Medieval or Early Modern

Medieval or Early Modern

The Value of a Traditional Historical Division

Edited by

Ronald Hutton

Medieval or Early Modern: The Value of a Traditional Historical Division

Edited by Ronald Hutton

This book first published 2015

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

CONTENTS

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

RONALD HUTTON

Human beings seem naturally to divide past time into different periods. The inhabitants of long-enduring monarchical states like those of Egypt, Mesopotamia and China, reckoned those periods in terms of royal dynasties. Some ancient Greeks spoke of a succession of ages, Golden, Silver, Bronze and Iron, leading up to the present. Their Hebrew neighbours were conscious that the time of their kings had been qualitatively different from the preceding time of judges, and that both were supposed to have been preceded by the archaic period of Genesis, divided from them by the dramatic collective experiences of the exodus from Egypt and the conquest of Canaan. Christians have, naturally enough, divided the whole of the human story into two parts separated by the coming of their Messiah, while Muslims have made a similar partition hinged on the appearance of their prophet. The tendency of historians to cut up their subject into different chronological slices, with identifying labels, is therefore not merely an attempt to separate out their job into manageable portions. It is also simply what our species does, when confronted with the past.[1]

It should be no surprise, therefore, that European historians have made their own customary division of it, into three: the ancient, the modern and the bit in between, logically called the Middle Ages. Nor should it be any less predictable that, as modernity has progressed, and so lengthened, it has become convenient to many to divide it in turn, speaking of an early modernity which preceded and prepared the world which seems relatively

---

[1] For the specific nature and problems of periodization as used by historians, see William A. Green, 'Periodization in European and World History', *Journal of World History*, iii (1992), 13-53; Lawrence L. Besserman (ed.), *The Challenge of Periodization* (New York, 1996); and Ludmilla Jordanova, *History in Practice* (London, 2000), pp. 114-40.

familiar, and recent, to those living today. A final development which is arguably just as natural is that this particular chopping up of time, customary and Eurocentric as it is, should have become questioned by some historians in the past couple of decades. Such a development may be ascribed to a convergence of two different phenomena: the evolution of multi-ethnic, multi-faith societies in Western nations, as part of a broader globalization of human affairs, and the great expansion of professional scholarship carried out within universities in a high-pressure, competitive atmosphere. Together, these processes have induced a major questioning of traditional scholarly assumptions, categories and structures of thought, and periodization has been submitted to such scrutiny along with so much else.

This collection of essays is designed to take stock of the current state of opinion with regard to one particular chronological boundary, that between the medieval and early modern periods. It resulted spontaneously from a symposium held at Bristol University in February 2013 by the Medieval and Early Modern Cluster of historians working at that institution, who gathered some distinguished guests to join them in debating the current utility of that division. The success and excitement of the day produced a proposal to publish the proceedings, with contributions from another friend, and the present work is the product of that undertaking. It is designed to contribute to, and stimulate further, the ongoing debate among professionals over the nature of historical periodization, and that of the centuries between 1300 and 1800 in particular. It is also, however, very much aimed at teachers and students in schools and universities, to acquaint them with the issues of that debate as they currently seem to stand, and enable them to form their own judgements. That is why, for example, one contributor can make a definition of the relationship between the thought of Shakespeare and Cervantes with that of the Cartesian and Ockhamite schools which should interest fellow experts, while taking care to explain what Cartesianism, and who William of Ockham, was.

The apportioning of time considered in it took place in very different historical contexts, because while the concept of the medieval (and therefore of the modern) has been current for about half a millennium, that of the early modern has been commonly adopted for only about forty years; indeed, it had hardly become fashionable before such divisions of the past were called into question. By definition, the Middle Ages could only be first defined by closing off their terminal boundary, and this exercise represented, like so many traditional labels in history, an advertising campaign which was linked to political abuse. The campaign

was launched by a group of fifteenth-century Italians, mostly from Florence, who were bent on recovering all that could be located of the knowledge of the ancient Greek and Roman worlds. Using this, they aimed to achieve a rebirth, in French a 'Renaissance', of learning and arts. The accompanying boast was that by uniting ancient knowledge with that which had been achieved since, they were producing a uniquely well informed and capable society. This claim automatically divided European history into three periods. With equally automatic effect, the exercise characterized the middle period as inferior to the succeeding one which these writers and artists were seeking to launch and maintain, and perhaps even to the ancient one. This attitude was taken up and greatly enhanced by liberal thinkers in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. They made the term 'medieval' synonymous with 'backward', 'ignorant', 'obscurantist' and 'bigoted', and used it as a stick with which to beat conservative forces in their own time. Counter-offensives were launched against them by conservatives, who represented the Middle Ages as a time of religious faith, beautiful architecture and social order. Some radicals also turned the tables, by making the Reformation and Counter-Reformation the true bringers of bigotry and repression and representing the medieval period as a time of social harmony and merriment: in one famous national incarnation, of 'Merry England'.[2] On the whole, it seems to have been the negative connotations which have remained strongest in popular culture, lasting right down to Quentin Tarantino's movie, *Pulp Fiction*, in which an American gangster threatens somebody that he will 'git medieval on your ass'.[3]

A large part of the problem posed by the traditional periodization into 'medieval' and 'modern' therefore lies not in the division made in itself but in the value judgements that have been attached to it, reflecting the political and cultural tensions of previous centuries. By contrast, the expression 'early modern' has made relatively little impact on the popular imagination, and is far more of a scholarly construct. It is also, as said, a

---

[2] George Stuart Gordon, *Medium Aevum and the Middle Age* (Oxford, 1925); Geoffrey Barraclough, *History in a Changing World* (Oxford, 1955), 54-63; Nathan. Edelman, *The Eye of the Beholder*, ed. by Jules Brody (Baltimore, 1974), pp. 58-85; Paolo Delogu, *An Introduction to Medieval History*, trans. By Matthew Moran (London, 2002); and Marcus Bull, *Thinking Medieval* (Basingstoke, 2005), pp. 7-41, all review aspects of the origins and uses of the concept of the Middle Ages, with good bibliographies.

[3] I am grateful to my former Bristol colleague, Marcus Bull, for drawing my attention to this cinematic moment, which features in his *Thinking Medieval* on p. 11.

recent one. Phil Withington has proved that it was originally coined by a Cambridge don called William Johnson, in 1869, and used again by a scatter of authors, mainly economic historians, in the first half of the twentieth century. In 1976, however, it was still so unfamiliar that, when Keith Thomas put it into the title of a lecture, his chairman, Sir Isaiah Berlin, claimed not to have heard it before. It is significant that Thomas was probably the pre-eminent representative of a new wave of cultural historians, because it was British and North American practitioners of social and cultural history who were to adopt it wholesale, followed by experts in literature and art.[4] Hitherto political historians had dated their work according to a particular century, or by national dynasties (such as Tudor or Stuart), while historians of art preferred labels like 'Renaissance' or 'Baroque', and those of religion spoke of 'Reformation' or 'Counter-Reformation'. None of these naming strategies was really appropriate for social or economic history, or cultural history which extended beyond elite art or major religious movements. The term 'early modern', by contrast, fitted the bill for those subject areas, and after its widespread appearance in them leaked into other areas of writing. It remained, however, largely an Anglo-American phenomenon.[5]

These chronological divisions succeeded because they provided a convenient shorthand to sum up particular epochs that did seem to possess particular characteristics. 'The Middle Ages' and 'medieval' served to label a period of European history dominated by cultural and political attitudes heavily overshadowed by a defunct or transformed Roman Empire; of a Christian Church led by the Pope and based on Latin literacy and a mixture of secular and religious clergy; of a direct knowledge of other parts of the world mostly limited to the further shores of the Mediterranean; of a landed aristocracy centred on the figure of the armoured knight; and of texts handwritten by scribes on parchment and vellum. 'Early modern' served to emphasise a succeeding transitional period in Europe between the medieval and truly modern, in which much of the Roman Catholic Church shattered into a complex of reformed Christian denominations, ultimately inducing a more tolerant attitude to differing religious opinion; noble retainers were replaced by professional armies as the military resources of states, supported by bureaucracies and regular taxation; famine and plague were banished from most of the continent; Europeans spread out across most of the globe to trade, conquer

---

[4] Phil Withington, *Society in Early Modern England* (Cambridge, 2010), pp. 1-70, and sources cited there.

[5] Notable early appearances were in Lawrence Stone, Peter Burke, Natalie Zemon Davis Keith Wrightson and J. A. Sharpe.

and settle; and a general fear of magic and witchcraft, based on a literal belief in their efficacy, was replaced by an official disbelief in both; and so forth. There was also a pleasing chronological symmetry to the design. The period generally regarded as medieval lasted roughly a thousand years, and was preceded by an ancient one which was only slightly longer: whatever cultural riches archaeologists keep revealing in Europe's long prehistory, history itself still begins in the continent (at its south-eastern extremity) around 700 BC, as it has always done. By comparison, the modern period is much shorter, at around half a millennium, but in that respect, of course, it has time on its side, and its faster pace of change has done much to make up for its comparative brevity.

Much of the utility of the labels depended on a flexibility and adaptability provided by their very lack of precision, coherence and uniformity. Each one swept over a tremendous range of times, places, societies, cultures, economies and mentalities. The boundaries of each depended heavily on the nationality, date and preoccupations of the historians who drew them, and there accordingly could be no general agreement on where they should be drawn. In the years around 1990, the end of the early modern period was located by university courses and textbooks at various points between 1650 and 1830, with more or less equal validity to each according to the criteria applied. As for the opening of the medieval, that was similarly contingent. For the study of Greek-speaking communities on the western coast of Asia Minor, for example, such a boundary is more or less irrelevant: although transformed dramatically in culture, religion and political allegiance as centuries passed, they experienced no really sudden and major fractures in their history between their settlement in the early first millennium BC and their expulsion by the Turks in the 1920s. For the history of Britain, on the other hand, the inception of the Middle Ages is clear and dramatic. In the decade following AD 407, the island passed from a (Roman) world which had a genuine history and easily dated archaeological material into one with virtually no reliable political history at all, and in which archaeological remains have not till now been securely dated within about a century. There it remained for almost two hundred years. In Ireland the onset of the medieval is equally unmistakable, but for precisely the opposite reason: that in exactly the same period in which Britain plunged out of history, the Irish emerged into it. Christianity and literacy arrived amongst them, accompanied by a major and enduring overhaul of social and political structures and overseas relationships. This book is dedicated in part to determining whether the other end of the Middle Ages, as

traditionally and vaguely defined, throws up such clear, and regionally specific, effects.

During the second half of the twentieth century, some academic historians became increasingly uncomfortable with, or irritated by, the customary periodization.[6] Its lack of precision, and its blanket coverage of such different kinds of community extending over such long spans of time, in which so much changed, seem to such critics to be unbecoming of a professional discipline. The moral baggage with which it was laden, at least in popular culture, added a further element of inconvenience. Even the newly popular term 'early modern', less freighted with popular stereotypes than 'medieval', can seem implicitly goal-directed (towards the 'properly' modern), and so smuggle in an admiration for progress and for profound change which may deform the manner in which the past is studied. The growing influence of social, economic and cultural history has undermined the fashion for divisions by precise dates, emphasizing as it does that major discontinuities in human affairs, involving multiple aspects of life, do not happen in a single year. Furthermore, the accelerating progress of globalization, and the development of multi-ethnic, multi-faith, multi-cultural societies in the West, have made world history an ever more important genre. The categories of medieval and early modern, based firmly on the European experience, may possess little relevance to that. At the least, historians of the period between 1400 and 1600 need now to ask explicitly how much is revealed, and how much concealed, by the retention of these divisions, and whether there is any real significance in marking a boundary between what is supposed to be medieval, and what is supposed to be (early) modern? If some agree that there is, then they next need to debate when and where such a boundary should be placed, in time and space.

This collection provides many of the materials for such a debate, and itself conducts one implicitly, in that the contributors each consider the relevance of the customary periodization to their own interests, preoccupations and disciplinary and sub-disciplinary framework. A pattern, and something of a provisional conclusion, emerge in the course of this process. Steven Ellis and I hope to have demonstrated that it is

---

[6] Most of the works at ns.1 and 2 are relevant here. See also Herbert Butterfield, *Man on his Past* (Cambridge, 1955), pp. 128-36; Dietrich Gerhard, *Old Europe: A Study of Continuity* (New York, 1981); Timothy Reuter, 'Medieval: Another Tyrannous Construct?', *Medieval History Journal*, 1 (1998), pp. 25-45; and Lester K. Little and Barbara H. Rosenwein (ed.), *Debating the Middle Ages* (Oxford, 1998); Randolph Starn, 'The Early Modern Muddle', *Journal of Early Modern History,* vi (2002), pp. 296-307.

possible to consider the same geographical area at the same time (the British Isles in the sixteenth century) with regard to this question, and disagree completely with equal legitimacy on both sides. The difference is a product of distinct preoccupations and perspectives. One of Steven's many cogent arguments is that a boundary between the medieval and early modern must be located in different nations at different points, and for many it is simply not relevant at all. Evan Jones, however, taking a global viewpoint, concludes that one of the most commonly perceived markers of the onset of the early modern, the eruption of Europeans across the oceans of the world, permanently changed world history in general. His is indeed perhaps the most confident restatement of the customary division. David Abulafia, concerned with the economic history of the Mediterranean and its relationship with other seas, also finds the European age of maritime discovery to make a very significant break with the past; and one which follows other such dividing lines in Mediterranean history which match up fairly well to other traditional boundaries between periods. On the other hand, there are also divisions in his historical narrative which occur within those periods; and it is for readers to determine whether these disrupt the familiar succession of ages after all. Poul Holm, moreover, as a historian of global climate, finds that major climate changes no longer match up to the traditional framework of periods, and calls for the scrapping of that framework within his sub-discipline. However, Martial Staub, dealing with another clearly very topical branch of history, that of migration, thinks – somewhat uneasily – that it might still have relevance to that, being in his elegant formulation 'comfortable but uncanny'.

The issues remain as subjective as the focus shifts to cultural history: and this is the more significant is that the boundary between medieval and modern, early or not, first emerged in this sphere, defined originally, as said, as part of the movement which finally became known in the nineteenth century as the Renaissance. Fernando Cervantes makes a very effective job of attacking the prevailing tendency to view the two greatest authors of the sixteenth century, William Shakespeare and his own namesake Miguel de Cervantes, as precursors of a modern understanding of the world. He demonstrates that in key respects they represented a continuation of definitively medieval attitudes. which lay at the heart of their writing. What readers may care to consider is the still open question of whether the context and application of those attitudes had altered significantly: in other words whether the great trauma of the Reformation, shattering the essential unity of Western Christianity, and the disorientation provided by the discovery of so many new worlds overseas, for which traditional teachings had not made provision, had caused them

to be used in new ways and for new problems. If the answer to that problem is affirmative, then it may be asked in turn whether the novelty of context is sufficient to mark the changing of an age.

Pamela King's chapter neatly complements Fernando's by looking at parallel changes in English drama, which according to established tradition ushered in a definitive transition to modernity: 'benchmarking the renaissance moment' when the medieval theatrical aesthetic gave way to a more sophisticated one, and Hamlet displaced Herod. Perhaps inevitably, she finds that things were more complex than that, for there was a paradigm shift in aesthetics, linked to a cultural rupture brought about by the Reformation, but both produced far from coherent and monolithic responses. 'Medieval' pageants, she shows, could be transformed into a commentary on the early modern condition: but to acknowledge that is to reaffirm the existence of a distinctively early modern condition. Were Fernando's 'medieval' sixteenth-century literary giants likewise making a commentary on a new age? Most readers may agree with Pam that in cultural, as in economic and social history, it is pointless to seek 'canyons' opening at particular dates to separate periods, but she still allows for a shift in 'tectonic plates' to form epochs.

The concept of a 'renaissance moment' (with or without a capital 'R') is, of course, one derived above all from the history of art, and this discipline is represented in the collection by Peter Dent. He immediately begins by confronting the paradox of his subject: that art history has always carved up the past according to changes in style, but that style itself pertains to a timeless sphere. Add to this the emergence of a global history of art which challenges European periodization, even while that periodization is very much alive in the Western world, and he is clearly facing some very complex issues indeed. He picks his way through them by suggesting that the traditional stylistic time-lines can only be maintained with a narrow spatial focus, but that by using other markers, such as linear perspective or the development of art as a project with its own body of theory and of the artist as a distinct profession, the long-accepted boundary at the end of the medieval still has some validity. To say this, he makes clear, is to suggest a diversity of options, each with its own limitations, and then, in a pair of exciting case studies, he shows how visual images can be used actively to manage time itself. Finally we come to the history of music, and the new discipline of musicology, which has particular significance for the collection in that, as David Allinson shows, it has never embraced the label of 'early modern'. Instead it has borrowed the older terms 'medieval' and 'Renaissance' from art history. David adroitly exposes the problems of using those, in the manner in which they

have been deployed hitherto, and concludes tentatively that in view of these it might actually be useful for the term 'early modern' to be adopted for his field because of the new perspectives that it would open.

Debates, by their very nature, presuppose differences of opinion, and a range of those are demonstrated here; and yet some kind of coherent conclusion does seem to emerge. The import of this collection is clearly that to retain or impose the traditional distinction between the medieval and early modern in all aspects of the study of history – and even of European history - is out of the question. It should be just as obvious, however, that the distinction retains considerable vigour and utility in some branches of history, and so it is equally futile to suggest that it now be forced into retirement as a general measure. Even within the same sort of history-writing, concerning the same time and the same area, it is possible to find practitioners who find it helpful and others, with equal validity, who do not. Periodization of this sort may increasingly be regarded as a resource, to be used or not according to the area of specialization, subject of study, and indeed personal inclination, of the individual historian. Such a conclusion, whether or not it possesses any intrinsic moral or practical merit, has the virtue of describing a state of affairs which patently already exists.

CHAPTER TWO

FROM MEDIEVAL TO EARLY MODERN:
THE BRITISH ISLES IN TRANSITION?

STEVEN G. ELLIS

The debate about the medieval/early modern divide reflects a perception, I think, that there are particular historical developments in each national historiography – and perhaps by extension in historiography more generally – which may be classified as quintessentially medieval or as characteristically early modern. There is also at least some commonality between the different national historiographies in regard to this perception. It is reflected, for instance, in the large-scale, pan-European collaborative projects which have dominated European history over the past twenty-five years. My earliest experience of these was the European Science Foundation's 1987 project on 'The Origins of the Modern State in Europe, 13th-18th Centuries', which was international and interdisciplinary, with over a hundred scholars from eighteen countries participating, and which ran to 1992.[1] The chosen dates reflected a perceived consensus that 13th-century Europe was everywhere still medieval and that 18th-century Europe had not yet reached modernity; and so the project deliberately grouped together 'medievalists and early modernists', as the participating

---

[1] Published as *The Origins of the Modern State in Europe, 13th-18th Centuries*, eds. Wim Blockmans and Jean-Philippe Genet (European Science Foundation; 7 vols., Oxford, 1997). My contributions were: (with Peter Blickle and Eva Østerberg) 'The Commons and the State: Representation, Influence and the Legislative Process' in Peter Blickle (ed.), *The Origins of the Modern State in Europe. Vol 5: Representation, Resistance and Community*. (Oxford, 1997), pp 115-153; 'Communalism: comment from a British perspective' ibid., pp 54-64. French edition: (with Peter Blickle and Eva Østerberg) 'Les Roturiers et l'État: Représentation, Influence et Procédure Législative' in Peter Blickle (ed.), *Les Origines de l'État Moderne en Europe: Résistance, représentation et communauté* (Presses Universitaires de France, 1998, pp 161-214 ; 'Autonomie des Communautés: commentaire dans une perspective britannique' ibid., pp 71-84.

scholars were described,[2] with the aim of identifying continuities and disjunctions in the study of the *ancien régime*. In practice, it was hampered by national differences over language, interpretation and explanation, but it was in this respect a significant advance on another collaborative project in which I was involved at the time, and which eventually produced a slim volume on what were described as Europe's 'internal peripheries'.[3] This latter project, based on a symposium in Hannover in 1988, generated a lot of papers by historians based in Socialist countries and, as I recall, discussed the transition from feudalism to capitalism and the inevitable triumph of Socialism in 1945; but after the collapse of Socialism, most of these papers were either withdrawn or rewritten.[4] My suspicion, therefore, is that attempts during the Cold War to define more precisely what was medieval and what was early modern across Europe would probably have foundered on ideological differences surrounding a categorizing of 'feudal' as 'medieval', and 'bourgeois' and 'capitalist' as 'early modern', with 'real existing socialism' still to come.

Even so, I do think there is mileage in following this European state formation model concerning the differences between medieval and early modern phases of state formation. I have been struck in particular by the arguments of the Danish scholar, Harald Gustafsson, who argued in 1998 that the modern unitary state did not 'spring out of the collapse of a feudal system in the late Middle Ages', but rather that, between the feudal condominium and the modern unitary state, the early modern conglomerate state stood in an intermediate position.[5] Looking at what was typical of state formation throughout Europe as a whole does, I think, offer us a perspective on the historical transformation of the British Isles at this time, if we set aside the usual arguments about English exceptionalism. Thus, in a British context, the feudal condominium of the English crown constituted a medieval phase of state formation whereby, alongside the peripheral territories in Wales, Ireland, and the English far north, the

---

[2] 'General Editors' Preface' in Peter Blickle (ed.), *The Origins of the Modern State in Europe. Vol 5: Representation, Resistance and Community* (Oxford, 1997), p. vii.

[3] Hans Heinrich Nolte (ed.), *Internal peripheries in European History* (Göttingen, 1991).

[4] The editor's introduction offers a brief outline of some other papers presented at the symposium but not included in the volume: Nolte (ed.), *Internal peripheries*, pp 2-3.

[5] Harald Gustafsson, 'The conglomerate state: a perspective on state formation in early modern Europe' in *Scandinavian Journal of History,* xxii (2002), pp 189-213 (quotation, p. 189).

English monarchy also ruled until c.1450 significant territories in France
(Normandy, Gascony, Calais) and so faced the associated problems of
organizing the defence of these continental territories with their long
landed frontiers. Following their loss, however, a new early modern phase
of centralization began in the mid-1530s with the Tudor administrative
reforms in Ireland, Wales, and the English north, and then the dynastic
union with Scotland in 1603. So the resultant early modern British
multiple monarchy, with its three kingdoms, was geographically quite
distinct from the later medieval Anglo-French empire, with its diverse
patchwork of lordships, duchies, towns, and kingdoms, with five or six
separate blocs of territory separated by land or sea, and with many
marches to patrol and defence. The centre of gravity of the British multiple
monarchy was also further north and west, and its territories were much
more compact – three centralized kingdoms and several islands but
without the military frontiers.[6]

  I think that looking at state formation in the British Isles in terms of a
transformation from medieval feudal condominium to early modern
multiple monarchy thus gives us a convenient number of pegs on which to
hang individual aspects of this transition across a number of fields. Quite
apart from the particular pattern of state formation with an emphasis on
integration and centralization, we may mention other associated
developments which can be seen as inaugurating the early modern period
in both Britain and Ireland. In the realm of intellectual ideas, for instance,
we think of the Renaissance and humanism. We might also classify as
early modern overseas expansion and colonization which was sparked by
demographic growth in Europe. Economically, we would probably also
include, as a marker of modernity, inflation – the 16th-century European
price rise – also fuelled by demographic growth. And in religious terms,
the Reformation marked a clear watershed.

  Based on these markers of modernity, Irish historians have in more
recent years generally chosen the year 1534 as the somewhat arbitrary
watershed date dividing medieval from early modern; and I wouldn't
disagree.[7] The developments surrounding the Kildare rebellion, or the

---

[6] This line of argument is developed in S.G. Ellis, 'From dual monarchy to
multiple kingdoms: unions and the English state, 1422-1607' in Allan Macinnes
and Jane Ohlmeyer (eds.), *The Stuart kingdoms in the seventeenth century* (Dublin,
2002), pp 37-48.
[7] This is a relatively recent development, reflecting a decision by the editors of The
New History of Ireland. See Art Cosgrove (ed.), *A new history of Ireland. II
Medieval Ireland 1169-1534* (Oxford, 1987); T.W. Moody, F.X. Martin, and F.J.
Byrne (eds.), *A new history of Ireland. III Early Modern Ireland 1534-1691*

Revolt of Silken Thomas, can mostly be tied to these traditional markers – the start of the Reformation, increased centralization with the appointment of English-born governors and a small standing garrison in place of the traditional ruling magnate, the use of the printing press, and in the English Pale at least indications of growing population and inflation. But for Gaelic Ireland, we might need to look at a rather later date for the impact of modernity – starting with surrender and regrant from 1541, for instance.[8] If at this point I can put on my English historical hat, however, I would say that 1534 is certainly too late as a watershed date. I would want to include as early modern the revival of crown government after the Wars of the Roses, and that would take us back at least into the 1490s (in Ireland we might also look at the governorship of Sir Edward Poynings (1494-95) in that context).[9] In England, there might still be some debate about whether the first Tudor king is medieval or early modern, but with Henry VIII we

---

(Oxford, 1976). The Helicon History of Ireland, planned later but published around the same time, was slightly more ambiguous about periodization: Art Cosgrove (ed.), *Late medieval Ireland, 1370-1541* (Dublin, 1981); Nicholas Canny, *From Reformation to Restoration: Ireland 1534-1660* (Dublin, 1987). See also R.W. Dudley Edwards and Mary O'Dowd, *Sources for early modern Irish history 1534-1641* (Cambridge, 1985). Before this, however, a wide range of dates had been suggested: 1495 (A.J. Otway-Ruthven, *A history of medieval Ireland* (London, 1968)); 1513 (Edmund Curtis, *A history of medieval Ireland from 1086 to 1513* (2nd ed., London, 1938); James Lydon, *Ireland in the later middle ages* (Dublin, 1973)); c.1515 (Philip Wilson, *The beginning of modern Ireland* (London, 1912)); 1494-1541 (James Lydon, *The lordship of Ireland in the middle ages* (Dublin, 1972)).

[8] The standard survey, K.W. Nicholls, *Gaelic and gaelicised Ireland in the middle ages* (Dublin, 1972; revised ed., Dublin, 2003), extends into the late 16th century.

[9] English historians have usually been more cautious about identifying a specific date as the point of transition from medieval to early modern. An exception is M.H. Keen, *England in the later middle ages* (London, 1973) which concludes with the comment that in political terms 1485 was 'a useful dividing line', and that the experience of an adult living 'under Henry VII was different in quality from that of a man who reached maturity in 1450 or 1460' (p. 513). A common response has been to sidestep the problem by labelling the period after the dynasty: thus, early modern began in the Tudor period, but precisely when is not spelled out. For other examples of surveys in which the title appears to tie the transition to particular dates, see Bertie Wilkinson, *The later middle ages in England 1216-1485* (London, 1977); J.A.F. Thomson, *The transformation of medieval England 1370-1529* (London, 1983); Robert Bucholz and Newton Key, *Early Modern England 1485-1714: A Narrative History* (Oxford, 2003); Jacqueline Eales, *Women in early modern England, 1500-1700* (London, 1998); Joan Thirsk, *Food in early modern England: phases, fads, fashions, 1500-1760* (London, 2007).

are certainly into early modern, and likewise with the leading figures of his reign – his first chief minister, Cardinal Wolsey, for instance, or the humanist Sir Thomas More. Inflation and demographic growth were certainly under way by the 1520s, and the Reformation Parliament first met in 1529.

I suppose one way of reconciling these differing chronologies of medieval and early modern is to suggest that, within the developing Tudor monarchy, the impact of those changes which we see as early modern is felt earlier and more consistently in the Tudor core territory of lowland England than in a peripheral region like the English Pale in Ireland. And it is felt even later in Gaelic Ireland which only became part of a Tudor kingdom from the 1540s onwards. Some kind of case could also be made for 1534 as a watershed in the other Tudor frontier region, the English far north. There, too, the traditional ruling magnate, Lord Dacre, was replaced in 1534 and crown government was reorganized in the aftermath of another major rebellion, the Pilgrimage of Grace in 1536-7, which also reflected the impact of the Reformation in the region.[10] In the far north, however, the impact of Tudor rule had been more consistently felt – not always to the region's advantage – from at least 1489 onwards.[11]

Very evidently, English historiography is more influenced than its Irish counterpart by modernization theory, castigating 'overmighty subjects' like the Percy earls of Northumberland as backward and feudal and dismissing the liberties and regalities of the English far north as feudal anachronisms.[12] Thus, according to John Guy, the punishment in Star Chamber in 1525 of Thomas Lord Dacre 'marked the end of the age of the medieval robber baron'. Elsewhere, the disciplining of the border surnames is characterized as a Tudor response 'to a mediaeval problem'.[13] In reality, however, the rule and defence of long landed frontiers remained no less a problem for the allegedly modernizing Tudors than it was for

---

[10] S.G. Ellis, *Tudor frontiers and noble power: the making of the British state* (Oxford, 1995) offers a comparative analysis of the English far north and the English Pale in Ireland and identifies the events of 1534 as marking a crisis in both regions.

[11] A.J. Pollard, *North-eastern England during the Wars of the Roses: lay society, war, and politics 1450-1500* (Oxford, 1990), ch. 15 offers a very positive assessment of Henry Tudor's interventions.

[12] S.G. Ellis, 'Civilizing Northumberland: representations of Englishness in the Tudor state' in *Journal of Historical Sociology*, xii (1999), pp 103-27 offers a critique of the modern literature: see esp. pp 103-8, 121-3.

[13] J.A. Guy, *The Cardinal's Court: the impact of Thomas Wolsey in Star Chamber* (Hassocks, 1977), p. 123; Ralph Robson, *The rise and fall of the English highland clans: Tudor responses to a mediaeval problem* (Edinburgh, 1989).

continental rulers: successive Tudor monarchs manifestly failed in their duty to do justice to and to defend their subjects in these border regions, notwithstanding the depiction of Tudor centralization as modern and progressive. By contrast, for Irish historians Tudor centralization was 'a bad thing': it brought about the end of 'aristocratic home rule' and the eclipse of ruling magnates like Kildare, although a succession of able earls of Ormond ensured that 'Butler feudal power' (so David Edwards describes it) enjoyed an Indian summer in Elizabethan Ireland.[14]

If we simply use the terms 'medieval' and 'early modern' as a kind of shorthand to refer to a range of concepts and developments which are seen as essentially one or the other, then they may well be useful. We need something to describe periods of three or four centuries. But much less helpful is the attempt to look at a relatively short period in terms of a transition from medieval to early modern. It needs to be remembered that the events and developments which are classified in one national historiography as medieval or early modern may find no echo in another. Periodization is not fixed: it varies quite considerably from one national historiography to another.[15] In Finland, for instance, the middle ages are thought to have begun around 1150, when Finnish pre-history ended; and in Latvia the middle ages soldiered on until around 1800, when modern history began. So 'medieval' is a pretty elastic concept. The concept of 'early modern' is even more problematic: many national historiographies simply do not use it. A more common periodization is from medieval history to modern history to contemporary history. Granted, in some countries 'modern history' covers the same chronological span as 'early modern' (*storia moderna* in Italy covers 1492 to 1789, for instance, before which there is Renaissance history from c.1350 onwards, and following which there is *storia contemporanea*): but in other countries 'modern history' continues until 1945 when 'contemporary history' begins. In some

---

[14] Vincent P. Carey, *Surviving the Tudors: the 'wizard' earl of Kildare and English rule in Ireland, 1537-1586* (Dublin, 2002); David Edwards, *The Ormond lordship in County Kilkenny 1515-1642: the rise and fall of Butler feudal power* (Dublin, 2003). 'Aristocratic home rule' was the description of Edmund Curtis (*History of Medieval Ireland*, ch. 15), but the later depiction of this period of rule through local magnates as 'aristocratic autonomy' or 'the Kildare ascendancy' reflects many of the sentiments.

[15] The following comments reflect the work on periodization of CLIOHnet, the European History Network, summarized on the Network's website (www.clioh.net) in the form of a table (http://www.stm.unipi.it/programmasocrates/cliohnet/clioh/table.htm) and a map (http://www.stm.unipi.it/programmasocrates/cliohnet/clioh/table/map.htm).

countries, modern or early modern is associated with the Reformation, and not just in western Europe. The concept of an Early Bourgeois Revolution associated with the Peasants War in Germany in 1525 may have collapsed with communism, but in the reunified Germany the Radical Reformation is still linked in some circles to a Revolution of the Common Man which is distinctly early modern.[16] And in some eastern European countries, given that there was no Reformation in Orthodox Christianity, there are some very different periodizations.

Over the past seven years, I have co-edited with Czech, German, Greek, Icelandic, and Italian historians seven multi-authored volumes on European history. These included in total well over a hundred essays by scholars from most European countries.[17] For two of these volumes,[18] where the contributors were mainly British/Irish and German, it proved possible to make meaningful use of the concept of 'early modern', because there was broad agreement about what this meant in terms of early-modern state formation. For the other volumes, however, it would have been impossible to organize them by period, in terms of medieval or early modern sections, because of the significant discrepancies in regard to usage and meaning in the different national traditions. It is perhaps also not widely known that even the accepted traditions of historical argument vary quite widely from one historiography to the next. By contrast with British 'nuts and bolts', the Germans will define their terms and concepts, while the French will proceed by thesis, antithesis, and synthesis after an

---

[16] Cf. Max Steinmetz, 'Theses on the Early Bourgeois Revolution in Germany, 1476-1535' in Bob Scribner and Gerhard Benecke (eds.), *The German Peasant War 1525 – new viewpoints* (London, 1979), pp 9-18; Peter Blickle, 'The "Peasant War" as the Revolution of the Common Man – Theses' ibid., pp 19-22; Peter Blickle, *The Revolution of 1525: the German Peasants' War from a new perspective* (Baltimore, 1985); Guenter Vogler, *Thomas Muentzer* (Berlin, 1989).

[17] (co-edited, with Guðmundur Halfdánarson and A.K. Isaacs) *Citizenship in historical perspective* (Pisa, 2006); (co-edited, with Raingard Eßer) *Frontiers and the Writing of History, 1500-1850* (Hannover-Laatzen, 2006); (co-edited, with Lud'a Klusáková) *Frontiers and identities: exploring the research area* (Pisa, 2006); (co-edited, with Lud'a Klusáková) *Imagining frontiers: contesting identities* (Pisa, 2007); (co-edited, with Raingard Eßer, J.-F. Berdah and Miloš Řezník) *Frontiers, regions and nations in Europe* (Pisa, 2009); (co-edited, with Iakovos Michailidis) *Regional and Transnational History in Europe* (Pisa, 2011); (co-edited, with Raingard Eßer) *Frontiers and border regions in early modern Europe* (Hannover, 2013).

[18] S.G. Ellis and Raingard Eßer (eds.), *Frontiers and the Writing of History, 1500-1850* (Hannover-Laatzen, 2006); Raingard Eßer and S.G. Ellis (eds.) *Frontiers and border regions in early modern Europe* (Hannover, 2013).

arresting (and often untranslatable) opening section which I call the 'cappuccino effect'. And until relatively recently, all across eastern Europe the purpose of history writing was chiefly to confirm the lessons of history which saw the inevitable rise to higher forms of society culminating in Socialism.

So, all in all, it does not help much at all to talk in terms of a medieval/early modern divide because the boundary between the two varies from one national historiography to the next and is in any case self-referential. In part, the reason for this is that the different national historiographies generally also incorporate what may be described as a 'national agenda', that is, a preoccupation with a range of themes and developments which – viewed teleologically – are seen as fundamental to such themes as the rise of the nation, the development of national identity, or the assembly of the national territory. The periodization of developments into medieval, early modern, and modern is unconsciously tied through the 'national agenda' to the various phases in the rise of the nation. Thus, the early modern phase commonly focuses on 'the emergence of the nation state'. In terms of English history, this is usually interpreted as unifying the state by means of administrative centralization and uniformity, including the building of a state church; but in Ireland the focus is more on building the Catholic nation from the medieval two nations in reaction to English colonialism.[19] And as was very apparent in the so-called Revisionist Debate, historians of Ireland are frequently suspicious of new approaches which might seem to cut across the 'national agenda'.[20] One example was the reaction to Ute Lotz-Heumann's application to Ireland of confessionalization – seen in German historiography as an aspect of early modern state formation – implying changes to periodization and a rejection of traditional claims for early modern Ireland's unique status in defying the principle of *cuius regio eius religio*.[21] More normally, though, it so happens that what we see as medieval or early modern in England and

---

[19] Cf. John Guy, *Tudor England* (Oxford, 1988); A.G.R. Smith, *The emergence of a nation state: the commonwealth of England 1529-1660* (2nd ed., London, 1997); R.D. Edwards, *Church and state in Tudor Ireland* (Dublin, 1935).

[20] See esp., Ciaran Brady (ed.), *Interpreting Irish history: the debate on historical revisionism 1938-1994* (Dublin, 1994).

[21] Ute Lotz-Heumann, *Die doppelte Konfessionalisierung in Irland: Konflikt und Koexistenz im 16. und in der ersten Hälfte des 17. Jahrhunderts* (Tübingen, 2000); Helga Robinson-Hammerstein, 'The confessionalisation of Ireland? Assessment of a paradigm' in *Irish Historical Studies*, xxxii (2000-01), pp 567-78. See also K.S. Bottigheimer and Ute Lotz-Heumann, 'The Irish Reformation in European perspective' in *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte*, lxxxix (1998), pp 268-309.

Ireland more or less agree and coincide. But that is because the two countries were either part of the one Tudor state, and so shaped by the same events and developments, or in the case of Gaelic Ireland they were closely influenced by events in that state. It is not because there are quintessentially medieval or early modern developments, or a common periodization throughout Europe, much less elsewhere.

In the circumstances, perhaps the best I can do to try and make some sense of this question about how helpful or otherwise I find this division between medieval and early modern is to offer some personal reflections on my research and writing in the context of Irish and British historiography more generally. Surveying the 120+ articles and books I have published since 1976, I see that I have used the description 'medieval' or 'early modern' in the titles of only nine of them, with some slight preference for 'medieval' in regard to articles published in Ireland, and a couple of items which include the description 'early modern' which were published in continental Europe.[22] Far more commonly, though, I make use of 'Tudor' as a chronological descriptor, or I simply supply two dates to indicate the chronological span. That, I think, is pretty revealing of

---

[22] 'Taxation and defence in late medieval Ireland: the survival of scutage' in *Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland*, cvii (1977), pp 5-28; 'Nationalist historiography and the English and Gaelic worlds in the late middle ages' in *Irish Historical Studies*, xxv (1986-87), pp 1-18 [reprinted in Ciarán Brady (ed.), *Interpreting Irish history: the debate on Historical Revisionism 1938-1994* (Blackrock, 1994), pp 161-80]; 'Ionadaíocht i bparlaimint na hÉireann ag deireadh na meán-aoise' [Representation in the Irish parliament in the late middle ages] in *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy*, xci (1991), sect. C, pp 297-302; 'Racial discrimination in later medieval Ireland' in Guðmundur Hálfdanarson (ed.), *Racial discrimination and ethnicity in European history* (Pisa, 2003), pp 21-32 [translation in modern Greek: 'Phyletikes diakriseis sten Irlandia ton teleutaion chronon tou Mesaiona' in Guðmundur Hálfdanarson (ed.), *Phyletikes Diakriseis sten Europaïke Historia* (Epikentro, 2006), pp 53-76]; 'Religion and identity in early modern Ireland' in Ausma Cimdiņa (ed.), *Religion and political change in Europe: past and present* (Pisa, 2003), pp 57-74; 'Building the nation: patriotism and national identity in early modern Ireland' in Robert von Friedeburg (ed.), *'Patria' und 'Patrioten' vor dem Patriotismus: Pflichten, Rechte, Glauben und die Reckonfigurierung europäische Gemeinwesen im 17. Jahrhundert* (Wiesbaden 2005), pp 169-91; 'A view of the Irish language: language and history in Ireland from the middle ages to the present' in A.K. Isaacs (ed.), *Language and identities in historical perspective* (Pisa, 2005), pp 67-78; (with Raingard Esser) 'Introduction: early modern frontiers in comparative context' in S.G. Ellis and Raingard Esser (eds.), *Frontiers and the Writing of History, 1500-1850* (Hannover-Laatzen, 2006), pp 9-20; (with Raingard Esser (eds.)), *Frontier and border regions in early modern Europe* (Hannover, 2013).

my preferences. I am also most comfortable in writing about developments in England and Ireland in the early Tudor period, specifically from 1485 (when early modern is most commonly held to have begun in English historiography) to 1534 (when the middle ages is usually held to have ended in Irish historiography). And in terms of a wider chronological span, I mostly study the 15th and 16th centuries, which is perhaps unusual: university lectureships in Ireland and Britain are usually advertised as later medieval – the two or three centuries to 1500 – or as early modern – the two or three centuries from 1500 onwards.

Looking back on things, I can see a number of reasons why my career developed the way it did, straddling this medieval/early modern divide. My initial training was as an English Reformation historian with Chris Haigh. I was also very influenced early on by the work of Sir Geoffrey Elton, who was the external examiner for my 1974 MA thesis on the Kildare rebellion, 1534-5.[23] Haigh had also been Elton's student, and my PhD thesis was heavily influenced by Elton's *Tudor revolution in government*. Even the title of my book-from-the-thesis, on English government in Ireland, was Eltonian.[24] So in that sense, my early work was very much as an English early modernist, reflecting the normal assumptions of the English 'national agenda'. There was just one small problem: it was on Ireland! And Ireland had its own 'national agenda', and this period was, on the whole, classified as medieval. I remember discussing the problem with Geoffrey on one occasion, and his response was that there was no reason why I shouldn't become a medievalist for the time being. In fact, there were a couple of reasons why this seemed a good idea at the time. One was that I had joined the Galway History Department in 1976. We then had a grand total of five lecturers – including Nicholas Canny (the established Irish early modernist who said I could teach what I liked before the 1560s and Sir Henry Sidney),[25] and Gearóid Mac Niocaill (who had an astonishing range from early medieval to mid-17th century, but didn't much mind if I wanted to teach Anglo-Norman Ireland). At the time, we really didn't have the library resources for me to research Tudor England and so I continued working on Ireland but moved backwards in terms of my teaching and research interests: almost all my early papers on Irish history cover the period from the 1390s to 1534.

---

[23] 'The Kildare rebellion, 1534' (unpublished MA thesis, Manchester, 1974).
[24] *Reform and Revival: English Government in Ireland, 1470-1534* (London, 1986).
[25] Canny's first monograph, on the viceroyalties of Sir Henry Sidney, had then just appeared: *The Elizabethan conquest of Ireland: a pattern established 1565-76* (Hassocks, 1976).

A second reason why I moved backwards concerned both the character of the surviving evidence for one of my early research interests, which was administrative history (inspired by Elton), and also the influence on me of the leading Irish historians who worked on this material. David Quinn was encouraging, but he was largely focused on America by this stage.[26] And I also found Jimmy Lydon very approachable and stimulating to talk to: even though I disagreed with his ideas about Anglo-Irish identity, I was very influenced by him in regard to ideas about marcher lordship and frontier society. Later on, when I began to work on the north of England (our library holdings had since improved!), I applied to this region some of the ideas about marcher lordship and society that I got from Lydon and also from Robin Frame.[27]

Another influence was that no one else seemed interested in what was almost a historiographical 'black hole' between the medievalists' preoccupation with the rise and fall of English lordship in Ireland and the early modernists' focus on the Tudor conquest. There wasn't even a decent political narrative of events in Ireland between, say, 1495 (when Otway-Ruthven's *History of Medieval Ireland* petered out with the passage of Poynings' Law) and 1534 (when the early modernists became interested).[28] Poynings' Law, passed in the parliament held by Sir Edward Poynings in 1494-95, strengthened considerably the king's control over the meeting and operation of the Irish parliament by enacting that no parliament was to meet in Ireland unless previously licensed under the great seal of England and that no statute was to be enacted there unless first submitted by the governor and council in Ireland for approval by the king and council in England. In order to understand the events of the early Tudor period, however, I thought it was important to look at the late medieval background. The available documentation is also an odd mix between the kinds of records which Irish medievalists like to use, the Latin

---

[26] Quinn was later persuaded back to write the political narrative for the period 1460-1534 in Art Cosgrove (ed.), *A new history of Ireland. II Medieval Ireland 1169-1534* (Oxford, 1987), chs. 21-4.

[27] In this context, papers which particularly impressed me included James Lydon, 'The problem of the frontier in medieval Ireland' in *Topic: A Journal of the Liberal Arts*, xiii (1967), pp 5-55; Robin Frame, 'Power and society in the lordship of Ireland, 1272-1377' in *Past & Present*, no. 76 (Aug. 1977), pp 3-33.

[28] D.B. Quinn, 'Henry VIII and Ireland, 1509-34' in *Irish Historical Studies*, xii (1960-61), pp 318-44 offered a reliable account of that topic. Bridging the gap between Otway-Ruthven, *A history of medieval Ireland* (London, 1968) and the start of Henry VIII's reign, however, there was only Donough Bryan, *The Great Earl of Kildare: Gerald Fitzgerald 1456-1513* (Dublin, 1933) and the opening parts of Richard Bagwell, *Ireland under the Tudors* (3 vols., London, 1885-90).

court rolls, and those on which the early modernists tend to rely, the State Papers. This in turn raises the question of the kind of records we use as the basis for our historical investigations. In terms of evidence, one of the differences between medieval and early modern is the appearance in the 16th century of new types of evidence and records and also more of them. These records are also much more likely to be in English than in Latin or Anglo-Norman French. The State Papers, Domestic, and the State Papers, Ireland, are seen as a quintessentially early modern type of record associated with the advent of new ideas and new ways of thinking – but in part this was because they were reassembled that way in the 19th century.[29] Beginning in Henry VIII's reign, there are also the regular reports of the new resident ambassadors to the English court, written to advise their masters, the Renaissance princes elsewhere in Europe. I find the reports of the Imperial ambassador, Eustace Chapuys, particularly useful, even though he is frequently ill-informed about events in the English far north or in Ireland.[30] As regards Ireland, there was also a temptation for historians to argue that because there was clearly a reform agenda among the Palesmen in the earliest of the surviving State Papers, Ireland series (SP60), this reform agenda must be new, because it appears in these new State Papers which, indeed, is precisely why the State Papers have survived from then on. But the argument is circular. What we have from 1509 is simply the survival of a different kind of evidence, not a new set of ideas. The same reform agenda, I think, appears in the address of the Irish parliament to King Edward IV in 1474 but it is in a different kind of record.[31] By and large, early modernists do not look at 15th-century parliament rolls, but far more parliament rolls survived from the 15th century than from the 16th century.[32] And as regards the State Papers,

---

[29] G.R. Elton, *England, 1200-1640* (Cambridge, 1969), pp 66-72, 75; R.W. Dudley Edwards and O'Dowd (eds.), *Sources for early modern Irish history 1534-1641* (Cambridge, 1985), pp 137-8.

[30] *Calendar of state papers, etc. relating to negotiations between England and Spain*, ed. G.A. Bergenroth *et al.* (London, 1862-1954); but see also the comments in Elton, *England, 1200-1640*, p. 74. TNA has a modern transcript of Chapuys' despatches: PRO31/18/3/1.

[31] TNA, C47/10/29 (printed, Donough Bryan, *The Great Earl of Kildare: Gerald Fitzgerald 1456-1513* (Dublin, 1933), pp 18-22.

[32] Most of the 15th-century parliament rolls survived into modern times and have been edited as H.F. Berry (ed.), *Statutes and ordinances, and acts of the parliament of Ireland, King John to Henry V* (Dublin, 1907); H.F. Berry (ed.), *Statute rolls of the parliament of Ireland, reign of King Henry VI* (Dublin, 1910); (H.F. Berry (eds.), *Statute rolls of the parliament of Ireland, first to the twelfth years of the reign of King Edward IV* (Dublin, 1914); J.F. Morrissey (ed.), *Statute*

similar types of letters do in fact survive for the 15th century, but in nothing like the same numbers.[33] In Ireland, too, there are the warrants to the great seal, known as Fiants, from 1521 onwards: most were calendared before their destruction in 1922. These are the Irish equivalents of the English signed bills, and in this case we know that this class of document was not new in the 16th century: the difference is that Fiants survive in some quantity from 1521 onwards but not before. [34]

This gap between the medievalists' preference for court rolls and early modernists' preoccupation with State Papers also skews the writing of history. There is no doubt that the State Papers are more colourful than the dry formulaic entries of exchequer memoranda rolls, and being in English they are also easier to use – at least, they are for us early modernists, who are less versed in medieval Latin.[35] By and large, the traditional court rolls also survive for the 16th century, but in Ireland the destruction of the Four Courts in 1922 has skewed the pattern of record survival: for some types of court roll, more now survives for the 15th century than for the 16th century.[36] But as regards the State Papers, the problem is that we are not comparing like with like here. For the most part, the Tudor State Papers

---

rolls of the parliament of Ireland, twelfth and thirteenth to the twenty-first and twenty-second years of the reign of King Edward IV (Dublin, 1939); Philomena Connolly (ed.), *Statute rolls of the Irish parliament Richard III-Henry VIII* (Dublin, 2002). There were far fewer parliaments after 1494 and they passed less legislation, but the more important statutes passed by 16th-century parliaments were printed in *The statutes at large passed in the parliaments held in Ireland*, i (Dublin, 1786). The only surviving roll, for the parliament of 1536-7, is published in full in Connolly (ed.), *Statute rolls of the Irish parliament Richard III-Henry VIII*, pp 147-301.

[33] Elton, *England, 1200-1640*, p. 68.

[34] *The Irish Fiants of the Tudor sovereigns during the reigns of Henry VIII, Edward VI, Philip & Mary, and Elizabeth I* (4 vols., Dublin, 1994). Cf. Edwards and O'Dowd (eds.), *Sources for early modern Irish history*, pp 17, 20.

[35] Elton, *England, 1200-1640*, pp 69-70.

[36] For instance, J.F. Lydon, 'A survey of the memoranda rolls of the Irish exchequer, 1294-1509' in *Analecta Hibernica*, xxiii (1966), pp 49-134 lists the various surviving extracts and calendars of this series to 1509. Much the most important were the 43 volumes of the Record Commissioners' calendar (ibid., pp 51, 67-9); but unfortunately, this calendar did not continue beyond 1509. For the attempt to reconstruct the medieval Irish chancery rolls destroyed in 1922, see CIRCLE, a calendar of Irish chancery letters, c.1244-1509 (http://chancery.tcd.ie). The Victorian calendar of the Tudor rolls from 1509 to 1603 is much less useful: James Morrin (ed.), *Calendar of patent and close rolls of chancery in Ireland, Henry VIII to 18th Elizabeth* and *Elizabeth, 19 year to end of reign* (2 vols., Dublin, 1861, 1862). For parliament rolls, see above, note 33.

are not providing a factual record of the operation of English government like the chancery rolls, the inquisitions, or the treasurers' accounts. Rather, they are developing an argument, and Tudor practice in this regard was to throw as much mud as possible in the hope that some would stick. So it is very easy to paint a wholly misleading picture of life in the early Tudor borderlands simply by rummaging around among the State Papers for evidence to fit a preconceived theory – a theory frequently suggested by 'the national agenda'. It also needs to be remembered that when in Tudor English it says that something was 'in manner' waste, or dead, or empty, the introduction of the words 'in manner' represent a very substantial qualification on what follows. In some respects, therefore, the attempt to document the transition from medieval to early modern by splicing together these two types of evidence so as to construct a grand narrative has had some unfortunate consequences. A telling example is the notion of English decline in Ireland and the origins of the Tudor conquest.

Viewed from a medieval vantage point in the mid-14th century, an account of later medieval Ireland organized around a grand narrative of the rise and fall of English lordship seems an obvious choice.[37] In this context, the start of the Tudor conquest in 1534 not only marks the end of the middle ages, it also signals the belated English response to the gradual disintegration of English lordship in later medieval Ireland. Likewise, from an early-modern vantage point in the early 17th century, 1534 looks equally convincing as a watershed because, quite clearly, the Kildare rebellion sparked a major reorganization of English government in Ireland, and early modernists – not inclined to look too closely at these medieval Latin court rolls – were happy to accept the verdict of medievalists that until 1534 English lordship remained in steep decline. But this consensus was actually based on very flimsy foundations, and it also constituted a kind of tunnel vision which ignored important perspectives suggested by the work of early Tudor specialists in England.

Even ignoring the remarkably sudden transition of the English of Ireland in 1534 from Anglo-Irish to Old English,[38] some awkward

---

[37] The best succinct narrative is James Lydon, *The lordship of Ireland in the middle ages* (2nd ed., Dublin, 2003), but the approach is a commonplace.
[38] Art Cosgrove (ed.), *A new history of Ireland. II Medieval Ireland 1169-1534* (Oxford, 1987) chose to label as 'Anglo-Irish' the medieval settlers who normally described themselves as 'English'. The same community are described as 'Old English' in T.W. Moody, F.X. Martin, and F.J. Byrne (eds.), *A new history of Ireland. III Early Modern Ireland 1534-1691* (Oxford, 1976), with the result that individual nobles and gentry who appear in both volumes appear to undergo a change of nationality in 1534.

questions remain. I will offer two examples here. The first relates to the English Pale, first so described during the governorship of Sir Edward Poynings in 1494-95 on the analogy of the English Pale at Calais, where Poynings had previously been governor, the first known reference to which is 1493. There was such a preoccupation with charting the origins of *the Pale* as a product of medieval English decline that obvious questions – such as what the term actually meant – went unanswered: thus, one chapter in *The New History of Ireland*, volume 2 is entitled 'The emergence of *the Pale*, 1399-1447'.[39] Yet contemporary English accounts usually offered a tripartite division of medieval Ireland, into 'the land of war' occupied by 'the wild Irish' or 'Irish enemies'; the marches; and 'the land of peace' inhabited by 'loyal English lieges'. By the 1420s, 'the land of peace' was also described as 'the maghery' (transliteration of *machaire*, Gaelic for 'a plain' or 'level ground') or 'the four obedient shires' (the four counties surrounding Dublin). The English terminology is important: it describes an island divided between two nations by a typical medieval march, that is, a fluid and shifting border region with a more militarized population protected by a system of castles, towerhouses, and fortified bridges, and defence in depth. It was supported by an official vocabulary which included a developed rhetoric of difference so as to highlight the distinction between subjects and aliens, English and Irish, and civility and savagery. But the concept of an 'English Pale' is a very different concept. For a start, the name was 'the English Pale', not 'the Pale': the adjective is important. It constituted a value judgment by Poynings and his troops on the region's English character. It also implies a precisely delineated area, like the defensive fortifications of early Tudor Calais, not the kind of defence in depth implied by a medieval march. So what we have here, then, is not a continuation of medieval decline but the creation of a continuous defended frontier dividing two nations, and with similar characteristics to the Anglo-Scottish frontier.[40]

This brings us to the question of the medieval frontier. In Ireland, frontiers were of course 'a bad thing'. They were an 'unusable past', since

---

[39] Cosgrove (ed.), *New history of Ireland. II*, ch. 18.
[40] These points are developed in S.G. Ellis, 'An English gentleman and his community: Sir William Darcy of Platten' in Vincent P. Carey and Ute Lotz-Heumann (ed.), *Taking Sides? Colonial and confessional mentalités in early modern Ireland. Essays in honour of Karl S. Bottigheimer* (Dublin, 2003), pp 22-5; idem, 'Region and frontier in the English state: Co. Meath and the English Pale, 1460-1542' in Helge Vidar Holm, Sissel Lægreid, and Torgeir Skorgen, (eds.), *The Borders of Europe: Hegemony, Aesthetics, and Border Poetics* (Aarhus, 2012), pp 49-54, 66-7.