuania — was a South African working in the copper mines in Kitwe where he met my mother, a McGucken from County Tyrone, who was a teacher. We moved to Belfast in 1969, the year after the Troubles broke out. They dominated my childhood and teenage years and like so many of my generation I left (in 1980) at the first opportunity to travel, to study and to pursue a career that in 2003 brought me back to Ireland, to Trinity College Dublin.[31] Over the course my life I have travelled extensively and taken with me my fascination with empire. I have visited the remains of the empires of the Greeks, Romans, Mughals, Ottomans, Incas and earlier civilisations in China, Vietnam and Ethiopia. I have spent most time in countries that once formed part of the British Empire: Kenya, Nigeria, Zambia, Zimbabwe; Egypt, Israel and Palestine; Hong Kong, Singapore, Malaysia, Sri Lanka, Myanmar/Burma and, above all, India.

As the founding Vice President for Global in Trinity (2011–14) I visited India every few months on university business and took any opportunity to visit historic sites, to spend an afternoon in a local library or archive, to meet local scholars and fellow historians. We had much to discuss and, thanks in part to the British Empire,

[30] Jane Ohlmeyer, *Civil war and restoration in the three Stuart Kingdoms: the political career of Randal MacDonnell first marquis of Antrim (1609–83)* (Cambridge, 1993); eadem, '"Civilizinge of those rude partes": the colonization of Ireland and Scotland, 1580s–1640s' in Canny (ed.), *The Oxford history of the British Empire*, vol. 1, pp 124–47; eadem, 'A laboratory for empire?', pp 26–60; eadem, 'Conquest, civilization, colonization: Ireland, 1540–1660' in Bourke and McBride (eds), *Princeton history of modern Ireland*, pp 21– 47.

[31] Discussed further with Kathy Sheridan from the *Irish Times* (https://www.irishtimes.com/life-and-style/people/the-women-s-podcast/the-irish-times-women-s-podcast-ep-467-professor-jane-ohlmeyer-1.4462123) and Hugh Linehan (https://www.irishtimes.com/news/politics/inside-politics/inside-politics-empire-imperialism-and-ireland-with-prof-jane-ohlmeyer-1.4502048).

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shared much in common. Though the cultures and histories of our countries were very different, I found very familiar the educational and legal systems, the civil services and bureaucracies, the built environment and architecture, the roads and railways, and, of course, the language — English — through which we conversed. Wherever I went in India there were constant reminders of a shared imperial past.[32] The historic relationships between Ireland and India were familiar to the older generation, many of whom had been educated by Irish nuns and priests. On a lecture trip to Aligarth Muslim University in 2015, Professor Irfan Habib, an authority on Mughal India and one of India's great public intellectuals, recalled how his father had met Éamon de Valera during his anti-partition tour of India in June 1948.

These visits kindled my research interests on Gerald Aungier, the founding father of Bombay in the 1660s and the grandson of men who had colonised and worked to anglicise Ireland in the early decades of the seventeenth century.[33] These interactions also resulted in long-term collaborations with academics in India. In 2014–15 I spent a sabbatical researching in the Indian archives and teaching graduate students at the Centre for Historical Studies at Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. More recently (2017, 2019), I co-taught a course on 'Empire and After' at Ashoka University in New Delhi, where we surveyed our shared engagements. The experiences of the Irish as servants of empire in India and as subversives within it resonated with students. Prime Minister Modi's brutal 2019 crackdown in Kashmir, triggered by the passage of a bill in the Indian parliament which stripped the state of its autonomy and special status, gave particular relevance to our discussions about partition and the on-going tensions in Kashmir and Northern Ireland, thanks largely to Brexit.

Ian McBride: I grew up in County Armagh. The border loops around my hometown a few miles to the west and again to the south; in the 1970s and 1980s it was a militarised and sectarianised area. Six of the twenty-one people killed there during the Troubles were family friends. Five were, or had been, members of the security forces, mostly ambushed off-duty — one driving his taxi; two shot outside the shops they owned; another working on his farm. The sixth was in the gospel hall at Darkley in 1983. Although the local war was primarily fought between the I.R.A. and the security forces, there were two Catholics killed, and many injured, by a loyalist bomb left at the Step Inn pub — one of the cases examined by Anne Cadwallader in *Lethal allies: British collusion in Ireland*.

When white, middle-class, male historians talk about positionality the results are rarely interesting. Few historians are capable of combining memoir and historiography with the subtlety and insight that distinguishes Tom Dunne's *Rebellions* (2004). There was nothing very unusual about my experience of the Troubles, although it certainly turned me into an Irish historian, determined my early subject matter (Presbyterian radicals, the Siege of Derry, Britishness) and explains my interest in talking to local groups, from Coiste na nIarchimí to a range of victims' organisations. Straightforward intellectual curiosity and serendipity account for my more recent preoccupations. I am writing a book on Catholics in the penal era, which originates in a chance visit to the Vatican Archives with an American art

[32] Jane Ohlmeyer, 'Ireland, India and the British Empire' in *Studies in People's History*, ii, no. 2 (2015), pp 169–88.
[33] Ohlmeyer, 'Eastward enterprises: Colonial Ireland, Colonial India'.

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historian researching Michelangelo. My interest in Irish attitudes to the slave trade took shape while I taught an M.A. course on 'Enlightenment and Revolution' at King's College London: it is indebted to the brilliant attempts to make sense of John Locke's views on slavery by James Farr, David Armitage and Mark Goldie; and underpinning it all is Carole Pateman's classic assault on the foundational texts of liberalism, *The sexual contract* (1988).[34]

I much prefer historiographical reflection to declarations of positionality. In a series of articles I have tried to show that Irish historical writings reflect historiographical paradigms and assumptions that are neither exclusively Irish, nor primarily driven by the politics and sociology of the Irish academy.[35]

Tim McMahon: I grew up in an American city, Milwaukee, with a substantial Irish-American presence and in a family with a strong sense of its Irish roots. Indeed, all four of my grandparents were either of Irish descent or, in the case of my paternal grandfather, born in Ireland. He died before I was born, and I was always curious to learn about him and his homeplace, Clontibret, County Monaghan. In fact, I was more interested in Ireland itself than I was in Irish-America per se. So much of what one usually associates with Irish-America — St Patrick's Day parades or fraternal organisations — was not a part of my younger days, not because it was unknown to me but I wanted to see Ireland for itself. In fact, just before beginning postgraduate study, I made my first visit to the island, found my grandfather's birthplace and even met some cousins we had never known. This was a profoundly important moment for me because it solidified my desire to learn systematically about the Ireland that my grandfather had been born into and that my great-grandparents had left in the 1880s and 1890s.

That desire has marked my work in many ways. My research is rooted in social history and my doctoral mentor James S. Donnelly, Jr. and the faculty at the University of Wisconsin–Madison familiarised me with European historiography, as well as with the historiography of the British Empire. The programme at Wisconsin also required that I use several European languages in my work. (For me, this has meant German, French and Irish, the last of which was essential to my study of the Gaelic Revival).[36] Further, in my home institution, Marquette University, my teaching remit includes nineteenth-century European history, as

[34] See, for example, Ian McBride, 'Swift, Locke and slavery' (https://pastandpresent.org.uk/swift-locke-slavery/). For Locke, see James Farr, '"So vile and miserable an estate": the problem of slavery in Locke's political thought' in *Political Theory*, xiv (1986), pp 263–89; James Farr, 'Locke, natural law and new world slavery' in *Political Theory*, xxxvi, no. 4 (2008), pp 495–522; David Armitage, 'John Locke, Carolina and the two treatises of government' in *Political Theory*, xxxii, no. 5 (2004), pp 602–27; David Armitage, 'John Locke, theorist of empire?' in Sankar Muhta (ed.), *Empire and modern political thought* (Cambridge, 2012), pp 84–111; Carole Pateman, *The sexual contract* (Cambridge, 1988), esp. chs 2–3.

[35] Ian McBride, 'Ireland's History troubles' in *Field Day Review*, iii (2007), pp 204–13; idem, 'The shadow of the gunman: Irish historians and the IRA' in *Journal of Contemporary History*, xlvi (July 2011), pp 686–710; 'J. G. A. Pocock and the politics of the new British history' in Margaret M. Scull and Naomi Lloyd-Jones (eds), *United Kingdom: four nations approaches to modern 'British' history* (London, 2018), pp 33–57; 'The Peter Hart affair: history, ideology and the Irish revolution' in *Hist. J.*, lxi, issue 1 (2018), pp 249–71.

[36] T. G. McMahon, *Grand opportunity: the Gaelic revival and Irish society, 1893–1910* (Syracuse, NY, 2008).

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well as Irish and British Empire history. Recognising the overlaps and lacunae in these disparate fields has inspired my approach to Irish history.

At the same time, maintaining contact with colleagues in Ireland and the United Kingdom has been essential to this process. I have been fortunate, therefore, that Marquette made it possible for me to visit the archives frequently and to attend conferences regularly, including meetings of the American Conference for Irish Studies, the organisation in which I have been most active. A.C.I.S. members from a variety of disciplines have challenged my assumptions and opened new perspectives for me, aiding my work immeasurably. In fact, the book I co-edited with Michael de Nie and Paul Townend, *Ireland in an imperial world: citizenship, opportunism, and subversion* (2017), grew out of conversations at several such meetings and included contributors based or trained in universities in the U.S.A., Ireland, Northern Ireland, England, and Scotland.

Laura McAtackney: My perspective on Irish history has evolved greatly through my personal and professional life. I grew up in Belfast during the Troubles in a working-class, nationalist (but largely apolitical) family. My early experiences were of being from somewhere but simultaneously feeling excluded from it. My family were proudly Irish, in private, but kept our heads down in public. We knew little about our family background — historical documents were not written about us — but we looked beyond the border for our cultural identity. I left Belfast at eighteen to be educated in Dublin (Trinity College) and then England (Cambridge and Bristol) and quickly realised that my self-identity was not the same as how I was perceived by others — rather my Irishness was of a peripheral and suspect kind in Dublin and to many English people I was simply a 'Paddy' with no shared connections. This experience of feeling doubly othered was unsettling but also gave me insights into the complexities of Irish identity and especially how it was changing in Northern Ireland due to the peace process. From that personal bedrock my research has always been interested in the underconsidered aspects of the past — the bits that we don't usually talk about — and I've looked for the experiences that are not so easy to locate, or are absent from, official archives. My approaches have been refined and shaped by working in a government archive (P.R.O.N.I. in Belfast), becoming more interested in how text fits into a wider material world and examining how 'the past' is refracted in changing presents. This has led me to work on challenging projects such as a contemporary archaeology of Long Kesh/Maze prison,[37] gendered graffiti from the Civil War in Kilmainham Gaol[38] and the Irish experiences of the colonial Caribbean.[39]

Kevin Kenny: A native of Dublin educated at Edinburgh University and Columbia University, I specialise in U.S. immigration history, with a focus on the Irish. I work simultaneously in Irish and American history, with migration as the connecting thread. The two central concepts in my work, diaspora and empire, provide the

[37] Laura McAtackney, *An archaeology of the Troubles: the dark heritage of Long Kesh/Maze prison* (Oxford, 2014).

[38] www.kilmainhamgaolgraffiti.com

[39] Laura McAtackney, Krysta Ryzewski and John F Cherry, 'Contemporary Irish identity on the Emerald Isle of the Caribbean; St Patrick's Day on Montserrat and the invention of tradition' in Diane Sabenacio Nititham and Rebecca Boyd (eds) *Heritage, diaspora and the consumption of culture: movements in Irish landscape* (Aldershot, 2014).

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framework in which I think about 'decolonising history'.[40] Because I was trained in the United States as an Americanist, I bring to the field of Irish history, broadly construed, two particular sensibilities. First, I regard Irish immigration history as inseparable from the history of other ethnic and racial groups. I study Irish immigrants in relation to these other groups and look for what their history can tell us about big themes in American history more generally, such as race, labour, or religion. Second, I approach the topic of empire not only in the realisation that the American colonies where the eighteenth-century Irish settled were part of the first British Empire, and that the United States acquired and governed overseas territories from the late nineteenth century onward, but that the United States in the century after the American Revolution — the period in which I specialise — was not just an emergent nation state but also an empire in the making, with a process of internal territorial conquest culminating in the assertion of sovereignty and imperial claims on the international stage.[41]

In the American context the most pressing use of the term 'decolonising history' has to do with Native American history and borderlands history.[42] The political and historiographical connotations of the term are inseparable, as people who remain oppressed in the present seek to recover a useable or at least a recognisable past. The History Department at New York University, where I work, acknowledges its location 'in ancestral Lenape homelands', noting that New York City has 'the largest urban Native population in the United States'. In this way, the department registers its commitment, however modest, to combating the effects of 'Indigenous exclusion and erasure' in educational institutions.[43] As it happens, one of my books is about how migration from Ulster led to a notorious massacre of Native Americans in eighteenth-century America, a story that unfolded in the context of British and French rivalry for imperial mastery.[44] Most of my work, however, has been on the American Irish in the nineteenth century.[45] It is relevant to 'decolonising' history not because I try to liberate the American Irish from past or present subjection, but because the history of no immigrant group makes sense without reference to others and because the nineteenth-century Irish settled in an

[40] Kevin Kenny, 'Diaspora and comparison: the global Irish as a case study' in *Journal of American History*, xc, no. 1 (2003), pp 134–62; idem, 'Two diasporic moments in Irish emigration history: the famine generation and the contemporary era' in *Studi irlandesi*, ix (2019), pp 43–65; idem, *Diaspora: a very short introduction* (New York, 2013); idem, *Ireland and the British empire*.

[41] Steven Hahn, *A nation without borders: the United States and its world in an age of civil wars, 1830–1910* (New York, 2016).

[42] S. A. Miller and James Riding In (eds), *Native historians write back: decolonizing American Indian history* (Lubbock, TX, 2011); Florencia Mallon (ed.), *Decolonizing Native histories: collaboration, knowledge, and language in the Americas* (Durham, NC, 2012); Stephen Perkins, R. R. Drass, and S. C. Vehik, 'Decolonizing the borderland: Wichita frontier strategies' in *Great Plains Quarterly*, xxxvi, no. 4 (2016), pp 259–80.

[43] Department of History Land Acknowledgment, New York University (https://as.nyu.edu/history/about-us/about-us1.html).

[44] Kevin Kenny, *Peaceable kingdom lost: the Paxton Boys and the destruction of William Penn's holy experiment* (New York, 2009); Patrick Griffin, *The people with no name: Ireland's Ulster Scots, America's Scots Irish, and the creation of a British Atlantic world* (Princeton, NJ, 2001).

[45] Kevin Kenny, *The American Irish: a history* (New York, 2000); idem, 'Irish emigration, ca. 1845–1900' in James Kelly (ed.), *The Cambridge history of Ireland:* vol. iii, *1730–1880* (Cambridge, 2018), pp 666–87.

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emerging nation state that was also an expanding empire. Understanding how the Irish interacted with and compared to other groups in this context is important to understanding both Irish-American history and U.S. history more generally. It involves 'decolonisation' in both of the senses I have referred to — challenging a received narrative about the racial status of the Irish and, on that basis, illuminating the position of non-European Americans in the broader narrative of U.S. history.

3. *How does the hybrid nature of Ireland's position within the British Empire complicate notions of what 'decolonising' Irish history is?*

Jane Ohlmeyer: Ireland's colonial status has invited comparison with other English colonies especially in the Atlantic world both by contemporaries and by later historians — most importantly by D. B. Quinn and Nicholas Canny.[46] A generation of scholars — geographers, literary specialists and historians — have offered nuanced case studies illustrating the interconnectedness of the Atlantic world, and the challenges and opportunities that a comparative approach affords.[47] Others have taken issue with this 'colonial model' and suggested that the nature of rule in Ireland was very different to the Caribbean and the mainland American colonies and that comparisons with other European 'composite monarchies' or with frontiers and borderlands would be more useful. Of course these three models — colonial, composite monarchies and frontier — are not mutually exclusive.[48]

The backdrop for this kingdom/colony debate, along with a wider one around Irish revisionism, was the Northern Ireland Troubles. Though none of the scholars who engaged in the debate sought to promote division or animosity, the use of the word 'colony' became politicised, as did discussions around Ireland's involvement in the British Empire and the extent to which the Republic of Ireland was 'post-colonial' and Northern Ireland 'colonial'. The advent of peace after 1998 has allayed many of these anxieties. That said, we as historians of Ireland have had — perhaps because of the legacy of the Troubles — difficulty in engaging with empire, leaving it to others to address. I'm thinking here of the work of Stephen Howe. Things did begin to change with the publication in 1998 of the *Oxford history of the British Empire*, the first volume of which was edited by Nicholas Canny.[49]

[46] D. B. Quinn, *Ireland and America: their early associations, 1500–1640* (Liverpool, 1991); Nicholas Canny, *The Elizabethan conquest of Ireland: a pattern established 1565–1576* (New York, 1976); idem, *Kingdom and colony: Ireland in the Atlantic world, 1560–1800* (Baltimore, 1988).

[47] Nini Rogers, *Ireland, slavery and anti-slavery, 1612–1685* (London, 2007) and Jenny Shaw, *Everyday life in the early English Caribbean: Irish, Africans, and the construction of difference* (London, 2013) are good examples.

[48] Steven Ellis, 'Writing Irish history: revisionism, colonialism, and the British isles' in *The Irish Review*, xix, no. 1 (1996), pp 1–21; idem, *Tudor frontiers and noble power: the making of the British state* (Oxford, 1995); Hiram Morgan, 'Mid-Atlantic blues' in *Irish Review*, xi (1991), pp 50–55; Andrew Murphy, 'Ireland and ante/anti-colonial theory' in *Irish Studies Review*, vii, no. 2 (1999), pp 153–61; idem, *But the Irish Sea betwixt us: Ireland, colonialism and Renaissance literature* (Lexington, KY, 1999); Alison Games, *The web of empire: English cosmopolitans in an age of expansion, 1560–1660* (Oxford, 2008); Audrey Horning, *Ireland in the Virginian sea: colonialism in the British Atlantic* (Williamsburg, VA, 2013).

[49] Canny (ed.), *The Oxford history of the British Empire*, vol. 1; Howe, *Ireland and Empire*.

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Sensitivities were, however, very real and undoubtedly remain and are being compounded by the ongoing saga around Brexit. In 2013 the archaeologist Audrey Horning rejected any notion of a shared colonial framework in *Ireland in the Virginian Sea: colonialism in the British Atlantic*. In the preface to her book she acknowledges how the Troubles influenced her research, how 'memories of the plantation are routinely invoked by partisans of both traditions' and how the unionist community finds the word 'colony' 'challenging'.[50] One must ask of Horning's study, as Gerald Farrell does, whether '[t]he subordination of the evidence to produce history which promotes inter-sectarian reconciliation must inevitably suffer from the same shortcomings as history designed to promote divisions and animosity'.[51]

Dónal Hassett: While Ireland's own experience of colonialism hopefully means we will be spared the type of imperial nostalgia that has infused debates around the decolonisation of history across Europe and in North America, it does have the potential to stymie broader public discussions about the involvement of parts of Irish society in the exploitation of colonies overseas. It is crucial that historians clearly communicate in their public history that acknowledging the participation of Irish people of all classes, religious backgrounds and genders in different forms of colonialism outside of Ireland does not diminish experiences of colonialism on this island or its legacies for the diaspora. This means asking if and how Irish participation in overseas colonialism was driven by the colonial structures that shaped Irish society. Here, the goal is not to absolve or to implicate Ireland, Irish society or sub-groups within it in colonialism overseas but, rather, to explore the intersections and divergences that defined colonial rule on this island and in other parts of the world. It also means grappling with the role Irish people have played in propagating and maintaining white supremacy around the globe. The presence of significant numbers of Irish in military forces in other colonial spaces, British, French, Spanish, or American, has received significant attention as has the role of diaspora communities in the exclusion of indigenous and other communities of colour. The complex position of Irish missionaries in colonial and postcolonial societies across the globe merits further attention. Much more work needs to be done on how racial discourses developed and honed in these overseas contexts have shaped racist attitudes, policies and structures both historically and in contemporary Ireland.

Ian McBride: We sometimes overstate the uniqueness of the Irish position. Indians in British East Africa and Lebanese in both British and French West Africa demonstrate that colonised peoples could become instruments and beneficiaries of imperial power outside their homelands. Hausa-Fulani Muslims and Baganda became 'sub-colonialists' or 'sub-imperialists' outside their own parts of Nigeria and Uganda respectively.[52] Irish Protestants regarded themselves as co-owners of empire, rather like the Scots. But Ireland's situation as a metropolitan colony produced distinctive paradoxes and predicaments, nowhere more evident that in the careers of Swift and Burke. *Gulliver's Travels* culminates in a spectacular denunciation of 'modern' colonialism, yet Swift had been the celebrated spin doctor for the Harley ministry which negotiated the Asiento contract to supply slaves to Spanish

[50] Horning, *Ireland in the Virginian Sea*, pp vii, viii.
[51] Gerard Farrell, *The 'mere Irish' and the colonisation of Ulster, 1570–1641* (Basingstoke, 2017), p. 287.
[52] I owe this point to Fred Cooper.

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America.[53] Burke was keenly interested in Britain's commercial and colonial expansion. He viewed African-American slavery as morally indefensible. Yet, he subordinated his misgivings to the priorities of British geopolitics and the interests of his numerous kinsmen whose political and financial ambitions were focused on the West Indies.[54] The contrast between Burke's relentless campaign against imperial misrule in India and his evasions over the atrocities that took place in the sugar islands serves as a reminder that colonialism was never a single, uniform project, and that careful differentiation between the political, economic and intellectual dimensions of imperial struggles is an essential part of decolonising history.

Kevin Kenny: In 2004 I edited a collection of essays called *Ireland and the British Empire*, which launched the companion series to the five-volume *Oxford history of the British Empire*. Eight historians were asked to reflect on two questions: What was Ireland's status within the empire in the period they covered? And what role did Irish people play in the affairs of the empire at large? None of the authors saw much contradiction in the idea that the Irish could be both subjects and agents of empire.[55] This project heightened my skepticism that Ireland's colonisation meant that emigrants carried an inferior racial status with them when they moved abroad — an idea that lies at the heart of the 'whiteness thesis', which emerged from American labour and immigration historiography fully thirty years ago and has by now largely run its course in American historical writing at least. David Roediger's *The wages of whiteness,* and especially Noel Ignatiev's *How the Irish became white,* proposed that the Irish were not initially regarded as white in the United States and became so by distancing themselves from black people and exerting their agency to acquire a new racial identity.[56] But it was unclear *who* did not regard the Irish in this way or, more importantly, how they regarded themselves. Critics of the 'whiteness thesis' pointed out the vague and slippery nature of its central concept. Historians seemed to be finding whiteness wherever they looked, yet it was difficult to know what they meant by the term. The quotation marks surrounding 'whiteness' suggested that it was intended as a shorthand for something other than itself. But what was that something? The answer to this question remained elusive. To pose the question 'how the Irish became white' presupposes that they were not white to begin with, that they set out consciously to become white and that they eventually did so. Yet, if these immigrants could 'become white' and black people — by definition — could not, then what sort of racism did the Irish experience? Put another way, to what race had the Irish supposedly been consigned? They could enter the United States freely, settle where they wished, move around, become citizens, exercise the vote and testify in court. Most African Americans could do none of these things. Race, seen from this perspective, carried no benefits or advantages. It was imposed, not chosen. It was not an identity but an attempt to erase agency and negate identity.[57] It is no part of my agenda to

[53] Ian McBride, 'Swift, Locke and slavery'.

[54] P. J. Marshall, *Edmund Burke and the British empire in the West Indies: wealth, power and slavery* (Oxford, 2019).

[55] Kenny, *Ireland and the British Empire*; Bender, 'Ireland and Empire'.

[56] David Roediger, *The wages of whiteness: race and the making of the American working class* (New York, 1991); Noel Ignatiev, *How the Irish became white* (New York, 1995).

[57] Eric Arnesen, 'Whiteness and the historians' [sic] imagination' in *International Labor and Working-Class History*, lx (2001), pp 3–32; Barbara J. Fields, 'Whiteness, racism, and identity' in *International Labor and Working-Class History*, lx (2001), pp 48–56.

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deny that the American Irish encountered social, cultural and religious prejudice. But whether the category of race is helpful, or even necessary, in explaining that prejudice is another matter. Despite nativist prejudice, Irish Americans stood on the same side of the colour line as other Euro-Americans. The point here is not to establish a hierarchy of suffering but to try to distinguish between different kinds of historical experience. In a certain sense you might even call that a reprovincialisation of Irish history — an attempt to make the subject less rather than more exotic — but this effort in turn contributes to the project of decolonising U.S. immigration history.

Laura McAtackney: The hybrid nature of Ireland and the Irish within Britain and the British Empire is a subject as compelling as it is difficult to disentangle. There is no single experience or overarching frame that can cover the exact nature of Ireland's relationship with empire as this changed over time and space and extends into many European nations. The only way we can tackle such a question is to recognise the limitations of what we can definitively say and then move between scales and levels of analysis to provide snapshots as to how various collectives and individuals experienced and negotiated those relationships. My own work as part of an archaeology project on Montserrat[58] has revealed that at various points in time there were Irish people at all levels of society, from indentured servants to governors on the island. There was little evidence that the Irish on the island saw themselves as a collective; rather, those who moved in the upper echelons of society did so amongst those they considered their equals and the lower echelons were viewed with suspicion as suspect and disloyal subjects. An interesting example is William Stapleton, who was an early governor of Montserrat from an Anglo-Irish, Catholic background.[59] His papers, mainly in the John Rylands Library, Manchester, reveal he was a successful soldier and diplomat who ingratiated himself with the plantocracy, married advantageously and pragmatically converted religion as circumstances dictated. Unfortunately for him he died in 1686 while in the British and Irish Isles and his wife spent the next decade trying to prove his unwavering dedication and loyalty to a crown that wished to confiscate his lands. Lesser-known stories of Catholic Irishmen who successfully navigated the colonial Caribbean can be found in the Danish Empire, where the Danish West Indian island of St Croix, in particular, became a favored destination for planters on Montserrat who wished to avoid Stapleton's fate. Orla Power has convincingly shown how Nicholas Tuite and his associates became some of the most successful and important planters on the island after they refocused their plantations from Montserrat to St Croix in the 1740s.[60] These anecdotes reveal the flexibility with which some Irish men (in particular) navigated the British Empire but also the possible limits of an ambiguous identity in retaining it.

Tim McMahon: One area that remains under-researched is the banality of empire in Ireland, and here I am talking about two particular imperial projects — the British

[58] Survey and Landscape on Montserrat (https://blogs.brown.edu/archaeology/fieldwork/montserrat/).

[59] John F Cherry and Krysta Ryzewski, *An archaeological history of Montserrat in the West Indies* (Oxford, 2020).

[60] Orla Power, 'Irish Planters; Atlantic Merchants: the development of St Croix, Danish West Indies, 1740–1766' (Ph.D. thesis, National University of Ireland, Galway, 2011).

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Empire expanding throughout the nineteenth century and into the twentieth; and the Christian churches seeking to spread the word (as they interpreted it) to all parts of the globe. The two strands were interlinked. The sinews of colonial knowledge, trade and personnel ran primarily, though not exclusively, through Britain but as Barry Crosbie has demonstrated, Ireland had its own imperial networks that supplemented those linking Britain to the United Kingdom's empire.[61] The presence of colonial products on Irish tables and built into the walls of Irish buildings are known to us retrospectively, but we have to look for them not because they were exotic and difficult to trace, but because they were so commonplace that contemporaries often failed to comment on them. They were part of the fabric of Irish life, just as were the letters from émigrés and migrant workers sending money home to support their loved ones or, potentially, to bring them out through the very networks the émigrés had previously traversed. Pride in that commonplace was held by Christianity. Protestant and Catholic churches sent missionaries throughout the world, and they proselytised and collected money on the home front. They refracted what was abroad through the prisms of mission weeks, bazaars, sermons, ephemeral literature and magazines, and their efforts continued beyond the creation of two states on the island of Ireland. Appreciating what Barr has called 'Greater Ireland' has profound implications for how we decolonise Irish history.[62]

4. *Where, to you, does this initiative sit in the intellectual and methodological strands of Irish history?*

Ian McBride: If one of our goals is to expose colonial habits of thinking produced by British rule in Ireland, then I think it is important to acknowledge (1) that earlier generations have tried to do that before; and (2) that the task is ultimately impossible, because it involves imagining a world in which the modern state, and the economic and social processes that underpinned it, had never been constructed. On the first point, it is now almost a century since Daniel Corkery berated Lecky for his assumption that the Irish language was merely 'a *patois* used by the hillmen among themselves'.[63] What surprises me is that the current generation of doctoral students seems no better equipped to read Irish-language sources and to incorporate their insights than their predecessors thirty years ago, when I started my own Ph.D. The dangers of relying on English-language sources exclusively have been demonstrated in a series of important books and articles by Vincent Morley.[64] Anyone

[61] Crosbie, *Irish imperial networks.*

[62] Edmund M. Hogan, *The Irish missionary movement: a historical survey, 1830–1980* (Dublin, 1990); Colin Barr, *Ireland's empire: the Catholic Church in the English-speaking world, 1829–1914* (Cambridge, 2020); Colin Barr and H. M. Carey (eds), *Religion and greater Ireland: Christianity and Irish global networks, 1750– 1950* (Montreal, 2015); T. G. McMahon, 'A new role for Irish Anglicans in the later nineteenth century: the HCMS and imperial opportunity' in Ciaran O'Neill (ed.), *Irish elites in the nineteenth century* (Dublin, 2013), pp 222–32.

[63] Daniel Corkery, *The hidden Ireland: a study of Gaelic Munster in the eighteenth century* (1924, repr. Dublin, 1967), p. 9.

[64] See for example, Vincent Morley, *Irish opinion and the American Revolution, 1760–1783* (Cambridge, 2002); idem, 'George III, Queen Sadhbh and the historians' in *Eighteenth-Century Ireland*, xvii (2002), pp 112–20.

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curious about how bilingual scholarship might transform our understanding of power relations between the Williamite wars and the Famine should read Lesa Ní Mhunghaile's admirable study of Irish-speakers and the legal system.[65] Progress has been very slow, in part because historians do not have the necessary language training (something that applies also to the vast corpus of archival material in Rome, mostly in Italian and Latin, which is the basis of my own current research). But it doesn't help either that so much of the Irish-language scholarship has been confined to the debate over Jacobitism. The problem has been exacerbated by our reliance on historiographical models imported from England, which brings me to my second point. 'Decolonization', as one of my Oxford colleagues has written, was 'an untidy, indefinite, and possibly even unfinishable process.'[66] Patterns of dependence, of communication, migration and the movement of capital survived the end of empire; the same is true of the language of politics. Anti-colonialism cannot be neatly disentangled from the colonial discourses it challenged because its conceptual tools were also derived from the West: human rights and self-determination are two obvious examples. These constraints apply to the writing of history also. As Dipesh Chakrabarty concluded, European paradigms are 'both indispensable and inadequate' in representing the history of modern India.[67]

Tim McMahon: Decolonising Irish history sits at a nexus connecting post-revisionist scholarship and transnational histories. It is post-revisionist in that its agenda is political — to understand Irish history as lived within multiple webs of relationships — that incorporates without focusing solely on the specific politics of Anglo-Irish tensions. Drawing from social history, gender history and critical race theory, it should seek to understand the lived experiences of Irish people and the connections they built beyond Ireland without assuming that the relationships of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries resonated in the same register during the nineteenth and twentieth. It is also transnational in that it is intensely comparative, without the presumption that the Irish experiences — including pain from and participation in empire — were *sui generis*. Such a reading would enable reassessing familiar material in important ways. For instance, Douglas Hyde's profound insight that Irish people lived in 'a half-way house', in which they hated the English yet imitated them, is too easily seen as an opening salvo in what was a nativist-nationalist prelude to revolution. It was, however, also an intensely relational reading of the lived experience of many on the island, paralleling the crisis faced by colonised people elsewhere.[68] Hyde's insight came from myriad experiences, including his education at home and at Trinity College, which featured wide reading in Irish, British and European intellectual traditions

[65] Lesa Ní Mhunghaile, 'The legal system in Ireland and the Irish language 1700–*c.*1843' in Michael Brown and S. P. Donlan (eds), *The laws and other legalities of Ireland, 1689–1850:* (Abingdon, 2016), pp 325–58.

[66] A. S. Thompson, 'Unravelling the relationships between humanitarianism, human rights, and decolonization: time for a radical rethink?' in Martin Thomas and A. S. Thompson (eds), *The Oxford handbook of the ends of empire* (Oxford, 2017), p. 454.

[67] Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincialising Europe: Postcolonial thought and historical difference* (Princeton, NJ, 2008), p. 19.

[68] See Douglas Hyde, 'The necessity for de-anglicising Ireland' in C. G. Duffy (ed.), *The revival of Irish literature* (London, 1894). Compare this insight to Ngũgĩ Wa Tiong'o, *Decolonising the mind: the politics of language in African literature* (Nairobi, 1994).

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infused with Darwinist thought; and a short experience living in Canada, where he taught among the diaspora and met with Native Americans.[69] Crucially, however, it was rooted in his friendships with Irish-speaking neighbours, which fuelled his burgeoning interest in folklore and opened insights into everyday life too easily overlooked by nineteenth-century elites and by later scholars whose source material is usually in English. But as Wolf, Mac Suibhne, and Kelleher (among others) have demonstrated, considerable material exists that — when read with care — reveals a rich tapestry of bilingual life experiences too long neglected in the study of modern Ireland.[70] Failure to appreciate that is itself a legacy of Ireland's colonial past and should be confronted as we decolonise Irish history.

Shahmima Akhtar: Conservative thinkers have recently invented a 'culture war' that is supposedly taking place in contemporary society.[71] For instance, these commentators take critique of the British Empire as being anti-patriotic — much in the same way that speaking on the history of slavery in the United States has been misrepresented by certain political pundits as being anti-American.[72] Not only is such a position ahistorical: it is also entirely unfounded. For example, the teaching of England's role in the Irish Famine of the 1840s may differ depending on geography. An English history school-teacher may choose to focus on the environmental and agricultural factors that led to the Famine and so downplay the policy decisions made by Charles Trevelyan, whereas in Ireland the impact of English policy makers may feature more prominently in histories of the Famine.[73] Being critical of our historical past creates and sustains a more critical and engaged populace which should be encouraged and developed. Thereby, the intellectual and methodological strands of Irish history should be bold and questioning in order to combat the fallacy so zealously imagined by right-wing thinkers about a so-called 'culture war'. We should constantly relay academic history to the public whether through books, exhibitions or documentaries and recognise the 'culture war' for what it is — an invention by those who fear positive change.[74]

Dónal Hassett: The rise of the global in Irish history has broadened the horizons and altered the Anglocentric imaginaries that have long defined the field. Nevertheless,

[69] Brian Ó Conchubhair, *Fin de siècle na Gaeilge: Darwin, an athbheochan agus smaointeoireacht na hEorpa* (Indreabhán, 2009).

[70] N. M. Wolf, *An Irish-speaking island: state, religion, community, and the linguistic landscape in Ireland, 1770–1870* (Madison, WI, 2014); Breandán Mac Suibhne, *The end of outrage: post-Famine adjustment in rural Ireland* (Oxford, 2017); Margaret Kelleher, *The Maamtrasna murders: language, life and death in nineteenth-century Ireland* (Dublin, 2018).

[71] The Conservative think tank Policy Exchange launched a monitoring project called 'History Matters' in June 2020, which 'confirms that history is the most active front in a new culture war' and tracks institutions who have endeavoured to remove statues, rename buildings or update university curricula.

[72] David Olusoga, 'Cultural warriors attacking 'woke' history care little for truth', *The Guardian*, 24 Jan. 2021.

[73] See John Hildebrand, 'Story of Famine stirs educational melting pot', *Newsday*, 13 Mar. 2001; Kate Zernike, 'Using the Irish Famine to explore current events', *New York Times*, 21 Mar. 2001.

[74] Justin Champion, 'What are historians for?' in *Historical Research*, lxxxi, no. 211 (Feb. 2008), pp 167–88.

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the global turn may run the risk of simply reframing narratives of Irish exceptionality. In our discussions of Ireland as the first English colony, as a laboratory for empire, as a polity that is a subject of and active participant in empire, and as a beacon of anti-colonial revolution to the rest of the world, we should be careful to acknowledge the important parallels that exist with histories elsewhere. Elements of these parts of Ireland's history are distinct from those of other colonies but any historian of a colonial space will recognise similar aspirations to exceptionality within the national historiographies of their areas of study. Like that of Ireland, the history of every colony is 'complex, full of contradictions, and in several respects unique'.[75] As a specialist in Algerian history, I immediately think of that country's constitution as a utopian laboratory in the French colonial imaginary, of the colony's 'unique' legal status as an integral part of the metropole and of its fame as the Mecca of anti-colonial revolution. Here, deeper collaboration with colleagues working in other colonial and postcolonial spaces, not just in the Anglophone world and/or the academy of the Global North, will help us better engage with the multiplicity of colonial and imperial structures of rule and where Ireland sits in them.

We should also be wary of narratives that use the global to project Irish history out onto colonial spaces in the Global South without engaging with the histories and historiographies of those spaces themselves. Casting Irish participation in the Second South African War as anti-colonial is, as Matthew Kelly has argued, wilfully blind to the Boers' commitment to maintaining white hegemony.[76] Upholding Roger Casement as the saviour of the Congo negates the agency of those who contributed to his report and who resisted Belgian brutality on the ground in the colony.[77]

Kevin Kenny: The kind of work I do is part of the recent trend to globalise Irish historical writing.[78] This points to a need for the 'decolonising' project to examine Irish history in the distinctive settings where the country's emigrants settled around the world. About ten million Irish men, women, and children have left Ireland since 1700 — many more than live on the island today and more than lived there in 1845, when Ireland's population reached its peak. A great deal of Irish history, in other words, unfolded abroad.[79] As a historian of migration, I am also interested in how the meaning of Irishness is changing in the contemporary era. Recent immigration into Ireland is obviously critical here. In the United States, meanwhile, scholars and cultural leaders have been worried for some time that the number of Americans who self-identify as Irish is declining due to the curtailment of mass immigration, the absence of a unifying political cause and the general phenomenon of ethnic fade. Yet, running counter to this trend is a growing interest by people of mixed African and Irish heritage in regaining a voice silenced by the archive, as for example in the

[75] Ohlmeyer, 'A laboratory for empire?', p. 58.

[76] Matthew Kelly, 'Irish nationalist opinion and the British Empire in the 1850s and 1860s' in *Past & Present*, cciv (2009), pp 127–54.

[77] Robert Burroughs's book does a great job of centring African voices and analysing European hierarchies of credibility in the report and related accounts of atrocities: *Congo: African testimony in the movement for Congo reform: the burden of proof* (London, 2020).

[78] Enda Delaney, 'Our island story? Towards a transnational history of late modern Ireland' in *I.H.S.*, xxxvii, no. 148 (Nov. 2011), pp 599–621; Kenny, 'Diaspora and comparison'.

[79] Kenny, 'Diaspora and Comparison'; Donald Harman Akenson, *The Irish diaspora: a primer* (Toronto, 1993).

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'Black, Brown and Green Voices' initiative at N.Y.U.'s Glucksman Ireland House.[80] Up for grabs on both sides of the Atlantic is what it means to be Irish. Answering that question is an ongoing historical process rather than one with a clear terminal point.

Laura McAtackney: Without repeating some of the excellent points already made in this thread I would like to push the discussion in another direction — that decolonising Irish history is not simply about adding to the canon or engaging with postcolonial literature and questions, but must include greater interrogation of the sources and methods we use to understand the past. I would not consider myself a traditional historian: I have a history degree and I worked in a government archive but those experiences made me more suspicious of using documents as the primary means by which we access the past, especially in post/colonial societies. Following Ann Laura Stoler's argument, colonial archives are sites of the production of knowledge and we must acknowledge their power in presenting and distorting the past.[81] Further, we must avoid relegating empire to the past and rather consider the 'ongoing quality of processes of decimation, displacement and decimation' that survive in imperial debris.[82] We should consider more creative combinations of sources and methods, both tangible and intangible, which can provide important insights into otherwise hidden or forgotten pasts. Following Martin Hall, one should not prioritise text over material in understanding colonial contexts but rather by bringing together things and words as a 'multi-stranded rope'[83] they can reveal the fear and anxiety that underlay the 'public performances of power'[84] materialised in colonial projects. Considering objects, buildings, landscapes, folklore, visual arts and texts within an in-flux material world can provide new ways of seeing as well as fresh insights into the past.

5. *Finally, how useful do you find the lens of postcolonialism in explaining the history of twentieth- and twenty-first century Ireland?*

Jane Ohlmeyer: This is a live issue. Ireland's imperial legacy is being discussed and debated in our universities, in the mainstream media and at many of the local history festivals in Ireland.[85] President Michael D. Higgins devoted one (of three) of his *Machnamh*100 seminars to discussions of 'Empire'.[86] An opinion piece I published in the *Irish Times* (29 December 2020) created something of a

[80] Glucksman Ireland House N.Y.U., Black, Brown and Green Voices (https://as.nyu.edu/content/nyu-as/as/research-centers/irelandhouse/academic-initiatives/black–brown-and-green-voices.html).

[81] A. L. Stoler, *Along the archival grain: epistemic anxieties and colonial common sense* (Princeton, NJ, 2008).

[82] A. L. Stoler (ed.), *Imperial debris: on ruins and ruination* (Duke, 2013).

[83] Martin Hall, *Archaeology and the modern world: colonial transcripts in South Africa and Chesapeake* (London, 2000), p. 9.

[84] Hall, *Archaeology and the modern world*, p. 40.

[85] Dónal Hassett, Hussein Omar and Laura McAtackney, 'The case for rethinking Ireland and Empire' (https://www.rte.ie/brainstorm/2021/0419/1210712-case-rethinking-ireland-empire/).

[86] *The Guardian*, 11 Feb. 2021, and https://www.rte.ie/culture/2021/0225/1199429-machnamh-100-ireland-and-the-british-empire/.

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storm on Twitter.[87] This demonstrated to me that our history — so core to our identity — really does matter. It was also heartening to receive so many emails and letters from others who had felt that they were being given permission to talk openly — and without shame — about how a family member had served in the British army or as a member of the colonial service. Like it or not, empire and colonialism has profoundly shaped us. We as a university in Trinity, itself an instrument of empire well into the nineteenth century, are reflecting on our colonial legacy. Colleagues in the History department and around Trinity have launched an initiative that aims to engage the college community in a critical conversation about Trinity's imperial past.[88] No doubt, the research will find many skeletons in the college closet, and recover stories of staff and student activism. I hope that we can learn from how others — Glasgow, Bristol and Oxford — have engaged in their imperial pasts and how best to decolonise Irish history.[89]

Dónal Hassett: This question is worthy of a whole other roundtable in and of itself but I will limit myself to one principal point. Historians of Ireland are perhaps better placed than I to debate the merits of the analytical tools supplied by postcolonial theory and broader colonial histories to the study of modern Irish history. If, however, we are truly interested in decolonising Irish history, which is after all the title of our round table, I would argue that we must take seriously the ways in which historical actors, scholars and contemporary activists outside of this island have drawn parallels with Ireland. To not do so is to simply rehash the Hibernocentric history wars of the past while also (unconsciously) perpetuating the idea that those in the Global South couldn't possibly understand Irish history, let alone elucidate it. We have seen some excellent work, though largely focused on Anglophone colonial contexts, on the way Ireland and its history were understood and reimagined by anti-colonial figures abroad.[90] Scholars should be encouraged to cast their nets wider and to expand the source base of this type of research. Here, we must be wary of both an overly empiricist approach that fixates on the accuracy of their narratives of Irish history, as if that was the most important object of historical study, while also rejecting the 'authentic vs instrumental' lens of analysis of cross-colonial solidarities, which, as our colleague Hussein Omar recently pointed out, 'chooses to take more seriously the claims of colonial officials

[87] Jane Ohlmeyer, 'Ireland has yet to come to terms with its imperial past, *Irish Times*, 29 Dec. 2020 (www.irishtimes.com/opinion/ireland-has-yet-to-come-to-terms-with-its-imperial-past-1.4444146).

[88] This project is led by Dr Ciarán O'Neill and Dr Patrick Walsh. See https://histories-humanities.tcd.ie/research/colonial-legacies/.

[89] 'Irish Universities and Imperial Legacies', Trinity Long Room Hub, Trinity College Dublin, 17 Nov. 2020 (https://www.tcd.ie/trinitylongroomhub/whats-on/details/event.php?eventid=149475948).

[90] See, for example, O'Malley, *Ireland, India and empire*; Michael Silvestri, *Ireland and India: nationalism, empire and memory* (London, 2009), Sikata Banerjee, *Muscular nationalism: gender, violence and empire in India and Ireland, 1914–2004* (New York, 2002); and M. C. Rast, '"Ireland's sister nations": internationalism and sectarianism in the Irish struggle for independence, 1916–22' in *Journal of Global History*, x, no. 3 (2015), pp 479–501. A forthcoming *Global History of the Irish Revolution* edited by Fearghal McGarry and Patrick Mannion and set to appear with N.Y.U. Press will add detail and further national contexts to existing research.

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than those that sought to topple their contractual form of government'.[91] Reading and teaching these sources alongside Irish, British and European sources on the modern history of Ireland can only enhance the understanding of students and scholars alike. While there is an established tradition of exchange with scholars in certain parts of the Anglophone Global South (especially India), there is much to be gained from engaging more widely with and listening to scholars in other parts of the world whose insights into colonialism as a system of rule, and even Ireland's specific experience of it, are largely ignored within the field. Finally, as recent weeks have hammered home, many contemporary activists against enduring forms of colonialism, most notably but not solely in the settler colonial context of contemporary Palestine, do see parallels with Irish experiences of colonialism. While romanticism and realpolitik certainly feed into this, we should be wary of dismissing these comparisons out of hand on the basis of an assumed ignorance about Ireland. After all, the average Palestinian, Sahrawi, Kanak, Native American, Chagossian or Kashmiri has a greater understanding of the lived experience of colonialism than most of the Irish academy, including this author. Here, again, active listening, sustained engagement and radical openness might help us decolonise our understanding of our pasts and presents, Irish and global.

Kevin Kenny: For most of the twentieth century, emigration from Ireland continued at the same relentless rate as in the second half of the nineteenth century. In the post-Famine era, Kerby Miller suggested in an influential interpretation of the field as a whole, the exile motif was invoked expediently to cast all emigration as a form of banishment stemming from British misrule. Among the more vocal proponents of this theory, he suggested, were strong commercial farmers who supported moderate forms of nationalism, contributed to the departure of the poor by consolidating land holdings and benefited from emigration through remittances, reduced competition for resources and a social safety valve that defused class conflict.[92] But with British rule over the majority of Ireland removed after 1921, who was responsible for mass emigration? Successive Irish governments grappled with this question, sometimes blaming the emigrants for not staying and sometimes blaming the materialist allure of nearby Britain.[93] If a deeper explanation for twentieth-century emigration lies in Ireland's postcolonial legacies, these legacies have yet to be adequately theorised in the field of History.[94] Yet something similar is true, surely, of the nineteenth century, when most emigrants left for economic reasons rather than as a directly discernible result of British colonial rule. If Irish poverty in the nineteenth century is to be accounted for in colonial terms — which is plausible — the origins and long-term effects of colonial impoverishment must be

[91] Tweet from Hussein Omar, 17 May 2021 (https://twitter.com/chebhocine/status/1394216217276211207).

[92] K. A. Miller, B. Boling and D. N. Doyle, 'Emigrants and exiles: Irish cultures and Irish emigration to North America, 1790–1922' in *I.H.S.*, xxii, no. 86 (1980), pp 97–125; K. A. Miller, *Emigrants and exiles: Ireland and the Irish exodus to North America* (New York, 1985).

[93] Enda Delaney, *The Irish in post-war Britain* (Oxford, 2007); idem, *Demography, state and society: Irish migration to Britain, 1921–71* (Montreal and Kingston, Ontario, 2000); Clair Wills, *The best are leaving*: *emigration and post-war Irish culture* (Cambridge, 2015).

[94] For the multidisciplinary perspective of a historically minded literary scholar, see Joe Cleary, 'Postcolonial Ireland' in Kenny (ed.), *Ireland and the British Empire*, pp 251–88.

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traced back to conquest and colonisation during Jane Ohlmeyer's period. The same holds true of Ireland after 1921: if Irish poverty and emigration in the twentieth century are to be described in a postcolonial framework, this framework needs to explain, rather than taking for granted, the ongoing effects of previous centuries of colonial rule. Otherwise, the long-term connections between colonialism and emigration, implicit in the notion of postcoloniality as a source of emigration, will remain obscure. The point here is not that this kind of work cannot be done but that it requires careful attention to domestic and international economic history, demography, religion and educational policy, and to the concrete connections between these questions and migration patterns.[95] Looking back on the last three centuries, I see mass emigration in the context of imperial rule and settlement as a fundamental attribute of modern Irish history. To capture this history, I might be more inclined to build a memorial to the downtrodden and departed than to tear down a statue of one particular person.

Shahmima Akhtar: 'We are here because you were there' is a popular dictum used in the field of postcolonialism to explain modern patterns of migration that have stemmed from British imperial rule.[96] The phrase asserts the right to exist, as well as the presence of Britain's minority communities, and historically situates migrants from Africa, Asia and indeed Ireland with a rootedness in Britain. Understanding Ireland's history through the lens of postcolonialism offers opportunities to map these networks of migration, to sketch out systems of trade and goods, to manifest and make real the lives of those caught up in these connections. Postcolonialism as a term suggests a 'post' to colonialism of course, but more productively it allows us to see how deeply imbricated our contemporary lives are to Britain's imperial past, whether through migration, culture or indeed our performed identities.

Laura McAtackney: Viewing recent Irish history through the lens of postcolonialism provides a framework that allows us to understand Ireland and its past (and how it refracts into the ever-changing present) in a way that avoids overly narrow and nationalistic interpretations and opens up more structural understanding of not only the relationship with England and Britain but its lingering and enduring nature in the present. By taking a structural approach to understanding colonialism — its logics and institutions — then postcolonial perspectives can allow us to reveal what continuities endure. At the most basic level the colonial logics of social hierarchies and classifications still underpin European understandings of society — including Ireland's — and by locating those logics inherent in racism, classicism, sexism, then we can begin to strategise how to act, be that by reforming policing, opening borders, provisioning refugees with dignity or broadening the definitions of Irishness. Understanding and recognition allow a move from postcolonial understandings to decolonising actions. Following George J. Sefa Dei, 'The search for new futurities must begin with a recognition of the power of the past, present and the future as inextricably linked. The past is embedded in the present and

[95] Tom Garvin, *Preventing the future: why was Ireland so poor for so long?* (Dublin, 2004); M. E. Daly, *The slow failure: population decline and independent Ireland, 1920–1973* (Madison, WI, 2006).

[96] See, for instance, I. S. Patel, *We're here because you were there: immigration and the end of empire* (London, 2021).

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what we see as the present holds within it the power to transform our futures … Colonialism has not ended.'[97]

Ian McBride: Again, there are two halves to that question, and I can only hint at answers here. In Ireland itself, it is certainly possible to view recent controversies over 'dealing with the past' as the product of a distinctively Irish form of decolonisation.[98] Comparative research on colonialism — and sadly there is very little — suggests that institutionalised inequalities in Northern Ireland were relatively low, as we might expect.[99] That is one reason why historians have often resisted postcolonial frameworks of interpretation. Postcolonial scholarship has tended to flatten out the differences between specific colonial situations rather than explore them, as the African historian Fred Cooper has complained.[100]

Turning to Ireland's position in a post-colonial world, the lesson from the eighteenth century is that the complicity of the Irish in empire — Protestant, Catholic and Dissenter — was systemic. Bishop Berkeley has recently become a candidate for de-commemoration, but it is not easy to determine his place on the contemporary spectrum of views on slavery. The verdict in Tom Jones's new biography, the fullest treatment so far, is damning.[101] Berkeley was a slave-owner. But we don't know what he thought about abolition because abolition was never a serious political option during his lifetime. The debate that preoccupied Berkeley was whether or not enslaved Africans could be baptised. In that debate Berkeley was on the opposite side to many slaveholders, who feared that a successful conversion campaign would remove an essential marker of difference between Christians and those they regarded as subhuman.[102] Edmund Burke, in contrast, is now praised as a consistent opponent of slavery. And yet, unlike the bishop of Cloyne, Burke was an influential M.P. in an age of anti-slavery activism. For the most part he refused to associate himself with either popular campaigns or parliamentary proposals for abolition.[103] Who is more culpable?

Tim McMahon: As noted above, one of my great concerns is that we think of Ireland and Irish history not simply in terms of the Anglo-Irish relationship but rather that we unpack the numerous webs of relationships connecting Ireland with the wider world. This includes recognising that the domestic history of Ireland both before and after independence was linked to and shaped by its ties to the British Empire, to communities outside the British Empire and to the diaspora, including in the U.S.A. Such connections included ongoing recruitment into entities like the Palestine police well after the establishment of the Irish Free

[97] George J Sefa Dei, 'Foreword' in Anila Zainub (ed.), *Decolonization and anti-colonial praxis: shared lineages* (Leiden, 2019).

[98] Ian McBride, 'Dealing with the past: historians and the Northern Ireland conflict' (2017) (https://www.academia.edu/34290336/Dealing_with_the_Past_Historians_and_the_Northern_Ireland_Conflict), pp 2–3.

[99] Caroline Elkins and Susan Pedersen (eds), *Settler colonialism in the twentieth century* (New York, 2005), p. 5.

[100] Cooper, *Colonialism in question*, ch. 1.

[101] Tom Jones, *George Berkeley: a philosophical life* (Princeton, NJ, 2021). I am grateful to the author for a preview of this authoritative book.

[102] Christopher Leslie Brown, *Moral capital: foundations of British abolitionism* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2006), p. 59.

[103] Marshall, *Edmund Burke and the British empire in the West Indies*, esp. ch. 8.

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State, while anti-colonial activists elsewhere held up that same state as a symbol of how to achieve independence from empire.[104] Rather than merely noting this apparent contradiction, such realities demand explanation from those of us working in modern Irish history.

But even carrying out the complex tracing of these webs only scratches the surface of what a postcolonial approach could mean for our field. One possible track to follow in the future might be to break free from setting our agenda along the lines of the history of the state and instead privilege the history of the people — that is, asking basic social historical questions such as what people ate, what languages they spoke and in which settings, what they read/listened to/sang, how they moved from place to place, how their beliefs/foods/ideas changed over time, whether women's experiences differed from those of men, who defined normative behaviours and how those behaving outside those norms were treated. Would we develop different timelines of Irish history than those with which we are familiar? And then take the next step: how might those timelines and, more important, those questions change if we consider the Irish case in the light of the experiences of colonised peoples living elsewhere? Historians of Ireland began to ask that final question a couple of decades ago, but in the light of ongoing research in imperial, transnational and postcolonial history, we should embrace that challenge anew.

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Unsurprisingly, this conversation has raised as many questions as it has answers, and has revealed the multiple layers inherent in unpicking the entanglements of Ireland's imperial experiences. As is clear from the above round table, nuance is essential: binaries of 'colonised' versus 'coloniser' or 'subject' versus 'agent' of empire fail to capture the shades of grey which colour Ireland's messy imperial story. Michael Rothberg's concept of the 'implicated subject' might prove another useful means of locating Ireland's relationship to empire: somewhere at the intersection of victim, perpetrator and bystander.[105] A great many people in late nineteenth-century Ireland could be described as implicated subjects, benefiting from the economic powerhouse of the empire even as they faced the structural violence of the British state in Ireland. But perhaps beginning with an uncomplicated notion of 'Ireland' and 'Irish' is in itself unhelpful. Disaggregation remains important. We must be vigilant to avoid collapsing into undifferentiated categories what were extremely variable experiences of what it meant to be 'Irish' within an emerging and then a fully articulated imperial system: by century, by class, by ethnicity, by gender, by language, by religious affiliation, or by urban or rural residence. Even so, historians have perhaps not yet been sufficiently sensitive to the long aftereffects of a nakedly violent conquest, even when it had been replaced by 'union'. Decolonising Irish history means looking this more squarely in the face, including its consequences for the Irish language, the fate of which was so bound up with imperial fortunes in Ireland. Decolonising our understanding of the Irish past also means being more sensitive to the implications of Irish

[104] Compare Gannon, *The Irish imperial service* and Shonk, 'The shadow metropole', pp 265–82.

[105] Michael Rothberg, *The implicated subject: beyond victims and perpetrators* (Stanford, CA, 2019).

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Catholic missionary activities in Latin America, Africa and Asia, which frequently went hand-in-hand with more overt European imperial expansion, as well as the alternative *imperium* carved out within the Anglophone Catholic world which had profound implications for indigenous people in North America and Oceania. In all of these areas, we can benefit from a closer engagement both with comparative postcolonial history and with the foundational work by a generation of Irish literary critics, as well as further interdisciplinary dialogues. Integrating these perspectives, while building on the rich existing scholarship on Ireland and empire, can help us rise to the challenges posed by the present juncture. As will be clear from the above conversation, decolonising Irish history is not an end in itself, but merely the continuation of a series of existing dialogues which can further extend the reach, impact and contours of our field.

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