Walpole, in common with every other English politician in the first half of the eighteenth century, usually accorded Irish business a low priority. Even at the height of the gravest crisis in Anglo-Irish relations in this period, the affair of ‘Wood’s Halfpence’, he displayed the superciliousness that characterised the fashionable Englishman’s attitude to all things Hibernian. ‘I have weathered great storms before now and I hope I shall not be lost at last in an Irish hurricane.’ Nevertheless, the way he and his colleagues tackled the Irish questions they were posed can tell us a good deal about the man and his administration, as well as about the nature of the Anglo-Irish political connection.

Walpole’s Irish policy has been viewed differently on either side of the Irish Sea. English historians have claimed that after defusing the furore in Ireland against Wood’s Halfpence, Walpole reacted by seeking to exclude Irishmen from the government of their country, peopling Dublin Castle instead with party hacks from England, and that he thereby alienated the ‘natural rulers’ of Ireland, the Protestant squirearchy, and unwittingly paved the way for the ‘nationalism’ of Flood and Grattan. Irish historians, by contrast, have viewed Walpole’s premiership as the beginning of the age of the ‘undertakers’, when the government, anxious for a quiet life, contracted out Irish parliamentary management to Irish politicians, who ‘undertook’ to carry through the king’s business in return for a say in policy and a sizeable piece of the patronage pie. Each of these conflicting interpretations contains part of the truth.
The wars, confiscations and migrations of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Ireland had left the 'Anglo-Irish' landowning and governing class in a dominant but exposed position. The English settlement of Ireland had been largely a plantation of gentry, lacking the necessary substructure of yeomanry and freeholders, so that although by 1700 Protestants controlled over 80 per cent of Irish land, they formed no more than a quarter of the population. The Anglo-Irish saw themselves as a beleaguered minority, vastly outnumbered by the Catholics, whose inveterate hostility, on national and religious grounds, reinforced by the bitter grievance of dispossession, was taken for granted. Furthermore, the only province in which Protestants had arrived in substantial numbers, Ulster, was dominated not by English settlers but by Presbyterian Scots, many of them recent immigrants, who were viewed by the Anglican establishment with almost as much enmity and suspicion as were the Catholics. Threatened from two sides, the Anglo-Irish were aware that their security depended on English military aid. It was an army from England that had sent King James packing in 1690, and English governments had maintained large standing forces in Ireland ever since (albeit for strategic, financial and political reasons of their own). Mobilisation of troopers to deal with outbreaks of banditry or agrarian disturbances acted as a regular reminder to Irish Protestants of their ultimate reliance on England.

On the other hand, there were limits to this feeling of dependence. While the Anglo-Irish accepted the insuperable hostility of their Catholic fellow countrymen, they were equally conscious of the improbability of any Catholic uprising. The Jacobite war and its aftermath, the exile of the so-called 'wild geese', had resulted in the 'destruction' of the Catholic 'gentry', and without their 'natural leaders' it was unthinkable that the common people could rebel. The only real chance lay in the importation of leadership from France and the Jacobites. Reports that the Pretender was on the sea let loose panic among the Anglo-Irish. In normal circumstances, however, even the fear of the Pretender was slowly coming to be