

## **Introduction by the President of ESEH**

This Notepad continues the series that surveys the activities of ESEH members in various regions of the world. Following Poul Holm's move from Roskilde (Denmark) to Dublin (Ireland), the emerald isle was mapped as a hive of green activity with the foundation of its own network for environmental research. The Irish Environmental History Network (IEHN) was born in 2009: more than one hundred network members represent a wealth of different research foci and disciplines, from eco-poetry to fisheries biology, historical climatology to the cultural history of wolves.

A cursory glance at the IEHN website is enough to see that it is a thriving community of scholars that has held numerous meetings over the past few years. Trinity College Dublin in particular offers exciting research opportunities and projects, including the Observatory on the New Human Condition, which received funding from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation in the United States and boasts partner institutes in Sydney and Arizona. Irish scholars of the environment work on all regions of the globe and they collaborate with environmental historians in many parts of Europe. This essay provides an introduction into research projects, recent research trends, and institutional developments. Poul Holm, former President of the European Society for Environmental History, has co-authored this essay with an expert on Ireland in the U.S., Frank Ludlow, and with Juliana Adelman of St. Patrick's College, Drumcondra, Ireland.

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## **Environmental History in Ireland**

Ireland is a rich arena for environmental historians, thanks to excellent natural, archaeological and documentary archives, and a wealth of literary writings. While few Irish academics explicitly label themselves environmental historians, there exists a broad range of academic studies that inform our understanding of the island's environmental past and its human dimensions. In addition, a small number of Irish academics are experts on non-Irish environmental history and contribute to a growing community of environmental historians.

Ireland's northeast Atlantic location makes the island acutely sensitive to major modes of climatic variability such as the North Atlantic Oscillation, as

well as changing ocean circulation.<sup>1</sup> Such changes register in the archives of peat bog and lake sediments. Pollen studies and allied palaeoecological analyses have used these same archives to reveal dramatic changes in land cover with complex natural and human origins, often reflecting changing agricultural practices.<sup>2</sup> In the 1970s and 1980s, scholars such as Michael Baillie, David Brown and colleagues at Queen's University Belfast were at the forefront of international dendrochronological efforts and compiled an oak tree-ring record that spans the past seven millennia.<sup>3</sup> As well as providing a key means of improving archaeological dating accuracy,<sup>4</sup> patterns in tree-felling dates have identified stark hiatuses in settlement construction (e.g. crannogs) that are of contested cause in prehistoric and medieval Ireland.<sup>5</sup>

Palaeoecologists, landscape and environmental archaeologists at University College Dublin and elsewhere have successfully addressed questions concerning historic human ecologies of Irish coastal landscapes.<sup>6</sup> The Discovery Programme has been instrumental in advancing Irish archaeological research,<sup>7</sup> often with a strong environmental focus. Achievements include regional case studies such as the monumental 2010 history of the Dublin region in the Middle Ages,<sup>8</sup> and the study of the settlement, landscape and hinterland of Lough Kinale in the Irish midlands.<sup>9</sup> Environmental influences on phases of

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1. John Sweeney, 'Ireland'. In J. Mayes and D. Wheeler (eds.), *Regional Climates of the British Isles*. London and New York: Routledge, 1997, pp. 254–275.
  2. Valerie Hall and Dmitri Mauquoy, 'Tephra-Dated Climate- and Human-Impact Studies during the Last 1500 Years from a Raised Bog in Central Ireland'. *The Holocene* 15, 7 (2005): pp. 1086–1093; Edwina Cole and Fraser J. G. Mitchell, 'Human Impact on the Irish Landscape during the Late Holocene Inferred from Palynological Studies at Three Peatland Sites'. *The Holocene* 13, 4 (2003): pp. 507–515.
  3. Jonathan R. Pilcher, Michael G. L. Baillie, B. Schmidt and B. Becker, 'A 7,272-year Tree-Ring Chronology for Western Europe'. *Nature*, 312 (1984): pp. 150–152.
  4. Michael G. L. Baillie, 'The Radiocarbon Calibration from an Irish Oak Perspective'. *Radiocarbon*, 51, 1 (2009): pp. 361–371.
  5. David M. Brown and Michael G. L. Baillie, 'Confirming the Existence of Gaps and Depletions in the Irish Oak Tree-Ring Record'. *Dendrochronologia*, 30, 2 (2012): pp. 85–91.
  6. Aidan O'Sullivan, *Foragers, Farmers and Fishers in a Coastal Landscape: An Intertidal Archaeological Survey of the Shannon Estuary*. (Discovery Programme Monograph No 5). Dublin: Royal Irish Academy, 2001; Aidan O'Sullivan and Colin Breen, *Maritime Ireland: Coastal Archaeology of an Island People*. Stroud: Tempus, 2007.
  7. <http://www.discoveryprogramme.ie/>
  8. Margaret Murphy and Michael Potterton, *The Dublin Region in the Middle Ages: Settlement, Land-Use and Economy*. (Discovery Programme Medieval Rural Settlement Project: Discovery Programme Monograph No. 9). Dublin: Four Courts Press for the Discovery Programme, 2010.
  9. Christina Fredengren, Annaba Kilfeather and Ingelise Stuijts, *Lough Kinale: Studies of an Irish Lake*. (Discovery Programme Lake Settlement Project: Discovery Programme Monograph No. 8). Dublin: Wordwell for the Discovery Programme, 2010.

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habitation in enclosed settlements known as *raths* (or ringforts) have also been scrutinised.<sup>10</sup>

Ireland also boasts a rich documentary heritage. Legal texts, primarily composed in the seventh and eighth centuries, present idealised rules for governing social conduct and arbitrating civil disputes, from which much about the structure of early medieval Irish society and its agricultural practices has been deduced.<sup>11</sup> The Irish annals, maintained originally in monastic institutions, present annually arranged lists of major events and preserve a detailed record of the impacts of extreme weather and disease outbreaks that is in many ways unparalleled elsewhere in Europe.<sup>12</sup>

For the later medieval period in particular, bardic poetry is abundantly available, composed by professional learned Gaelic families, often in praise of royal patrons. The Bardic Poetry Database compiled by Katharine Simms allows thematic inquiry into Gaelic conceptions of landscape and sacral kingship.<sup>13</sup> The establishment of the Anglo-Irish colony from the later twelfth century also generated a rich corpus of administrative records that supplement the Gaelic Irish sources.<sup>14</sup> Evidence of considerable diversity and quantity is thus available to environmental historians to examine the interrelationships between environment and society in Ireland. Yet, as recently as 2009, the number of scholars explicitly identifying themselves as environmental historians (of any period of Irish history) could be counted on a single hand. This was revealed by an audit of 8,848 online research profiles of academic staff at 12

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10. Thomas, R. Kerr, Graeme Swindles and Gill Plunkett, 'Making Hay While the Sun Shines? Socio-economic Change, Cereal Production and Climatic Deterioration in Early Medieval Ireland'. *Journal of Archaeological Science*, 36 (2009): pp. 2868–2874.
  11. Fergus Kelly, *A Guide to Early Irish Law*. Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1988; Fergus Kelly, *Early Irish Farming*. Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1997.
  12. Daniel McCarthy, *The Irish Annals: Their Genesis, Evolution and History*. Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2008; Francis Ludlow, 'Assessing Non-Climatic Influences on the Record of Extreme Weather Events in the Irish Annals'. In Patrick J. Duffy and William Nolan (eds.), *At the Anvil: Essays in Honour of William J. Smyth*. Dublin: Geography Publications, 2012, pp. 93–133.
  13. <http://bardic.celt.dias.ie/>. For relevant work employing these sources, see Katharine Simms, 'References to Landscape and Economy in Irish Bardic Poetry'. In Howard B. Clarke, Jacinta Prunty and Mark Hennessy (eds.), *Surveying Ireland's Past: Multidisciplinary Essays in Honour of Anngret Simms*. Dublin: Geography Publications, 2004, pp. 145–168; Elizabeth Fitzpatrick, *Royal Inauguration in Gaelic Ireland c. 1100–1600: A Cultural Landscape Study*. Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2004; Roseanne Schot, Conor Newman and Edel Breathnach (eds.), *Landscapes of Cult and Kingship*. Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2011; Thomas Finan, *A Nation in Medieval Ireland? Perspectives on Gaelic National Identity in the Middle Ages*. Oxford: Archaeopress, 2004.
  14. For an overview, see Philomena Connolly, *Medieval Record Sources*. Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2002. See also The CIRCLE project, at: <http://chancery.tcd.ie/content/reconstructing-rolls-medieval-irish-chancery>

major research institutions in Ireland and Northern Ireland.<sup>15</sup> The audit sought to identify researchers in any discipline employing any methodology with interests in how humanity has perceived, managed, influenced, and in turn been influenced by, the natural environment. In total, 533 such persons were identified, representing 6.0% of those audited. Of those, 118 (or 22.3%) were considered to engage in work directly relevant to Irish environmental history (e.g. pursuing research as discussed in the paragraphs above). A further 415 persons were considered to engage in moderately to potentially relevant work.

Environmental historians of Ireland can thus interact with a diverse community of scientists and scholars engaged in complementary research. Geography, in its reading of the human element in the Irish landscape, is a prominent example of a discipline that has developed research concerns closely aligned with (and providing a foundation for) the study of Irish environmental history.<sup>16</sup> Environmental historians also increasingly view the city as an important study site.<sup>17</sup>

Economic and social historians have tackled themes squarely within the domain of environmental history. David Dickson's pioneering study of the human impact of the severe winter 1740–41 shows how the rich sources for an environmental history of Irish weather and its social dimensions may be exploited.<sup>18</sup> There are recent exhaustive studies of Ireland's Great Famine of 1845–52. While none are written strictly from the perspective of environmental history, some draw a complex picture of the interplay between an environmental disaster and policy responses that were mostly quite unsuccessful in managing its impacts upon society.<sup>19</sup> Further study of the pathways that

15. Francis Ludlow, David Dickson and Poul Holm, 'Audit of Research Activity in Irish Environmental History'. Irish Environmental History Network, 2010. <http://www.tcd.ie/trinitylongroomhub/iehn/audit.php>.
16. Relevant geographical studies include Emyr Estyn Evans, *The Personality of Ireland: Habitat, Heritage and History*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973; Frederick H. A. Aalen, *Man and the Landscape in Ireland*. London: Academic Press, 1978; William Nolan (ed.), *The Shaping of Ireland: The Geographical Perspective*. Cork: Radio Telefis Éireann & Mercier Press, 1986; John H. Andrews, *Shapes of Ireland: Maps and their Makers 1564–1839*. Dublin: Geography Publications, 1997; William J. Smyth, *Map-Making, Landscapes and Memory: A Geography of Colonial and Early Modern Ireland, c.1530–1750*. Cork: Cork University Press in association with Field Day, 2006; Patrick J. Duffy, *Exploring the History and Heritage of Irish Landscapes*. Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2007.
17. See for example, Clay McShane and Joel A. Tarr, *The Horse in the City: Living Machines in the Nineteenth Century*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011; Jacinta Prunty, *Dublin Slums, 1800–1925: A Study in Urban Geography*. Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1998; Ruth McManus, *Dublin, 1910–1940: Shaping the City & Suburbs*. Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2002.
18. David Dickson, *Arctic Ireland: The Extraordinary Story of the Great Frost and Forgotten Famine of 1740–41*. Belfast: White Row Press, 1997.
19. E. Margaret Crawford (ed.), *Famine: The Irish Experience, 900–1900: Subsistence Crises and Famines in Ireland*. Edinburgh: John Donald Publishers Ltd., 1989; Cormac Ó Gráda, *Ireland: A New Economic History, 1780–1939*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994; Ciarán Ó Murchadha, *The Great Famine: Ireland's Agony 1845–1852*. London: Continuum, 2011.

government relief policies inadvertently created (e.g. in extensive use of overcrowded workhouses, fever hospitals and soup kitchens) for the propagation of disease in a hunger-weakened population would offer a new perspective on this dominant theme in Irish historical study.<sup>20</sup> New publications in urban history and the history of science have close affinities with environmental history.<sup>21</sup>

In the last ten years, the history of medicine has grown substantially and there are real opportunities for Irish historical environmental studies of disease. In particular, eighteenth and nineteenth-century interests in the relationship between weather and disease resulted in the collection of a rich array of weather data. In some cases these data were directly correlated with disease outbreaks by medical men seeking atmospheric or miasmatic causes.<sup>22</sup> Such material provides both an opportunity to examine past weather patterns and a means of understanding historic conceptions of the relationships between the environment and human health.

In October 2009 the Irish Environmental History Network (IEHN) was founded.<sup>23</sup> It is hosted by the Trinity Long Room Hub, Trinity College Dublin, to provide a point of contact between researchers in diverse disciplines. In the 21 meetings held thus far, themes have included the expression of environmental and agricultural change in archaeological records; reconstructions of historic weather extremes; the conservation and restoration of raised bogs; Irish eco-poetry before 1820; fisheries biology and environmental history; contrasting pressures of conservation and economic development in historic rural landscapes in Italy; the Landcare movement in Australia; the Tragedy of the Commons as applied to the Firth of Forth, Scotland; readings of ecological themes in Hollywood film; the outbreak of cattle plague in nineteenth century Britain; the natural and cultural history of wolves in Ireland; reconstructions of landscape change on Clare Island, Co. Mayo; historic coppicing practices as discerned in pollen records; medieval timber trade in Northern Europe; the impacts and policy responses to the severe 1975–76 drought in the U.K. and Ireland; and livestock parks in the lordships of medieval Gaelic Ireland.<sup>24</sup>

Member research profiles are also hosted on the IEHN website. As of February 2013, there are 119 members, 74 of whom have online profiles.

20. See most recently the multidisciplinary studies in John Crowley, William J. Smyth, and Michael Murphy (eds.), *Atlas of the Great Irish Famine, 1845–52*. Cork: Cork University Press, 2012.

21. Juliana Adelman, Animal knowledge: Zoology and classification in nineteenth-century Dublin, *Field Day Review*, 5 (2009), pp. 109–21. Juliana Adelman, *Communities of science in nineteenth-century Ireland*. London: Pickering & Chatto Publishers, 2009. Juliana Adelman & Éadaoin Agnew (eds.), *Science and Technology in Nineteenth-Century Ireland*. Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2011.

22. John Rutt, *A Chronological History of the Weather and Seasons, And of the Prevailing Diseases in Dublin*. London: Robinson and Roberts, 1770.

23. <http://www.tcd.ie/trinitylongroomhub/iehn/>

24. Details of all meetings can be found at: <http://www.tcd.ie/trinitylongroomhub/iehn/meetings/recent.php>

The IEHN actively collaborates with the many relevant organisations that promote environmental and historical research in Ireland, such as the Irish Quaternary Association,<sup>25</sup> the History of Marine Animal Populations project,<sup>26</sup> the Irish Meteorological Society,<sup>27</sup> the Group for the Study of Irish Historic Settlement,<sup>28</sup> the Discovery Programme, and the Agricultural History Society of Ireland. The IEHN has also helped to highlight developments in the study of Irish ecocriticism,<sup>29</sup> and the rapid development of digital humanities in Ireland has also given rise to innovative projects such as the Irish Digital Literary Atlas by Dr Charles Travis, launched in 2010 at a meeting of the IEHN. The atlas matches literary analysis with Geographic Information Systems technology to reconstruct the imaginary landscape of the Irish novel.<sup>30</sup>

Most recently, the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, USA, has announced financial support for global environmental humanities studies, including an Observatory on the New Human Condition under the direction of Professor Poul Holm at Trinity College Dublin. The studies proposed under this research umbrella have a global reach and are aligned with partner institutes at the Universities of Sydney and Arizona.<sup>31</sup> The Observatory identifies its research objective in this way: “In an age of Global Change societies are faced with the Prisoner’s Dilemma: We would all benefit from collaborating towards the common good, but in an open system of a free market, weak global politics, cultural distrust, and imperfect communication, any defector is likely to get away with cheating. The only solution to overcome the Prisoner’s Dilemma is mutual trust, yet politics are rarely able to make this choice. In the long run, societies have proven and in the future are likely to prove resilient and adapt to change. The question, however, is not if, but when, and how successfully, we may respond to global challenges.” In this way, environmental history has an important role to play in the future of society.

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25. <http://www.iqua.ie/>

26. <http://hmapcoml.org/about/>

27. <http://www.irishmetsociety.org/>

28. <http://irishsettlement.ie/>

29. <http://literatureconservation.blogspot.com/> The conference was organised by Alison Lacivita and Megan Kuster.

30. Charles Travis, *Literary Landscapes of Ireland: Geographies of Irish Stories, 1929–1946*. New York: Mellen Press, 2009. And see the Atlas at: <http://www.tcd.ie/trinitylongroomhub/digital-atlas/>

31. Holm, P., et al., Collaboration between the natural, social and human sciences in Global Change Research. *Environmental Science & Policy* (in press)