Introduction: The Irish Anomaly

There is a saying current in Ireland that the Irish were the ‘first to find the faith and last to lose it,’ referring to the very early and peaceful conversion of the Irish and to the continuing conservatism and traditionalism of Irish Catholicism despite the sweeping changes which have rocked the Catholic Church since Vatican II. Although the slogan implies an uninterrupted continuity in religious outlook that is clearly exaggerated, its emphasis on tradition is nonetheless justified and reveals durable aspects of Irish religiosity that are crucial to understanding the religious transformations of the early modern period.

In the sixteenth century, Ireland proved to be the greatest anomaly in the progress of the European Protestant Reformation. From the beginning it was clear that Ireland was not following the familiar European pattern of *cuius regio, eius religio* during the age of confessionalism. Everywhere else in Europe, the slogan applied, one way or another. Only in Ireland were the terms reversed, with the religion of the official government commanding the support of only a tiny minority of the population, whereas the majority of the Irish people continued to practice the proscribed Roman Catholic faith. At first glance it appears that the Anglican Reformation should have been easily implemented in Ireland. For centuries, Ireland had been under the sovereignty of the English, whose administrators ruled with a stockade mentality from behind the high walls of the Dublin Pale. Since 1494 the Irish Parliament had been subordinate to that of England. In 1534, with very little objection, the Reformation was proclaimed by fiat in Ireland. Enforcing conformity to the new religious regime should have been a fairly simple matter of the centralized government using alternating policies of coercion and conciliation to insure support for religious change, similar to the strategies adopted in England and elsewhere in northern Europe. For a brief period it seemed that Ireland would follow the same pattern. However, at least by 1590, the signs were unmistakable: the Reformation had undeniably failed in Ireland. The majority of the Irish population remained obstinately Catholic and a vigorous Counter-Reformation church was evolving right under the noses of the Protestant government.

How can we explain this Irish anomaly? Historians have been as puzzled by the turn of events as were contemporary observers. Debates in Irish historiography have generated much controversy over the deceptively simple-looking question, ‘Why did the Reformation fail in Ireland?’ The question underpins virtually all scholarship on early modern Ireland, even if not
explicitly articulated. But because this debate has tended to focus on Anglo-Irish political tensions, rather than religion *per se*, it has produced little resolution.

This book also considers the failure of the Reformation in Ireland, but approaches the problem in a less conventional way. Rather than examining Reformation Ireland simply as an extension of English politics, I have tried to place Ireland in a European perspective, where it offers an extremely important case study of religious change – and continuity – during the age of confessionalism. ⁷

Moreover, I have framed my analysis in terms of the interrelationship between Irish social realities and religious perceptions. ⁸ In other words, this is much more a history of mentalities than it is a history of Reformation politics. I do not mean to underplay the important role that politics played in the overall transformation of Irish society during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, but that story has already been told with great eloquence and erudition by such historians as Nicholas Canny, Brendan Bradshaw and Steven Ellis. My purpose is rather to examine the religious milieu of early modern Ireland from a social and cultural perspective. That emphasis in itself changes the basic question. My starting point is not 'why the Protestant Reformation failed in Ireland' but rather, 'why did Catholicism endure?' The explanation, I will argue, lies in the particular nature of the medieval Irish religious tradition and the way in which it was intertwined with the social and mental structures of the traditional Gaelic world.

Specifically, I will argue that what made Ireland different was the active role of its Gaelic scholar-elites in transmitting religious beliefs and practices. ⁹ All parts of Christendom had scholars, but only Ireland had a living bardic tradition which intersected with religious life in unusual and sometimes startling ways. The representatives of the bardic order (correctly referred to by the Gaelic term *aes dána*, or Men of Art) were remarkably eclectic cultural intermediaries. The *aes dána* comprised all the educated, literate professionals of Gaelic Ireland – the teachers, lawyers, scribes, historians, physicians, and especially the high poets. As a group they demonstrated a strong corporate identity, usually having a common base of shared educational experiences, and quite often sharing hereditary ties to a veritable caste of scholarly families in Ireland. Because their training derived from both monastic tradition and from the ancient Gaelic vernacular tradition, they bridged the gulf between Gaelic and Latin learning, as well as mediating between written and oral traditions. The *aes dána* belonged to the highest elite social order, yet were the preservers and transmitters of 'popular' culture. ¹⁰ They were often at least partially educated abroad, but held their bardic offices through ancient hereditary rights, thus combining a