

“Can any good come from Ireland?” Contrasting Images of Ireland and the Irish in
the *Topography of Ireland* by Gerald of Wales

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Abstract

The purpose of this master's thesis is to examine the seeming duality in the representations of Ireland and the Irish in the first recension of the *Topography of Ireland* (*Topographia Hibernica*) by Gerald of Wales (c. 1146–1223). The results of the study are threefold. Firstly, by comparing and contrasting the two representations, the study demonstrates that there is a contrast between the overwhelmingly positive portrayal of Ireland and the overwhelmingly negative characterisation of the Irish. Secondly, by comparing these representations with the negative preconceptions conveyed in the author's preface, it may be said that there is a shift in the image of Ireland, whereas the image of the Irish is only reinforced. More specifically, Ireland seems to be raised to a new status as the home of the "wonders of the West", while the Irish are marginalised even further. Both descriptions are based on the image of the island as the farthest western periphery. An exploration of the *Topography's* historical context indicates that the characterisation of the Irish taps into the contemporary cliché of the peripheral and inferior barbarian. At the same time, the concept of the periphery seems to be rehabilitated where Ireland, the land, is concerned. Thirdly, although the inner logic of the work may be questioned, the author's personal circumstances indicate that the two representations are not contradictory where authorial interests are concerned in so far as both may be seen to serve the same purpose of demonstrating the superiority of the Self. The *Topography of Ireland* revolves around notions of superiority and inferiority. The results of the study indicate the centrality of the Self in the work, which raises questions as to its real subject. In any case, although, historically, the *Topography's* reputation has centred on its characterisation of the Irish, it is not the Irish—namely, the Other—but the Self that is of real interest in the work.

Tiivistelmä

Tämä pro gradu -tutkielma vertailee Irlannin ja irlantilaisten näennäisen ristiriitaista kuvausta Gerald Walesilaisen (c. 1146–1223) teoksessa *Topographia Hibernica*. Tutkimus koskee teoksen noin vuonna 1187 ilmestynyttä ensimmäistä versiota. Tutkimuksesta käy ilmi, että teos esittää Irlannin positiivisessa valossa, mikä korostaa irlantilaisten negatiivista kuvausta. Lisäksi vertaamalla kuvauksia kirjoittajan esipuheessaan esiintuomiin negatiivisiin ennakkokäsityksiin voidaan todeta, että näkemys Irlannista muuttuu teoksen edetessä, kun taas irlantilaisiin liittyviä negatiivisia ennakkokäsityksiä vahvistetaan. Tarkemmin sanoen teos kohottaa Irlannin uuteen asemaan ”lännen ihmeiden” kotipaikkana syventäen irlantilaisten marginalisointia. Molempien kuvausten perustana on käsitys Irlannista kaukaisimpana läntisenä periferiana. Tutkimuksesta käy ilmi, että teos hyödyntää 1100-luvulle tyypillistä, syrjäseutujen kansoihin liitettyä barbaarisuuden käsitettä irlantilaisten kuvauksessa. Samalla periferian käsitteen voidaan nähdä muuttuvan suotuisammaksi mitä tulee Irlannin kuvaukseen. Vaikka teoksen sisäinen logiikka ontuu, molempien kuvausten voidaan nähdä palvelevan kirjoittajan etuja, sillä *Topographia* on ennen kaikkea argumentti minuuden ylemmydestä. Tutkimustulokset viittaavat minuuden käsitteen keskeiseen rooliin *Topographiassa*. Tutkielma esittääkin, että vaikka *Topographia Hibernican* maine on usein painottunut sen esittämään irlantilaisten kuvaukseen, olennaisinta on kuitenkin se, mitä se kertoo kirjoittajastaan ja tämän maailmasta.

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1 Introduction

In his preface to the *Topography of Ireland* (*Topographia Hibernica*), Gerald of Wales (c. 1146–1223) elucidates his decision to write about Ireland. In his own words,

After long musing on this subject, and after anxiously revolving it in my mind, at last it occurred to me that there was one corner of the earth, Ireland, which, from its position on the furthest borders of the globe, had been neglected by others. Not that it had been left altogether untouched, but no writer had hitherto comprehensively treated of it. (Giraldus, “Preface” 6)

Indeed, according to F. X. Martin, Gerald was “the first foreigner to write a book about Ireland” (“Gerald of Wales” 279)—that is, a book-length account. Moreover, the work may certainly be called a comprehensive one, what with its combination of natural history, miracle account, history and ethnography. In fact, Georgia Henley and A. Joseph McMullen see the *Topography* as an innovative work (1). The impetus behind Gerald’s literary endeavour may be found as much in Irish history as in the circumstances of Gerald’s personal life and career. Gerald’s above-cited statement refers to a contemporary lack of research on Ireland due to the island’s location on the fringes of the West, and indeed the known world. However, the *Topography* was written c. 1187–1188 (Robert Bartlett 103), and thus, at a pivotal time in Irish history; namely, shortly after the Anglo-Norman invasion of Ireland (1169–72),¹ and more specifically, during the early years of the colonisation and settlement of the island. Scholarship agrees on the significance of these events as much for Ireland as for cultural relations on the British Isles: in the words of Marie Therese Flanagan, “what was to become an enduring link was now forged between the English crown and Ireland” (“Anglo-Norman invasion”). It may be said that these recent events had brought the question of Ireland more to the fore.

Giraldus de Barri, better-known by the epithet Giraldus Cambrensis (‘Gerald of Wales’), was an author and ecclesiastic. Gerald wrote the *Topography*, and another Irish work, the *Conquest of Ireland* (*Expugnatio Hibernica*), following his travels in Ireland in the 1180s while in royal service

¹ The nomenclature of these events in terms of the “national” identity of the invaders remains a point of scholarly debate. According to Marie Therese Flanagan, the term ‘Anglo-Norman invasion’ “enjoys wide currency” and is therefore used in the present study as well (“Anglo-Norman invasion”). However, there seems to be a growing tendency to see the events as an ‘English’ invasion.

under King Henry II. However, Gerald was connected to Ireland on a more personal level as well, his Marcher relatives having taken part in the invasion. Gerald's lineage from both Norman and Welsh aristocracy and the education he derived in Paris—the best education available at the time (Henley and McMullen 2)—ensured him a unique vantage point as an observer (and more often as a critic) of late twelfth- and early thirteenth-century society: in the words of J. J. N. McGurk, “he was in a position to know the eminent of his age; kings, popes, statesmen and scholars were among his familiars” (255). Gerald's oeuvre includes saints' lives, political tracts, historical treatises and an autobiographical work among others (Martin, “Giraldus as Historian” 268; John J. O'Meara, “Introduction” 12–13). However, Gerald is known primarily for his works on Wales and Ireland.

Gerald's above-cited statement implies that he recognised a niche in Ireland for himself as an author. Yet, the choice of subject comes with a concession:

But it may be asked, “Can any good come from Ireland?” “Will its mountains drop sweetness, and its vallies flow with milk and honey?” Let us, then, endeavour to suck honey out of the rock, and draw oil from the flint. Let us follow the example of great orators, who, in an admirable manner, most polished the shafts of their eloquence, when the poverty of their subject required it to be elevated by the superiority of their style. (Giraldus, “Preface” 6)

Gerald is clearly anticipating criticism for his work and must therefore defend his topic. Thus, Ireland's remoteness notwithstanding, Gerald's statement indicates that there must have existed a prejudice against the country, which made necessary a justification of the subject. In fact, Gerald states explicitly that

since the country of which we treat is backward and feeble, it will be no small satisfaction to studious minds to survey, at least in thought, our better part of the world and its condition, having all things made easy to be understood. (Giraldus, “Preface” 7)

Thus, Gerald sees Ireland as “backward and feeble”: the original Latin contains the words *tarda et infirma* (Giraldus, “Introitus” 7), which may be translated, for example, as ‘slow’, ‘dull’ or ‘stupid’, and ‘weak’, respectively (“*tardus*”; “*infirmus*”). Gerald's exact meaning with these adjectives is ambiguous, but considering the following reference to the reader's sense of superiority, the main

point seems to be that Ireland was considered something that contrasts with “our better part of the world”; in other words, inferior.

Ireland had not always been seen in this way. However, in the words of John Gillingham, “[i]n the history of English attitudes to Ireland, the twelfth was the crucially formative century” (24), as a “new attitude of superiority, hostility and alienation” was adopted towards the Irish (ibid.). In fact, by the time that the *Topography* was written, the ‘barbarity’ (and hence, inferiority) of the Irish had become a commonplace in how the people was portrayed (ibid.). Further, Gerald was to become another, important link in this continuum. Henley and McMullen argue that Gerald’s legacy is “broadly acknowledged by scholars of medieval Britain and Ireland alike” (3). However, this legacy is of a dual nature: besides their contributions to our knowledge, Gerald’s Irish works have had a harmful effect on the image of the Irish. For while he was not the initiator of the image of the barbarian, “[n]o one was to give more memorable expression to this cliché” than Gerald (Gillingham 24). Further, in the words of Martin, “[u]nfortunately there was nobody at that time to rebut Gerald’s charges; and they stuck” (“Gerald of Wales” 288). According to Flanagan, Gerald’s portrayal of the Irish “was to be relied on heavily by subsequent Anglo-Irish and English writers” (“Gerald of Wales”). Unsurprisingly, the works have provoked strong reactions and opposition, in particular from Irish writers: “in Ireland his works have historically and in the modern period received considerable vitriol, probably because his prejudiced portrayal of the Irish played a role in the propaganda used during the Tudor conquest of Ireland and left lasting damage” (Henley and McMullen 4). Indeed, it may be said that the *Topography of Ireland* is primarily known for its ruthless characterisation of the Irish.

Given the *Topography*’s well-known “anti-Irishness” along with its rather biased preface referring to the poverty of the subject, the reader may be struck by the work’s initial treatment of the country and the author’s enthusiasm with his topic. The *Topography* as a description of Ireland divides into three parts: the first part, the natural historical element of the work, is devoted to a description of the island in terms its geography, topography and fauna; the second part deals with the country’s wonders and miracles; finally, it is only in the third part that Gerald provides his description of the inhabitants of the island in terms of their history and characteristics. In fact, while the preface seems to portend the negative portrayal of the Irish towards the end of the work, it to some extent contradicts the content of the work where ‘Ireland’ is concerned (a concept that excludes the Irish).

For, what sometimes escapes notice is that the work does list Ireland's advantages as well. In fact, it may be said that the description of the country as presented in the first part of the *Topography* is largely complimentary, and the overall tone may be described as positive. For example, "[t]he land is fruitful and rich in its fertile soil and plentiful harvests" (*Topography* 34), "[c]rops abound in the fields, flocks on the mountains, and wild animals in the woods" (*ibid.*), and "[t] his country, above all others that we have seen, is well supplied also with beautiful lakes, full of fish and very large" (*Topography* 37), containing also "islands rising to some height and very beautiful" (*ibid.*). In addition, the "many good points of the island" (*Topography* 53) include a temperate and healthy climate, which renders doctors useless, for "[y]ou will not find many sick men" on the island (*ibid.*). While the fact remains that the *Topography's* characterisation of the Irish is exceedingly negative, the above-cited examples seem to call into question F. X. Martin's statement that neither of Gerald's Irish works "is complimentary to the country" ("Gerald of Wales" 279). For it may be said that it is only when Gerald moves on to describe the people of the island that there is a shift in tone.

The purpose of this thesis is to examine this duality of the *Topography of Ireland* as it appears in the first recension of the work, translated by John J. O'Meara in 1982.² It should be noted that O'Meara's translation is called *The History and Topography of Ireland*; however, to avoid confusion, the present study has chosen the shorter form *Topography of Ireland* as a more neutral or "official" title. Moreover, although, strictly speaking, the official title in use today seems to be the Latin title, the present study has preferred to use the anglicised form to reflect the fact that the study is based on a translation, not the original Latin version. By comparing and contrasting Gerald's description of Ireland with his characterisation of the Irish, I intend to demonstrate, firstly, that—to answer Gerald's own, rather rhetorical question—he in fact saw much good in the country, which contrasts with what he saw in the people inhabiting it. In terms of the material, a comparison of Ireland and the Irish effectively means a comparison of parts one and three, although part two is used to complement these; in fact, it might be said that part two represents a kind of transition in terms of the tone of the work. Secondly, I intend to assess the possible reasons behind the seemingly dichotomous description of Ireland and the Irish by examining Gerald's personal interests with the work. It may of course be asked whether comparing portrayals of a country and a people makes sense. However, Keith D. Lilley argues that "place and social identity are closely intertwined" (21).

² This is a revised edition of his translation published by the Dundalgan Press in 1951 (O'Meara, "Foreword" 7).

This seems to highlight the seeming contradiction in the *Topography's* representations of Ireland and the Irish. Secondly, it may be said that it is Gerald's tone and approach to these two topics which is compared. The present thesis is informed by Irish Studies and the history of anti-Irish imagery. It should be noted that, even if we acknowledge the positive tone of the first part of the *Topography*, this does not necessarily detract from the fact that the work is a piece of colonialist, anti-Irish propaganda. The present study is not a revisionist effort in this respect; on the contrary, the positive description of Ireland is likely to highlight the negative characterisation of the Irish.

The *Topography of Ireland* is inseparable from its author. Therefore, the present study begins with an overview of Gerald's life and career. Secondly, section 2.2 provides a discussion of his complicated identity. In addition, section 2.3 will examine some of the tendencies in past research on Gerald and his works. Section 3, an introduction to the *Topography of Ireland* will provide a survey of the work in relation to the present thesis: thus, the section will discuss, firstly, the work's manuscript context as well as its modern editions and translations; secondly, in section 3.2 I will provide an outline of the content and structure of the work while at the same time assessing the author's overarching point of view; thirdly, section 3.3 will explore some of the historical tendencies visible in the *Topography* and which must be taken into consideration in the present study as well. Importantly, I will examine the *Topography* in relation to twelfth-century historical writing, for in the words of Robert Bartlett, "Gerald must be viewed in the context of the English historical tradition, one of the strongest elements in English culture at this time" (4). This contextual part concluded, I will proceed to an examination of the work itself: thus, section 4 provides, firstly, a comparison of the portrayals of Ireland and the Irish. Secondly, in section 4.2 the two portrayals are compared with the preconceptions of Ireland conveyed in Gerald's preface. Finally, the results of these two sections are discussed further in section 4.3, which examines the author's potential reasons for representing Ireland and the Irish in the way that he did. Throughout my study, I will use Gerald's preface to the *Topography* as a starting point for the interpretation of the work, and moreover, as a key to deciphering the curious duality visible in it. The quotations from the preface are from Thomas Forester's 1863 translation.

2 Gerald of Wales

The present section provides a brief overview of the life and career of Gerald of Wales in terms of their main episodes, a necessary step for any study of his works, for in the words of A. B. Scott, Gerald's writings "almost all originate in the circumstances and events of his life" (xii). Further, understanding Gerald's complicated identity is important—not least when it comes to assessing his portrayals of the peoples on the British Isles. Consequently, it may be said that this question is particularly important for the present study. Therefore, section 2.2 attempts to illustrate the complex ethnic and cultural background from which Gerald came, and moreover, on the basis of which he wrote his *Topography*. Moreover, as the focus is on Gerald as the author of the *Topography of Ireland*, the section examines, too, Gerald's connections with Ireland. This will allow us to explore the possible motivations, interests and goals involved in his literary enterprise. Finally, in section 2.3 I will examine briefly the history of research on Gerald and his writings, observing some of the main tendencies in the past and in more recent times. While Gerald may be said to constitute a much-studied subject, the research has some important flaws as well. In addition, the section will also address some of the difficulties related to the study of his works.

2.1 Life and career

The present chapter provides a brief overview of the life and career of the author, Gerald of Wales. The author's name is a good place to start. Born Giraldus de Barri, the author has come to be known by the epithet Gerald of Wales, or the Latin form Giraldus Cambrensis (from the Latin *Cambria* 'Wales'). Indeed, the epithet is not without foundation: Gerald was born in Wales, at the castle of Manorbier, Pembrokeshire, c. 1146 (O'Meara, "Introduction" 11). Moreover, he seems to have been very attached to his birthplace, which is attested by his writings on Wales (McGurk 256). However, the geographic location of his birthplace notwithstanding, it is important to note that Gerald was of mixed Norman and Welsh descent (Henley and McMullen 2). His ancestors were involved in both the conquest of England and the invasion of Wales (Martin, "Gerald of Wales" 280). Indeed, despite the epithet, McGurk argues that "[i]t is erroneous to style him 'Gerald the Welshman' as several Welsh writers have done" (256), and that "Gerald was a child of a foreign culture that was finding its feet in Welsh society" (258). In fact, recent research on Gerald has focused on his hybrid ethnic identity (Henley and McMullen 4). Secondly, Gerald was of noble birth: his father William de Barri

belonged “to the Norman Marcher lordly family, which had settled in Pembrokeshire” (McGurk 256), and his mother Angharad “gave Gerald descent from the Welsh royal house” as well (ibid.). In addition, in the ecclesiastical sphere, Gerald’s uncle David FitzGerald was the bishop of St David’s, the principal Welsh see (Martin, “Gerald of Wales” 281). Unsurprisingly, Martin argues that Gerald was proud of his family; more importantly, “[n]obody was more conscious than Gerald that the Cambro-Normans were a race of supermen and that the mass of the native population in these western islands, be they mere Scots, Welsh, English or Irish, were of inferior clay” (“Gerald of Wales” 280).

Gerald’s educational background is important for a full appreciation of him as a writer and historian. From the beginning of his life, Gerald was “drawn to literature and an ecclesiastical career” (O’Meara, “Introduction” 11), and these two interests came to characterise his life and career. According to O’Meara, “[l]ittle is known of his early upbringing and education” (“Introduction” 11). We do know that Gerald went to school at St Peter’s Abbey, Gloucester, where according to Lewis Thorpe he “began to acquire his mastery of medieval Latin and his extensive knowledge of classical and later Latin authors” (10–12). Gerald continued his studies further in Paris where he stayed roughly a decade in c. 1165–74 (Henley and McMullen 2). In Paris his studies included Latin authors, law, philosophy and theology (O’Meara, “Introduction” 11–12). According to his own testimony, Gerald was somewhat successful in his studies, and “was pointed out by his masters as a model of piety and good scholarship” (McGurk 257). Gerald returned to Wales, however, and in 1175 he became Archdeacon of Brecon “and a very vigorous supporter of ecclesiastical discipline” (O’Meara, “Introduction” 12). The year 1176 proved something of a turning point in Gerald’s career. His uncle, the bishop of St David’s, died in May that year, and the see became vacant (Thorpe 13). Gerald became one of the candidates to succeed his uncle, but was ultimately rejected by King Henry II, “who would not appoint a Welshman to a Welsh see” (O’Meara, “Introduction” 12). Following this “thwarted attempt to succeed his uncle into the bishopric” (Henley and McMullen 2), Gerald “returned to Paris to study and teach canon law and theology” where he stayed from c. 1176–9 (ibid.). Gerald returned to England and spent “five more years studying theology, possibly at Lincoln” (ibid.).

Understanding Gerald’s familial background is important for the very fact that it was this that led to him becoming involved with Ireland in the first place. His brothers and many of his cousins were

part of the successful “vanguard” of the invasion of 1169 (McGurk 257), his uncle Maurice FitzGerald actually being one of the principal leaders of the invasion (O’Meara, “Introduction” 11). Gerald’s family may have taken part in the invasion, but it should be noted that Gerald’s own travels in Ireland took place only in the 1180s; that is, well after the conquest and during the early years of the colonisation and settlement of Ireland. It seems natural that Gerald should have visited Ireland, where “many of his Cambro-Norman relatives had acquired lands” (Flanagan, “Gerald of Wales”): indeed, he came to visit the island four times in all, the first time in c. 1183 (McGurk 259–60). This was to accompany his brother Philip, “who recruited armed aid for their uncle FitzStephen, then hard-pressed by the Gaelic Irish in Cork” (McGurk 260). According to O’Meara, while in Ireland, Gerald “joined the entourage of Henry II in 1184, and was employed partly in diplomatic negotiations with the Welsh, and partly as tutor” to the king’s youngest son, John (“Introduction” 12). John had been designated lord of Ireland in 1177 by his father (Flanagan, “John”). Further, Gerald used his time in Ireland to gather material for his works (Martin, “Giraldus as Historian” 267; McGurk 260). His second visit came shortly after, in 1185, this time, however, “despatched by Henry II” to accompany Lord John (O’Meara, “Introduction” 13). He stayed on the island for some time after John’s departure as well (Flanagan, “Gerald of Wales”).

Gerald returned to Ireland twice, in 1199 and again in 1204 (O’Meara, “Introduction” 12), but it is the first two visits to which are owed, according to Flanagan, his two works on Ireland, the *Topography of Ireland* and the *Conquest of Ireland*, written shortly after his travels on the island (“Gerald of Wales”). After spending ten years in royal service, Gerald retires from court life c. 1194 (Henley and McMullen 2). In 1199 his election as bishop of St David’s is refused again, this time by King John, but once again due to political reasons (Henley and McMullen 2–3). According to Henley and McMullen,

[f]ollowing four unsuccessful appeals to the pope, Gerald resigned his arch-deaconry in 1203 and retired to Lincoln in defeat, where he wrote detailed accounts of his failed elections. His late works are tinged by bitterness, frustrated ambition and a tendency to see betrayal in everything. (3)

It may be said that his ambition of becoming the bishop of St David’s failing, Gerald’s literary career ultimately took over: tellingly, according to McGurk, “he could have had at least four other bishoprics, two in Ireland and two others in Wales; but, as he put it, ‘all these offers he trod

underfoot as a hindrance to his studies, which he assiduously pursued” (McGurk 255–256). Several writers have addressed Gerald’s personality: firstly, Martin describes Gerald as an individualist, “a man of fierce personal loyalties—loyalty to his family, to his birthplace, to his race, to the Church” (“Gerald of Wales” 280). Martin refers, too, to his self-confidence and courage (“Gerald of Wales” 282). Gerald readily offered criticism where he saw fault, and the clergy “received no preferential treatment” from him (Martin, “Gerald of Wales” 283). In fact, “[f]rom the beginning of his career, Gerald gave evidence of reforming zeal” (Thorpe 12). Scholarship situates Gerald’s death somewhere in the early 1220s, usually in 1223 (McGurk 256; O’Meara, “Introduction” 12).

The present chapter has been an introduction to the life and career of Gerald of Wales. One of the most important aspects about Gerald is the duality present in his life: it may be said that, career-wise, Gerald had two distinct passions, literature and the Church, both of which he pursued ambitiously. However, not having achieved his ultimate ambition in the ecclesiastical sphere, the see of St David’s, Gerald poured his energy to his studies and writing. Consequently, today Gerald is known mostly as an author. Yet, it should be noted that the ecclesiastic never left him, and the religious aspect remains significant in his work.

2.2 Identity

Writing in 1982, Robert Bartlett argues that “[h]istorians studying Gerald all have, at some stage, to discuss his ambiguous sense of nationality” (9). The question of Gerald’s identity is not a new one and has historically provoked much debate among scholarship. In the nineteenth and early to mid-twentieth centuries, Gerald’s identity was perceived mainly through his ancestry, the debate revolving around the question of “how Welsh or Norman” he was. This was reflected in the debate concerning the anglicised form of Gerald’s epithet: namely, whether Giraldus Cambrensis should be translated as ‘Gerald the Welshman’ or the more neutral ‘Gerald of Wales’ (ibid.). In the past, some writers emphasised his ‘Welshness’, which is due to the fact that, towards the end of his life Gerald came to identify increasingly with the Welsh (Gillingham 33). Moreover, his Welsh works, the *Itinerarium Kambriae* (‘Journey Through Wales’, 1191) and the *Descriptio Kambriae* (‘Description of Wales’, 1194), were from the late nineteenth to mid-twentieth centuries “claimed as native histories written by a champion of Welsh independence” (Henley and McMullen 4). Conversely, other writers emphasised his Norman lineage (Bartlett 9). Since then, there has been a

shift towards a more inclusive approach: in terms of Gerald's Welshness, for example, "[r]ecent studies have been more tempered, viewing Gerald within his own historical context and as a complex product of Marcher society, exhibiting conflicted views about his identity" (Henley and McMullen 4). In addition, there is more to the question of Gerald's identity than his Norman-Welsh lineage.

Importantly, Gillingham draws attention to the difference between ancestry and "perception of present identity" (35). In fact, although in his *De Principis Instructione* Gerald describes his descent as "three parts English and Norman" and "one part Welsh" (qtd. in Gillingham 35), he continues that his upbringing had been among the English (ibid.). In fact, according to Gillingham, "[b]y the late twelfth century there were many who were conscious of Norman ancestry but who now thought of themselves as English" (35). Furthermore, the question of Gerald's identity is compounded by the special circumstances of twelfth-century society. According to Bartlett, Gerald's identity should be seen more broadly so as to include not only his "regional loyalties" or "provincial solidarity" but also the internationalism which characterised twelfth-century society, and the upholders of which were the aristocracy and the Church (11–12). In fact, Bartlett argues that "[w]hether he was travelling in England, Ireland, or Wales, studying in Paris or pursuing lawsuits at Rome, [Gerald] never lacked a cultural context with which he could identify, in the form of French-speaking aristocrats or Latin churchmen" (11). Gerald's identity as an ecclesiastic is not insignificant, as religion is a pervasive aspect in his writings.

Further, we might also consider the intellectual identity that he acquired through his education in Paris, where "he came into contact with theologians and canon and civil lawyers, some of them committed to high standards in Church life" (Bartlett 29). Bartlett describes the impact of Gerald's Paris years and, in particular, the influence of Peter the Chanter by arguing that "[i]mmersed in such an environment, Gerald adopted a rigorous moralism, a reforming zeal, and a vocal concern with the pastoral duties of ecclesiastics" (29). Bartlett discusses Gerald's "underlying ideals of reform" as demonstrated by the *Gemma Ecclesiastica* (30). One of the two "main heads" is "the individual moral reform of the clergy" (ibid.). Further, this "rhetoric of reform is scattered throughout Gerald's writing" (Bartlett 29). Gerald's "disruptive" reforming activities in 1174–6 in the diocese of St. David's, such as "enforcing the payment of tithes" and "attempts to regularize clerical life" (Bartlett 32), demonstrate that his ideals were more than ideals and amounted to extremism. Further,

according to J. W. Baldwin, Gerald belonged to the Chanter's "circle" (qtd. in Bartlett 29). B. Smalley has observed that this circle "had a sense of mission. Their role was to lead the clergy in reforming the church and the laity . . . They were high churchmen" (qtd. in Bartlett 29). Thus, in addition to the ideological framework that Gerald's education gave him, and which moreover is visible in his work, we might also think of the sense of superiority that it may have given him in the ecclesiastical sphere as a member of an intellectual vanguard. This cultural and intellectual aspect was probably one of the few constants in Gerald's life where his identity is concerned.

For, from our perspective, the ambiguity of Gerald's identity lies to a great extent in the fact that his loyalties and sense of identity varied in the course of his life. The most obvious example is perhaps his attitude towards the English and his own sense of "Englishness". The *Topography* is dedicated to King Henry II and also contains a panegyric on the king's merits. However, "Gerald was eventually to prove one of the harshest and most hostile critics of the Angevin kings" (Bartlett 58). Moreover, Gillingham cites Gerald's remark that "the English are the most worthless of all peoples under heaven . . . in their own land they are slaves to the Normans" (qtd. in Gillingham 33), which according to Gillingham "has often been quoted and interpreted to show that Gerald had a low opinion of the English" (33). However, such statements with Gerald cannot be taken out of context. For instance, the timing of the above-cited remark is crucial, as "his scornful remarks about the English were written in 1201 . . . at a time when he had become a 'Welshman' and was acting as a mouthpiece for grievances which the Welsh had against the English" (ibid.). Significantly, though, it was only later in life that he assumed this Welsh bias, and according to Henley and McMullen, "he was never quite Welsh either, preferring to distance himself from the society and customs of *pura Wallia*" (4). Noteworthy is also Gerald's characterisation of the people in his Welsh works as barbarians. In fact, Gillingham refutes the whole epithet Giraldus Cambrensis (and the translations with it), for it "tends to identify him too emphatically with just one stage of a career which, roughly speaking, began as pro-English, went first pro-Welsh, then pro-French" (33). In sum, there are shifts and transformations to be observed in Gerald's life and career.

It goes without saying that Gerald's manifold complexities and shifts must be taken into consideration in the study of his works. Firstly, if we talk about Gerald's identity on some kind of general level, we must abandon unequivocal descriptions as impossible and acknowledge that he may be "considered from many angles" (Bartlett 12–13). In the words of Bartlett,

His genetic background included Norman warriors and a Welsh princely family. His mother tongue was French, his occupational tongue Latin, and he had other languages to take into account too, particularly Welsh and English. His class background was knightly, military, and land-holding. He was a member of a vigorous Marcher clan. His order or status was clerical—a secular cleric, curial and scholarly by turn. (13)

Secondly, all of the above-cited descriptions “assumed importance at different times in his life” (ibid.). Thus, as the complicated nature of Gerald’s identity arises partly from the shifts and transformations in the course of his life and career, it follows that when we study an individual work of Gerald’s, we must try to identify his current “stage” in life in order to understand his interests, motivations and aims. In addition, we should also be conscious of the potential conflicts at play at that particular stage. For in the words of Bartlett, Gerald came from a “complex society, where Marcher, native, and royal interests often clashed” (3). Finally, noteworthy are also his interests career-wise—in particular, considering his ambitious character. For example, “Gerald’s political employment in the years c. 1184–94, when he served as a royal clerk, involved furthering the aims of the kings of England in Wales” (Bartlett 15). In short, Gerald’s writings should not be taken at face value, for these do not necessarily reflect his real opinions or real sense of identity.

The points made above may be summed up by examining Gerald’s “stage” of life when he wrote the *Topography* to understand potential bias, interests and loyalties at this point of his life and career—and in relation to Ireland. Firstly, Gerald was connected to Ireland on a personal level, due to his family’s involvement in the invasion. In fact, Bartlett argues that

In his earlier works Gerald frequently appears as the spokesman for the Marchers. He was their eulogist and apologist. The *Expugnatio Hibernica* is, in many ways, a family epic. (20)

However, in terms of the *Topography* specifically, the main point seems to be that the work is dedicated to King Henry II. While it should be acknowledged, as Bartlett states, that “Gerald’s dedications and laudations were intended to serve his ambitions, and we should not expect them to reflect his full and private feelings about the great men concerned” (61), this does not change the fact that the work is likely to serve the interests of the king of England. In any case, Gillingham states that “[u]p until the mid-1190s, when he himself was probably in his fifties, Gerald identified himself

with the English, and hoped for a career and a bishopric in England” (33). Significantly, Gerald’s “Irish writings belong to this stage of his career” (ibid.). Finally, Gerald also went to Ireland as a member of the Church, which is significant to remember, considering the *Topography’s* religious themes.

Perhaps the reason why questions of identity are and have been such a persistent theme in the study of Gerald’s works is that Gerald himself had to deal with them. Gerald had a promising start in life, considering his familial background. In the words of Martin,

[i]n his grand-parents he had the tangible evidence of Norman achievement and superiority; his grandmother, Nesta, afforded him with pride in princely Welsh blood. Furthermore, when he was only two years old his maternal uncle, David FitzGerald, was elected bishop of St David’s, the principal Welsh see. This was to have a profound effect on Gerald’s career. (“Gerald of Wales” 281).

Moreover, Gerald was “given the best clerical education that his age could offer” (Bartlett 27), which not only contributed to his later literary style but also ensured him a place in government employment (Bartlett 3). However, Gerald aimed higher, but often found obstacles in his career path, related to his complicated ethnic background. In fact, according to Bartlett, “[h]is mixed Welsh and Norman blood and his Marcher sympathies put a millstone around his neck” (Bartlett 212), as these “made the central government suspicious” (ibid.). The very practical consequences of these suspicions are demonstrated by Gerald’s failure to become the bishop of St David’s. In the words of Henley and McMullen,

[w]hile his privileged position as a Marcher aristocrat with Welsh familial connections gave him an independent view into several cultures, as well as the ability to explain native Welsh society in detail to out-siders, it also made him an unsettling threat to royal authority in Wales, and seems to explain why he never received the ecclesiastical preferment he so desired in the late 1190s. (4)

Henley and McMullen refer, too, to Gerald’s “ill-defined place in Welsh and Anglo-Norman society” (4).

In fact, many writers see Gerald as an outsider figure. In the words of Bartlett,

His *morum institutio* and *conversatio* (his upbringing and active life) were among the English, his *natio* and *cognatio* (descent and family connections) in Wales. The result, he complained, was that ‘both peoples regard me as a stranger and one not their own . . . one nation suspects me, the other hates me’. (17)

According to Bartlett, this outsider status left him insecure (4). Yet, from our perspective, it is this ambiguous position that makes Gerald’s writings as important as they are. In the words of Henley and McMullen,

[i]t may be this tense insider/outsider status that has made him such a compelling figure for modern critics, as it seems to have heightened both his observational skills and his ambitions, granting us a unique view into aspects of medieval British and Irish society and culture (4).

Bartlett concurs, stating that “it was just this ambiguous position which enabled him to write the innovative topography and ethnography he did. His experience of a divided society stimulated his powers of observation” (212). Further, “[i]t was Gerald’s training at Paris, and his acquisition there of the highest learning that the Latin West could offer, that enabled him to articulate and analyse his own society in the way he did” (Bartlett 3). Thus, despite the difficulties for Gerald himself, scholarship agrees that his complex background and identity gave him unique insight as a writer.

While scholarship today acknowledges that Gerald is a complicated figure, identity remains an important topic; in fact, “[r]ecent critical attention to Gerald’s works has been devoted to untangling his perceptions of and experiences with his hybrid ethnic identity” (Henley and McMullen 4). It is important to note that Gerald had not only various but varying loyalties and interests. If Gerald, from our perspective, seems to present contradictory views on, for example, the Welsh and the English, this is because his interests and loyalties—and moreover, his sense of identity—underwent significant changes throughout his life. Questions of identity played an important role in his life and career—often in the negative sense.

2.3 Previous research

The previous section has already made reference to scholarship’s fascination with Gerald of Wales and his works. Indeed, in the words of Henley and McMullen, “scholarly attention to Gerald has been broad” (4). The fascination seems to be due to the man himself and his personality, and the

way that these are conveyed to us through his writings: in the words of Bartlett, “we can hear his voice” (1). Moreover, Gerald stands out among his contemporaries in this respect, for “the flood of vivid and personal prose that he produced gives us a degree of intimacy and acquaintance with Gerald that is not common for figures of the twelfth century” (ibid.). Henley and McMullen, too, cite Gerald’s “unrelentingly self-expressive voice” (1), and refer to his “compelling” life story as well (3). Gerald’s appeal lies also in his literary merits. According to Martin, it was his mastery of Latin that made him “one of the outstanding literary figures of his day” (“Gerald of Wales” 282). O’Meara attests to his “gift of story-telling” (“Introduction” 17), while McGurk argues that “he is reckoned among the most learned of a learned age, versed in languages, a master of rhetoric, and keen observer of the many tempestuous events, intrigues and controversies of the second half of the twelfth century” (255). Nor is the study of Gerald’s works insignificant. In the *Topography*, Gerald expresses a wish to “instruct posterity” (*Topography* 32), and in many ways he has done just that. Henley and McMullen cite his “contributions to our understanding of late twelfth-century history, society and Latinity in Britain and Ireland” (3). Bartlett concurs, stating that “[a] study of his thought throws light on many of the complex processes of twelfth-century society” (6).

However, in addition to praise, Gerald has received much criticism as well: in the words of O’Meara, “[i]t is usual to use hard words of Giraldus” (“Introduction” 17). In fact, there is a duality visible in Gerald’s reputation, in the form of fame and infamy, best exemplified by his reception in Ireland and Wales, respectively. As might be expected, Gerald’s controversial characterisation of the Irish has provoked strong condemnation historically but seems to have been an issue in more recent times as well. In fact, Martin observed in 1969 that “many may rightly still carp at his opinions about the Irish” (“Gerald of Wales” 291). It should be noted that the biased nature of Gerald’s Irish works is, naturally, not an argument against studying them. On the contrary, the works are important for the very fact that they provide insight into the history of cultural relations on the British Isles. In fact, Henley and McMullen argue in relation to Gerald’s Irish and Welsh works that

[t]hese strikingly original compositions provide a detailed view of societies on the margins of the Anglo-Norman empire from the point of view of an informed outsider, exemplifying many of the assumptions about barbarity, civility and ecclesiastical reform that broadly characterise the Anglo-Norman relationship with its Celtic neighbours in this period. These important works have had lasting effects on our understanding of British cultural relations in the medieval period, informing both medieval and modern historiographical narratives. (3)

Further, “[t]he stark contrast between Gerald’s reception in Ireland and his reception in Wales attest to his complexities and highlight the importance of understanding him as a writer and rhetorician” (Henley and McMullen 4).

Nor has the criticism been restricted to Gerald’s Irish works. For instance, Gerald’s self-adulation is an often-cited point of criticism. For example, McGurk states that “[r]eaders need little skill in criticism to see his vanity, credulity and lack of consistency” (255). Bartlett states that “it is sometimes necessary, in order to understand him fully, to refuse to be lured by his eloquent self-presentation and to pay attention instead to what he does not say” (1). James F. Dimock’s preface to his edition of the *Topography* is illuminating in terms of nineteenth-century attitudes towards medieval histories:

In some cases he must, I think, have been imposed upon by his informants. He was almost as credulous as he was vain and pompous . . . For instance, his account of the mode of inaugurating a king in Tirconnell has not a fraction of truth in it, and is so absurdly and disgustingly incredible and impossible, that I can only imagine it to have been told him by some one who was trying whether, in his contempt of the Irish, there was any possible ridiculous and foul calumny that his gullibility would not swallow. (lxvii)

Dimock made his observations in 1867, but similar opinions may be found a century later, albeit in a milder form. O’Meara, for instance, states in his introduction to his translation of the first recension of the *Topography* that:

[t]he reader will be able to judge for himself the amount of credit to be placed in Giraldus’ statements, and the motives by which he was actuated. He will see the single-minded vanity of an ambitious flatterer, the haughty contempt of one who came with his family to reform and invade, and the apparent credulity which must have delighted the hearts of the Irish. (“Introduction” 17)

In fact, many writers in the nineteenth and early to mid-twentieth centuries have attested to Gerald’s credulity, as well as to the unreliability of his works.

To state the obvious, the problem with the *Topography's* characterisation of the Irish has been its lack of truth, as Dimock's above-cited statement indicates. However, more recently, there has been a shift in our approach to medieval histories, and it now seems self-evident that, when it comes to these writings, we are not even looking for strict historicity; the value lies somewhere else. In the words of Nancy F. Partner, "[a]ll medieval histories contain more that is valuable to us than scraps of verifiable information, although what that 'more' is, exactly, varies from book to book and is sometimes difficult to describe" (5). In the case of the Gerald's works, their historical significance has already been noted. Moreover, Partner observes that "there is no single method to bring to historiographical studies" (6). However, the basics seem clear. In her book, Partner describes her strategy in dealing with her chosen twelfth-century authors; namely, of tracing "the connecting lines between the historian and his book and the world he watched and cared about (and took for granted and ignored)" (7). Medieval histories are not easy topics; however, what we can do is examine the historical context in which they were written, and significantly, the author is part of that context. Yet, it may be said that this is one of the flaws in research on Gerald.

For, paradoxically, while Gerald "has provided the biographer with a great wealth of material" (Scott xii), Henley and McMullen argue that "Gerald remains somewhat of an enigma to modern scholars" (3): indeed, "[f]or an author who wrote so much about himself, much about him remains ambiguous" (ibid.). Henley and McMullen seem to attribute this to a lack of "individual attention" to Gerald's life and works among scholarship (ibid.). Moreover, "[w]hile details from his works are frequently cherry-picked for inclusion in broader studies of medieval Ireland and Britain, little attention tends to be devoted to Gerald himself" (Henley and McMullen 4). Indeed, Martin commented in his 1969 article that "[t]here is no satisfactory biography of Gerald though a great deal has been published about him" ("Gerald of Wales" 291 [n1]). Scott, too, argued in 1978 that

[t]here are many brief accounts of Giraldus' life and writings. Some of these are distinctly superficial, dwelling on the more picturesque features of his flamboyant character, and repeating the same stories, mostly culled from his autobiographical *De rebus a se gestis*. (xii)

Not much has changed in this respect, either, as Henley and McMullen, writing in 2018, observe that Robert Bartlett's 1982 monograph, *Gerald of Wales, 1146–1223*, is "the only book-length

assessment of him to date” (3). Henley and McMullen see the work as “a great leap forward in the study of Gerald’s life, works and influences” (4). However, even Bartlett’s work is, in his own words, “a biographical study rather than a biography” (“Preface”).

Henley and McMullen refer to the “the difficulty of understanding the influences, motivations and goals that underpin [Gerald’s] diverse writings and tumultuous life” (3), which has been compounded by the narrow focus of scholarship on his most well-known works (*ibid.*); namely, those on Ireland and Wales. Naturally, scholarship tends to see these as his most important works: according to Henley and McMullen, “their blending of ethnography, history, miracle and marvel represents Gerald’s most innovative and captivating achievement” (3). Yet, “a substantial part of his corpus—his religious, political, hagiographical, autobiographical and polemical writings—remains almost untouched by scholars” (Henley and McMullen 4). The 2018 multidisciplinary collection of essays, *Gerald of Wales: New Perspectives on a Medieval Writer and Critic*, edited by Georgia Henley and A. Joseph McMullen, attempts to respond to these deficiencies. As the name implies, the work takes a new approach to the writer by examining his lesser-known works while at the same time providing “new perspectives” on the Irish and Welsh works (Henley and McMullen 2). In fact, research on Gerald’s works seems to have entered a new phase. Henley and McMullen refer to a recent surge in research on Gerald: “recent, foundational work on the complete manuscripts of his works by Catherine Rooney, as well as new studies of his ethnographic interests and the vernacular reception of his texts, have opened up new avenues for research, and several new editions of Gerald’s works are forthcoming” (6).

The present section has observed some of the tendencies in previous research on Gerald of Wales and his works. Noteworthy is Gerald’s dichotomous reputation. It is clear that scholarship has always held a certain fascination with his writings due, for example, to his personal style and observational skills; yet there is much that scholarship has taken issue with as well. However, it is perhaps Gerald’s divisiveness and complexities that have made him such an interesting topic. In fact, Martin calls Gerald an “exasperating fascinating individual” (“Gerald of Wales” 279). In any case, despite the problematic nature of medieval histories (and, indeed, their authors), these works cannot be ignored. According to Partner,

[w]e have simply lost contact, albeit willingly and rightly, with everything that could allow us to approach medieval histories naturally and directly. And yet those works have continued to be read by scholars variously puzzled, bored, critical, and intrigued, because they are the sources for information otherwise unavailable. (4)

Indeed, Martin argues, too, that we must “come to terms with” Gerald (“Gerald of Wales” 279). The present section has also demonstrated that, despite Gerald’s significance and status as a much-studied subject, there are important flaws to be observed in research both on Gerald himself and his oeuvre.

3 *Topography of Ireland*

The present section provides an introduction to the material being studied, the *Topography of Ireland*. Section 3.1 discusses the manuscripts and modern editions and translations of the work, observing some potentially problematic aspects therein, concerning the work's writing process and its existing modern editions and translations. I will define the material of the present study as the first recension of the *Topography of Ireland* and explain what this means. Section 3.2 provides an overview of the structure and content of the *Topography*, while at the same time assessing what the diverse topics have in common, thus demonstrating Gerald's overarching point of view. It should be noted that this is only an introduction to the work and therefore keeps to a general level; a more detailed description of the relevant passages will be provided in the analysis in section 4. Finally, section 3.3 will examine the *Topography*, firstly, within the context of twelfth-century historical writing. Secondly, the section will demonstrate that Gerald's negative characterisation of the Irish was not the first of its kind or in any way unique but, on the contrary, tapped into pre-existing models of how peripheral peoples were portrayed.

3.1 Which *Topography*?

The *Topography of Ireland* is at once one of the first and the last in Gerald's oeuvre, for Gerald kept revising the work throughout his life. The *Topography* was edited by James F. Dimock in 1867 as part of the so-called Rolls Series, and according to Caoimhe Whelan, this remains the standard edition in use (254 [n1]). Dimock's was not an easy task, for he states that "[i]nstead of a lack of manuscripts, I can only here complain of a greater number than I have been able to grapple with" (xi). Further, Dimock comments that "[o]f the works of Giraldus Cambrensis already edited by Mr. Brewer in former volumes of this series there has been generally a sad lack of manuscripts" (ix). In fact, Martin observes that the wealth of extant manuscripts is an indication of the *Topography*'s popularity ("Gerald of Wales" 287). Dimock classed the manuscripts which he had collated tentatively in four editions, and this only "for convenience' sake" (xv). In fact, modern scholarship sees the *Topography* as consisting of five recensions. However, as Whelan observes, these "are not yet represented in the edited editions" (254 [n1]). In comparison, Gerald's second Irish work, the *Expugnatio Hibernica*, also edited by Dimock (and published in the same volume as the *Topography*), was edited and translated by A. B. Scott and F. X. Martin in 1978 (ibid.). It may be added that the

English translation of the *Topography* by Thomas Forester dates from 1863 and was published in *The Historical Works of Giraldus Cambrensis* (edited and revised by Thomas Wright), which contains a translation of the *Expugnatio Hibernica* as well (ibid.).

The present study, however, examines the first recension of the *Topography*, translated by John J. O'Meara's in 1982. This is a revised edition of his 1951 translation, which (in his own words) follows more closely his 1949 edition of the first recension of the Latin text (O'Meara, "Foreword" 7). The 1949 edition comes with the statement that "[t]he present paper attempts to present the original version, shorn of all later excisions, revisions and additions" (O'Meara, "Giraldus" 114). It may be said that O'Meara's edition and translation are important alternatives for the nineteenth-century ones, for there is a distinct difference between the original version of the *Topography* and the final one. According to Bartlett, whereas the first edition

had been relatively free of symbolic interpretation of the birds and beasts it described . . . By the time Gerald completed the fourth edition, however, the work was twice its original length and additional material of an allegorical kind had swamped the natural history. (145)

Further, the original version seems more interested in Ireland *per se*: in the words of Dimock, the first edition "contains all . . . that is of any value as regards Ireland, his subject" (xiii). O'Meara concurs, stating that, with the revisions, "the real subject of his book, Ireland and its early history, gets less and less prominence" ("Giraldus" 114). Moreover, several writers have voiced the opinion that the revisions did little to improve the work: for instance, O'Meara comments that Gerald "was proud of his success and, unfortunately, set out to improve upon it" (ibid.).

Further, Bartlett argues that the transformation of the *Topography* "represents the drift of Gerald's thinking in the 1190s and early thirteenth century" (145), namely his "striking shift from topography and history to hagiography and polemic" (ibid.). Although the *Topography* is seen as Gerald's first serious attempt at writing (Dimock xi), it was not his first work. His early writings include scientific works, although of these only the *Cosmographia* survives (Bartlett 127–28). Bartlett discusses Gerald's place in the "history of natural science" (123) and in the context of the new, twelfth-century 'naturalism' (103). Bartlett argues that, while Gerald "was not a scientific writer" in the same way as some of his contemporaries (127), "his contributions to natural observation and explanation" are

interesting (153). Scholarship often refers to Gerald's observational skills, which are visible in the *Topography*: according to U. T. Holmes, "[t]he information on Irish fauna alone contained in the *Topographia Hibernica* is indicative of his superior talents as an observer" (qtd. in Bartlett 134). This suggests the importance of the natural historical side of the *Topography*, at least initially, in the first recension. Bartlett refers, too, to the "tensions Gerald felt between naturalistic and theological explanation" (153); as the transformation of the *Topography* demonstrates, the theological side eventually won. However, this was at least to some extent influenced by outside "pressures and expectations" (Bartlett 145). According to Bartlett, Gerald was "sensitive to the charge that secular literature was a frivolous pursuit for ecclesiastics" (4). Moreover, the reception of the *Topography* seems also to have played a part, for according to O'Meara, Gerald apparently expanded upon those aspects for which he received praise ("Giraldus" 114). Bartlett concurs, stating that Archbishop Baldwin's favourable reaction to the theological elements in the work, "must have encouraged Gerald in his perpetual expansion of the allegorical elements in the *Topographia Hibernica*" (145–46).

The differences between the five recensions of the *Topography*—in particular, the difference between the original version and the final one—begs the question whether we should identify better "which *Topography*" is meant when we talk about the work. For, while scholarship acknowledges the existence of these five recensions, the process of how they came to be, as well as the differences between the first recension and the final one, it nevertheless seems to deal with the *Topography* as one; namely, a work that includes all five recensions. In light of Gerald's evolution as an author—as well as the episodes in his life, relating, for example, to his shift from a supporter of the Angevin kings to their passionate critic—it might be suggested that the different recensions reflect different stages of his life, and should therefore be taken into consideration in the study of the work. Naturally, it may be argued that the five recensions together equal the final, and hence, the "correct" version. In fact, Catherine Rooney's study indicates that Gerald himself insisted everyone reading "the most up-to-date versions of his works" (104). However, even if we see the final version as just that, the final, most finished version, and therefore, the "real" *Topography*, it might be said that which of the recensions is meant depends entirely on the research question.

In any case, the present study has chosen the first recension, its focus being on the work's "real subject", Ireland, and not on its religious allegory. In addition, the first recension might be seen as

the closest thing to the original version, written shortly after Gerald first went to Ireland, and therefore representing also his initial reactions to the country. In Dimock's words, "[i]t records what he himself saw, or was there told and believed, penned at the very time, or soon afterwards, whilst everything was still fresh in his memory" (xiii). In addition, it might be said that an examination of the "final version" (the modern edition of which does not even exist) would have to take into account Gerald's whole life history and the various shifts therein, which goes far beyond the scope of the present study. Nevertheless, Dimock's edition and Forester's translation are used to complement the study as needed: one such case is the author's preface, which is not included in O'Meara's edition or translation, presumably because the preface is not in any of the manuscripts of the first edition (Dimock 3 [n2]).³ However, it seems that the two are roughly contemporaneous, for according to Dimock, the preface was included in Gerald's public recitation of the *Topography* at Oxford shortly after the work was written (ibid.), although Bartlett refers to it as "the preface to the second edition", dating from 1189 (59). Naturally, Bartlett's statement does not necessarily mean that the preface was not included in the aforementioned public recitation; moreover, the first edition was written only a year or two earlier, in 1187–1188 (Bartlett 59). In any case, the preface has been used in the present study mainly as a useful tool: the study itself focuses on O'Meara's translation.

The present section has attempted to highlight an apparent flaw in research conducted on the *Topography of Ireland*; namely, the lack of a comprehensive modern edition and translation. This is curious, for the *Topography* was, according to Bartlett, "Gerald's first major work and his most popular" (213); moreover, the author's constant revisions to the work point to its importance within his oeuvre. Further, Gerald's "enduring intellectual achievement was his ethnographic writing" (Bartlett 6), which the *Topography* naturally represents. Gerald's *Expugnatio Hibernica*, on the other hand, has a more recent standard edition and translation, which is probably due its long-standing status as the main source for the Anglo-Norman invasion of Ireland (Martin, "Gerald of Wales" 279; McGurk 260). The *Topography*, although roughly contemporaneous, does not deal with these events *per se*. Interestingly, Martin, writing in 1969, argues that the *Topography* "now ranks well below the *Conquest* in scholarly value" ("Gerald of Wales" 288). It is unclear what Martin means by this, but the statement—which, it may be said, is no longer valid, as section 2.3 has clearly

³ The manuscripts for O'Meara's edition of the first recension (M, P, H) are the same as the ones that Dimock sees as the manuscripts of the first edition (O'Meara 16; Dimock 3 [n2]).

demonstrated—seems to betray attitudinal issues in the past concerning medieval histories such as the *Topography*, in particular, where their reliability or historical accuracy is concerned. Closely related is the *Topography's* infamous reputation as anti-Irish propaganda—and indeed, its harmful effect on the image of the Irish. Thus, the work's characterisation of the Irish may have been a factor.

Yet another reason might be found in Gerald's (rather rambling) revisions to the work, which is supported by the fact that the first recension has received a more recent edition and translation.

Dimock argues in relation to the additions that

valuable more or less as these all may in some way be, they are utterly foreign to his subject, and wearisome beyond measure to the reader, who is expecting information about Ireland. They have about as much to do with Ireland or its people as with the moon and the man in it. (xiii–xiv)

By contrast, the first recension is described by O'Meara as “vigorous, graceful and, on the whole, well-directed, if not always at the same time impartial or credible” (“Giraldus” 114). In fact, O'Meara's seems to justify his decision of editing and translating the first recension by stating that “the merits of the original work are considerable” and that “[t]he whole story gains immensely in vigour and interest by the omission of extraneous matter which to a modern reader can only be tedious” (“Introduction” 16). It may be assumed that in this case, too, attitudes have changed. Finally, the present section has also asked how the *Topography's* long-drawn-out writing process should be approached. For, although it might be said that it is the ultimate version which counts, the transformation of the author suggests that the five recensions might be seen as separate stages within that process.

3.2 Gerald's point of view

For the modern reader, the title ‘Topography of Ireland’ (in Latin as either *Topographia Hibernica* or, less commonly, *Hiberniae*) may be slightly misleading, considering the more restricted, modern sense of the term. However, for Gerald, the word *topographia*, deriving from the Greek *topos* ‘place’ and *-graphia* ‘writing’ (*Oxford Dictionary of English*, “topography”, “-graphy”), probably just meant the ‘description of a place’. Indeed, the *Oxford English Dictionary* lists the sense “[t]he science or practice of describing a particular place, city, town, manor, parish, or tract of land; the accurate and

detailed delineation and description of any locality” for the word (“topography”). Gerald’s description of Ireland divides into three parts, each with its separate focus. The first part begins with a brief description of Ireland’s geography and topography in terms of the location and main physical features of the island. This is followed by detailed observations on Irish fauna, mainly birds and fish, but other beasts too. These observations are often accompanied by religious allegory or moralisation, as Gerald draws analogies between Irish fauna and the human condition, as though inspired by Irish wildlife. For instance, in relation to the “crane” and its “natural instinct” (*Topography* 40), Gerald tells us that “[w]e should follow the example of this bird in watching and being on our guard, because we are entirely ignorant of the hour at which the thief will come” (*ibid.*). Gerald also describes the temperate and healthy Irish climate (*Topography* 53). In addition, the final chapters are devoted to a comparison between the East and the West, which culminates in a passionate argument against the former.

The second part is a miscellaneous collection of marvels and miracles, which date both from Gerald’s time and earlier times. According to Bartlett, “[t]he crucial distinction in Gerald’s mind between a marvel and a miracle was that the miracle was produced by divine power, usually, though not exclusively, working through a saintly man or woman, while the marvel, however remarkable it might be, was a work of nature” (106). Indeed, the stories describe both natural anomalies, such as tidal peculiarities, the effects of the moon as well as stories about islands and wells, and miracles performed by and attached to saints and holy places. A wealth of part three is devoted to a description of the history of the Irish, which consists of stories about various peoples arriving in Ireland, six arrivals in all. Gerald deals briefly with the history of Irish Christianity as well, recounting how Patrick was “the first by the aid of divine grace, to preach and plant there the Christian Faith” (*Topography* 104–105), baptizing the people, converting the whole island, and finally choosing Armagh as his see (*ibid.*). Although the *Topography* is not really about the conquest or colonisation of Ireland, part three does include a brief argument for the right of the kings of Britain to Ireland. Gerald explains this both in historical terms as well as in relation to circumstances from “recent times” (*Topography* 100); namely, “the spontaneous surrender and protestation of fealty of the Irish chiefs” and “the favour of the confirmation of the claim by the Pope” (*ibid.*). In addition, the conquest of Ireland is portrayed in a favourable light, as part of King Henry’s “titles and triumphs” (*Topography* 124). After this historical account, Gerald turns to a description of the contemporary people of the island in terms of their “nature, customs and characteristics”

(*Topography* 100), including both “their mental and physical” traits (*ibid.*). Lastly, the *Topography* ends with a panegyric in honour of King Henry II, which Gerald in fact considered “one of his finest literary creations” (Bartlett 59).

The drawback of Gerald’s rather all-embracing study is that the work may come across as a miscellaneous collection of “this and that”, mingled with religious digressions. Nevertheless, there is a guiding idea to be found in the work. In fact, Martin sees the *Topography* as “a well-planned work” (“Giraldus as Historian” 270). The *Topography* begins with some important premises. Firstly, Ireland is identified as the “farthest island of the west” (*Topography* 33). Moreover,

beyond those limits there is no land, nor is there any habitation either of men or beasts—but beyond the whole horizon only the ocean flows and is borne on in boundless space through its unsearchable and hidden ways. (*Topography* 31)

This suggests that Gerald is not merely providing a neutral description of Ireland’s geographical location: rather, Ireland’s ‘imagined geography’ is established as the remotest western periphery, a condition which renders the island secretive and mysterious.⁴ In fact, Gerald describes how he began to examine “what new things, and what secret things not in accordance with her usual course had nature hidden away in the farthest western lands” (*Topography* 31). Thus, Gerald’s mission is to shed light on the unknown, for in the preface he states that “I propose, therefore, to take, at least, a distinct view of this most remote island, both as regards its situation and character, explaining its peculiarities, so long hidden under the veil of antiquity” (Giraldus, “Preface” 7).

Unsurprisingly, Gerald’s encounter with the unknown revealed some new and foreign things. In his own words,

when I had seen many things not found in other countries and entirely unknown, and at the same time worthy of some wonder because of their novelty, I began to examine everything carefully. (*Topography* 31)

⁴ The concept of ‘imagined geographies’, here, is based on Keith D. Lilley’s book chapter “Imagined Geographies of the ‘Celtic Fringe’ and the Cultural Construction of the ‘Other’ in Medieval Wales and Ireland” in *Celtic Geographies: Old Culture, New Times*, edited by D. C. Harvey, Rhys Jones, and Neil McNroy (Routledge, 2002). According to Lilley, “[f]or a number of years now, ‘imagined geographies’ have been a focus of much discussion among ‘post-colonial’ geographers, sociologists and anthropologists” (21), and in his book chapter he is applying the concept to the medieval context of Ireland and Wales.

This indicates that he witnessed in Ireland something different, unique and novel, which inspired him to write about the island. Therefore, Gerald's point of view is to examine Ireland's distinctive features: there is an underlying comparison here with other countries: for example, he states that the characteristics of the land are examined "from the point of view of the presence or absence of various living things" (*Topography* 92). However, the focus is on difference: for example, Gerald observes fish or birds that are "missing" (*Topography* 37), or on the contrary, "new and not found elsewhere" (*Topography* 38). Secondly, Gerald presents Ireland's distinctive features that he has set out to reveal as deriving from the island's remote and peripheral location. Importantly, in the *Topography*, Gerald emphasises his own, first-hand experience: for instance, he undermines Bede and Solinus's respective observations on the existence of vineyards and bees in Ireland, remarking that both authors lacked "the evidence of their eyes" (*Topography* 35). Further, Gerald argues that "it is only when he who reports a thing is also one that witnessed it that anything is established on the sound basis of truth" (*Topography* 35). Thus, Gerald gives himself authority in reporting the novelties of Ireland by highlighting that, contrary to previous authors, he has actually been to Ireland.

However, Gerald seems to contradict himself: on the one hand, he has collected things "which, appearing to be contrary to nature's course, are worthy of wonder" (*Topography* 57). In other words, in the *Topography* there is a pervasive theme of reporting things worthy of mention due to their unusual quality. On the other hand, he criticises people's inability to appreciate ordinary things that occur daily:

For human nature is so made that only what is unusual and infrequent excites wonder or is regarded as of value. We make no wonder of the rising and the setting of the sun which we see every day; and yet there is nothing in the universe more beautiful or more worthy of wonder. When, however, an eclipse of the sun takes place, everyone is amazed—because it happens rarely. (*Topography* 42)

Thus, Gerald draws attention to the wonder in the "usual", which people tend to ignore because it is ordinary.

An overview of the *Topography of Ireland*, the present section has demonstrated the work's wide-ranging approach to its subject, ranging from zoology and miracle account to ethnography, not to mention the overall religious undertones. As demonstrated in section 3.1, the religious side of the *Topography* eventually took over: in fact, Dimock argues that "[i]f the *Topographia Hibernica* had come down to us in this first edition only, it would have answered far better to its name" (xiv). Thus, the first recension of the *Topography of Ireland* essentially remains just that, a 'description of Ireland'. However, there is a religious agenda visible here, too, which cannot be ignored. The multidimensional aspect of the *Topography* notwithstanding, there is an overarching, comparative point of view visible throughout the work: Gerald has set out to reveal Ireland's *proprietates* (Giraldus, "Introitus" 7), its 'special character' ("proprietas"), which is presented as deriving from the island's peripheral location. In sum, the *Topography* as a description of Ireland comes across as someone making sense of an unknown place.

3.3 Twelfth-century tendencies

Robert Bartlett and F. X. Martin, in their roughly contemporaneous works, take different stances towards the *Topography's* genre: while Martin (1978) states unambiguously that "[i]t was not history" but "constructed as a wonder-book, one of the *De Mirabilibus* books then in circulation" ("Giraldus as Historian" 270), Bartlett (1982) argues that Gerald

regarded himself as a historian. Although, to our eyes, only the *Expugnatio Hibernica* conforms to the standard model of historical narrative, the other Irish and Welsh works attempted to delineate contemporary societies as concrete, historical communities, and 'history' was the only term then available to categorize writing of this kind. (4)

The *Topography* is thus a twelfth-century history; in fact, when Martin refutes the term 'history', it seems that he is referring to the *Topography's* reliability and historical accuracy in relation to the modern concept of history and its requirements, which is supported, for example, by his statement that Gerald "did admit at the end of his days . . . that some of [the *Topography*] was unreliable" ("Giraldus as Historian" 270). In addition, Martin argues in relation to the second part, that Gerald "must have received the information directly or indirectly from the professional storytellers in the towns and the Norman castles" ("Giraldus as Historian" 271), and suggests that Gerald was "unduly

receptive to some of the tall stories told to him with straight faces by the imaginative Irish" (ibid.). O'Meara, too, argues that Gerald's account of the wonders of Ireland is "partly made up of 'yarns', some of them decidedly 'tall', that were told to Giraldus" ("Notes" 130 [n15]).

However, in twelfth-century terms, strict historicity was not a requirement in the same way that it is today; on the contrary, a bit of embellishing was even desirable. In her book on twelfth-century English historiography, Nancy F. Partner observes that, whereas "we now demand 'hard' information, disdain amusement, resist morality" (3), for centuries "literary embellishment was a beneficent and welcome mediator between boredom and historical narrative" (ibid.). According to Martin, Gerald's sources were threefold: personal observation, oral information and Gaelic written records ("Giraldus as Historian" 270). For example, O'Meara states that "[h]is brief sketch of Irish history in this third part is undoubtedly based on the oldest version of the *Lebor Gabála*, the 'Book of Invasions'" ("Notes" 133 [n42]). Gerald would certainly have embellished the stories. According to Martin, while the second part contains "legends and tales which are known to us also from Irish sources" ("Giraldus as Historian" 271), and which, consequently, were not "products of Giraldus's imagination" (ibid.), he is nevertheless liable to have touched them up for artistic purposes (ibid.). In general, Partner observes that, although main historical events were not to be invented, "[d]uring the whole of the Middle Ages, history enjoyed many of the freedoms of fiction; and fiction, in turn, conventionally masqueraded as fact—no serious deception was intended by either" (3).

As for miracle stories, it should be noted that medieval attitudes to them were very different from our own: according to Bartlett, "[t]here was virtually no scepticism about the miraculous as such" (104), which seems to detract from the above-cited arguments on Gerald's gullibility. Yet, Gerald does appear conscious of the miraculous nature of what he is recounting. In his own words,

I am aware that I shall describe some things that will seem to the reader to be either impossible or ridiculous. But I protest solemnly that I have put down nothing in this book the truth of which I have not found out either by the testimony of my own eyes, or that of reliable men found worthy of credence and coming from the districts in which the events took place. (*Topography* 57)

However, Gerald also argues that “it should not seem surprising if wonderful things are written about the works of him who made whatever he wished” (*Topography* 57–58). In fact, “evidences of God’s continuing interest in human affairs” were one of the ways to catch the reader’s interest, which was a requirement in twelfth-century terms (Partner 2). Partner argues in relation to “serious and skillful medieval writers” that “if their ambition rose beyond the modest annal to the dignity of high literature, their work had to arrest the attention and divert the imagination” (ibid.). Twelfth-century historical writing was meant to entertain: moreover, “[t]he older, longer tradition of history as serious entertainment was a particularly rich one in England” (Partner 4).

The *Topography of Ireland* constitutes Gerald’s “first serious essay in authorship” (Dimock xi). In fact, the work was written with no humble intentions in mind, indicated by the way that Gerald likens his endeavour to the work of Classical authors. The preface to the *Topography* begins as follows:

When I reflect that our life is short and fleeting, I am filled with admiration of the noble aims of those men of genius who, before their path for the future was yet plain, resolved on making it their principal object to leave behind them some excellent memorial, by which they might secure enduring fame, and at least live in after-times, when their brief span of existence had ended. (Giraldus, “Preface” 3)

Gerald sees the attempt at an eternal life through fame as the main incentive of Classical authors for their literary work (ibid.), and states that it is the same motivation, “the hope of possibly achieving a glorious reputation when my days are ended” that urges him on (Giraldus, “Preface” 6, 4). According to Bartlett, Gerald had “a very high evaluation of literature” (212) and “expressed his love for writing and saw literary attainment as a way of escaping the transience of life, transcending mortality” (61). In the dedication to the king, Gerald states that “I decided to send to your Highness those things rather which cannot be lost. By them I shall, through you, instruct posterity. For no age can destroy them” (*Topography* 32). Towards the end of his life Gerald wrote increasingly for posterity (Bartlett 100), “his last recourse, amid the failure, frustration, and bitterness of his active life” (ibid.), but this tendency is visible in the *Topography* as well.

However, Gerald had another motivation for writing as well. In addition to (posthumous) fame, Gerald refers to Classical authors’ second incentive:

There was another, second indeed in merit as well as in order, namely, the patronage, reward, and encouragement of illustrious princes. For honours are the nurses of the liberal arts (Giraldus, "Preface" 3–4).

Moreover, Gerald sees patronage as a precondition for literature, as "letters" need "lettered princes" in order to flourish (Giraldus, "Preface" 4). In fact, Gerald observes a contemporary fault in this respect: "There would be no lack of eminent writers at the present day, if there were none of enlightened rulers" (ibid.). Significantly, the *Topography* is dedicated to King Henry II; further, the work ends with a panegyric on the king's "various titles and triumphs" (*Topography* 124). The goal is obvious: "Clearly he was seeking patronage, hoping to win the attention of those at the top of the pyramid of power" (Bartlett 58). Thus, it seems that Gerald is already looking forward, beyond the potential success of this particular work, to future endeavours as well. The *Topography* ends with Gerald expressing his readiness to write more at the king's request: "If you command me to write the true history of so much and such difficult material, and such as demands capacity far greater than mine, I shall make the attempt" (*Topography* 125). Thus, it may be said that the *Topography* reads like a job application.

In sum, Gerald aimed for success: he even resorted to a grandiose "publicity campaign" after finishing the manuscript (Martin, "Gerald of Wales" 286): "He arranged to read it, over three consecutive days, before selected audiences at Oxford; to sustain their interest he entertained them generously on each occasion" (ibid.). As for the literary methods available, a diverting history could be achieved, for example, through "scandalous gossip" and "tales of exotic places" and "all this in as beautiful a style as the writer could command" (Partner 2–3). In fact, considering the contemporary requirements, which included "information, morality, amusement, and beauty of language" (Partner 3), the *Topography* seems like a textbook example of a twelfth-century history. Gerald's literary works were "designed to be entertaining and stylistically satisfying as well as edifying" (Bartlett 4). The entertainment aspect certainly applies to the *Topography*: in the words of Martin, "[t]his colourful presentation was guaranteed to hold spellbound the audiences at Oxford and to fascinate the readers of the book in England and Europe" ("Gerald of Wales" 288). Gerald's strategy in his own words was "to rouse the reader's attention, by setting before him some new things, either not before related or very briefly noticed" (Giraldus, "Preface" 7). This may be challenged, however, at least where Gerald's characterisation of the Irish is concerned.

The twelfth century was a transformative period in terms of the image of the Irish, as “the hitherto dominant view, an essentially positive one, was replaced by a new, hostile and condescending one” (Gillingham 26). The shift was radical: in the words of Gillingham,

For some centuries before the twelfth, the English and Irish inhabited what Denis Bethell called “a common cultural world in which the Irish could still be teachers”. But, he went on, by the mid twelfth century, “‘barbarity’ had become, and was to remain, a cliché in describing the Irish. (24)

Therefore, as the *Topography* dates from the late 1180s, it is clear that there was nothing new about its ideas of Irish barbarity; on the contrary, this had become a commonplace. For instance, “Gerald’s fiercest criticisms of the state of religion among the Irish were platitudes of twelfth-century reform” (Gillingham 26). Indeed, the *Topography*’s rhetoric bears a strong resemblance to that of previous authors: for example, Gillingham refers to the impact of Bernard of Clairvaux’s famous description of the Irish as

shameless in their customs, uncivilised in their ways, godless in religion, barbarous in their law, obstinate as regards instruction, foul in their lives; Christians in name, pagans in fact. (Bernard of Clairvaux, qtd. in Gillingham 26)

In sum, it is evident that the *Topography*’s characterisation of the Irish draws on pre-existing tendencies.

Furthermore, the Irish were not unique in being portrayed as barbarians. Gillingham continues that as the Welsh and Scots “suffered a similar fate at the hands of twelfth-century writers” (24), this may be called “one of the most fundamental ideological shifts in the history of the British Isles” (ibid.). In fact, Gerald himself provides a characterisation of the Welsh in his *Descriptio Kambriae* which at times matches that of the Irish in its ruthlessness. Secondly, the shift was part of a wider tendency: Celtic peoples in the West were conceptualised in a similar way as the Scandinavians in the North, and the Slavs and Magyars in the east—namely, as ‘barbarians’ (Bartlett 158). According to Bartlett, the concept of the ‘barbarian’ included elements such as “lesser economic development” (160), “religious deficiency” (169), sexual immorality (170), and “moral and psychological qualities” (165), such as “ferocity, cruelty, and bloodthirstiness, their faithlessness and

disregard for good laws and customs” (165). In the case of the Irish, the crux of the matter seems to have been marriage customs (Bartlett 43): several authors point to the significance of the Irish marriage law, which, as Gillingham states

led to the Irish being judged and found wanting by ecclesiastical reformers—an articulate body of men who were all too certain of their own moral rectitude and were very ready to condemn as uncivilised values which they did not share. (37)

In fact, Bartlett argues that Gerald “too, saw Irish marriage customs not as a different law, but as an infringement of law” (44). It should also be noted that the “twelfth century was a time when the Church was engaged in an energetic attempt to extend its control over marriage and sexual affairs” (Bartlett 38).

Importantly, what peoples conceptualised as barbarians had in common was that they inhabited the fringe areas of Europe: this suggests the connection between the idea of the periphery and the image of the barbarian. In fact, Keith D. Lilley argues that “[h]ow people and places are imagined is fundamental to the cultural construction of social difference and otherness” (22). Lilley refers to the medieval roots of the idea of the ‘Celtic fringe’, arguing that “[t]he Anglo-Normans looked upon the Welsh and Irish as people who lacked civility *because* they occupied the fringes of the ‘civilised’ (Anglo-Norman) world” (23). Moreover, “this imagined geography served to project an image of Wales and Ireland as subordinate and marginal to England: the Anglo-Normans imagined Wales and Ireland as an outer ‘fringe’ to reinforce their own sense of ‘centrality’ and primacy” (Lilley 23). Thus, it seems that the idea of the periphery was actively utilised by colonisers as well. Lilley argues for the similarity between medieval and “modern” colonialism: “the Anglo-Norman ‘othering’ of subject populations, which went hand in hand with the process of colonisation in Britain and Ireland, was little different from the European othering of peoples in Africa, Asia and the Americas in later centuries, since both relied on constructing imagined geographies to depict the colonised as an ‘inferior’ Other” (23).

The present section has discussed the *Topography* in the historical context in which it was written. In terms of the requirements for twelfth-century historical writing, it should be noted that a certain shock-value was a desired feature: in brief, the works were supposed to be entertaining. The

Topography was a serious literary endeavour for Gerald: his preface indicates that his primary motivations for writing the work were (posthumous) fame and patronage. The present section has also demonstrated that Gerald was not the instigator of anti-Irish imagery, although it should be noted that this does not detract from his role in cementing the negative portrayal of the people. In any case, Gerald's ethnographic writing should be seen as part of a widespread twelfth-century tendency of perceiving peoples in the peripheral regions of Europe as 'barbarian'. Therefore, even if particular stories about the Irish in the *Topography* were new, the concept of barbarity informing them was not.

4 Comparison of Ireland and the Irish

The present section provides an analysis of the *Topography of Ireland's* contrasting representations of Ireland and the Irish. Section 4.1 compares and contrasts these portrayals, demonstrating that the basis for both descriptions is essentially the same: namely, that Ireland is a periphery and, hence, different and unusual. However, Gerald's attitude to these consequences of the periphery for the land and the people is demonstrated to be distinctly different and seemingly contradictory. Section 4.2 examines the shift in the image of 'Ireland' vis-à-vis the preface of the work, while demonstrating that the image of the Irish remains the same and is even reinforced. Section 4.3 continues this discussion by assessing Gerald's reasons for shifting towards a favourable portrayal of Ireland, while maintaining the negative image of the Irish.

4.1 Contrasting consequences of the periphery

Gerald's description of Ireland is based on the island's peripheral position as the "farthest island of the west" (*Topography* 33). Locating Ireland, as much in the public imagination as on the actual map of Europe, at the very edge of the West and the known world immediately establishes Ireland's case as unique. In fact, Gerald presents Ireland's distinctive features as deriving from the island's peripheral location; it is the periphery which makes Ireland home to new and unusual, in other words, different, things. For Gerald explains how nature, "sometimes tired, as it were, of the true and the serious . . . draws aside and goes away, and in these remote parts indulges herself in these secret and distant freaks" (*Topography* 31). Thus, Ireland is identified as something like nature's playground; a place where her fickleness may be seen. It may be said that nature is a very present agent in the *Topography's* Ireland. Gerald states that he has "thought it worth while [sic] to give some account of such things as are marvellous in themselves and, because of their recent origin, are easily seen and have been placed in these parts by nature herself" (*Topography* 57). This suggests that such phenomena are somehow especially visible in Ireland.

In terms of 'Ireland', these are charming freaks of nature and cause for wonder for Gerald. For example, he describes the feet of the ospreys—one of which "is armed with talons, open and ready to snatch" (*Topography* 42), while the other "is closed and peaceful and suitable only for swimming" (*Topography* 42–43)—as "a wonderful instance of nature's pranks" (*Topography* 43). Gerald's tone

is enthusiastic, as though he has been inspired by Irish natural phenomena; at times, his reaction even suggests admiration. Here, noteworthy is the story of the barnacles: “There are many birds here that are called barnacles, which nature, acting against her own laws, produces in a wonderful way” (*Topography* 41). Significantly, these birds reproduce without sin, as they are “not born of flesh” (*Topography* 42) but “of the fir-tree” (*Topography* 41). Thus, in short, these natural “freaks” of Ireland convey a favourable image of the island; they constitute advantages. A good example is, too, the lack of poisonous reptiles on the island, and, indeed, their inability to thrive on Irish soil. In Gerald’s words,

[i]t is clear then, that, whether because of a clemency in the air that is, indeed, something new and never heard of before, but is nevertheless benign, or some hidden force of the land itself that is inimical to poisons, no poisonous animal can live here. And if poison be brought in, no matter what it be, from elsewhere, immediately it loses all the force of its evil. (*Topography* 51)

Further, Gerald continues that “the soil of this land is so inimical to poison that, if gardens or any other places of other countries are sprinkled with it, it drives all poisonous reptiles far away” (*Topography* 51). These examples suggest that, in Gerald’s opinion, there is some kind of natural “goodness” about Ireland.

Moreover, this is where Ireland seems to contrast with the known, “old” world. A good example is Gerald’s discussion of the Irish climate, which he sees as beneficial to the health: according to Gerald, “[t]he air is so healthy that there is no disease-bearing cloud, or pestilential vapour, or corrupting breeze” (*Topography* 53), and consequently, “[t]he island has little use for doctors. You will not find many sick men, except those that are actually at the point of death” (*Topography* 53). Significantly, Gerald continues that

This indeed was the true course of nature; but as the world began to grow old, and, as it were, began to slip into the decrepitude of old age, and to come to the end, the nature of almost all things became corrupted and changed for the worse. (ibid.)

This extract suggests that Gerald sees Ireland as having remained in some kind of primeval, uncorrupted state. In other words, due to its peripheral location, Ireland lacks progress, and this

primitiveness is represented as a positive thing. Moreover, this makes the case of Ireland unique, for elsewhere, in the “old” world, such wonderful phenomena have been lost.

The characterisation of the Irish, too, is based on their lack of progress; however, Gerald’s attitude towards the primitiveness of the people is very different from his approach to the primitiveness of the land. For, in the case of the Irish, lack of progress means lack of culture and civilisation. Moreover, it is their lack of progress that makes the Irish different, for Gerald states that “[j]udged according to modern ideas, they are uncultivated” (*Topography* 102). According to Gerald, the lack of culture shows in everything that they do, as “[a]ll their habits are the habits of barbarians” (*Topography* 102). Two points, in particular, deserve attention. Firstly, in Gerald’s words, “[t]hey have not progressed at all from the primitive habits of pastoral living” (*Topography* 101). The following is illuminating in terms of the author’s way of thinking:

While man usually progresses from the woods to the fields, and from the fields to settlements and communities of citizens, this people despises work on the land, has little use for the money-making of towns, contemns the rights and privileges of citizenship, and desires neither to abandon, nor lose respect for, the life which it has been accustomed to lead in the woods and countryside. (*Topography* 101–102)

Thus, for Gerald, the Irish way of life seems to contradict what is usual and proper. Secondly, it should be noted that especially objectionable to Gerald seems to be the ignorance of the Irish “of the rudiments of the Faith” (*Topography* 106). Gerald goes on listing their unchristian habits: they do not “yet pay tithes or first fruits or contract marriages” nor “avoid incest” (*ibid.*), and men “debauch” the wives of their dead brothers (*ibid.*). In sum, Gerald’s opinion on the Irish is that they are “a barbarous people, literally barbarous” (*Topography* 102).

Gerald sees this as a result of the remoteness of Ireland and of the consequent isolation of the Irish from civilisation. In his words,

[s]ince conventions are formed from living together in society, and since they are so removed in these distant parts from the ordinary world of men, as if they were in another world altogether and consequently cut off from well-behaved and law-abiding people, they know only of the barbarous habits in which they were born and brought up, and embrace them as another nature. (*Topography* 102–103)

Secondly, when it comes to their lack of economic progress, Gerald attributes this to laziness and neglect, pure and simple: “[f]or given only to leisure, and devoted only to laziness, they think that the greatest pleasure is not to work, and the greatest wealth is to enjoy liberty” (*Topography* 102). The vices and “wickedness” (*Topography* 108) of the Irish do not end here, however: besides being lazy, the people are also represented as having a singular tendency towards anger, revenge and treachery (*Topography* 91, 106). Even the saints receive their share of criticism: “just as the men of this country are during this mortal life more prone to anger and revenge than any other race, so in eternal death the saints of this land . . . are more vindictive than the saints of any other region” (*Topography* 91). The Irish are represented as having completely outlandish ways. Perhaps the most striking and controversial story in part three, and the whole work, is an account of the inauguration rites of a people in Ulster, which include bestiality and general barbarity, and which Gerald condemns as “altogether outlandish and abominable” (*Topography* 110). In sum, contrary to the unusual natural wonders of ‘Ireland’, the “unusual” in the Irish provokes only shock and scandal.

If we consider Gerald’s statement in the preface that he intends to search “out both the qualities and defects” of Ireland (Giraldus, “Preface” 7), it may be said that this applies mostly to the first part, dealing with ‘Ireland’. By contrast, the characterisation of the Irish is an overwhelmingly negative one. Admittedly, Gerald does refer to their “beautiful upright bodies and handsome and well-complexioned faces” (*Topography* 100), but even here the praise is reserved not so much to the Irish themselves for having such bodies and physiognomies than to nature for shaping them that way (*ibid.*). A rare compliment is also the musical talents of the Irish: “[i]t is only in the case of musical instruments that I find any commendable diligence in the people” (*Topography* 103). Moreover, “[t]hey seem to me to be incomparably more skilled in these than any other people that I have seen” (*ibid.*). However, in the words of Martin, “[t]his limited praise pales into insignificance beside his harsh words” (Martin, “Gerald of Wales” 288). While the description of ‘Ireland’ is not exclusively positive—for instance, “this country more than any other suffers from storms of wind and rain” (*Topography* 34)—the main point is that, compared with the portrayal of the people, it is overwhelmingly positive, as the good (or wonderful) points outweigh the negative ones. In addition, the portrayal becomes increasingly favourable towards the end of the first part, as Gerald embarks on his comparison of the West and the East; in brief, the overall image that the reader is left with is complimentary to the country where ‘Ireland’ is concerned.

It has been demonstrated that the remoteness of Ireland has been beneficial to 'Ireland' in that it has remained uncorrupted in some ways. It might be suggested that there is a contradiction in the consequences of the periphery on the land and the people, respectively, as the Irish do not seem to enjoy the benefits that Ireland does. Alternatively, as Gerald states that the "natural qualities" of the Irish are "excellent" (*Topography* 103), but "almost everything acquired is deplorable" (*ibid.*), it might be suggested that the Irish are demonstrated to have failed their natural potential by their acquired ways, which of course makes the crimes of the Irish seem even worse. In fact, Gerald states that "although they are fully endowed with natural gifts, their external characteristics of beard and dress, and internal cultivation of the mind, are so barbarous that they cannot be said to have any culture" (*Topography* 101). In fact, the *Topography's* description of the many good points of Ireland in many ways highlights the deficiencies of the Irish referred to in the work. For instance, the story about barnacles reproducing without sin creates a framework, a high moral standard, against which the sexual immoralities of the Irish appear even worse. Here, we may also consider the reference to Ireland's natural resources in the third part:

The fields cultivated are so few because of the neglect of those who should cultivate them. But many of them are naturally very fertile and productive. The wealth of the soil is lost, not through the fault of the soil, but because there are no farmers to cultivate even the best land . . . How few kinds of fruit-bearing trees are grown here! The nature of the soil is not to be blamed, but rather the want of industry on the part of the cultivator. He is too lazy to plant the foreign types of trees that would grow very well here. (*Topography* 102)

Thus, the Irish are demonstrated to have failed not only their own potential but that of their country as well.

The present section has demonstrated that the basis for Gerald's description of Ireland is its remote geographical location. Secondly, Gerald argues that Ireland's peculiarities are a result of the island's peripheral location. Both 'Ireland' and the 'Irish' are represented as lacking progress, which make them different from other countries, but the author takes a different attitude to the primitiveness of the land and to that of the people. The primitiveness of 'Ireland' comes across as a type of pristine, uncorrupted state, whereas the primitiveness of the people means lack of culture and civilisation; in other words, barbarity. Noteworthy is also Gerald's reaction to the unusual: the exoticness of 'Ireland' inspires wonder; that of the Irish, only shock and condemnation. In sum, there is a contrast

in that Ireland is represented in an overwhelmingly favourable light, whereas the image of the Irish emphasises negative aspects. In addition, the positive description of the land underlines the negative characterisation of the Irish—their failed potential.

4.2 Preconceptions and new constructions

According to his own testimony, Gerald chose Ireland as a subject, because, due to its remoteness, the island had been largely neglected by previous authors (Giraldus, “Preface” 6). However, something was known about Ireland, and this something apparently called into question whether the country was worth writing about, as the subject required the author, in Gerald’s words, to “suck honey out of the rock, and draw oil from the flint” (ibid.). However, section 3.3 has demonstrated that a certain entertainment value was a requirement for high literature in the twelfth century. Thus, in order to succeed with the *Topography*, Gerald had to make the subject interesting. Firstly, he had to justify his subject and dismantle the preconception of Ireland as a “poor” subject of study. Gerald does this by invoking the unknown, foreign aspect of Ireland: its secret wonders and novelties—in other words, the island’s periphery-based distinction, or even exoticness. In this respect, it might be said that Gerald constructs an image of Ireland as an unknown and mysterious periphery.

In the dedication, Gerald describes being sent to Ireland by King Henry II, implying also that, inspired by Ireland’s exoticness, he began to examine the island further (*Topography* 31). However, according to his own testimony in the *Expugnatio Hibernica*, Gerald had gone to Ireland prior to this “to help his uncle and his brother by his counsel, and diligently to explore both the site and nature of the island and primitive origin of its race” (qtd. in O’Meara, “Giraldus” 113). According to O’Meara, “[f]rom this statement we might suppose that he had already projected a work, or works, on Ireland and its early history” (“Giraldus” 113). It should also be noted that Gerald’s point of view is to focus on Ireland’s distinctive features. In his own words, while he has “collected everything” (*Topography* 31), he has only “chosen out some of them” (ibid.). These are loosely defined as things “which I have thought worthy of being remembered” (ibid.). In other words, it does not follow automatically that Ireland seemed wholly unique and exotic to him in all respects. The selectiveness suggests that he was not only inspired by the difference that he encountered but also actively searched for and utilised it. In sum, it may be said that Gerald constructs an image of Ireland as the

location of the secret “wonders of the West”, which he, Gerald, will now reveal. Further, he refers to the importance of recording “the marvels of the West” (*Topography* 57), which until that point have “remained hidden away and almost unknown” (*ibid.*). Moreover, these equal “the marvels of the East” (*ibid.*), which have already been brought to “the light of public notice” (*ibid.*). In Gerald’s words,

[j]ust as the countries of the East are remarkable and distinguished for certain prodigies peculiar and native to themselves, so the boundaries of the West also are made remarkable by their own wonders of nature. (*Topography* 31)

Thus, Gerald’s point seems to be that “we too have wonders”; the East is not unique in this respect.

Yet, the Ireland of the *Topography* is not altogether foreign: in other words, its description is not based solely on difference. For example, Gerald states that “Ireland has almost all the kinds of wild animals that are found in the western regions” (*Topography* 47). In fact, although the *Topography* discusses many exotic novelties and wonders, it refers to Ireland’s familiar aspects as well, which conveys an air of familiarity. This is especially true when compared with the other ‘Foreign’ in the first part; namely, the East. There is a contrast in the first part, for example, between Ireland’s mild climate and its (from Gerald’s perspective) “homely” fauna, and the suffocating heat and dangerous, exotic beasts of the East. Thus, contrasted with the East, Ireland becomes “less foreign”. This “familiarity” is used as an argument for the superiority of the wonders of the West over those of the East. Further, as section 4.1 has demonstrated, Ireland’s exoticness is not only of a more homely but “pleasant” kind; the island is represented as remaining in an uncorrupted state. Here, the lack of poisons in Ireland contrasts with the East, the location of the “well of poisons” (*Topography* 56). Gerald states that

[t]he well of poisons brims over in the East. The farther therefore from the East it operates, the less does it exercise the force of its natural efficacy. (*ibid.*).

On the other hand, Ireland, as the farthest western periphery is as far away as possible from this “well of poisons”: indeed, the previous section has demonstrated that the wonders of Ireland are represented as having some kind of primitive “goodness” about them. In addition, the healthy Irish

climate contrasts with the East where “[a]ll the elements . . . are pestiferous” (*Topography* 54) and “threaten his wretched life, deprive him of health, and finally kill him” (*ibid.*). In fact, Gerald states that “nature has given a more indulgent eye to the regions traversed by the west wind than those traversed by the east” (*ibid.*).

In addition, as the peculiarities of the East are demonstrated to be dangerous and unpleasant, they highlight the “good points” of the West by setting off the wonderful nature of the ‘usual’, which otherwise might not be perceived. In the case of “[t]he incomparable mildness of our climate” (*Topography* 55), it may be said that a “mild climate” is perhaps not very interesting in itself, but contrasted with the elements of the East, its “wonderful” nature is revealed. In Gerald’s words,

[o] gift from God, on this earth incomparable! O grace, divinely bestowed on mortals, inestimable, and not yet appreciated! We can safely take our rest in the open air, or upon bare marble. . . . The air, that by breathing in we encompass and which continually encompasses us, is guaranteed to us to be kindly and health-giving. (*ibid.*)

In fact, the comparison of the West and the East seems to explain Gerald’s somewhat contradictory approach to the unusual, which varies from enthusiastic wonder to contempt. For if we examine these instances more clearly, it seems that it is not the exotic freaks of nature that he disdains (for these are indeed wonderful) but people’s inability to appreciate the wonderful nature of usual things, such as the rising or setting of the sun. Some qualities of the West might seem like deficiencies, but when they are contrasted with the qualities of the East, they come across as benefits. In Gerald’s words,

There are certain other things also which, as in the case of reptiles, are wanting here, but whose absence is a good thing. There never are earthquakes here. You will hear thunder here scarcely once in the year. Accordingly thunder does not frighten, nor lightning terrify one. No cataracts rush down upon one. No earthquakes swallow one. The lion does not prowl, nor the panther tear to pieces, nor the bear devour, nor the tiger eat one up. No hospitality is dangerous because of the suspicion of poison—even in the case of an enemy. The step-son fears no poisoned cup from his step-mother, nor the husband from his enraged wife. (*Topography* 55–56)

Gerald seems to argue that, although the wonders of the East, because highly unusual and exotic, may easily be seen as interesting, “the advantages of the West outshine and outstrip those of the East” (*Topography* 56).

According to V. H. H. Green, the moral situation in the Middle Ages was “threaded by the notion of the subordination of what was inferior, whether things, beings or concepts, to those which were superior” (175). The *Topography of Ireland* certainly revolves around notions of inferiority and superiority. As has already been demonstrated, the answer to why Ireland might have been considered a poor subject of study is found in the preface, as Gerald explicitly describes the country as “backward and feeble” (Giraldus, “Preface” 7), which, moreover, contrasts with “our better part of the world and its condition” (ibid.). Thus, the *Topography* starts from the premise that Ireland is inferior. In this respect, it may be said that the status of ‘Ireland’ undergoes a change vis-à-vis the preconceptions about the country expressed in the preface. There is shift from the negative image in the preface towards a distinctly more favourable one in the first part. Although the beginning of the work emphasises the country’s remoteness, by the end of part one, Ireland has in some ways been brought closer to the rest of western Europe by the references to its familiar features; or rather, it might be said that Ireland is established as part of the West, albeit as a peripheral part; namely, as the home of western wonders. Noteworthy is also the contrast between the word *infirma* (translated by Forester as “feeble”) used in the preface and the construction of “the wonders of the West”, which are moreover superior to those of the East. Therefore, Ireland is even given a certain superiority, albeit in relation to the East.

Although in the first part, Gerald observes some similarities between Ireland and the West in general where the natural qualities of the country are concerned, he does not seem to find anything to relate to in the Irish but sees (or chooses to see) distinction only. The Irish “characteristics” are things in which they differ from the ‘Self’—in brief, they lack civilisation and culture and are prone to outlandish ways. Thus, the work emphasises a view of the Irish as an inferior Other. In addition, there is something similar about the Irish and the people of the East, described briefly at the end of the first part. Gerald describes how the “poisoned hand is to be feared” in the East (*Topography* 55), that “of the enraged wife by her husband, and that of his wicked cook by the master” (ibid.). Therefore, there is an idea of “wickedness” attached to both the Irish and the people of the East, which is interesting if we consider Gerald’s aforementioned “well of poisons” argument. For,

although the Irish live as far away as possible from this “well of poisons”, this does not seem to have an effect on the people, who are prone to all kinds of vices. In sum, contrary to ‘Ireland’, which seems to be brought closer to the rest of the West, the peripheral condition of the Irish is only reinforced; they remain an inferior people.

The present section has attempted to demonstrate that the contrast between the *Topography*'s portrayals of Ireland and the Irish is made all the more remarkable by the fact that, compared with the ideas advanced in the preface, the image of ‘Ireland’ seems to undergo a change during the first part, whereas the image of the Irish remains the same or is even reinforced. Nevertheless, as the work progresses, there is a shift towards the starting point, the idea of “backwardness” expressed in the preface; in other words, the work goes full circle in this respect. It seems that, in order to justify his work and make it a successful one, Gerald, to some extent, had to dismantle some negative preconceptions about Ireland; namely, the idea of the country as a poor subject of study, which was based on the notion of Ireland's backwardness and inferiority. The preface only refers to “Ireland” or the “country” in relation to the negative preconceptions (Giraldus, “Preface” 6–7), although this concept includes the people as well, indicated by the list of things examined about the country (Giraldus, “Preface” 7). However, it might be said that the prejudiced image indicated in the preface had derived from Ireland's ‘imagined geography’ as a periphery and from the established way of portraying fringe societies. In other words, the idea of the periphery seems to have contained an underlying idea of ‘backwardness’ and barbarity. Therefore, if barbarity is the consequence of the periphery, it might be suggested that in the *Topography* the idea of the periphery is rehabilitated where ‘Ireland’ is concerned, as it is demonstrated to have positive consequences as well. Ireland is even given a “superiority” which is based on its peripheral location. In addition, contrary to the preface, in the work itself, the two concepts, ‘Ireland’ and ‘the Irish’, are treated separately; indeed, the first part is characterised by the absence of the Irish. Further, it is the concept of ‘the Irish’ that retains the negative preconceptions, while the concept of ‘Ireland’ assumes a new status. Thus, while Gerald in a way reconstructs ‘Ireland’ as the location of the wonders of the west, at the same time, he does not refute the preconception of Irish barbarity, as it is retained (and possibly reinforced) in the characterisation of the Irish.

4.3 Notions of inferiority and superiority

To state the obvious, emphasising the inferiority of the Other at the same time underlines the superiority of the Self. Therefore, to understand why the *Topography* portrays the Irish as inferior, we must examine why Gerald would argue for the superiority of the Self. The simple answer is that this is what was done at the time when the *Topography* was written, as the characterisation is in line with the “attitude of superiority, hostility and alienation” adopted towards the Irish in the course of the twelfth century (Gillingham 24). Therefore, despite Gerald’s declaration that he will “rouse the reader’s attention” through novelties (Giraldus, “Preface” 7), his characterisation of the Irish was nothing original but tapped into pre-existing notions of Ireland as a barbarian society. In fact, Gerald considers the conundrum whether “to publish what is new, or what is already well known”, for “[m]en recoil with disgust from what is trite and common, while, on the other hand, novelties require the support of authority” (Giraldus, “Preface” 6). Given that the inferiority of the Irish was a cliché by the time the *Topography* was written, it may be asked why Gerald chose to refer to something that was, to use his own words, “trite”. However, in the first preface to his *Description of Wales* (c. 1194), Gerald refers to the *Topography* as dealing with Ireland’s “natural curiosities until then unknown” (*Description* 211). This suggests that the novelties that he refers to in his preface to the *Topography* are in fact related to the concept of ‘Ireland’, not the Irish. Thus, it might be suggested that citing the well-known barbarian characteristics of the Irish was a way of giving authority to his work and especially the novelties in it.

In addition, as Gerald emphasises his first-hand experience—namely, that he has actually been to Ireland—we might also see the *Topography* as providing “fresh proof” of Irish barbarity. Further, as the *Topography* was written shortly after the invasion of Ireland, such proof served to justify the invasion. Naturally, Gerald was not the first to present such a justification. In the words of Bartlett,

[d]uring the course of their eleventh- and twelfth-century expansion, the peoples of central western Europe encountered societies which were poorer, less well organized, and of a different mould from their own. Their ideological, or cultural, response to this was to create a hostile stereotype to salve their consciences and justify their conquests. (176–77)

As for Ireland, Gillingham states that “[t]he moral justification, set out in *Laudabiliter* as well as in forged papal privileges, was that since the Irish were a barbarous and sinful people, it was right that

Henry II should be set as a reforming ruler over them” (28). Thus, it may be said that Gerald’s characterisation is a more like a confirmation of what was already known. Further, Gerald had several reasons to argue in favour of the invasion (and colonisation) of Ireland: firstly, members of his family, who had taken part in the events, had acquired lands in Ireland; secondly, he was of member of the Church and a zealous reformer; thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, he was in royal service at the time, which included promoting the interests of the king. Further, he was seeking Henry’s favour in the form of patronage. In any case, Gerald was “pro-English” at this point of his life (Gillingham 33).

However, the ‘Self’, whose superiority is being demonstrated in the *Topography*, might also be seen as Gerald himself. Importantly, section 2.2 has revealed issues in Gerald’s life and career concerning identity. For, although Gerald was in some ways part of the elite of his time, he was also “a child of a frontier society” himself (Bartlett 6). In other words, while it seems safe to assume that someone like Gerald would have been conscious of his superiority over a peripheral people like the Irish (whose barbarity was a cliché), his position among other, civilised and “superior” peoples was not necessarily equally established. Moreover, it was on the ‘English’ level that Gerald’s hybrid ethnic identity seemed to prove most difficult. In fact, Bartlett refers to “the need he felt for models by which to define himself” (211). Moreover,

The more insecure, threatened, and divided he felt, the more important it was that he have some picture of himself, as a man of letters or man of God, indispensable royal servant or brilliant academic, to give him an anchor. (ibid.)

Bartlett also continues that “[t]his tendency was exacerbated by the disappointments of his life” (ibid.). It should be noted that Gerald had already suffered one important setback, as his candidacy for the bishopric of St David’s was rejected by King Henry II, apparently due to his ethnic background. In other words, Gerald’s ‘Englishness’ had already been challenged. According to Martin, the “failure to become bishop of St David’s was the single most important event in Gerald’s life—as he saw it” (“Gerald of Wales” 284). Thus, the *Topography* may be seen as Gerald’s effort to reassert himself, a necessity that arises from his ambiguous social position.

Yet, the previous section has demonstrated that the *Topography* also seems to give Ireland more prominence. It has been established that the *Topography’s* approach to its topic is a comparative

one. However, a comparison presupposes a point of reference, and whereas in the case of the Irish, the point of comparison is unequivocally the 'Self', whether that be Gerald himself, the conquerors of Ireland or the Latin West in general, the point of reference in the first part seems to be more fluid. The beginning of the first part may compare Ireland with the known, western world, but the end is reserved to "a comparison of the East and the West" (Giraldus, "Preface" 7). Here, the East assumes the role of the Other, and Ireland's implied "superiority" applies therefore only as it is compared with the East. However, it may also be asked to what extent Gerald is actually talking about Ireland here, for he refers to the superiority of the 'West', not Ireland specifically, although the superiority is based on the wonders found on the island. Further, Gerald refers to the "mildness of **our** climate" and describes how "[w]e have no fear of any breeze" (*Topography* 55), which indicates that he must see himself as part of the world that he is describing.⁵ Once again this 'world' may just be the 'West', but it might also be suggested that, as the colonisation process of Ireland was already under way, and Gerald's immediate family had acquired lands on the island, Gerald might have been willing to see 'Ireland' in a way part of his own world. Be that as it may, the end of part one is essentially a general argument for the West and against the East, and not really about Ireland at all.

In fact, Partner argues that "[t]welfth-century historians increasingly tended to record many things other than their ostensible subjects: best of all, their own voices" (6). This begs the question what Gerald is really saying here. For it may be said that, by constructing an image of Ireland as the location of the wonders of the West, Gerald has constructed a topic for himself, an Ireland worth writing about, and at the same time creating a niche for himself as the one who reveals these secret wonders, thus ensuring himself enduring fame. In his own words,

For just as the marvels of the East have through the work of certain authors come to the light of public notice, so the marvels of the West which, so far, have remained hidden away and almost unknown, may eventually find in me one to make them known even in these later days. (*Topography* 57)

⁵ Moreover, this contrasts with Gerald's statement in the preface that the first part deals, for example, with "fishes and birds which are distinct from ours" (Giraldus, "Preface" 7); in other words, here he does not see himself as part of the world that he is describing.

Moreover, by demonstrating the superiority of the wonders of the West over those of the East (which have been observed by previous authors), he also raises his own status as a writer. It should also be noted that the *Topography* was, according to Gerald's dedication, essentially a gift for King Henry II, which may also explain Gerald's creation here of the wonders of the West. Importantly, Gerald describes how he "could, as others have done, have sent your Highness some small pieces of gold, falcons, or hawks with which the island abounds" (*Topography* 32); however, he has decided on something more unique and is thus presenting the king with Ireland's "natural curiosities" in a literary form.

Finally, we may question the sincerity of Gerald's statements in the preface about the poverty of the subject, for it may be said that, by this acknowledgement Gerald is making his achievement seem more impressive, as this literary endeavour professedly requires him to use all his literary skill to elevate the topic. Gerald likens himself to Classical authors grappling with poor subjects: "It behoved them, therefore, to lavish the graces of elocution on cases which were in themselves barren of interest" (Giraldus, "Preface" 6). Noteworthy is, too, Gerald's statement in the preface about his treatment of native Irish sources:

these having been heaped together by the native writers in a loose and disorderly manner, with much that is superfluous or absurd, and being composed in a rude and barbarous style, I have digested them, with much labour, as clearly and compendiously as I could, like one seeking and picking up precious stones among the sands on the sea-shore, and have inserted whatever was of most value in the present volume. (Giraldus, "Preface" 8)

Thus, he claims to have used all his literary skill to elevate the material provided by these sources. Moreover, Gerald argues that "such is the effect, such the power of eloquence, that there is nothing so humble which it cannot exalt" (Giraldus, "Preface" 6), which implies that a good writer can make any topic interesting, even Ireland. Thus, it seems that, by observing first the poverty of the subject and then making the *Topography* as interesting as possible (through both wonder and scandal), Gerald uses the work as testimony to his own skill as an author.

To recall Partner's aforementioned statement about twelfth-century historians' tendency "to record many things other than their ostensible subjects" (6), it seems important to note that there is a persistent "non-essential" element in the *Topography*; namely, moral instruction. As has been

demonstrated, this aspect became more pronounced with the subsequent editions of the work; however, it may be said that, due to these instances of moralisation and religious allegory, the “real” subject of Gerald’s study is at times lost. In other words, from the perspective of the modern reader, they seem to hinder the reading of the description of Ireland. Conversely, we might ask whether Ireland in fact is the real subject here. For it might be suggested that the examples that Gerald lists in the *Topography* allowed him to prove a point or a theory; namely, to carry out his mission of reform. Moreover, as the natural historical side of the *Topography* ultimately gave way to its religious dimension, it might be suggested that in the later recensions, Ireland became increasingly just a medium of making a point. As for the first recension, there is once again a duality visible in Gerald’s moral instruction. Firstly, the primitive goodness visible in some wonders of Ireland allows Gerald to use these phenomena as examples of “how things should be”, while the barbarity of the Irish demonstrates for the readers “what they are not to do”.

To begin with the former, in the *Topography* Gerald encourages readers to open their eyes to the wonders of the usual. However, he also seems to draw attention to the fact that what is usual is not necessary the right way. The best example is provided by Gerald’s barnacle story. By demonstrating that these birds reproduce without sin, Gerald opens the readers’ eyes for the possibility of immaculate conception:

The third only, that achieved by the co-operation of man and woman, because it is usual, you, with your hard neck, approve of and affirm. But the fourth generation, in which alone is salvation, that is from a woman without the co-operation of a man, you cannot, in your obstinate will, abide—and to your own destruction. (*Topography* 42)

Moreover, Gerald encourages readers to “consider the evidence of nature” (*ibid.*), who “daily produces and brings forth new creatures without the co-operation of any male or female for our instruction and in confirmation of the Faith” (*ibid.*). Thus, a phenomenon in Ireland provides an example of how things really should be. In addition, as has been demonstrated, this type of evidence “of God’s continuing interest in human affairs” was part of the means available for twelfth-century writers striving to catch the interest of the reader (Partner 2). In fact, in the second part, Gerald quotes the Book of Psalms in “[c]ome and see the works of the Lord, the wonders that he has worked on the earth” (*Topography* 58). The barnacle story is also interesting for another reason. According to Bartlett, “certain qualities of barbarians might be held up for approval and used as a

standard to criticize the writer's own society" (172). Naturally, the barnacle story is not related to the Irish, yet it seems noteworthy that Gerald is criticising his own society here—or mankind in general—by describing the good points of a foreign one.

According to Partner, twelfth-century histories contained "accounts of exemplary lives" (2). In the *Topography*, exemplary ways are reserved to phenomena attached to the concept of 'Ireland'; the Irish represent the exact opposite, being "adulterous, incestuous, unlawfully conceived and born, outside the law, and shamefully abusing nature herself in spiteful and horrible practices" (*Topography* 118). Further, Gerald demonstrates that the Irish have been punished for their crimes: for example, he sees the (allegedly) manifold physical defects of the Irish as a "just punishment from God" (*ibid.*). In addition, in relation to the origins of Lough Neagh, Gerald recounts how the lake was created by a flood, which Gerald sees as divine intervention, for "in the region now covered by the lake" there was "a people very much given to vice, and particularly addicted, above any other people in Ireland, to bestiality" (*Topography* 64). Particularly interesting is Gerald's criticism of the Irish clergy, given that one of the main "heads" of his ideals of reform concerned "the individual moral reform of the clergy" (Bartlett 30). Further, Gerald's "vocal concern with the pastoral duties of ecclesiastics" has also been observed (Bartlett 29). Gerald argues that this is an area where the Irish clergy have failed and accuses them of neglecting their "the care of the flock committed to them" (*Topography* 113). In fact, according to Gerald,

[i]f the prelates from the time of Patrick through all those years had done a man's job, as they should have done, in preaching and instructing, chastising and correcting, they would have extirpated at any rate to a certain extent those abominations of the people already mentioned, and would have impressed upon them some semblance of honour and religious feeling. (*Topography* 112–113)

Thus, Gerald holds the Irish clergy responsible for the shortcomings and deficiencies of Irish.

It should be noted that there is more to Gerald's criticism of the Irish and the Irish clergy than a mission of reform. Bartlett argues that

Twelfth-century Ireland was the scene of vigorous efforts on the part of native reformers. . . . they were as active as anywhere in western Europe. Gerald's criticisms

were not distinguished so much by the rigour of his principles as by his unsympathetic and external viewpoint. He wrote as a hostile outsider. (38)

Here, we come back to the *Topography's* justification of the invasion of Ireland. For, “[d]espite the fact that Irish reformers themselves were attempting to eradicate uncanonical sexual practices, the sexual irregularities of the Irish were used as an argument for the Anglo-Norman invasion” (Bartlett 44). In fact, Bartlett refers to the “metamorphosis of Church reform into an ‘ideology of colonization’” (45). On a final note, Gerald’s criticism of the Irish clergy may be seen to involve notions of inferiority and superiority, and it may be said that this was a way for Gerald to reinforce his image as part of the intellectual vanguard in the ecclesiastical sphere—in particular, given his well-known ambitions therein.

5 Conclusion

This master's thesis has attempted to tackle the seeming duality in how the *Topography of Ireland* represents 'Ireland' and the 'Irish'. Firstly, by its comparison of the two portrayals, the study has demonstrated that there is in fact a distinct contrast between the portrayal of Ireland and the characterisation of the Irish: on a general level, it may be said that the former is overwhelmingly positive (although not exclusively so), while the latter is overwhelmingly negative. Moreover, the positive representation of Ireland may be seen to underline the negative image of the Irish, as the Irish are represented as having failed their natural potential as it were. The premise for the two portrayals is the same, as Gerald's description is based on Ireland's 'imagined geography', to use the term referred to by Keith D. Lilley: namely, Ireland is the farthest western periphery and has, therefore, qualities that are different and unusual. On the other hand, it may be said, too, that Gerald's point of view seems to be to focus on the country's distinctive features. Overall, in both cases it may be said that what makes Ireland unusual and different is its lack of progress due to its isolation: but where the seclusion of the Irish has resulted in something negative—in their lack of culture and civilisation—the isolation of 'Ireland' has been beneficial, as the island has remained in an uncorrupted state. In other words, the barbarity of the Irish contrasts with the primeval 'goodness' of Ireland. Thus, more specifically, the contrast (or in this case, paradox) between the two portrayals lies in the fact that Gerald takes a different approach to the effects of Ireland's peripheral location on the land and the people, respectively.

Secondly, the contrast between the two portrayals is made all the more remarkable in that, if we compare them with the negative preconceptions of Ireland brought forward in the author's preface (Ireland being a concept that apparently includes both the land and the people inhabiting it), it seems that there is a shift in how 'Ireland', the land itself, is represented, whereas the image of the Irish remains the same or is even reinforced. To be precise, the preconception in the preface may be seen to issue from the contemporary cliché of Irish barbarity and inferiority. In accordance with the twelfth-century requirement for entertainment, Gerald seems to dismantle the preconception of Ireland as a "poor" subject by emphasising Ireland's peripheral condition and by invoking the country's consequent distinctive features to make the subject interesting for the reader. In the case of 'Ireland', Gerald constructs an image of the island as the location of the wonders of the West; as for the Irish, Gerald resorts to scandal by tapping into pre-existing notions of the Irish barbarity.

Thus, whereas the idea of the periphery marginalises the Irish even further and emphasises their inferiority, it seems to endow 'Ireland' with a new status, giving it more prominence on the map of Europe.

Thirdly, the present study has demonstrated that Gerald had an interest both in reconstructing the image of 'Ireland' and, conversely, in confirming that of the Irish. To begin with the latter, as Irish barbarity was a commonplace by the time Gerald wrote the *Topography*, it might be suggested that the author relied on this generally accepted notion to give authority to his work and the novelties in it. This is supported by Gerald's reflection in the preface on whether "to publish what is new, or what is already well known" (Giraldus, "Preface" 6). Secondly, demonstrating the inferiority of the Irish was a way of justifying the recent invasion of Ireland. Thirdly, Gerald's characterisation of the Irish might be seen as his way of reasserting his own identity; namely, his 'Englishness'. However, displaying the inferiority of the Irish was not the only way that the work allowed its readers to appreciate their "better part of the world" (Giraldus, "Preface" 7), as Gerald states, for the *Topography* may be seen, too, as an argument for the superiority of the West over the East. Here, it is the East that assumes the role of the Other; therefore, the contrasting images of Ireland and the Irish in the *Topography* may, to some extent, be explained by a different point of reference. In addition, Gerald aimed for success with the work, and it might be suggested that by constructing an image of Ireland as the location of the wonders of the west, and by demonstrating their superiority over those of the East, Gerald created a niche for himself and boosted his own image as an author. Lastly, the contrasting representations of Ireland and the Irish may be seen to serve Gerald's activities or "mission" of reform, as Ireland has apparently provided him both with examples of 'how things should be' and 'how things should **not** be'. Moreover, Gerald's criticism of the Irish clergy is consistent with his rhetoric of reform visible throughout his oeuvre.

The implications of these results are as follows. Although the inner logic of the work may be questioned, in terms of authorial motivations and aims, the two portrayals are not contradictory in so far as both may be seen to serve what is essentially the same purpose—demonstrating the superiority of the Self, whether that 'Self' be, for example, Gerald himself, the English invaders of Ireland or the Latin West in general. Based on the results, we might in some ways refute F. X. Martin's statement cited in the introduction that neither of Gerald's Irish works "is complimentary to the country" ("Gerald of Wales" 279); for overall, the first part of the *Topography* represents

Ireland in a strikingly favourable light. According to J. J. N. McGurk, “all who read [Gerald] are attracted by . . . his deep love of the natural beauties of Wales and Ireland, described with topographical detail” (255). In fact, despite his potential (or probable) ulterior motives, there is also a sincerity to be observed in Gerald’s enthusiastic treatment of the Irish landscape and wildlife. Moreover, Gerald’s early, naturalistic phase indicates that this type of observation of the natural world was a real interest of his at this point of his career and not simply an instrument of reform or success. Yet, we may ask which of the contrasting images conveyed by the *Topography* is the dominant one—or alternatively, which was more memorable or entertaining for his medieval audience. It seems that the answer is to be found in the history of anti-Irish imagery and the *Topography*’s place in it. In addition, it should be noted that Gerald himself sees “man himself” as “the most worthy subject of our investigation, and on whose account we have treated of the other things” (*Topography* 92). Thus, it might be said that it is the negative image or impression that the reader is ultimately left with.

According to F. X. Martin, “[a]nybody concerned with medieval Irish history has to deal with Giraldus Cambrensis” (“Giraldus as Historian” 267). Gerald’s two Irish works certainly give him a place in Irish studies. In fact, as O’Meara argues, without the *Topography* and the *Expugnatio*, “our knowledge of the Ireland of the twelfth century would be much the poorer” (“Introduction” 17). However, the *Topography* has a place in Irish Studies for another reason as well: in fact, Martin’s aforementioned statement seems to refer implicitly to Gerald’s infamous reputation. Indeed, this provided the incentive for the present master’s thesis as well. The present study has demonstrated that, although Gerald was not the initiator of the image of the Irish barbarian, his writings became an important link in the history of anti-Irish imagery, as later writers relied on his characterisation of the Irish, and his works were used for propaganda purposes. Yet, to reiterate Partner’s statement that “[t]welfth-century historians increasingly tended to record many things other than their ostensible subjects: best of all, their own voices” (6), it may be said that there is much more to the *Topography* than Ireland. In particular, the present study has demonstrated the centrality of the ‘Self’ in the *Topography*, which begs the question whether the real subject of the work in fact is Ireland. For it might be said that Ireland is at times “lost” within, for example, Gerald’s religious musings; in some cases, such as in his comparison of the East and the West, we may question whether he is talking about Ireland at all. Moreover, given Gerald’s ambitions with the work (indicated, for example, by its preface), it seems safe to assume that the *Topography* was not meant simply as a description of

Ireland: Gerald seems to have motivations and aims here that transcend the topic itself. In brief, it seems that the work was intended as an instrument of achieving fame and patronage. Thus, it might be suggested that for the modern reader, the point is no longer Ireland; it is the Self that matters.

The present study has demonstrated that even with a seemingly much-studied subject like the *Topography*, everything has not been done. In fact, the research seems to have some important faults. The main episodes of Gerald's life are relatively well-known, but further study is needed in order for us to appreciate his various motivations and goals. In addition, scholarship has tended to focus on his Irish and Welsh works, while most of his works remain neglected. Yet, despite this focus, the *Topography of Ireland* lacks an exhaustive modern edition and translation. In any case, the transformation in our perceptions of and approach to medieval histories indicate the necessity of continuing research on these works. As for the present study, one of its weaknesses is, firstly, that it is based on translations, not the original Latin, although the author has consulted the Latin versions in ambiguous cases. In fact, it should be noted that John Gillingham refers to cases of mistranslation in Gerald's works (34), indicating, for example, a blatant translation error in A. B. Scott's translation of the *Expugnatio Hibernica* (ibid.).

Secondly, to return to the present study, the examination of twelfth-century tendencies in historical writing has demonstrated that the characterisation of the Irish conforms to pre-existing models of how peripheral societies were portrayed, and how the Irish themselves had come to be represented in the course of that transformative period. However, the interpretation of the *Topography*, as it is an account of the "wonders of the West", would have benefited from a comparison with contemporary accounts of the "wonders of the East". Lastly, the author acknowledges the complicated and difficult nature of discussing authorial motivations and aims—especially, as scholarship's work on Gerald's manifold interests is clearly unfinished—and the risks involved in taking an author like Gerald at face value. However, it should be noted that the main purpose has been to compare and contrast the two representations, and this the present study has been able to do somewhat successfully, as the comparative approach has highlighted aspects in both portrayals.

In the introduction to his book, Nancy F. Partner describes her method in dealing with her chosen twelfth-century authors:

I attempted to read my histories as thoroughly as I could, with the intention of acquiring a live sense of the writer's mind and personality and a palpable sense of his book—of its texture, its intellectual style, its appeal—and all this, with the conviction that every man who writes a book, whatever its subject, is capturing in some way an image of his world and that it, too, can be 'read'. (7)

To echo Partner's words, by examining Gerald's life and career in relation to his *Topography*, the present thesis has attempted to capture something of the author's "world". Although the study does not in any way claim to be exhaustive, it has hopefully drawn attention to Gerald's endless complexities, related, for example, to his ambiguous identity, various and varying loyalties, and transformations as an author. In fact, Gerald's value for modern scholarship seems to lie in his striking multidimensionality. According to Henley and McMullen,

Gerald has been utilised by historians, Celticists and linguists alike as a valuable source of information about the twelfth-century Insular world, including Angevin court life, ecclesiastical reform and clerical conduct, the Norman conquest of Ireland, southern Welsh politics, English saints' lives, natural history, and a host of other topics discussed in his characteristically energetic voice. (1)

However, it follows that any study of Gerald's writings requires a comprehensive exploration of the context in which they were written with all its intellectual, ideological and political tendencies. Moreover, an examination of this context, rather than automatically revealing his motivations and goals, throws into relief the difficulty of understanding him as a writer.

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