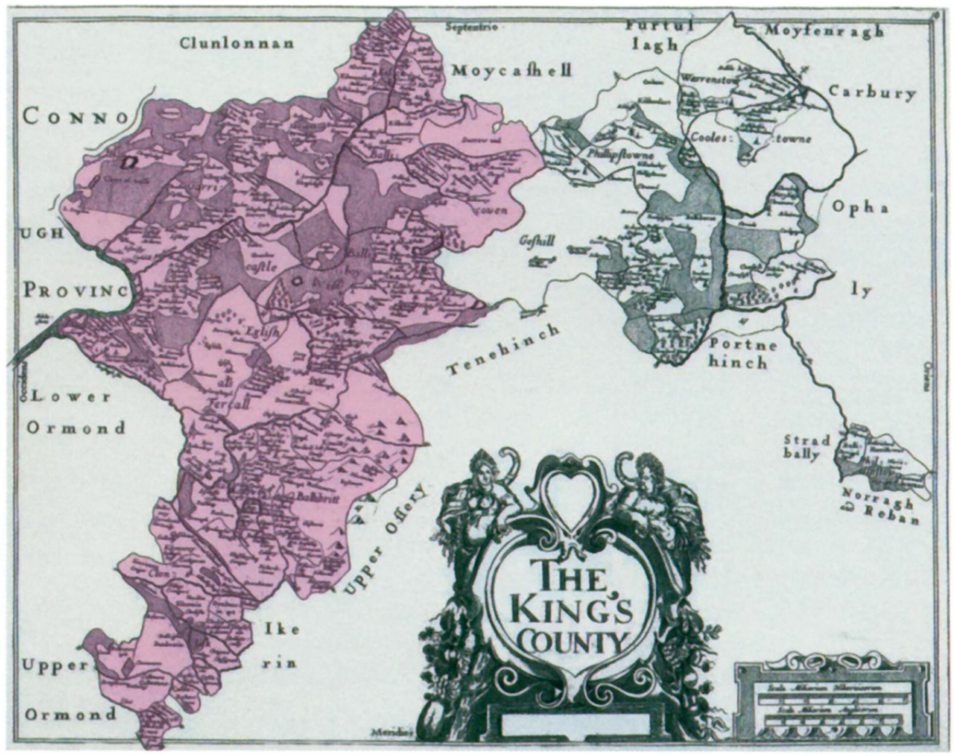
James Lyttleton explores the dichotomy between the theory and practice of plantation by examining the surviving buildings of seventeenth-century west Offaly



SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY WEST OFFALY

—accommodating the new realities

The consequences of the social, economic and cultural transformations of the early modern period upon the Irish landscape were significant, affecting the way people interacted with their families, friends, neighbours and strangers. For the first time since the thirteenth century there was large-scale migration into Ireland. It was inevitable that new ideas on economic activities or social conventions would appear. In material terms this manifested itself in new styles of pottery, the enclosure of farmland and developments in architecture. These did not occur in isolation but were an integral part of the cultural and social movements of the time. Exploring buildings that have been left behind allows us to investigate various social themes such as group identity and conflict resolution in seventeenth-century Offaly.

The Ulster plantation, which saw the greatest redistribution of land and people, was only part of the 'solution' to the 'Irish problem'. To consolidate Britain's military and economic interests in the country, the policy of plantation had to be pursued in the very heart of Ireland. After the defeat of the Gaelic nobility at the end of the Nine Years' War in 1603 it became apparent that a wedge would have to be driven between the recalcitrant Ulster nobles, such as the O'Neills and O'Donnells, and their fellow countrymen further south, such as the McCarthys and O'Mores. For the Stuart rulers to maintain the momentum of their Tudor predecessors, control of the Shannon river basin in areas such as west Offaly was imperative. A fruit, however desirable on the outside, with a rotten core was not palatable in the eyes of Whitehall mandarins.

Discrepancy between plantation theory and practice

However, the history of the plantations in Ireland was marked by a discrepancy between theory and practice. The conditions laid out in 1619 and 1620 for plantation of the Gaelic lordships in west Offaly—Ely O'Carroll, Delvin MacCoughlan, Ferceall and Fox's Country—envisaged a scheme in which 25 per cent of existing holdings passed into planters' hands. The remaining 75 per cent would be regranted to native landholders. These plantation schemes covered areas of Offaly which fell outside the scope of the earlier plantation of east Offaly in the mid-sixteenth century (above). This transfer of land would underpin a conversion of the local populace to British values such as adherence to the common law and Protestantism. In practice, however, while colonisation took place in both the mind and the landscape, it was not thorough enough to guarantee a loyal population. Indeed, while society was in the throes of domination and resistance, the archaeological evidence in the form of upstanding buildings in west Offaly suggests an ambiguity in how group identities were manifested

Above: **Down Survey map of Offaly (King's County), with the area affected by the 1619–20 plantation schemes highlighted in colour.**

in the region. This ambiguity was designed to accommodate or resolve the tensions that individuals experienced.

The west Offaly landscape bears traces of this turbulent century and the society that lived through it. The late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries saw the introduction of novel architectural forms. Developments in military technology were making castle architecture redundant. This, combined with the Renaissance ideal of how the aristocracy should comport themselves, allowed the construction of the first proper country houses in Ireland. These buildings have been closely associated with the newcomers in Offaly, such as the famous Ballycowan Castle, with its numerous square-hooded, mullioned and transomed windows and its elegant chimneys rising skywards (below). The owners of this fortified house, first the Morres from 1589 and then the Herberts from 1626, made an architectural statement of the new dispensation.

However, it was not only these new English Protestant settlers who contrived to build these homes. The native aristocracy, faced with both political and fiscal pressures, transformed elements of their material culture, not necessarily in a subservient manner but in such a way as to undermine or militate against the full impact of this renewed colonial expansion. The political manoeuvring of the native aristocracy, with continual changes in allegiance throughout the late medieval period, would astound the modern observer. What changed in the seventeenth century was that one set of allegiances became predominant over others and there was a consequent change in the material culture.

Coming to terms with the present; learning from the past; innovating for the future

The O'Carrolls of Ely O'Carroll in south-west Offaly are a case in point. The Down Survey of 1657 indicates that one particular O'Carroll owned an English-style house at Moynure, of which there is unfortunately no surface trace. However, the same family at Oakley Park near Seir Kieran constructed one of the finest examples of plantation period houses, more commonly known as Ballymooney Castle (below). It was built *c.* 1622 and was in native hands until the Cromwellian confiscations. This is a fine house, to be expected of a family versed in Renaissance virtues, and consists of a central accommodation block with two projecting gable-ended towers, one of which is a storey higher than the other. Here we see the provision of large windows to allow for better lighting and ventilation of the interior. The large internal area provided for a greater number of rooms than would have been possible in a tower-house. This facilitated the division of space into areas reserved for family, guests and servants, suggesting different social conventions than would have prevailed in the more cramped tower-houses.

However, seventeenth-century Ireland was not at peace with itself, and the architecture of the time had to resolve the conundrum of combining comfort and prestige with security. As a result we see a compromise between novel architectural form and security considerations at the house in Oakley Park, with the provision of a machicolation above the doorway at roof level and the survival of a bawn wall, of which only the east wall and the north-east and south-east corner towers remain. In plan and elevation this O'Carroll residence is similar to the house built in Birr by one of the pre-eminent planter families in the region, the Parsons (future earls of Rosse). Hence the archaeological landscape presents a picture of a society coming to terms with the present, while learning from the past and innovating for the future.

Innovation was not simply confined to the construction of buildings. Small objects such as date-stones and plaques with coats of arms proliferated across Gaelic Ireland as the native ruling classes looked for alternative means of manifesting their political and social weight in a manner acceptable to the new dispensation. In the townland of Derrydolney, not far from Kilcormac, there is an armorial plaque with a depiction of the O'Molloy coat of arms inserted in a modern wall (below). The O'Molloys controlled an area of west Offaly known at the time as Ferceall, which now constitutes the baronies of Ballyboy, Ballycowan and Eglish. Underneath the shield is the inscription:

> This house was erected by Philip Molloy and Mary Molloy his wife in the yeare of our Lord God 1684, in the three and thirteenth yeare of the reign of Charles II, by the grace of God, King of England and Scotland, and France and Ireland. Defender of the Faith.

No surface traces whatsoever remain at the site of this house, recorded by the Archaeological Survey of Ireland as the site of a castle. What can be seen here is a partisan statement embodying allegiance to both the state and the established church. This particular family of native aristocrats, in a period which had seen terminal decline for the native ruling classes, redefined their interests and were thereby able to amass the resources to



Ballycowan Castle (left), a fortified house with windows and chimney-stacks characteristic of the early seventeenth century but with a machicolation at roof level above the doorway and a bartizan projecting out from the north-east corner of the building, defensive features more typical of tower-houses. Ballymooney Castle (centre), Oakley Park near Seir Kieran, a fortified house built by the O'Carrolls of Ely O'Carroll. Armorial plaque (right) of the O'Molloys of Ferceall with a dedication dated 1684, Derrydolney, Kilcormac, Co. Offaly.

build a new house, with a fine plaque to commemorate the fact that they could do so.

Going native (architecturally)

This ambiguity could also be found in the attitudes of newcomers such as Matthew de Renzy, who was living in Delvin MacCoughlan during the 1610s, before the actual plantation of that lordship in 1620. A collection of his letters reveals the mind-set of a foreigner who had ambitions in a future colonial scheme for the area. He was an interesting character, a German-born merchant who went bankrupt in London before seeking his fortune or continued freedom in the bogs of Offaly. He advocated the large-scale takeover of the land so that the hegemony of the MacCoughlans would be undermined in the area. He learnt the Irish language, not only so that he could converse with his workers and neighbours but also so that he could learn the culture and history of the enemy. In doing so he hoped to undermine the native polity from within, exploiting native weaknesses to facilitate government intrusion into the locality. Interestingly enough, de Renzy believed that the conversion of the local populace to the Protestant faith was not desirable, as this would give the workforce greater legal protection. This same man, who believed that the native population deserved to be dispossessed because of their backward and archaic social structures, was content to live in a building that epitomised that very society, a tower-house at Clonony (right)!

Similarly, a colonist of a previous generation by the name of John Briscoe, from Cumberland in the north of England, built a tower-house at Ballydrohid on the outskirts of Tullamore in 1588 (below right). Already before plantation there was an emerging environment in which colonial and native values were intermingling rather than past structures simply being eradicated. In de Renzy's case it could be argued, particularly with his rather dubious credit record, that he made do with what was available in the area rather than building anew. However, Briscoe committed himself to building a structure that may have been more acceptable to native minds at the time. This approach is not indicative of a mind that believed in the inevitable collapse of the Gaelic world.

While historians have written much on the period, very little is understood of the surrounding environment at the time and how it conditioned the circumstances of plantation. There is an ambiguity that presents itself in the archaeological record, and this ambiguity is very much tied in with group identity and how that identity, once confronted with a certain situation, was able to accommodate the new reality.

James Lyttleton lectures in the Department of Archaeology, University College Cork.

Further reading

M. Craig, *The architecture of Ireland from the earliest times to 1880* (Dublin, 1989).

P.J. Duffy, D. Edwards and E. Fitzpatrick (eds), *Gaelic Ireland c.1250–c.1650, land, lordship and settlement* (Dublin, 2001).

C. O'Brien and P.D. Sweetman, *Archaeological inventory of County Offaly* (Dublin, 1997).

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Glossary

Bartizan: a small overhanging turret.

Bawn: from the Irish for a cattle enclosure, which came to mean the walled enclosure attached to towers and fortified houses.

Machicolation: a projecting structure supported on corbels on the exterior of walls from which stones etc. could be dropped on attackers below.

Mullion: vertical bar of stone or timber dividing a window.

Transom: horizontal bar of stone or timber dividing a window.

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Above: **Clonony Castle, a tower-house that was inhabited by Matthew de Renzy, a German-born merchant, in the years preceding the 1620 plantation of Delvin MacCoughlan.**

Right: **Srah Castle in the townland of Ballydrohid on the outskirts of Tullamore—a tower-house built by an English settler, John Briscoe of Cumberland, as early as 1588.**