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Irish Elites in the Nineteenth Century

Ciaran O'Neill
EDITOR



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Contents

| | |
|--|----|
| LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS | 9 |
| LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS | 11 |
| LIST OF CONTRIBUTORS | 13 |
| ACKNOWLEDGMENTS | 16 |
| <i>Ciaran O'Neill</i> Introduction | 17 |
| ELITES AND THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT | |
| <i>Andrew Tierney</i> Architectures of gentility in nineteenth-century Ireland | 31 |
| <i>Susan Galavan</i> Building Victorian Dublin: Meade & Son and the expansion of the city | 51 |
| RETHINKING THE LANDED ESTATE | |
| <i>Kevin Mc Kenna</i> Elites, ritual and the legitimation of power on an Irish landed estate, 1855-90 | 68 |
| <i>Maeve O'Riordan</i> Assuming control: elite women as household managers in late nineteenth-century Ireland | 83 |
| <i>Joanne McEntee</i> 'Gentlemen practisers': solicitors as elites in mid-nineteenth-century Irish landed society | 99 |

LOCAL ELITES AND ASSOCIATIONAL CULTURE

- Matthew Potter*
 'The most perfect specimen of civilised nature': the Shannon Estuary
 Group – elite theory and practice 113
- Felix M. Larkin*
 Double helix: two elites in politics and journalism in Ireland, 1870–1918 125
- Pamela Emerson*
 The three Fs – founders, fellowship and finance: the influence of book
 club members on Belfast's civic identity in the nineteenth century 137
- Brian Griffin*
 The Big House at play: archery as an elite pursuit from the 1830s to
 the 1870s 153

WRITING THE DECLINE

- Patrick Maume*
 The ruins of Youghal: Canon Samuel Hayman, antiquarianism and
 the decline of Irish Anglican ascendancy 172
- Anna Pilz*
 Lady Gregory's fans: the Irish Protestant landed class and negotiations
 of power 185

EXPORTING IRISH ELITES

- Neil Smith and Mervyn Busted*
 A diasporic elite – the emergence of an Irish middle class in nineteenth-
 century Manchester 197
- Raphaël Ingelbien*
 Men who did not exist? Irish tourists and the definition of a
 national elite 209
- Timothy G. McMahon*
 A new role for Irish Anglicans in the later nineteenth century:
 the HCMS and imperial opportunity 222

PORTRAYING THE POLITICAL ELITES

- Fintan Cullen*
 Visual parody and political commentary: John Doyle and
 Daniel O'Connell 233
- Nicola K. Morris*
 'A *rara avis*': Jeremiah Jordan, Methodist and Nationalist MP 248

REVISITING BLOCKED MOBILITY

- John Hutchinson*
 The Irish revival, elite competition and the First World War 259
- INDEX 275

Introduction

CIARAN O'NEILL

A century ago, a rich Irish trader, the manufacturer, even the lawyer or the doctor – unless by chance he could produce a pedigree – held little place in the social scheme; but today his granddaughters flaunt it with the best.

Katherine Cecil Thurston, 1908¹

We live in an age when 'elite' has become a multi-purpose and no-purpose word, a diluted concept that is often equated with everyday services or video-game culture.² It can refer to any powerful group or sectional interest in society, and is often asked to do so. The problem is now so acute that one of the leading British academics in the area, John Scott, has argued that the word 'elite' is one of the 'most misused in the sociological lexicon', leading many scholars to conclude that the concept has become 'completely vacuous and without any significant analytical value'.³ As if to illustrate the point, Ireland's premier business directory lists companies as diverse as 'Elite Copier Services' (Celbridge, Co. Kildare), 'Elite Dental Practice' (Belfast), and 'Elite Oil Products' (Tuam, Co. Galway).

This is the first volume of collected essays to directly address the topic of elites, elite behaviour, or elite formation in nineteenth-century Ireland. This flourishing of interest in a neglected topic is thanks, in part, to the publication of Fergus Campbell's timely study of the 'Irish establishment' between 1879 and 1914.⁴ Campbell's book stands alone as the only full-length attempt to classify an Irish elite. The present collection of essays seeks, therefore, to build on Campbell's work. This will be done chronologically, by extending the parameters further back into the nineteenth century, and thematically, by offering examples of Irish elites which fall outside of Campbell's categorization. Before allowing the contributors to go about this task in their own voice, this introductory essay surveys the literature in this area, defines what is meant by concepts such as 'power' and 'elite' in this volume, and points to areas that might benefit from further analysis.

¹ Katherine Cecil Thurston, *The fly on the wheel* (New York, 1908), p. 3. ² In this volume, I have chosen to use 'elite' rather than the more correct 'élite', respecting the conventions of much of the English-language scholarship on the subject. ³ John Scott, 'The transformation of the British economic elite' in Mattei Dogan (ed.), *Elite configurations at the apex of power* (Leiden, 2003), p. 155. ⁴ Fergus Campbell, *The Irish establishment, 1879–1914* (Oxford, 2009).

ELITES AND IRISH HISTORIOGRAPHY

How is it possible that so little has been written on the subject of Irish elites? The temptation here is to bemoan or at least acknowledge the usual factors whenever a yawning gap is pointed out in Irish historiography. These factors include an infatuation with political history, the conservatism and caution that has been characteristic of the historical profession in Ireland, the relatively late development of the discipline of sociology in Irish universities, the continuing sorry state of disciplines such as social history and historical sociology, and even the simple dearth of Irish historians gainfully employed. All those factors are, of course, relevant, though the twentieth-century reticence to explore issues such as social stratification and social mobility in Ireland ought not to be dismissed as easily as that, reflecting as it does a general unwillingness to admit to an enduringly unequal society in the postcolonial context.⁵

Nonetheless, it is important to note that much of the history written in or about Ireland is skewed towards a fascination with the rich and most powerful in society. Students of Irish history can hardly complain of a shortage of biographies of charismatic leaders, chronicles of leading political parties or source material on landed families. There is, however, a distinct lack of theoretically sophisticated surveys of elite groups, reflective of a wider unwillingness to engage with perspectives or frameworks inspired by or drawn from other disciplines. Outside of Ireland, the topic has experienced three discernible peaks in twentieth-century scholarship. The first was inspired by the scholarship of Gaetano Mosca and Vilfredo Pareto, two Italian theorists whose work has subsequently become linked with the national socialist or fascist regimes, which, to some extent at least, appeared to take on board their ideas and then to apply them in a largely negative manner.⁶ Mosca and Pareto espoused a vertical, linear conception of power that sought to explain how, in their society, it came to be concentrated in the hands of so few. Theirs was not an overt critique of the process, however, rather accepting that all societies had been characterized by the dominance of a small cadre of leaders over the masses who were 'led' by them. The next upsurge was a more 'scientific', community-based approach pioneered by scholars such as C. Wright Mills and Floyd Hunter in 1950s America. Mills, in particular, stimulated American academics with his study of power relations among top US

5 The classic text for pre-Celtic-Tiger era social mobility in Ireland is still Richard Breen and Christopher T. Whelan, *Social class and social mobility in Ireland* (Dublin, 1996). For more on social mobility in twenty-first-century Ireland, see Richard Layte and Christopher T. Whelan, 'Class transformation and trends in social fluidity in the Republic of Ireland, 1973 to 1994' in Richard Breen (ed.), *Social mobility in Europe* (Oxford, 2004), ch. 7. 6 We could easily include Robert Michels, a former student of Max Weber, in this list of 'traditional' elite theories. The classic texts for these theorists are Robert Michels, *Political parties: a sociological study of the oligarchical tendencies of modern democracy*, trans. Eden & Cedar Paul (London, 1915, from 1911 original); Vilfredo Pareto, *The mind and society*, trans. Andrew Bongiorno et al. (London, 1935, from 1916 original); Gaetano Mosca, *The ruling class*, trans. Hannah D. Kahn and rev. by Arthur Livingstone (London, 1939, from 1896 original).

officials, politicians, and business tycoons in *The power elite* (1950). This book is now the ironic and unwitting inspiration behind the Forbes lists and other celebratory chronicles of accumulated wealth, but it was originally a strong critique of capitalism as well as a pioneering study of how power can be conceived of as something that can come to be wielded by a very select few with no prior conspiracy or cosy agreement. Mills, and those who followed him, were increasingly characterized as leftists, their community-focused work inspiring later 'democratic' theories of power by Robert A. Dahl and others. The last discernible peak in elite studies came in a more diffuse manner with the onset of neo-Marxian critiques of capitalist society in the 1970s, the theories of nationalism (most usually connected with the London School of Economics) and the re-imagining of Durkheim's 'French School of Sociology' by scholars such as Pierre Bourdieu and Victor Karady. Elite studies have fallen from the forefront of the social sciences in the past two decades, undermined by what Mike Savage and Karel Williams have termed the 'pincer movement' of, on the one hand, structuralist and post-structuralist critiques of the ability of established elites to remain dynamic actors in modern societies. The other 'pincer' was a methodological one, the rise of 'orthodox, positivist and neo-positivist social science'. The widespread use of quantitative source data, such as national statistical surveys, meant that the traditional conception of an identifiable or visible elite simply faded from academic discourse.⁷

To a great extent, all of these later scholars were preoccupied with institutional or infrastructural power, and committed to the study of those who peopled such hierarchies or were controlled by them. However, the work of scholars such as Pierre Bourdieu, Jürgen Habermas and Anthony Giddens all aimed to remodel earlier perceptions of the 'circulation of elites' as seen by Mosca and Pareto. This remodelling led to a greater interest in defining elites as plural rather than singular entities, with imprecise rather than precise boundaries and codes. Recent work on elites, therefore, has tended to emphasize their distinct institutional character, seeing them instead as 'politically diverse groups of national leaders'. This muddying of waters has arguably contributed to the word itself being so confused and inexact in its contemporary usage. It is also, however, the point at which this volume may be differentiated from the work of Campbell, whose characterization of the Irish elite is much closer to that of a 'closed' singular elite than any definition we will endorse. Following scholars such as John Higley and Robert D. Putnam, Irish elites may be defined much more loosely, as Trygve Gulbrandsen posits in relation to Norwegian society, as 'the holders of top positions in central institutions and organizations within significant sectors' of society.⁸ This definition, more elastic than others, allows us to

7 See Mike Savage and Karel Williams, 'Elites: remembered by capitalism and forgotten by social science' in Mike Savage and Karel Williams (eds), *Remembering elites* (Oxford, 2008), p. 3. 8 Trygve Gulbrandsen, 'Elite integration and institutional trust in Norway', *Comparative Sociology*, 6 (2007), 190–214 at 191. For the classic studies which prefer this more fragmented approach, see Robert D. Putnam, *The comparative study of political elites* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ, 1976); Michael G. Burton and John Higley, 'The elite variable in

conceive of power as something that is not doggedly maintained or monopolized by state forces, monarchies or hereditary stake-holders, but something altogether more fluid and difficult to characterize. The question of whether power and authority was coercive, legitimate or an inconvenient blend of both in nineteenth-century Ireland is one that goes right to the heart of the great debates of Irish history.

Yet Irish historiography has remained somewhat aloof from the international debate on the subject. Those scholars who *have* contributed to this debate in an Irish context have been greatly influenced by theories of nationalism and exercised more by the idea of theorizing the rival 'Catholic elite' than the dominant Protestant elite – which is often taken for granted as an elite *in situ* but also in irreversible decline. The potential problem with this interpretation is that it is an inherently present-centred approach, not incompatible with a nationalist viewpoint, and one which analyses nineteenth-century Irish society as if it ought to be taken for granted that an established elite of (mostly) Protestant composition was morally suspect and, in any case, doomed to failure and marking time before an inevitable Catholic takeover.

The issue of Irish elites barely arose until the 1980s, when both Tom Garvin and John Hutchinson produced full-length studies of aspirant nationalism (the radical sort by Garvin; the cultural sort by Hutchinson) in the second half of the nineteenth century.⁹ To a great extent, both of these studies honed in on the 'blocked mobility' theory of mass mobilization, popularized and modified by figures such as Miroslav Hroch, Ernest Gellner and Hutchinson's own mentor, Anthony D. Smith. Broadly speaking, the 'blocked mobility' thesis seeks to explain the radicalization and politicization of formerly excluded groups (usually intellectuals) who have found themselves suddenly eligible but nevertheless excluded from positions of power in an unequal and anti-meritocratic elite. It is, in other words, a way of seeing political or social revolution as a product of frustrated ambition and rising expectations. This thesis, when applied to a specifically Irish context, would, without some qualification, lead a believer to the conclusion that Catholic dominance was inevitable from the second half of the nineteenth century as greater access to elite positions became possible as a result of more widespread access to education. It would lead too, potentially, to the conclusion that the downward pressure exerted by a largely Protestant and 'alien' ascendancy was morally suspect, moribund and structurally doomed to failure. It rather neatly explains the 'surprise' of 1916 and the subsequent revolution to 1923, as well as the apparent collapse and dispersal of the ascendancy class after independence. Garvin, in particular, is seduced by this possibility, and by focusing his attention on the background of the revolutionary generation (by which he means a narrow stratum of advanced nationalists), he makes them exemplars of an entire generation of lower middle-class Catholics. The inference here is clear enough. Had there been a greater degree of upward social mobility available to the rising Catholic

democratic transitions and breakdowns', *American Sociological Review*, 54 (1989), 17–32.

⁹ Tom Garvin, *Nationalist revolutionaries in Ireland, 1858–1928* (Oxford, 1987); John Hutchinson, *The dynamics of cultural nationalism: the Gaelic revival and the creation of the Irish nation state* (London, 1987).

lower middle class, then the social revolution of 1916–23 would not have occurred. The wide acceptance of this thesis within Irish historiography has important implications for our analysis of Irish elites.

These studies were later modified by Senia Pašeta, who indirectly critiqued their depiction of a homogeneous rival Catholic elite in her influential monograph *Before the revolution* (1999), building on an earlier revision of Catholic 'penetration' into various elite groups in Lawrence McBride's *The greening of Dublin Castle* (1991). Pašeta and McBride, in pointing out what they saw as a greater diffusion of Catholic wealth and influence prior to Independence, posed a threat to the 'blocked mobility' reading of elite competition. These works, representing the bulk of sociologically informed historiography on the subject, have been widely cited and highly influential, and have remained largely unchallenged until the appearance of Campbell's *The Irish establishment* (2009).

Campbell's monograph represents a shift away from Pašeta and McBride, and a conscious return to the 'blocked mobility' thesis of Garvin and Hutchinson. Looking back from a distance of twenty-five years, Hutchinson replies to some of the subsequent criticism of his work in an essay included in this volume. While Hutchinson pointed to the importance of three 'cultural' revivals, Campbell's analysis rests on his identification of the six elite groups he considers the most influential in society – namely large landholders, top civil servants, police officers, leading religious figures, wealthy businessmen and politicians – and is based on an impressive control group of c.1,200 biographies. This 'positional analysis' leads Campbell to conclude (supported by statistical analysis) that Catholic penetration into the upper echelons of power and influence was, *pace* McBride and Pašeta, very limited between 1879 and 1914 and that power in nineteenth-century Ireland was something that was concentrated in the hands of a closed cartel, access into which was controlled according to a religious affiliation. His subsequent characterization of the Irish elite as illegitimate, unrepresentative and a 'head without a body' is therefore grounded in solid empirical research and constitutes a significant challenge to scholars interested in the area. This challenge is issued in admirably clear terms:

The Irish Revolution may have been partially directed against those Catholic Unionists and Home Rulers who had been assimilated into the Irish establishment. But the main target of the Irish Revolution was the British state in Ireland, which had presided over a society that continued to regard Irish Catholics as second-class citizens and denied them access to the positions in society to which – by virtue of their qualifications and talents – they were entitled.¹⁰

Arguing that Mosca's definition of an actively excluding 'closed elite' appears to have some application in the Irish case, Campbell states that 'the revolution in Ireland was

¹⁰ Campbell, *The Irish establishment*, p. 318.

a consequence of structural inequalities in Irish society at the beginning of the twentieth century, and of the discontent that some sections of Irish society felt at the time. If we are to take Campbell at his word, any meaningful exploration of an Irish elite prior to Independence would require its creator to acknowledge that the 'establishment' was a 'closed elite' of (mostly) Protestant composition, which actively excluded Catholics from its membership. If we are to reject this as a simplification of Irish history pre-1914, leaving aside the problematic use of imprecise terms such as 'Catholic Unionist' and the insistence that a 'revolution' took place, on what basis might we do so?

A MORE OPEN ELITE?

There are several points of contestation open to us as we search for a wider definition of Irish elites. The first, and most compelling, is the complete absence of women from the debate thus far. Of the work done on Irish elites, Campbell is the only one to really acknowledge this absence, before compounding it by excluding them from his analysis because 'in most cases women were formally excluded from positions of power'.¹¹ This constitutes a now unforgivable blind-spot in Irish historiography, as several important and relatively recent studies have demonstrated just how integral women were within elite culture.¹² Diane Urquhart's work on three generations of Ladies Londonderry and their role in pushing the political and social claims of their husbands, sons, and confidantes, is perhaps the most striking proof of salonnrière-style influence in an Irish context, but the exclusion of women from studies of power-relations is an absurdity that blights almost all scholarship on the subject, leading to a situation where the original (but contestable) oppression and subjugation is reinforced and in some cases worsened by the myopia of later scholarship.¹³ In the case of Irish history, if we continue to concentrate on the political system, the state bureaucracy, the military, the clergy, and the 'public sphere' in search of power, then we will, of course, continue to find it in male hands. If we conceive of power as 'influence', or indeed as an enabling or 'empowering' force rather than uniformly coercive or repressive, then more exciting and holistic work awaits us.

We must also address the question of a homogenous elite structure, the so-called 'closed elite'. In a nineteenth-century context, we can say that the state developed rapidly as a bureaucratic organization from the 1820s onwards at a gradually accelerating pace. State control over Irish lives was probably at its greatest in metropolitan

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 6. ¹² See Oonagh Walsh, *Anglican women in Dublin: philanthropy, politics and education in the early twentieth century* (Dublin, 2005); Diane Urquhart, *The ladies of Londonderry: women and political patronage* (London, 2007); *Women in Ulster politics, 1890-1940* (Dublin, 2000); Catherine Morris, *Alice Milligan and the Irish cultural revival* (Dublin, 2012).

¹³ For an excellent discussion on precisely this problem, see Amy Allen, 'Feminist perspectives on power' in Edward N. Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2011), <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2011/entries/feminist-power>.

and policed areas and at its weakest in rural and remote districts. The classic example of this is the infamous Maamtrasna murders, which took place very far from the gaze of the state, even at a point when the bureaucracy had reached relative sophistication in the early 1880s.¹⁴ We cannot, therefore, speak of a coherent or centralized state structure for much of the first half of the century. Critics of C. Wright Mills, such as Robert A. Dahl and Arnold C. Rose, saw this as a problem even in the twentieth century. Rose, challenging Mills' argument that a small closed elite controlled mid-twentieth-century America, argued that there were 'large-scale historical forces – often of an economic character – which constrain, limit, push and direct any society in ways beyond the control of any segment in it'. Rose pushed instead for a pluralistic understanding of the dispersal of power, maintaining that the substructure of an advanced society was only 'to a very limited extent manipulable by any one group'.¹⁵

This need for greater elasticity in relation to any definition of an 'Irish elite' paves the way for a discussion of relevant literature affecting the essays that follow. Perhaps the leading chronicler of Irish elites and elite institutions was the late R.B. McDowell, whose work on Trinity College Dublin and two socially exclusive Dublin clubs complements his earlier classic surveys of nineteenth-century state bureaucracy in *Public opinion and government policy, 1801-1846* (1952) and his indispensable *The Irish administration, 1801-1914* (1964).¹⁶ McDowell was a practitioner of a statist history at a time when the welfare state was at its peak, and his work remains the starting-point for those interested in how nineteenth-century administration developed in Ireland. In terms of history-from-below, the work of US scholars James S. Donnelly and Samuel Clark stands out for its critique of Irish social relations. Their 1979 collection of essays, *Irish peasants*, was a significant contribution to Irish social history and, for a moment, it seemed that the QUB historian K.H. Connell was finally to be aided in his pioneering work on the history of the excluded and forgotten Irish labouring classes.¹⁷ That never materialized, however, with much of the scholarship in this area remaining focused on rioting, social banditry and social protest.¹⁸ Influential and accomplished young historians such as Joe Lee and Paul Bew gradually relinquished their earlier social history tendencies in favour of pursuing political history, albeit with no diminution in the quality of their output.

¹⁴ See Jarlath Waldron, *Maamtrasna: the murders and the mystery* (Dublin, 1992). ¹⁵ Arnold M. Rose, *The power structure: political process in American society* (Oxford, 1967), p. 18.

¹⁶ R.B. McDowell, *Public opinion and government policy, 1801-1846* (London, 1952); *The Irish administration, 1801-1914* (London, 1964); *Land and learning: two Dublin clubs* (Dublin, 1993); R.B. McDowell and D.A. Webb, *Trinity College, Dublin, 1592-1952: an academic history* (Cambridge, 1982). ¹⁷ K.H. Connell, *Irish peasant society: four historical essays* (Oxford, 1968); Peter Berresford Ellis, *A history of the Irish working class* (London, 1972). ¹⁸ Michael Beames, *Peasants and power: the Whiteboy movements and their control in pre-Famine Ireland* (Brighton, 1983); Tom Garvin, 'Defenders, ribbonmen and others: underground political networks in pre-Famine Ireland', *Past and Present*, 96 (1981), 133-55. See also Todd B. Quinlan, 'Big Whigs in the mobilization of Irish peasants: an historical sociology of hegemony in pre-Famine Ireland (1750s-1840s)', *Sociological Forum*, 13:2 (1998), 247-64.

The trend of Irish history had not been substantially altered and the 1980s brought with them a gradual return to more familiar territory, with the bulk of the so-called 'revisionist' canon concentrating on dismantling the myths and legends of Irish history through the medium of deconstructivist political biography or large-scale surveys. The landmark work on the Irish land system, the cause of so much social strife in the nineteenth century, was W.E. Vaughan's *Landlords and tenants in Ireland, 1848–1904* (1984). This work steered clear of theory, offering a valuable appraisal of the social structure without over-elaboration.¹⁹ Vaughan has had no obvious successor, though the appearance of Terence Dooley's *The decline of the Big House in Ireland: a study of Irish landed families* (2001) brought rural hierarchies once again to the fore and has recently been complemented by a much-needed study of the Big House in Ulster by Olwen Purdue.²⁰ Historians of eighteenth-century Ireland have been lucky to have had scholars of the calibre of S.J. Connolly, David Dickson and Toby Barnard to help bridge this gap with a more holistic approach, but nineteenth-century specialists have had nothing like the accumulation of small-scale studies with which to produce a synthesis comparable to the work done on the English land system by Lawrence A. Stone and David Cannadine in the 1980s and early 1990s.²¹ Leaving these major conceptual questions aside, then, what might we object to in how elites have thus far been presented in Irish historiography, and most recently by Campbell?

Of the elites identified by Campbell, the 'landed' elite is ostensibly one of the most obvious and acceptable of the six categories identified. If we were to accept the landlord-tenant system in Ireland as a fundamental axis of power, then we might still seek to qualify Campbell's identification of those with the most land as being the most influential of the landed gentry. Kevin Mc Kenna, in an excellent essay contained in this collection, shows us the extent to which landlords were themselves 'locked' into the system of primogeniture and entail with little opportunity to facilitate any fluidity of ownership within the landed class even if they had desired it.²² The land system, until it was reformed by a series of parliamentary acts, arguably forced those who had inherited land to remain tied to it, therefore limiting their agency and controlling their behaviour. Campbell demonstrates that although

¹⁹ Other important and contemporary contributions to the work on land and social structure include Liam Kennedy, 'Social change in middle Ireland', *Studies: an Irish Quarterly Review*, 74:295 (autumn 1985), 242–51; William J. Smyth, 'Landholding changes, kinship networks and class formation in rural Ireland: a case study from Co. Tipperary', *Irish Geography*, 16 (1983), 17–36. ²⁰ Terence Dooley, *The decline of the Big House in Ireland: a study of Irish landed families* (Dublin, 2001); Olwen Purdue, *The Big House in the north of Ireland: land, power and social elites, 1878–1960* (Dublin, 2009). See also Mark Bence-Jones, *Twilight of the ascendancy* (London, 1987); *Life in an Irish country house* (London, 1987). ²¹ David Cannadine, *Lords and landlords: the aristocracy and the towns, 1774–1967* (1980); *The decline and fall of the British aristocracy* (New Haven, CT, 1990); Lawrence A. Stone and Jeanne C. Fawtier Stone, *An open elite? England, 1540–1880* (New Haven, CT, 1984). ²² Kevin Mc Kenna, 'Elites, ritual and the legitimation of power on an Irish landed estate, 1855–90', this volume, pp 68–82.

Catholics constituted over 40 per cent of landholders with more than five hundred acres by the 1860s, the bigger estates remained in Protestant hands. We might just as easily characterize that land as being trapped within such families for as long as they continued to procreate, leading in some cases to an apparently anachronistic situation where a landlord such as the earl of Kenmare might own 118,000 acres while heavily indebted and unable to service his £146,000 debt to Standard Life.²³ If we begin to look at the land system in this light then Irish landlords begin to look less and less like the archetypal elite group with leverage and dynamism. Furthermore, while the system of entail, even after the passing of the Encumbered Estates Act in 1849, accounts for Protestant domination of the landed class, the arbitrary measurement of elite-composition-by-acre does not allow for any estimation of their actual influence in either local or national affairs. Theo Hoppen has shown us, many years ago, the extent to which the participation of the landed classes in national politics waned as the nineteenth century progressed and it is possible to suggest that their influence at a local level came to an effective end with the passing of the Local Government Act in 1898.²⁴ We might even argue that the less land a landlord had the more likely he was to project or exert influence on a national scale. Andrew Tierney's perceptive point about the 'minor gentry' status of the Burke family behind the bible of British and Irish landed elite membership, *Burke's landed gentry of Ireland* and *Burke's peerage*, is itself an indication of the extent to which those with less land might wield significant influence. Tierney's demand that we reappraise the overemphasis on the Big House in both architectural and social terms is complemented by Maeve O'Riordan's insistence that we reappraise the role played by women in the management of the landed estate, while Brian Griffin shows us that neglected pastimes and sports such as archery can reveal much about gender relations among the landed elites.²⁵

Campbell's identification of the police as an elite group is questionable at a more fundamental level. One of the most important considerations in historical sociology has been the question of social capital, social status and the informal socialization of elite groups. This is a feature of the work of Bourdieu, of C. Wright Mills, of Dahl, even of the classical elite theorists. Campbell's inclusion of police, and to a lesser extent, the merchant class, points to a potential conceptual weakness in the work. There is no question that, outside of the top three or four figures in the Dublin Metropolitan Police and the Royal Irish Constabulary, those engaged in the business end of policing would have been excluded from the social elite. Indeed, within the penal triangle that exerted corporal power over Irish citizens in the nineteenth century – the law, the armed forces and the prisons – the police were arguably the

²³ Michael Moss, *Standard Life, 1825–2000: the building of Europe's largest mutual life company* (Edinburgh, 2000), p. 110. ²⁴ K. Theodore Hoppen, 'Landlords, society and electoral politics in mid-nineteenth-century Ireland', *Past & Present*, 75 (May 1977), 62–93. ²⁵ Andrew Tierney, 'Architectures of gentility in nineteenth-century Ireland', this volume, pp 31–50 at p. 49; Maeve O'Riordan, 'Assuming control: elite women as household managers in late nineteenth-century Ireland', this volume, pp 83–98.

least significant actors. Campbell also includes a section on the religious elite but the omission of two of the three 'ancient learned professions', law and medicine, strikes us as anachronistic, especially when we consider the long-standing link between radicalism, law and politics through the pantheon of Irish heroic figures from Theobald Wolfe Tone and Robert Emmet, through Daniel O'Connell and Isaac Butt, to Edward Carson and Patrick Pearse.

This increasing influence of the professional class is something we can also trace in other European societies at the time, albeit with no convenient or neat pattern. In France, for example, scholars have analysed the legal bourgeoisie in the nineteenth century as a self-selecting elite group, a *bourgeoisie de robe*, who retained privilege through their domination of the lycées, even while school reforms ostensibly aimed at equalizing society in the 1880s.²⁶ This group proved to be much more dynamic than the traditional nobility, who had by then lost a great deal of political influence to the middle classes (as in Ireland) and effectively dominated only the social heights of metropolitan Paris and the localized government of rural Brittany, Franche-Comte and south of the Massif Central. The influence exerted by barristers in the burgeoning associational culture of nineteenth-century Ireland is given short shrift by Campbell in *The Irish establishment*, and this detracts somewhat from our understanding of the nuances of class consciousness in Irish society. A group such as this complicates the issue and points to a gradual infiltration of democratic ideals, and indeed the apparently paradoxical use of those ideals to improve social mobility. It would not, for example, be difficult to see Daniel O'Connell's career in this light. Fintan Cullen's essay mines the figure of O'Connell as found in the work of the celebrated London-based cartoonist 'H.B.', whose caricatures of O'Connell reached thousands and helped to shape the legend of that particular barrister. Joanne McEntee's essay offers us a new perspective on even a relatively lowly social group in the Irish *bourgeoisie de robe* – solicitors – by proving how central they were to the operation of the land system in rural Ireland, far away from the metropolitan base of the bar in Ireland. Her essay, along with that of Susan Galavan on the Meade family's rise and fall in Victorian Dublin, show that civic and social lives were interwoven and complementary, both in town and country, in a way that implies Campbell's vision of a closed elite is too restrictive and may not be the most useful way of thinking about Irish elites.

In literature, the question of elites and elitism has usually been bound up with the fate of the Big House, the crumbling edifices of which provide us all with an all-too seductive metaphor for the declining aristocracy. From the fiction of Maria Edgeworth and Sidney Owenson to the short stories of Somerville and Ross, to the literary memoirs of Elizabeth Bowen, the literature of elitism has been inextricably linked to both the topography of power and prestige and, somewhat more strikingly, to the tradition of women's writing. There are a number of seminal works worth

²⁶ Christophe Charle, 'La bourgeoisie de robe en France en XIXe siècle', *Le mouvement social*, 181 (1997), 39–52.

mentioning in relation to these traditions. W.J. Mc Cormack is the doyen of elite literature in nineteenth-century Ireland, and Vera Kreilkamp has contributed much to our understanding of the 'Big House' novel.²⁷ Literary theorists such as Terry Eagleton have provided sometimes far-fetched but always provocative readings of nineteenth-century literature, which alert the reader to the existence of elites by virtue of a rather gleeful critique of their existence and legitimacy.²⁸ Claire Connolly has recently added much to our understanding of the cultural construction of the Irish novel in the early nineteenth century, while James H. Murphy and John Wilson Foster have provided exhaustive surveys of Victorian literature in Ireland that rescue from obscurity some long-forgotten novelists who specialized in dissecting middle-class and elite social circles.²⁹ We could include Ladies Hartley and Blessington, Rosa Mulholland and Hannah Lynch in this list of knowing critics. Indeed it is worth remarking that R.F. Foster's magisterial two-volume consideration of William Butler Yeats stands out as the yardstick of how informed biography can elude its narrow confines to illuminate an age, however transitional that age was. So too has Eve Patten's in-depth reconsideration of Samuel Ferguson renewed our perspective on elite metropolitan culture early in the nineteenth century.³⁰ Anna Pilz, with her essay in this collection on Lady Gregory, blends these inherited traditions in her appraisal of that most diplomatic of female Irish writers, whose careful negotiation of the political and cultural elites may have had less to do with self-aggrandizement and more to do with the career advancement of her only son than was previously thought. Patrick Maume reminds us, through a detailed analysis of the antiquarian Samuel Hayman, that the dominance of the 'Protestant ascendancy' was defended resolutely not only by the landed rural families usually supposed to be at its core, but also by metropolitan civic elites throughout the nineteenth century.

Hayman's defence of the Protestant interest raises one further issue connected to the history of Irish elites: that of the 'two nations' or two states. It became somewhat fashionable to conceive of Irish history in an essentialist, almost racist, formulation where the populace (and its politics) might easily be split into Catholic-nationalist and Protestant-unionist monoliths. Facilitating this formulation is the idea that the Catholic Church, in particular, acted as a 'state within a state' – a cliché so entrenched in Irish historiography as to make us reluctant to query it. The work of scholars such

²⁷ W.J. Mc Cormack, *Ascendancy and tradition in Anglo-Irish literary history from 1789 to 1939* (Oxford, 1985); Vera Kreilkamp, *The Anglo-Irish novel and the Big House* (Syracuse, NY, 1998). J.C. Beckett's classic study, *The Anglo-Irish tradition* (Cornell, NY, 1976), also merits a mention here. ²⁸ This is most true of Terry Eagleton, *Heathcliff and the great hunger: studies in Irish culture* (London, 1995). ²⁹ Claire Connolly, *A cultural history of the Irish novel, 1790–1829* (Cambridge, 2012); James H. Murphy, *Catholic fiction and social reality in Ireland, 1873–1922* (London, 1997); *Irish novelists in the Victorian age* (Oxford, 2011); John Wilson Foster, *Irish novels, 1890–1940: new bearings in culture and fiction* (Oxford, 2008). ³⁰ R.F. Foster, *W.B. Yeats, a life. I: the apprentice mage, 1865–1914* (Oxford, 1997); *W.B. Yeats, a life. II: the arch-poet, 1915–1939* (Oxford, 2003); Eve Patten, *Samuel Ferguson and the culture of nineteenth-century Ireland* (Dublin, 2004).

as Emmet Larkin and J.H. Whyte has helped to embed the idea of the Catholic Church as a viable rival (rather than aspirant) elite structure from the mid-nineteenth century and onwards.³¹ This rather downplays the cross-community and inter-class engagement with state bureaucracy which is evident throughout the century, however, and gives the impression that the church was attempting to claim territory that was properly regarded as none of its concern. In fact, this was true of quite specific issues, education being perhaps the most celebrated of these, though health and wellbeing were others. Arguably, secular church interest in these areas was mainly targeted at those most in need of care, the working and non-working sector: thus competing with well-intentioned but often misdirected public and private provision of welfare with the intention of protecting the faith of those in receipt of aid. There seems ample room to argue that, outside of specific concerns such as welfare and education, the churches had little enough interest in areas of national fiscal or military policy, policing and law, except where any or all of them impinged on the rights of their respective flocks.

The 'legitimate' political elite, as one might expect, has been well-mined in Irish historiography. The early work of J.H. Whyte marked a turning point in historical analysis of politics; his *Irish Parliamentary Party, 1850-59* is in continual use. Later studies, mostly emanating from Trinity College Dublin and the influence of T.W. Moody, filled in the subsequent gaps in the 'parliamentary tradition'.³² The more recent work of Alan O'Day, Eugenio Biagini and Alvin Jackson has provided us with much of merit in the interim.³³ Though the political elite inspired several of the papers given at Liverpool, they are here considered by three essays. Felix M. Larkin interrogates the link between the media and the political class, while Fintan Cullen revisits the portrayal of Daniel O'Connell by the caricaturist John Doyle, and Nicola K. Morris contributes a piece on a political 'outsider' in Jeremiah Jordan, the Methodist Home Ruler whose career path reveals much of the complexity of the Irish Parliamentary Party as well as the tensions within the Methodist elite. The

³¹ Emmet J. Larkin, 'The devotional revolution in Ireland, 1850-75', *The American Historical Review*, 77:3 (June 1972), 625-52; *The consolidation of the Roman Catholic Church in Ireland, 1860-1870* (Dublin, 1987); *The Roman Catholic Church and the emergence of the modern Irish political system, 1874-1878* (Dublin, 1996); J.H. Whyte, 'The influence of the Catholic clergy on elections in the nineteenth century', *English Historical Review*, 75 (1960), 248. ³² I refer here to the graduate research done by Moody's students, much of which can be traced on a continuum and was subsequently published, such as that of F.S.L. Lyons, 'Irish parliamentary representation, 1891-1910' (PhD, TCD, 1947); Conor Cruise O'Brien, 'Irish parliamentary party, 1880-90', ii (PhD, TCD, 1954); David Thornley, 'Isaac Butt and the creation of an Irish parliamentary party, 1868-79' (PhD, TCD, 1959); R.F. Foster, 'Charles Stewart Parnell in the context of his family and social background' (PhD, TCD, 1974). ³³ Alan O'Day, *The English face of Irish nationalism: Parnellite involvement in British politics, 1880-86* (Dublin, 1977); Alvin Jackson, *Home Rule: an Irish history, 1800-2000* (Oxford, 2003); *The Ulster Party: Irish unionists in the House of Commons, 1884-1911* (Oxford, 1989); Eugenio Biagini, *British democracy and Irish nationalism* (Cambridge, 2007). A recent and important addition is Gerald R. Hall's *Ulster Liberalism, 1778-1876* (Dublin, 2011).

dominance of 'high politics' in Irish historiography has meant that few have focused on how policy percolated down from that lofty height, or how it was accepted or resisted by special interest groups. The absence of a centralized local government structure in Ireland until the last years of the century has led to near absence of historical debate on local political agitation and advocacy, or indeed the roles of vitally important local vectors of power such as the grand juries, high sheriffs, deputy lieutenants and justices of the peace who effectively ran Ireland day-to-day throughout the nineteenth century.³⁴ In his essay on the Shannon Estuary Group, Matthew Potter goes to some length to show that localized elites were also well-informed and both national and international in their horizons. Felix M. Larkin reinforces a recurring theme in the collection by pointing out how the political and print media elites overlapped, and how a worrying proportion of Irish print media was controlled by newspapermen from just one county: Cork. The importance of the local features heavily, too, in Pamela Emerson's essay on Belfast book clubs in the first half of the nineteenth century – reinforcing our earlier point that history-from-below and local studies are chronically insufficient in Irish historiography.

Our received image of the Irish emigrant is that of a forlorn and desperate youth forced out of a homeland they would forever lament. An essay in this collection from Mervyn Busted and Neil Smith challenges this by highlighting the diverse class composition of the Manchester Irish. We have also become familiar with the thoughts of radical or elite tours of Ireland in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, with the musings of travellers as diverse as William Thackeray, Gustave de Beaumont, Friedrich Engels and L. Paul-Dubois all cropping up in mainstream accounts of the century. Raphaël Ingelbien inverts this navel-gazing in his essay about Irish elites on tour, which brings to life the withering observations and heightened insecurities of the leisured Irish elite as they toured other societies. Timothy G. McMahon, for his part, allows us a glimpse at the strategic migration of the Hibernian Church Missionary Society as they toiled assiduously to redefine their role as a Protestant elite within the imperial context.

The collection ends, appropriately, with an essay by John Hutchinson – a scholar who has done more than most to highlight the question of Irish elites in the late nineteenth century with his seminal work on the third Irish revival. The essay returns to themes such as 'blocked mobility' and cultural revival, which are central to our present understanding of how modern Ireland developed and poses new questions about how – on the eve of a centenary decade – the First World War might

³⁴ There are several exceptions here; for local government structure, see William L. Feingold, *The revolt of the tenantry: the transformation of local government in Ireland, 1872-1886* (Boston, MA, 1984); Virginia Crossman, *Local government in nineteenth-century Ireland* (Belfast, 1994); Matthew Potter, *The municipal revolution in Ireland: local government in cities and towns since 1800* (Dublin, 2010); Mary E. Daly (ed.), *County and town: one hundred years of local government in Ireland* (Dublin, 2001). For resident magistrates, see Penny Bonsall, *The Irish RMs: the resident magistrates in the British administration of Ireland* (Dublin, 1997).

be the most useful prism through which to understand both the radical and conservative nature of the Irish revolution. It is hoped that the essays that precede it, grouped together thematically and chronologically where possible, will bring a similar blend of forward-thinking and reflection to a topic in need of invigoration.