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An Irish El Dorado: Recovering Gold in County Wicklow

Timothy Alborn

As the California gold rush of 1849 was first finding its way into English newspapers, a journalist for the *Literary Gazette* greeted the discovery by remarking that “almost the best of the joke is, that no sooner does famished Ireland hear of this El Dorado, than up starts an association to swear that Wicklow is infinitely superior, and solicit subscriptions to work the mines, where gold is not found in paltry spangles or drops, but in quarts (which they spell with a terminating zed).”¹ The reason he selected Wicklow, a small county south of Dublin, for his scorn was that the quartz deposits in its mountains had, in fact, fleetingly yielded thousands of ounces of gold fifty years earlier, bringing celebrity to the region that would persist intermittently through the nineteenth century. For six weeks in the autumn of 1795, Wicklow residents left their fields and worked around the clock sifting the sands of a stream that flowed from Croghan Kinsella, the highest mountain in the county. Their labors earned them around £10,000 in gold dust and nuggets before authorities called in a local militia, as much to take possession of the newfound wealth as to restore public order. Subsequent state-sponsored excavations (which were interrupted by the Irish rebellion of 1798) yielded much less gold and no sign of a mother lode further upstream.

The literary and scientific yield of this gold mine, which vied with its economic output, included more than a century’s worth of travelogues, mineralogical surveys, and a string of poems, plays, and short stories that either took the gold as a central metaphor or referred to it in passing. In 1796, the poet Jane Elizabeth Moore penned “On the Discovery of The Gold Mine, in the County of Wicklow,”

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¹ “Sketches of Society: California,” *Literary Gazette* 1669 (January 1849): 27.

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and the playwright John O’Keeffe used it as the central plot device in his comic opera *The Wicklow Mountains*. Two decades later, Thomas Moore included a verse on the mine in his popular ballad “Has Sorrow Thy Young Days Shaded,” as did Lord Byron in his “Hints from Horace.” Several other stories, plays, and poems returned to that thread in the decades that followed. Over the same span of time, a succession of travel writers, who had begun retailing Wicklow’s scenic beauty before the discovery of gold, inserted it into their catalogs of attractions. Finally, Wicklow gold made several appearances in early and mid-nineteenth-century geological surveys before returning to the foreground in the 1880s in a debate over Ireland’s mineral resources.

Assessments of British national and imperial identity have included ample space for material culture, from the anti-Gallican picture frames and jewel cases recounted in Linda Colley’s *Britons* to more recent discussions of calico and tea. Most of these discussions have focused on the domestication of foreign goods, either through import substitution (as with Colley’s frames and cases) or through the conversion of colonial products into sources of national identity (as in Julie Fromer’s discussion of Assam tea, the marketing of which performed the useful service of “domesticating the potentially troubling exotic origins of the national beverage”).² Up to a point, the discovery of gold in Ireland in 1795 might be said to have performed the same function as the discovery of tea in India. Gold was indisputably Britain’s national metal: through 1797, and again from 1821 through the end of the century, it formed the basis of the country’s currency, and in the intervening years British gold reserves bankrolled its defeat of France.³ Gold also possessed “troubling exotic origins” prior to 1795. Most of what circulated at the time derived from Spain’s plunder of Mexico and Peru two centuries earlier, and the rest trickled into the Bank of England from remote regions such as Indonesia, Brazil, and the Gold Coast—so, at least in theory, a new supply in Ireland held out the prospect of removing the “barbaric” taint that Milton had attached to the metal in *Paradise Lost*.⁴ Finally, some in Ireland increasingly hoped that Wicklow’s allegedly untapped gold reserves might hold the key to their nation’s independence from Britain.

Yet gold was not just any commodity, nor was Ireland just any colony. As Deborah Valenze has recently argued, the “detoxification” of money was well under way by the end of the eighteenth century, as moralists increasingly shifted

² Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707–1837*, 2nd ed. (New Haven, CT, 2005), 95; Lara Kriegel, *Grand Designs: Labor, Empire, and the Museum in Victorian Culture* (Durham, NC, 2007); Julie E. Fromer, “‘Deeply Indebted to the Tea-Plant’: Representations of English National Identity in Victorian Histories of Tea,” *Victorian Literature and Culture* 36, no. 2 (September 2008): 536. See also Erika Rappaport, “Imperial Possessions, Cultural Histories, and the Material Turn: Response,” *Victorian Studies* 50, no. 2 (Winter 2008): 289–96.

³ On gold and national identity, see Timothy Alborn, “Coin and Country: Visions of Civilisation in the British Recoinage Debate, 1867–1894,” *Journal of Victorian Culture* 3, no. 2 (Autumn 1998): 252–81; and Boyd Hilton, *Corn, Cash, Commerce: The Economic Policies of the Tory Governments, 1815–1830* (Oxford, 1977), 55–66.

⁴ John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, ed. David Scott Kastan (Indianapolis, 2005), 40: “the gorgeous East with richest hand / Showers on her kings barbaric pearl and gold” (bk. 2, lines 3–4). On British images of gold’s exotic origins, see William S. Maltby, *The Black Legend in England: The Development of Anti-Spanish Sentiment, 1558–1660* (Durham, NC, 1971); and Ruth MacKay, “*Lazy, Improvident People*”: *Myth and Reality in the Writing of Spanish History* (Ithaca, NY, 2006), 211–19.

from viewing it as the root of all evil to reassuring themselves of its redemptive capacity.⁵ Gold shared in this redemption, as evidenced by the profusion of gold medals, boxes, cups, and plates that emerged as symbols of honor, civic virtue, scholarly or athletic achievement, and genius.⁶ Notwithstanding these associations, however, gold also provoked lingering ambivalence well into the nineteenth century—with the result that its discovery so close to home was seldom heralded as an unmixed blessing. Before 1850, gold routinely figured in speeches, sermons and antislavery tracts as a metaphor for idolatry, corruption, and avarice; and the midcentury gold rushes in California and Australia added social dislocation to this list of associated ills.⁷ Even in the realm of monetary policy, where gold persisted for much of the century as a symbol of stability, Scots disparaged the gold standard as an expensive luxury, and bimetalists echoed these complaints in the 1880s.⁸

Ireland, for its part, occupied an anomalous (and continually changing) position in relation both to colonial identity and to British identity. The discovery of gold in Wicklow coincided with a high-water mark of Irish separatism, which would rise to a rebellious crescendo in 1798. The Act of Union, which soon followed in 1801, both stalled and refracted the nationalism that had been generated by the United Irishmen. Over the course of the nineteenth century, a variety of competing nationalisms emerged, including Daniel O’Connell’s Catholic-centered repeal campaign, the Romantic Gaelicism of the Young Ireland movement, and postfamine land reform.⁹ For their part, the British spent the century after the passage of the Act of Union wishfully possessing Ireland, but they betrayed a

⁵ Deborah Valenze, *The Social Life of Money in the English Past* (Cambridge, 2006), 260–70. For a complementary perspective on the discursive stabilization of money (especially credit) in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, see Mary Poovey, *Genres of the Credit Economy: Mediating Value in Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Chicago, 2008).

⁶ See, e.g., Arthur Aikin, *An Address . . . at the Annual Distribution . . . of the Rewards adjudged by the Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures, and Commerce* (London, 1817), 5–10; Paul Langford, “William Pitt and Public Opinion, 1757,” *English Historical Review* 88, no. 346 (January 1973): 57–67; J. Warburton et al., *History of the City of Dublin*, 2 vols. (London, 1817), 1:551; and “The Ascot Gold Cup or Plate,” *Bell’s Life*, 17 June 1838.

⁷ In contrast to the cultural history of paper money and credit in modern Britain, which has received no shortage of attention in recent years, the history of gold has largely been the province of monetary historians, most notably Michael Bordo and Barry Eichengreen. For Victorian-era references to gold that mirror those discussed in my article, see, e.g., Charles Dickens, *Barnaby Rudge* (Philadelphia, 1842), 180–81; Sir Richard Phillips, *Golden Rules of Social Philosophy* (London, 1826), 184; and Thomas Carlyle, *Latter-Day Pamphlets* (London, 1850), 18–19. On the perceived social threat of the midcentury gold rushes, see Robert Stafford, “‘Preventing the Curse of California’: Advice for English Emigrants to the Australian Gold Fields,” *Historical Records of Australian Science* 7, no. 3 (December 1988): 215–30; and Crauford D. W. Goodwin, “British Economists and Australian Gold,” *Journal of Economic History* 30, no. 2 (June 1970): 405–26.

⁸ Matthew Rowlinson, “‘The Scotch Hate Gold’: British Identity and Paper Money,” in *Nation-States and Money: The Past, Present and Future of National Currencies*, ed. Emily Gilbert and Eric Helleiner (London, 1999), 45–66; E. H. H. Green, “Rentiers versus Producers? The Political Economy of the Bimetallic Controversy,” *English Historical Review* 103, no. 408 (July 1988): 588–612.

⁹ See, e.g., D. George Boyce, *Nationalism in Ireland* (Baltimore, 1982), 123–91; Sean Cronin, *Irish Nationalism: A History of Its Roots and Ideology* (New York, 1981), 65–96; Brian Jenkins, *Irish Nationalism and the British State: From Repeal to Revolutionary Nationalism* (Montreal and Kingston, 2006), 3–142; John Hutchinson, *The Dynamics of Cultural Nationalism: The Gaelic Revival and the Creation of the Irish Nation State* (London, 1987); Fergus Campbell, *Land and Revolution: Nationalist Politics in the West of Ireland, 1891–1921* (Oxford, 2005); and Michael Mays, *Nation States: The Cultures of Irish Nationalism* (Lanham, MD, 2007), 43–47.

variety of opinions about what they might do with it. Some viewed Ireland as a pastoral counterpoint to Britain's industrial future—and sought, through tourism or antiquarianism, to preserve a sense of their own past in Ireland's present. Others sought to exploit Ireland for what it was worth: these ambitions mainly had reference to agriculture but sometimes extended to minerals as well.¹⁰

Following a description of the most active period of gold mining in Wicklow, which stretched from 1795 to 1811, this article turns to its various echoes on both sides of the Irish Sea in the succeeding century. Reflections on Wicklow's gold fell roughly into two camps: efforts to prevent memories of the discovery from intruding on an idyllic vision of Ireland, and hopeful endeavors to recover whatever gold might remain in the valley. These responses did not neatly accompany "British" and "Irish" positions on Wicklow gold. Concerns about gold's capacity to corrupt what was truly valuable in Ireland were as likely to emerge among Irish proponents of Romantic nationalism as among British travel writers and antiquarians. And hope for renewed supplies of gold in Wicklow, which first surfaced among defenders of Britain and Ireland's union, spread to Irish nationalists by the end of the century.

A "NEW PERU"

Gold was not the first precious metal to be discovered in County Wicklow during the eighteenth century. Profitable iron mining took place there from as early as 1734, and by the 1770s, copper mines were shipping more than a hundred tons of ore annually. In 1788, the Liverpool-based Associated Irish Mining Company (AIMC) discovered a solid copper vein in Cronebane, a few miles from where gold would be discovered less than a decade later. That company and the rival Hibernian Mining Company (established by Irishmen in 1789) continued to extract copper from the region until 1808, after which time the AIMC's managing partner, Abraham Mills, reported that "everything is going steadily to ruin." Mining revived in Wicklow in the 1830s, first with new copper discoveries and then, from 1840 through 1855, with the conversion of iron pyrite (otherwise known as "fool's gold") from the leftover copper ore into sulfur. New supplies of cheap iron pyrite from South America after 1870 put an end to Wicklow's mining fortunes, which had already begun to wane owing to labor shortages.¹¹

The metal that made Wicklow's name, however, if not its fortune, was gold. In early October 1795, a Dublin correspondent reported to the *European Magazine* on "a subject which has here excited much conversation, and which, near as we are to the source . . . has been treated very generally as a fable, or an imposture." Counting himself as "one of the most obdurate of the unbelievers," the writer confirmed that a Dublin goldsmith, just returned from Wicklow, had set him

¹⁰ Alvin Jackson, "Ireland, the Union, and the Empire, 1800–1960," in *Ireland and the British Empire*, ed. Kevin Kenny (Oxford, 2004), 123–53; Cormac Ó Gráda, *Ireland: A New Economic History, 1780–1939* (Oxford, 1994), esp. chap. 13.

¹¹ Abraham Mills, quoted in D. Cowman, "The Mining Community at Avoca, 1780–1880," in *Wicklow History and Society: Interdisciplinary Essays on the History of an Irish County*, ed. Ken Hannigan and William Nolan (Dublin, 1994), 772, and see 762–63, 772–73; Arthur G. Ryder, *Notes on the Ancient and Recent Mining Operations in Ovoca District* (Dublin, 1886), 3.

straight by showing him a six-ounce sample of “this precious metal.” Joining this report were testimonials from an Arklow rector, an amateur geologist, and Abraham Mills.¹² A “gentleman of respectability” residing in Dublin told of a mid-September purchase from a “common labourer” of gold that was “as pure as any brought from the Gold Coast of Africa” and added that another laborer “cleared ten guineas in two days” at the mine. Most other eyewitnesses likewise lingered on the “extraordinary purity and fineness of the gold” before turning to “the great concourse of people, who were busily engaged in endeavouring to procure a share of the treasure”: as many as four thousand men, in one account, with women and children in tow, had been attracted by “the adventurous researches of this New Peru.”¹³

Estimates of gold excavated from Wicklow and sold by miners ranged from 800 to 8,000 ounces; this figure settled down at 2,666 ounces, selling for the round sum of £10,000.¹⁴ The men at the scene formed themselves into gangs of four to eight diggers, with a “treasurer” who kept watch over whatever they found; women assisted by separating gold from mud and gravel in wooden dishes. A side industry of “ale and whisky tents” arose to cater to the men during their breaks, accompanied by “a spirit of animosity . . . among the different parties employed in gathering the ore.” By late September, this collective assault with “picks, spades, shovels, case-knives, iron spoons, [and] bits of slates” had rendered the bog two feet shallower than it had been a month earlier. By October, the crews started sinking deeper shafts and getting less gold. All this activity came to an abrupt halt on 15 October, when, according to *The Times*, “proper officers and a military force” appeared on the scene “to keep off marauders from further invading the property of the owners of the soil, and the rights of the crown.” The force in question was the Kildare Militia, two companies of which (numbering nearly seventy men) guarded the valley into the following year.¹⁵

Pronouncements on the gold rush that appeared in London mirrored this alarmed official English response to the gold discovery. English and French eyewitnesses depicted “mountain Tartars” assaulting Croghan Kinsella’s “ruffian bowels” and washing what they found “in a rude manner, somewhat similar to that

¹² “Discovery of a Gold Mine,” *European Magazine* 28 (1795): 283; J. L. de Latocnaye, *Rambles through Ireland*, 2 vols. (Cork, 1798), 1:85; John Lloyd, “An Account of the Late Discovery of Native Gold in Ireland,” *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society of London* 86 (1796): 34–37; Abraham Mills, “A Mineralogical Account of the Native Gold Lately Discovered in Ireland,” *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society of London* 86 (1796): 38–45.

¹³ *Gentleman’s Magazine* 65, pt. 2 (September 1795): 783; “Further Account of the Newly-discovered Gold Mine at Rathdrum, in Ireland,” *Weekly Entertainer* 26 (October 1795): 353–54; Mills, “Mineralogical Account,” 43; Latocnaye, *Rambles through Ireland*, 1:83.

¹⁴ Mills, “Mineralogical Account,” 43 (800 ounces); Stephen Barlow, *The History of Ireland from the Earliest Period to the Present Time*, 2 vols. (London, 1814), 2:335 (8,000 ounces, worth £30,000). For references to “2,666 ounces” and/or “£10,000,” see Robert Fraser, *Gleanings in Ireland* (London, 1802), 20; J. N. Brewer, *The Beauties of Ireland*, 3 vols. (London, 1825), 1:334; Leitch Ritchie, *Ireland Picturesque and Romantic*, 2 vols. (London, 1837), 1:121; Robert Kane, *Industrial Resources of Ireland* (Dublin, 1845), 220; John Calvert, *The Gold Rocks of Great Britain and Ireland* (London, 1853), xii; and *Our Own Country: Descriptive, Historical, Pictorial*, 6 vols. (London, 1882), 5:124.

¹⁵ “Account of the Newly-discovered Gold Mine at Rathdrum, in Ireland,” *Weekly Entertainer* 26 (October 1795): 309; “Discovery of Gold in Co. Wicklow,” *Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland* 3, pt. 2 (1913): 183; *The Times*, 20 October 1795; Latocnaye, *Rambles through Ireland*, 1: 86; *Annual Register . . . for the Year 1795*, 2nd ed. (London, 1807), 37.

practised by the negroes in Africa.” The exiled French royalist Jean-Louis de la Tocnaye, who was in Wicklow during the gold rush working on a travelogue, welcomed the arrival of the militia, worrying that in their absence “all the vagabonds of the three kingdoms . . . would have probably plundered the neighbouring houses” once the gold ran out.¹⁶ More charitably (and with palpable relief), outsiders did compliment the speed with which diggers “quietly dispersed” once the militia showed up, and these observers also occasionally interspersed uplifting rags-to-riches stories among their stories of profligacy. A journalist recounted the tale of “a poor boy that had been taken from the Work-house” who found a nugget worth £17, which “a humane Gentleman took care of” by buying a cow for the boy’s mother and investing the rest in an apprenticeship.¹⁷

By law, the crown had a right to any gold found in Ireland.¹⁸ To reinforce this, the Irish Parliament passed a statute in April 1797 enabling the Treasury “to conduct the working of a gold mine in the county of Wicklow”—formalizing state-sponsored mining in Wicklow that had already commenced eight months earlier. The government’s first object was “to endeavour to collect all the gold deposited, and thereby to remove every temptation for the assembling of mobs, whose numbers had before that time increased to an alarming degree”; its second was to “produce, if possible, a profit from the workings”; and its final aim was to “ascertain, whether the works should be proceeded upon or abandoned.”¹⁹ Leading up to the state takeover, an Irish politician suggested that it would at the very least “prevent the labouring persons in the neighbourhood from wasting their time upon the spot”; and the future Duke of Wellington, on tour in Ireland a decade later, agreed that the question was “not exactly one of gain or loss” but, rather, was “referable to the police of the country and to the industry of the people.” He concluded that it was worth the expense to retain control over the mine “to prevent the assembly of idle people there, and the loss which individuals would have sustained if they had been allowed to speculate.”²⁰

By the time Arthur Wellesley made these comments in 1807, keeping the peace was the only justification left for the government’s presence in Wicklow. Although the team appointed to supervise the operation found enough gold to pay their expenses for the first two years, thereafter they worked the mine at a loss, and their efforts to discover hidden wealth elsewhere in the valley came to naught. Abraham Mills took time away from his nearby copper mine to head this team;

¹⁶ “Further Account of the Newly-discovered Gold Mine,” *Weekly Entertainer* 26 (October 1795): 354; *Morning Chronicle*, 20 October 1795; *A System of Geography; or, a Descriptive, Historical, and Philosophical View of the Several Quarters of the World*, 4 vols. (Glasgow, 1807), 4:319; Latocnaye, *Rambles through Ireland*, 1:83–84.

¹⁷ Joseph Robertson, *The Traveller’s Guide through Ireland; or, a Topographical Description of that Kingdom* (Edinburgh, 1806), 293; “Extract of a Letter from Little Peru, County of Wicklow, Ireland,” *Morning Chronicle*, 16 October 1795.

¹⁸ Calvert, *Gold Rocks of Great Britain and Ireland*, 39, 283. The estate where the gold was discovered belonged to John Joshua Proby, Lord Carysfort; his ancestor had sold its mineral rights (not including gold and silver) to the Earl of Ormand, who leased these to the government in 1796; see Robert Fraser, *General View of the Agriculture and Mineralogy . . . of the County Wicklow* (Dublin, 1801), 20.

¹⁹ A. Mills, T. King, and J. Weaver, “Report . . . of the Gold Mines in the County of Wicklow,” *Transactions of the Dublin Society* 2 (1801): 134, 144.

²⁰ *The Times*, 13 February 1796; Arthur Wellesley to John Foster, 2 December 1807, in *Civil Correspondence and Memoranda of Field Marshal Arthur Duke of Wellington* (London, 1860), 211–12.

joining him were Thomas Weaver (his AIMC partner) and Thomas King, an “active and spirited local magistrate.” Initially they focused on rewashing the leftover gravel from the previous autumn; by 1801, they hoped that these efforts would be enough to convince local residents that it was “in vain to search for gold among the rubbish.”²¹ From there, they consulted the eminent English geologist Richard Kirwan, who urged them to survey the quartz veins that ran through the mountain. Since quartz had coincided with all the gold that had so far been discovered, he assumed that driving a level to meet these veins further up the mountain would yield more gold. Besides this, they also pursued rumors of gold in neighboring valleys, to which the evicted miners had adjourned.²²

Mills, Weaver, and King worked constantly from August 1796 through February 1811, with the only break coming between May 1798 and September 1800, when seeking gold gave way to quashing rebellion as the first order of government business. Although Wicklow had been largely immune from earlier disturbances that shook southern Ireland in the previous decade, rising anti-Protestant sentiment and proximity to Dublin made the county one of the epicenters (along with Ulster) of the more sustained and widespread rebellion of 1798. Mills, who captained a local militia, dispatched a patrol to the mining camp in late May to recover “all the timber, boards, and materials,” which he used to set up a makeshift military barracks in a nearby town. Rebels raided the mine a few days later, burning and destroying everything that Mills had left behind. He kept the gold that had been collected prior to the uprising under armed guard until August, when things had settled down enough to send it on to Dublin.²³

As soon as the government regained control of the valley, Mills began cutting a level, which extended more than a thousand feet into the mountain and crossed more than fifty quartz veins, and also cut “thousands of fathoms of open casts . . . along the slopes of the mountain,” none of which yielded any sign of gold. After he spent three years and £4,700 in Treasury funds in this manner, his paymasters ordered his team back to the stream, where they spent another decade washing clay and gravel.²⁴ Once the government decamped, local gold seekers returned: at first “with exceeding avidity,” according to an account from 1842, then limited to the occasional “group . . . raking the débris which the streams had brought from the mountains” or “solitary wanderer . . . scraping the edges of the current.” Estimates of the worth of what they discovered over the succeeding seventy years ranged from £20,000 to £160,000. As one geologist remarked, it was “very difficult to ascertain how much it is exactly, because they do not either like you to see their operations or to give you the gold, for fear, I suppose, it

²¹ *Morning Post*, 26 October 1795; Mills, King, and Weaver, “Report . . . of the Gold Mines,” 144, and see 132–36.

²² Gerrard A. Kinahan, “On the Mode of Occurrence and Winning of Gold in Ireland,” *Journal of the Royal Geological Society of Ireland*, n.s., 6, pt. 2 (1882): 142–43; Mills, King, and Weaver, “Report . . . of the Gold Mines,” 134–35, 147–48.

²³ *Thirty-eighth Report of the Commissioners of Accounts of Ireland* (London, 1812), 58; Mills, King, and Weaver, “Report . . . of the Gold Mines,” 132, 136–37; Ruán O’Donnell, *The Rebellion in Wicklow, 1798* (Dublin, 1998), 12–15, 138, 191; L. M. Cullen, “Politics and Rebellion: Wicklow in the 1790s,” in Hannigan and Nolan, *Wicklow History and Society*, 411–501. Mills retained a company militia (subsidized by the AIMC) after the rebellion to protect the mine from local interlopers; see Cowman, “The Mining Community at Avoca,” 770.

²⁴ Kinahan, “Mode of Occurrence,” 145; *Thirty-eighth Report*, 56.

might be seized by the Crown.” These prospectors left in their wake “confused heaps of stone, many of them overgrown with sod . . . scattered along the bank of the streams.”²⁵

Punctuating long periods of mining by local inhabitants were shorter bursts of activity by joint-stock companies that received official permission to seek gold in Wicklow. Although one such firm formed for this purpose as early as 1825, the first to send miners into Wicklow was the London-based Crockford and Co., which collected 600 ounces of gold (worth £1,800) in four months during 1840. Contemporaries attributed the company’s failure to find more than this to the “very imperfect and trifling manner” in which it prospected, the dishonesty of the sixty diggers (mostly girls) that it employed, and legal tangles with the Commission of Woods and Forests, which had granted a license to dig in exchange for a royalty.²⁶ After another abortive attempt in 1849 by the railway promoter William Collett, the Carysfort Company prospected in Wicklow in 1862 with even less success: just 53 ounces, worth a little over £200. After examining “almost every known lode in the neighbourhood, without finding any gold,” the firm gave up in 1866. The returns diminished further when Frederick Acheson’s “desultory streaming” between 1872 and 1879 yielded just £60 worth of gold. The government granted three more leases to search for gold in Wicklow in the 1890s, including one to the nationalist Charles Stewart Parnell, but none of the lessees actually commenced mining operations there.²⁷

The central cultural reference point for the gold discoveries in 1795 had been Peru, which almost immediately proved problematic once people considered the implications of relocating the Spanish Conquest to a quiet spot fifty miles south of Dublin. References to Wicklow as “Little Peru” or an “Irish Potosi” pervaded the press coverage of the discovery, but anyone who stopped to think this through either shunned the analogy or stumbled in its exposition. The English poet Jane Elizabeth Moore held out hope that the county’s newfound “golden gleam” would endow its “tatter’d peasant[s]” with riches instead of consigning them to the status of “harass’d victims to . . . torture,” as had been the case with Peruvian natives under Spanish rule. A *Morning Chronicle* correspondent greeted the arrival of the militia at the diggings by expressing relief that it would “defend our isle from all modern *Cortez’s* and *Pizarro’s*, whose deadly ambition, and sanguinary avarice, the fame of our gold may excite!”—leaving the reader to wonder who such predators might be if not the British government itself.²⁸

²⁵ Samuel Carter Hall and Anna Maria Hall, *Ireland: Its Scenery, Character &c.*, 2 vols. (London, 1842), 2:243; Kinahan, “Mode of Occurrence,” 146; *Report from the Select Committee on Industries (Ireland)* (London, 1885), 31 (evidence of William Kirby Sullivan); Warrington W. Smyth, “On the Mines of Wicklow and Wexford,” *Records of the School of Mines* 1, pt. 3 (1853): 403.

²⁶ Calvert, *Gold Rocks of Great Britain and Ireland*, 173–74; Kinahan, “Mode of Occurrence,” 147; Kane, *Industrial Resources of Ireland*, 221; Smyth, “Mines of Wicklow,” 402; Hall and Hall, *Ireland*, 2:244; J. A. Farrer, “Gold-Bearing Britain,” *Gentleman’s Magazine* 264, no. 4 (April 1888): 334.

²⁷ “An Irish California,” *Bell’s Life*, 14 January 1849; Kinahan, “Mode of Occurrence,” 146–47; J. Malcolm Maclaren, “The Occurrence of Gold in Great Britain and Ireland,” *Mining Engineer* 25 (1903): 488; *Reports of Inspectors of Mines, 1873* (London, 1874), 26; *Sixty-eighth Report of the Commissions of Woods, Forests, and Land Revenues* (London, 1890), 27.

²⁸ Jane Elizabeth Moore, “On the Discovery of The Gold Mine, in the County of Wicklow,” *Miscellaneous Poems* (Dublin, 1796), 88; *Morning Chronicle*, 20 October 1795. For other references to “Little Peru” or “New Peru,” see John Ferrar, *A View of Ancient and Modern Dublin, with its Im-*

Hence, although the notion of Wicklow as a “New Peru” lingered in some recollections, alternative interpretive frames soon emerged for making sense of the discovery of its gold. The most prominent of these paralleled the two primary national narratives that came to prevail in Ireland during the decades after the Act of Union: a Romantic focus on the land as a source of antiquity and scenery, and an economic focus on the land as a resource to be inventoried and exploited. The first of these narratives, from an Irish perspective, converted Wicklow’s gold into a metaphor for Ireland’s superior virtue and rich heritage, while British observers disparaged the gold mine as a potentially disruptive exception to Wicklow’s otherwise picturesque landscape. In contrast, the natural-resource narrative (expressed by unionists as well as nationalists, although with differing emphases over time) impatiently insisted that the government had abandoned the mine prematurely and that renewed efforts should be made to discover a mother lode beneath Croghan Kinsella. These respective efforts both to *re-cover* and to *recover* Wicklow’s gold form the final two sections of this article.

RE-COVERING WICKLOW’S GOLD

Most of the initial literary renderings of Wicklow’s gold mine issued from Irish writers who sympathized either openly or indirectly with the Romantic vision of nationalism that would later inform the Young Ireland movement. Few of these writers were unproblematically Irish, however: they all expressed an antimodern nationalism that was effective at galvanizing Irish solidarity but also was prone to appropriation (if not permanent ownership) by would-be colonizers.²⁹ John O’Keeffe, whose *Wicklow Mountains* (1796) was the first fictional retelling of the gold discovery, was an Irish expatriate who had been living in London for fifteen years when he wrote his play. Still, he drew from personal memories of hiking in Wicklow as a teenager, and audience response in Ireland was more favorable than in England: he recalled that it was “a great favourite all over Ireland . . . particularly in Dublin, where it brought much gold to the treasury of the Theatre.”³⁰ A different ambiguity, involving reception rather than identity, attached to the work of Thomas Moore, whose inclusion of Wicklow’s gold mine in a popular ballad published in 1821 secured its place in national memory. Although Moore drew inspiration from the United Irishmen and inspired Young Ireland, he owed his celebrity as much to English as to Irish audiences—not least because his songs (in

provements to the Year 1796 (Dublin, 1796), 115; “Account of the Newly-discovered Gold Mine,” and “Further Account of the Newly-discovered Gold Mine,” *Weekly Entertainer* 26 (October 1795): 310, 354; and *Annual Register . . . for the Year 1795*, 37.

²⁹ Katie Trumpener, *Bardic Nationalism: The Romantic Novel and the British Empire* (Princeton, NJ, 1997), 22–34; John Wilson Foster, “Nature and Nation in the Nineteenth Century,” in *Nature in Ireland: A Scientific and Cultural History*, ed. John Wilson Foster and Helena C. G. Chesney (Dublin, 1997), 412–13.

³⁰ *Dictionary of National Biography*, online ed., ed. H. C. G. Matthew and Brian Harrison, s.v. “O’Keeffe, John (1747–1833),” by Olive Baldwin and Thelma Wilson, <http://www.oxforddnb.com/article/20658>; “Recollections of the Life of John O’Keeffe,” *New Monthly Magazine* 17 (1826): 26. Although the play debuted in London in 1796, it had longer and more successful runs in Dublin, Limerick, and Kilkenny through 1799; see *Sun*, 11 April 1796; and William Smith Clark, *The Irish Stage in the County Towns, 1720 to 1800* (Oxford, 1965), 327.

one modern critic's words) "constantly defer the fulfilment of . . . an independent Ireland" by locating it in the distant past or an undefined future.³¹ The same could be said of the many Irish antiquarians who connected the Wicklow mine to ancient Irish ornaments, diverting attention from contemporary conditions to a time when Bronze Age Irish kings displayed their power through fine art wrought with native Irish gold.

By combining humor with a Romantic appeal to a morally pure Irish peasantry, O'Keefe's *Wicklow Mountains* set the tone for much subsequent literary treatment of the discovery. O'Keefe told the story of Felix, a young man who discovers a gold mine, secretly sells nuggets in Dublin, and spends the proceeds on gifts for the local townspeople. A schoolmaster, Sullivan, appears as Felix's covetous foil; Sullivan jails the boy, tells him "you either rob, or have sold yourself to the devil for your gold," and concludes that "you do more good in the village, than all of us put together, so you must be a bad man."³² The play used the trope of concealed discovery to conjure what a later critic called O'Keefe's "illusion of a fanciful type of Irishman and a mythical Ireland." The only urbane character in the play is an absentee landlord who, returning to his estate in disguise, contrasts "the malice of rustic jealousy" with Felix's simple generosity. One reason the play was a success in Ireland as well as London was that O'Keefe contained all the negative Irish stereotypes in the single character of Sullivan (together with his dim sidekick, Billy, a "dam'd lump of a munster potatoe") and allowed Felix to steal the show by "putting Gold to its noblest use, deeds of benevolence."³³

O'Keefe's concluding chorus taught the moral that the Irish could well do without gold but not without their innate "friendship, mirth and love": "was our gold, but Irish brass, / Good humour's stamp can make it pass." Thomas Moore transposed this lesson into a melancholy key in "Has Sorrow Thy Young Days Shaded," comparing love to the "sparkles of golden splendour" that played over the surface of "our Lagenian mine"—which he identified in a footnote as "Our Wicklow Gold-Mines, [which] deserve, I fear, the character here given of them." Reinforcing the theme of the ballad, which tragically contrasted hope and love with sorrow and old age, Moore concluded the verse on a cautionary note:

But, if in pursuit we go deeper,
Allur'd by the gleam that shone,
Ah! false as the dream of the sleeper,
Like Love, the bright ore is gone.

Although such references to Wicklow waned after 1850, when nationalists increasingly came to hope for gold in its more literal form, echoes remained into

³¹ Mary Helen Thuente, "The Folklore of Irish Nationalism," in *Perspectives on Irish Nationalism*, ed. Thomas E. Hachey and Lawrence J. McCaffrey (Lexington, KY, 1989), 45, 50–52; Leith Davis, "Irish Bards and English Consumers: Thomas Moore's *Irish Melodies* and the Colonized Nation," *Ariel* 24, no. 2 (April 1993): 17. Julia M. Wright complicates Davis's interpretation in "Irish Literature in an Age of Nationalism," in *Romantic Poetry*, ed. Angela Esterhammer (Amsterdam, 2002), 346–53.

³² John O'Keefe, *The Wicklow Mountains; or, The Lad of the Hills* (Dublin, 1797), 9–10, 18.

³³ G. C. Duggan, *The Stage Irishman: A History of the Irish Play and Stage Characters from the Earliest Times* (New York, 1937), 142; O'Keefe, *The Wicklow Mountains*, 10, 44, 46. On the play's reception in Ireland, see Clark, *The Irish Stage*, 188, 327; and T. J. Walsh, *Opera in Dublin, 1705–1797: The Social Scene* (Dublin, 1973), 307.

the 1870s. One example is Thomas Corry's "Emerald Gems" (1877), which shared space in his *Irish Lyrics, Songs, and Poems* with poems such as "Evicted" and "Awake! A Song of 1798." Its three stanzas moved from Ireland's "landscapes fair" through its "treasures rare . . . / Within the deep, dark Wicklow mines," before concluding with a final "priceless gem":

This jewel sheds alike its rays
In cot or lordly hall—
'Tis virtue, shrined in woman's heart,
The purest gem of all.³⁴

A variant of these Romantic appropriations of the Wicklow gold discovery, appropriations that persisted into the twentieth century, linked it to much earlier tales of inexhaustible gold—evidence of which recurrently surfaced in the form of ornaments found in bogs and railway cuttings. Visitors to the Wicklow mine reported a widely held view among locals "that native gold was found here centuries ago." As early as 1803, Irish antiquarians—including Thomas Moore himself, in his *History of Ireland*—set to work confirming this view by connecting the county's mineral resources to "wise and learned" ancestors (most notably the Bronze Age king Tigernmas) who "were rich in mines of gold . . . and wrought them to the highest perfection."³⁵ Subsequent antiquarians ran tests that allegedly proved the gold in ancient ornaments to be identical to the "fine native gold of Croghan," enabling late-century nationalists to assert "an extraordinary amount of metallurgic knowledge" among ancient goldsmiths and an accompanying "high state of civilization."³⁶ This conclusion developed into an article of faith, such that by 1920 a leading collector called Bronze Age Ireland "a kind of El Dorado of Western Europe" and offered that it was "generally conceded by archaeologists that . . . the gold was almost certainly derived from Co. Wicklow, where it has been obtained in large quantities in modern times."³⁷

³⁴ O'Keefe, *The Wicklow Mountains*, 47; Thomas Moore, "Has Sorrow Thy Young Days Shaded," in *Irish Melodies* (London, 1821), 133–34 ("Lagenian" refers to the province of Leinster [Irish: *Laighin*], which includes county Wicklow); T. C. S. Corry, "Emerald Gems," in *Irish Lyrics, Songs, and Poems* (Belfast, 1879), 67.

³⁵ J. Goldsmith, *The Natural and Artificial Wonders of the United Kingdom*, 3 vols. (London, 1825), 3:295; S. O'Halloran, *An Introduction to and an History of Ireland*, 3 vols. (Dublin, 1803), 1:201–5, 111; Dennis Taaffe, *An Impartial History of Ireland, from the Period of the English Invasion to the Present Time*, 2 vols. (Dublin, 1809), 1:544; *Dublin Penny Journal* 1 (1832): 414; Thomas Moore, *The History of Ireland: Commencing with Its Earliest Period*, 2 vols. (Philadelphia, 1843), 1:71.

³⁶ W. R. Wilde, *Catalogue of the Antiquities of Gold in the Museum of the Royal Irish Academy*, 2 vols. (Dublin, 1862), 2:5–6; "Gold Fields and Other Unworked Treasures of Ireland," *American Catholic Quarterly Review* 13, no. 50 (April 1888): 319; "Minutes of Proceedings of the Year 1864–65," *Journal of the Royal Geological Society of Ireland* 1 (1867): 99. See also John Windele, "Ancient Irish Gold and Its Origin, with Notes on Early Irish Navigation and Commerce," *Ulster Journal of Archaeology* 9 (1861–62): 214–16; and Charles Johnston, *Ireland Historic and Picturesque* (Philadelphia, 1902), 108–9.

³⁷ E. C. R. Armstrong, cited in Joseph Raftery, "Irish Prehistoric Gold Objects: New Light on the Source of the Metal," *Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland* 101, pt. 1 (1971): 101. This consensus came to a crashing end in 1970 when German mineralogists revealed that "the vast majority of Irish gold objects show no connection whatever with gold from Co. Wicklow," leading Raftery to call for "a revision of both archaeological tenets and nationalistic prejudices" ("Irish Prehistoric Gold Objects," 104).

These various Irish responses to the discovery of gold in Wicklow overlapped in many ways with the inclusion of that discovery in the travel literature that burgeoned in the decades after the Act of Union. Wicklow figured prominently in such writings, owing both to its lush scenery, which made it a favorite destination for tourists and landscape painters alike, and to its convenient proximity to Dublin. Its scenic spots, along with those in Ireland's southern and western coastal counties, merited inclusion in what one historian has called "a canon of Irish landscapes" that combined antiquarian, bucolic, and (above all) "characteristically Romantic" charms.³⁸ Whereas Irish writers discovered a strong sense of national identity in this sort of Romantic imagery, British tourists tended instead to find comfort in the apparent permanence of union. In part, this was because they mostly visited the properties of Anglo-Irish landlords, who went out of their way to attract visitors by investing in roads, bridges, and self-consciously picturesque woods. And in part, they consoled themselves and their readers by wishfully stereotyping the local "peasants" as quaint, good-humored, and "amenable, if not enthusiastic, to unionism."³⁹

For travel writers hoping to describe Ireland as an Edenic foil to industrial England, the discovery of gold in Wicklow awkwardly intruded on an otherwise undisturbed portrait. Although the mine clearly warranted mention as a point of interest, it was also an ugly sight—a peat bog with holes—that was out of place in productions that were mainly intended to entice tourists to visit "this delicious garden of the west." Some tried to square this circle either through the wishful thinking that was characteristic of picturesque writing and painting (referring to the muddy Ballinvalley River as "a stream of remarkable clearness" surrounded by banks that "if planted, . . . would be a beautiful walk") or by inviting the reader to associate the spot with the "vivid hopes" of times gone by.⁴⁰ Others winced and moved on as quickly as possible. Leitch Ritchie informed readers of his *Ireland Picturesque and Romantic* (1837) that visiting the mines "will hardly repay the trouble," and Anne Plumptre, twenty years earlier, had not even bothered to travel to the spot, since there was "nothing to see but a naked mountain, with a little stream running down from it, such as may be seen in a hundred other places."⁴¹

The gold mine in Wicklow also it made it harder for travel writers to portray the local "peasantry" in soft shades, since it recalled scenes of chaos, avarice, and (less directly) rebellion.⁴² They resolved this conundrum by privileging stories

³⁸ Fintan Cullen, *Visual Politics: The Representation of Ireland, 1750–1930* (Cork, 1997), 131; O'Donnell, *The Rebellion in Wicklow*, 10–12; Martin Ryle, *Journeys in Ireland: Literary Travellers, Rural Landscapes, Cultural Relations* (Aldershot, 1999), 28–33.

³⁹ W. H. A. Williams, *Tourism, Landscape, and the Irish Character: British Travel Writers in Pre-Famine Ireland* (Madison, WI, 2008), 8–9, 51–79; Glenn Hooper, "Stranger in Ireland: The Problematics of the Post-Union Travelogue," *Mosaic* 28, no. 1 (March 1995): 43 and *Travel Writing and Ireland, 1760–1860: Culture, History, Politics* (Basingstoke, 2005), 59–99.

⁴⁰ J. Stirling Coyne, *The Scenery and Antiquities of Ireland* (London, 1842), 182; Jonathan Binns, *The Miseries and Beauties of Ireland*, 2 vols. (London, 1837), 2:211; Brewer, *Beauties of Ireland*, 1: 333. On the picturesque in Irish travel writing, see Williams, *Tourism, Landscape, and the Irish Character*, 21–31.

⁴¹ Ritchie, *Ireland Picturesque and Romantic*, 1:120; Anne Plumptre, *Narrative of a Residence in Ireland during the Summer of 1814, and that of 1815* (London, 1817), 186.

⁴² On the problem of balancing Wicklow's panoramic beauty with its status as a focal point of the 1798 Rebellion, see Glenn Hooper, ed., *The Tourist's Gaze: Travellers to Ireland, 1800–2000* (Cork, 2001), xx–xxi.

about the discovery of gold in the decades prior to 1795 over accounts of the gold rush itself. These stories all began with a chance discovery in the 1770s or 1780s, followed variously by feuding relatives, secretive or maniacal attempts to get more gold, or mistaken identity (a tale in which a valuable nugget was used as a paperweight). Most occupied a gray area between folklore and fiction, and some writers directly linked their retold tales to “Mr. O’Keefe’s little piece.”⁴³ By repackaging the discovery in this way, travel writers could focus less on the environmental and social disruption occasioned by the gold rush and more on the “touches of comic humour” afforded by the apocryphal antics preceding it. A *Penny Magazine* article from 1844 encapsulated the gist of all such retellings: “The Irish peasantry, with the love of legendary tales which distinguishes them, have filled out all the details of a very marvelous version of the discovery, in which perhaps the real fact itself is buried in a whole cloud of wonders.”⁴⁴

Beyond burying facts about Wicklow gold in “traditional” discovery stories, travel writers also self-consciously appealed to the Romantic master narrative of O’Keefe, Moore, and the antiquarians. The Anglo-Irish folklorist Thomas Crofton Croker produced the richest example of this when he illustrated the Wicklow gold mine as one of four “illustrations” in his *Landscape Illustrations of Moore’s Irish Melodies* (1835). Prefacing his comments with a reference to “Gold, yellow, glittering, precious gold!” from *Timon of Athens*, he quickly passed on from the discovery of nuggets and dust to the “chains, rings, torques, fibulae, bracelets, [and] ingots” that had been “frequently raised by the spade of the peasant”; the accompanying watercolor was all lush scenery and no scarred bog. Even Anna Maria Hall and Samuel Carter Hall, who visited the site in 1840 when active mining was under way (and provided a full account of the operation), draped their visit in self-consciously literary terms: they recycled Croker’s Shakespeare reference and confessed that prior to their visit they had “fancied that only in the poet’s verse we should find ‘our Lagenian mine.’”⁴⁵

Such descriptions indicate a substantial overlap between both Irish and English perceptions of Wicklow gold as a distraction from Ireland’s higher pleasures, although they usually parted ways over the question of union. As early as 1820, this English perspective started to share space with more pessimistic accounts of Ireland, as some onlookers began to lose confidence in the value of the country’s status within the United Kingdom.⁴⁶ Once they eliminated scenic beauty and ancient relics as worthy of notice, all that remained was the literal gold—or, rather, its apparent absence, in the wake of the government’s abandonment of the mine. In such readings, Wicklow emerged (either literally or metaphorically) as a trap to be avoided. Unlike Romantic allusions to the county, which typically employed relatively positive Irish stereotypes, the underlying allusion in this case was the

⁴³ Hall and Hall, *Ireland*, 2:241; Dennis Sullivan, *A Picturesque Tour Through Ireland* (London, 1824), facing pl. 3. See also Thomas Crofton Croker, *Landscape Illustrations of Moore’s Irish Melodies; with Comments for the Curious* (London, 1835), 55; Isaac Weld, *Illustrations of the Scenery of Killarney and the Surrounding Country* (London, 1807), 196; Goldsmith, *Natural and Artificial Wonders*, 3: 293; G. N. Wright, *A Guide to the County of Wicklow* (London, 1827), 97; and Plumtre, *Narrative of a Residence in Ireland*, 184–85.

⁴⁴ Brewer, *Beauties of Ireland*, 1:333; “Irish Gold Mines,” *Penny Magazine*, 2 November 1844.

⁴⁵ Croker, *Landscape Illustrations*, 49; Hall and Hall, *Ireland*, 2:240.

⁴⁶ On this tendency in travel writing, see Hooper, *Travel Writing and Ireland*, 110–43.

unattainable treasure at the end of the rainbow; and it was probably not a coincidence that the decades after 1820 saw a spate of published tales featuring “gold goblins,” leprechauns, and assorted other faeries who were loath to share their gold with any human characters.⁴⁷

Pessimistic references to Wicklow found equal space in English financial journalists’ cautions against fruitless investment and in literary warnings against easy paths to wealth. J. R. Leifchild told midcentury readers of the *London Quarterly Review* that he had found “scarcely a quill-full” of gold in Wicklow, and *Bell’s Life* greeted William Collet’s gold mining project in 1849 with scorn: “Railways being somewhat out at the elbows, . . . the pensive Irish public is about to be tickled with another high-sounding speculation.” Literary dismissals of Wicklow gold included Lord Byron’s sneer, in a note to his “Hints from Horace,” that “the Irish gold mine of Wicklow . . . yields just ore enough to swear by, or gild a bad guinea,” and a series of set pieces by more ephemeral writers designed to pour cold water on wishful thinking. The anonymously published *Life in the West* (1842), which claimed to explore “the borders of the picturesque, the sublime, and ridiculous,” describes an estate agent who sends his client off to Wicklow “on the high road to Fortune’s lap . . . with El Dorado in his mind’s eye”; once he arrives, all he finds are “sinking moss and rugged furze brake,” together with a gruff herdsman who asks him if he “saw anything like *gould* in that.” In a story from 1880, a Mexican mining engineer teams up with an Irishman to extract “about five shillings’ worth of gold” from Wicklow “after crushing about as much rock as would build a seawall from the Pigeon House to the Hill of Howth.”⁴⁸

Many English writers extrapolated from this theme to use Wicklow gold as a symbol of an innate tendency among the Irish to grasp at unrealistic improvements in their fortune. The *New Monthly Magazine* concluded in 1854 that Wicklow gold was like “everything else in Ireland . . . the produce has been at times overrated, and the promises held out vaunted beyond anything reasonable.” More archly, the cartoon “Another Irish Gold Mine,” in the humor magazine *Fun*, depicted an Irishman’s promise to “surprise” his wife with the discovery of gold in his “pratich patch”—culminating in a different sort of surprise when an exploding stick of dynamite pitches him into his wife’s waiting arms in the kitchen. Such critics urged the Irish to set their sights on more achievable goals, such as growing potatoes: this had been the advice of the *Caledonian Mercury* when the state departed Wicklow in 1811, contrasting the abandoned gold mines with “those

⁴⁷ See, e.g., “The Leprechaun, or Gold Goblin,” *New Monthly Magazine* 7 (1823): 230–37; Thomas Keightley, *The Fairy Mythology*, 2 vols. (London, 1828), 2:180–86; “The Unlucky Gift,” *Court Magazine and Belle Assemblée* 2, no. 3 (March 1833): 141–43; Samuel Lover, *Legends and Stories of Ireland* (Philadelphia, 1846), 240–58; and John Brougham, *A Basket of Chips* (New York, 1855), 200–212.

⁴⁸ J. R. Leifchild, “Gold, in its Natural Sources,” *London Quarterly Review* 8, no. 15 (April 1857): 76; “An Irish California,” *Bell’s Life*, 14 January 1849; George Gordon Byron, Baron [sic], “Hints from Horace,” in *The Works of Lord Byron, including The Suppressed Poems*, ed. J. W. Lake (Philadelphia, 1856), 717; *Life in the West: . . . Rough Sketches on the Borders of the Picturesque, the Sublime, and Ridiculous* (London, 1842), 88–89, 93; “My Raid into Mexico,” *Catholic World* 32, no. 1 (October 1880): 88–89. See also Joseph Moser, “The Bubbles,” *European Magazine* 53, no. 1 (January 1808): 95; “Mélange from the Journal and Notes of an Employé,” *Fraser’s Magazine* 16, no. 5 (November 1837): 587; and John Parsons Hall, “Speculation: A Tale of a Bank,” *Bentley’s Miscellany* 21 (1847): 166.

Potatoe Mines where [people] will not be disappointed in finding the genuine *Irish Diamonds*.”⁴⁹

From a unionist perspective, the most important Irish ambition in need of discouragement was that of independence. It was with that (as well as gold) in mind that Robert Wynne wrote *Ballinvalley* (1896), a historical novel that mixed and matched real-life and fictional characters from the original gold rush and colored them with the “intense hatred” leading up to the rebellion of 1798. Its protagonist, the “rustic pedagogue” John Driscoll, becomes obsessed with gold after his sweetheart, Kate Kinsella, shows him a small nugget that her sister has discovered in a stream. Murmuring “Auriferous . . . Auspicious,” he finds a much larger nugget after an evening’s frenzied digging, which he takes to Dublin in hopes of making his fortune and marrying Kate. However, a nationalist named Darby ambushes him en route and steals the nugget, and by the time Driscoll returns to Wicklow, Kate’s loose tongue has transformed the county’s peasants into a “rough concourse of semi-savages.” Driscoll spends much of the book assisting the government in policing the valley, but his continued obsession with the nugget (which he regains, then immediately loses to another nationalist villain named O’Keefe) further complicates his hoped-for marriage with Kate. In the end, gold emerges as a Midas-like metaphor for nationalism: neither, implied Wynne, would cure Irish poverty. After losing the nugget, Darby reflects on his inability to feed his family as long as he hoarded it: “Not one drop of milk had it been the means of supplying to the little child which was starving for want of nourishment.”⁵⁰

RECOVERING WICKLOW’S GOLD

The author of a *Quarterly Journal of Agriculture* article on Wicklow’s farming prospects jokingly mused in 1835: “Were we to indulge our taste for the *picturesque* . . . we should grow *romantic*, and quote Tommy Moore’s *Melodies*, and be very bad company for the generality of our agricultural readers.” Had his readers been of a mineralogical persuasion, a Romantic perspective on Wicklow would have been equally out of place. Much more typical, in this regard, was the verdict of Joseph Jukes, the field director of the Irish Geological Survey, who complained from Wicklow in 1853 that “one can’t see the geology in this confounded rolly-polly wood covered country.”⁵¹ For such men (and, unlike the writers discussed in the previous section, these were all men), Wicklow gold was never a metaphor for something else: the only question was whether or not there was more of it beneath the county’s “rolly-polly” hills.

What Irish and British mineralogists lacked in figurative flourish, they at least

⁴⁹ “Gold in Great Britain and Ireland,” *New Monthly Magazine* 100 (1854): 19; “Another Irish Gold Mine,” *Fun*, no. 52 (July 1890), 30; *Caledonian Mercury*, 27 May 1811.

⁵⁰ G. Robert Wynne, *Ballinvalley; or, “A Hundred Years Ago”: A Tale* (London, 1896), 29, 33, 69, 90. Wynne was an Anglican archdeacon from county Kerry who regularly wrote tracts and novels (including *Ballinvalley*) for the Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge.

⁵¹ “Observations on the Agriculture and General Circumstances of the County of Wicklow,” *Quarterly Journal of Agriculture* 6, no. 30 (August 1835): 161; Joseph Jukes to Andrew Ramsay, 15 June 1853, quoted in Gordon L. Herries Davies, *Sheets of Many Colours: The Mapping of Ireland’s Rocks, 1750–1890* (Dublin, 1983), 163.

partly made up for in politics. From 1795 into the twentieth century, the existence or otherwise of new reserves of gold in the county was a politically fraught topic, though its politics shifted over time. Into the 1840s, most scientists who defended the continued exploration for gold in Wicklow did so from a distinctly unionist stance: just as it was for advocates of bog drainage and canal construction, the overriding motive of such men was to turn Ireland's inclusion in Great Britain into a paying proposition. Nationalists stayed out of this debate, both because pro-union Anglo-Irish elites dominated scientific institutions through 1850 and because early Victorian Irish nationalism was oriented either toward religion, as was Daniel O'Connell's campaign, or literature, as was Thomas Davis's Young Ireland movement. When Davis set about reforming Dublin's intellectual scene, for instance, he focused on the absence of an academy from which "literary force . . . would gush abundantly" and consigned geology and natural history to a brief paragraph.⁵²

After the middle of the nineteenth century, English and Irish scientists switched sides on the question of gold in Wicklow. After 1850, English geologists minimized the potential for Irish minerals, including gold, while Irish geologists and company promoters embraced the island's mineral potential as a likely means to economic self-sufficiency and included Wicklow gold as an important part of that process. This shift accompanied the rise of indigenous geological institutions: upon forming in 1831, the Geological Society of Dublin provided ample scope for the airing of nationalist viewpoints despite its Anglo-Irish leadership; and the Irish Geological Survey, despite being run by Englishmen or unionists from its founding in 1845, included on its field staff vocal geologists with strong nationalist views.⁵³

This political shift accompanied significant changes in mining technology and in geological theory, both of which affected the nineteenth-century debate about gold in Ireland. As mining techniques improved, the prospect of earning a profit from a relatively small deposit of gold increased—but so did the investment capital needed for expensive ore-crushing machinery. As the financial outlay increased along with the potential payoff, the debate hinged on the willingness of the state either to fund such exploration or to remove obstacles to private investment. Geologists, meanwhile, went from inferring the presence of gold from its surrounding minerals, to inferring it from the nearby sedimentary strata, to focusing on patterns of glaciation. The first boded well for the prospect of more gold in Wicklow and lay behind the government's strenuous search. Stratigraphy also raised hopes, since gold in Wicklow appeared in the same Silurian formations that had yielded major quantities of gold in Siberia and Australia. Eventually, however, the theory of glacial drift, which became the central framework for Irish geology by the end of the nineteenth century, tipped the balance against the prospect of

⁵² Thomas Davis, "Institutions of Dublin," in *Prose Writings* (London, 1889), 170, 173. On Anglo-Irish dominance of science prior to 1850, see Richard A. Jarrell, "Differential National Development and Science in the Nineteenth Century: The Problems of Quebec and Ireland," *Scientific Colonialism: A Cross-Cultural Comparison*, ed. Nathan Reingold and Marc Rothenberg (Washington, DC, 1987), 339–46.

⁵³ Patrick N. Wyse Jackson, "Fluctuations in Fortune: Three Hundred Years of Irish Geology," in Foster and Chesney, *Nature in Ireland*, 100–101; Herries Davies, *Sheets of Many Colours*, 168–221.

profitable gold mining in Wicklow, because it indicated that rather than breaking off from nearby rocks, the gold had been deposited from a distance.⁵⁴

The earliest advocates of investment in Irish gold mining were Abraham Mills and Thomas Weaver, who split their time in the early nineteenth century between searching for gold in Ballinvalley under government contract and mining for copper in nearby Avoca on behalf of their Liverpool shareholders. For them, the leading indicator of gold was the local mineralogy. When Mills originally lobbied the Treasury to pay for his level, he cited similarities between the rocks in Wicklow and those found in proximity to gold in southern Europe, the Urals, Mexico, and Chile. He concluded, on the basis of the “veins of *quartz*, bearing magnetic iron ore” near the mine, that there was “every probability, that . . . similar veins of quartz may be found productive of gold.” Weaver, who had studied with Alexander von Humboldt in Freiberg before joining Mills, cited Humboldt’s South American surveys as well as discoveries in Africa, Tibet, and Sumatra to justify his hunch that Wicklow’s quartz veins were auriferous.⁵⁵

In the context of the recent Act of Union, such prognoses dovetailed with the efforts of many British and Anglo-Irish elites who saw regional economic development as the surest path to imperial unity. Mills and Weaver both played an active role in the landlord-dominated Dublin Society (later the Royal Dublin Society), which actively encouraged a mineralogical inventory of Ireland in the decades following union; Wicklow, with its gold and other mineral resources, was the first county to be mapped as part of this project. The Scottish geologist who made that map, Robert Fraser, insisted that the Irish would “not have to regret the removal of her legislature” as long as they participated fully with the British in cultivating their “natural productions and domestic resources.” He prefaced his survey of Wicklow with the hope that the recent gold discovery “may attract the attention of men of extensive capital in other parts of the United Kingdom, fair and ample scope being here afforded for the employment of vast sums, in the *skilful* pursuit of the treasures contained under the surface of the earth.” A few years later he cited “some very skilful mineralogists” to support his claim that Wicklow possessed “a sufficient quantity of gold to supply all Europe” if it was “pursued with spirit.”⁵⁶

⁵⁴ On stratigraphy, see James A. Secord, *Controversy in Victorian Geology: The Cambrian-Silurian Dispute* (Princeton, NJ, 1986); and Robert A. Stafford: *Scientist of Empire: Sir Roderick Murchison, Scientific Exploration and Victorian Imperialism* (Cambridge, 1989), 4–63. On glaciation in the British Isles, see David Roger Oldroyd, *Thinking about the Earth: A History of Ideas in Geology* (London, 1996), 145–66.

⁵⁵ Abraham Mills, “Second Report of the Wicklow Gold Mines,” *Transactions of the Dublin Society* 3 (1802): 89–96; Mills, King, and Weaver, “Report . . . of the Gold Mines,” 147; Smyth, “Mines of Wicklow,” 405; Thomas Weaver, “Memoir on the Geological Relation of the East of Ireland,” *Transactions of the Geological Society of London* 5 (1821): 208–9; Gail Vines, “The Hunt for Wicklow Gold,” *New Scientist*, no. 193 (January 2007), 48.

⁵⁶ Anna Gambles, “Free Trade and State Formation: The Political Economy of Fisheries Policy in Britain and the United Kingdom circa 1780–1850,” *Journal of British Studies* 39, no. 3 (July 2000): 298; Fraser, *General View*, iii; R. Fraser, “On the Metals and Metallic Strata of Ireland,” *Monthly Magazine* 24, no. 160 (August 1807): 27. See also Herries Davies, *Sheets of Many Colours*, 8–12, 18; Weld, *Illustrations of the Scenery of Killarney*, 198; and *Fourth Report of the Commissioners appointed to enquire into the Nature and Extent of the Bogs in Ireland, and, the Practicability of Draining and Cultivating Them* (London, 1814), 172.

By the 1840s, stratigraphy had pushed mineralogy aside as the leading predictor of a region's resources. Pioneered by the English geologist Roderick Murchison, this approach used fossils to date sedimentary rock and then applied that knowledge to mineralogical discovery. Its most dramatic success was Murchison's prediction in the 1840s, on the basis of auriferous Silurian rocks in Siberia, that similar strata in Australia would also yield gold. Returning Australian prospectors in the 1850s pointed to the Silurian bed running from Wales through the south of Ireland and predicted similar riches closer to home. A reviewer of John Calvert's *Gold Rocks of Great Britain and Ireland* (1853) imagined its author's challenge to Murchison: "You have . . . an analogue to the Silurian system of the Ural: why not extend your gold-prophecy, so that it may include Britain?" Armed with the latest American crushing machines, Calvert argued, a team of "old Australian diggers" could easily make gold mining in Wicklow pay.⁵⁷

Although the profit motive impelled Calvert (and company promoters who also brandished parallels with Australia), older unionist arguments also took the new stratigraphy on board. The English geologist Joseph Holdsworth, for instance, cited Wicklow's "Silurian formation" in hope that its gold reserves might unleash Ireland's "latent forces of civilization" and thereby bolster "the strength and supremacy, of the British Nation."⁵⁸ However, most mainstream English geologists—starting with Murchison himself—did their best to prevent an appeal to Siluria from attracting gold seekers to Ireland. Murchison cautioned that Wicklow would have yielded much more of the precious metal had "any portion of these old slaty British rocks . . . been largely penetrated by gold." Although he granted that improved mining technologies might prove him wrong, this did not alter his conviction that "the old gold tracts of Europe have been on the whole exhausted of their wealth." He shared this general verdict with most English geologists who (unlike amateur advice-givers such as Calvert and Holdsworth) played an official role in assessing Ireland's mineralogical potential.⁵⁹

While geologists debated the relevance of Murchison's theories to Ireland, new mining technologies were forcing them to recalibrate how much precious metal needed to be present for a mine to deliver a profit. Those who had argued in the 1850s that better machinery might make Wicklow pay found support for their claim across the Irish Sea in Wales, where, between 1861 and 1867, mining companies crushed 15,000 tons of ore to net nearly £60,000 worth of gold. Meanwhile, the price of gold—which fell precipitously in the wake of California and Australia—began to rebound in the 1870s, with new discoveries of silver and with Germany's adoption

⁵⁷ James A. Secord, "King of Siluria: Roderick Murchison and the Imperial Theme in Nineteenth-Century British Geology," *Victorian Studies* 25, no. 4 (Summer 1982): 416–18, 425–29; "There is Gold in England," *Chambers's Journal of Popular Literature, Science and Arts* 1, no. 4 (28 January 1854): 50; Calvert, *Gold Rocks of Great Britain and Ireland*, 309.

⁵⁸ Joseph Holdsworth, *Geology, Minerals, Mines, and Soils of Ireland, in reference to the Amelioration and Industrial Prosperity of the Country* (London, 1857), 17, v. For a company promoter's appeal to Australia, see "An Irish California," *Bell's Life*, 14 January 1849.

⁵⁹ Roderick Impey Murchison, *Siluria: The History of the Oldest Known Rocks containing Organic Remains, with a Brief Sketch of the Distribution of Gold over the Earth* (London, 1854), 435–36; Herries Davies, *Sheets of Many Colours*, 168–69, 208.

of the gold standard in 1870.⁶⁰ In view of these developments, Irish geologists began to push back against their English colleagues who doubted Ireland's mineral potential. In 1865, the Geological Society of Ireland called for redoubled efforts to discover the source of Wicklow's gold. In 1883, Henry Kinahan, who was second-in-command at the Irish Geological Survey, echoed this call, after his son Gerrard had discovered "specks and scales of gold" on a beach east of Ballinvalley. The Kinahans concluded that previous prospectors had been looking in the wrong place: instead of cutting levels higher up on the mountain, the existence of gold on the coast indicated that the valley itself was the likely source.⁶¹

The Kinahans found a wider forum for their views, and gained new allies, in 1885, when Parliament held an inquiry into the state of Ireland's industries. The senior Kinahan used the occasion to introduce his son's views into the evidence, and (in a rare show of agreement) his boss at the Irish Geological Survey, Edward Hull, affirmed that "a great deal of gold" remained undiscovered. Arthur Ryder, whose bluster in running the Connorree-based Ovoca Mineral Company was matched only by his failure to make it pay, argued that Wicklow presented "a most promising field for the profitable employment of capital" and concluded that a search for gold there would "transform the barren mountain sides into a veritable mine of wealth." Against this testimony, the president of Queen's College in Cork offered his opinion that Irish gold had "only a scientific and historical value," and the Liverpool businessman George Smyth worried that golden dreams were preventing the Irish from profitably working "their little farms." He bemoaned the "popular belief among the working classes in Ireland . . . that there are lots of gold to be had, but that the Government will allow no one to dig for it."⁶²

From Parliament, the debate over Wicklow spilled into the press when the Welsh mining magnate and MP William Pritchard Morgan announced his conviction that the reefs that he was exploring in Merionethshire crossed the Irish Sea to "the sister isle." When *The Times* published news of Morgan's interest in 1888, several correspondents (including Kinahan and Ryder) wrote in to support the view that with better machinery (such as Morgan would soon use to find £68,000 worth of gold in Wales) there was no reason why Wicklow should not be a paying proposition. Four years later, Morgan again fueled nationalist suspicions that the British government was standing in the way of Irish prospecting when he spoke out in Parliament against the crown's high-priced leases and intolerable royalties for gold exploration in Wicklow. An Irish American witness to this debate called Britain's "policy of suppressing the working" of Wicklow's gold "an epitome of the entire British treatment of Ireland," and Ryder spat that the state's "procrastinating spirit of *laissez faire*" had "prevented energetic and systematic work at

⁶⁰ Maclaren, "Occurrence of Gold," 443–46; Barry Eichengreen and Ian W. McLean, "The Supply of Gold under the Pre-1914 Gold Standard," *Economic History Review* 47, no. 2 (May 1994): 288–309.

⁶¹ "Minutes of Proceedings of the Year 1864–65," 87–102; "Auriferous Sand in Co. Wicklow," *Academy* 20 (1881): 185; George Henry Kinahan, "On the Possibility of Gold being found in Quantity in the Co. Wicklow," *Journal of the Royal Geological Society of Ireland*, n.s., 6 (1883): 208–10; Kinahan, "Mode of Occurrence," 135, 141.

⁶² *Report from the Select Committee on Industries (Ireland)*, 108, 441, 891, 812–13, 806–7.

Croghankinsella, [where] wealth beyond the dreams of avarice” still lay fallow “beneath the ruined habitations of an impoverished people.”⁶³

By 1900, a persistent lack of return on their investment had led speculators to lose interest in Wicklow gold mining, and geology also moved on. If analogies across vast expanses of space had provided much of the fodder for earlier predictions of additional gold in Ireland, a new natural history shot these predictions down once and for all—specifically, the theory of glacial drift. Although Irish geologists had bought into glacial drift as early as the 1860s—and, in fact, Henry Kinahan himself had presented a paper on it in 1876—the Kinahans did not mention glaciers once in their papers on gold. In contrast, a later survey of Irish gold in 1903 appealed to “the presence of the glacial striae” in Wicklow as proof positive against “the hope of payable gravels on the broad hills between the valleys”: the “complete sweeping of the country by ice” made the chance of a surviving mother lode extremely unlikely. A century later, geologists would circle back to the Kinahans’ conclusion that the gold’s origins lay beneath the valley (buried by glacial deposits), but they remained convinced that erosion had long since washed most of it out to sea.⁶⁴

CONCLUSION

The history of prospecting in County Wicklow persisted long after geologists had determined that the gold rush of 1795 was, for all practical purposes, the end of the story. Efforts to discover the mother lode resurfaced in 1935, yielding a political scandal but not much money: the Free State government, it turned out, had granted gold-mining leases to four Fianna Fáil party members, who then illegally sold their rights to English speculators. The incident rekindled earlier tensions between competing visions of Irish nationality—which, if anything, grew more pronounced as the Irish edged toward independence and as new mining techniques amplified the discord between resource extraction and scenic beauty. Looking back in 1937 on the recent revival of interest in Wicklow gold, the botanist Robert Praeger blanched at the “deep-seated conviction that Ireland is . . . an El Dorado bristling with pit-heads and dumps and the tall chimneys of chemical works” but consoled himself and his readers that any gold left in the county was “widely and very sparsely distributed.”⁶⁵

Fifty years later, the same tensions reemerged when a consortium of Canadian mining companies targeted Wicklow for gold exploration, then quickly evaporated in the face of pressure from environmentalists—suggesting that even if improved mining techniques might make Irish gold mining newly viable from an economic

⁶³ “Gold in Ireland,” *The Times*, 12 September 1888, 28 September 1888, 3 October 1888; “Gold Mining in Ireland,” *The Times*, 25 October 1888; “Crown Royalties on Gold,” *The Times*, 23 March 1892; *Third Report of the Royal Commission appointed to Inquire into the Subject of Mining Royalties* (London, 1891), 94–95; “Gold Fields and Other Unworked Treasures,” 316.

⁶⁴ G. H. Kinahan, “Irish Drift,” *Journal of the Royal Geological Society of Ireland* 4 (1876): 210–18; Maclaren, “Occurrence of Gold,” 499; Vines, “The Hunt for Wicklow Gold,” 48.

⁶⁵ *London Quarterly and Holborn Review* 161 (1936): 96; “Goldmining Leases in Co. Wicklow,” *The Times*, 12 September 1935; Robert Lloyd Praeger, *The Way That I Went: An Irishman in Ireland* (Dublin, 1937), 286–87.

perspective, the attendant toll on Wicklow's continued pastoral image would render further gold extraction unlikely.⁶⁶ By the same token, foiled hopes for mining companies have left room for hope on the part of local residents. A Wicklow expatriate recalled, upon reading a draft of this article, "a most interesting character" from her childhood who could always be found "around the Ballinvalley River working away with her pan and all the trimmings needed." And an RTÉ radio documentary broadcast in 2008 profiled a local explosives expert who, in the course of the show, fruitlessly detonated sixty holes in a Wicklow streambed on the logic that the flakes of gold that still periodically appeared in the valley "had to come from somewhere."⁶⁷

Like gold, nationalism has to come from somewhere; it also tends to attach itself to tangible things in order to be recognized and used by people who see themselves as part of a nation. When the nation in question is Ireland in the nineteenth century, every thing that nationalism touched carried multiple meanings, which shifted with the varying shades of Britishness and Irishness that contended with one another. Gold, which was especially prone to ambiguous interpretations, was no exception. Upon its discovery in county Wicklow, Irish observers diverted attention from the gold itself to the metal's other meanings, whether as a metaphor for virtue or as a symbol of antiquity. British travel writers, whose unionist vision for Ireland privileged picturesque beauty over what lay beneath its surface, easily adapted this perspective to their own purpose—in stark contrast to a different set of unionists, who insistently urged the British government to support Irish gold mining along with a long list of other "improvements." After the mid-nineteenth century, as the sources of Irishness shifted from religion and Romanticism to land and labor, the prospect of tangible gold in Wicklow went from being a unionist dream to a nationalist one.

In most of these various responses to Wicklow gold, the metal itself was peculiarly absent: it was either wished away, by those who preferred to think of an Ireland free of filthy lucre, or wished for in places where it turned out not to be. When actual Wicklow gold did make an appearance in the historical record, it typically underscored the point that neither the Irish nor the British could ever fully possess it, any more than Ireland could ever be fully possessed by Britain. When Daniel O'Connell received a crucifix of "pure Wicklow gold" upon being freed from jail in 1844, the *Freeman's Journal* reported that "the material is national, the design perfect, and the workmanship exquisite." Then again, gold from Wicklow also adorned a necklace, earrings, brooch, and bracelet that the Earl of Fitzwilliam's tenants presented to his son's bride—which Fitzwilliam (by far the largest absentee landowner in the county) identified as "a mark of that confidence between landlord and tenant which

⁶⁶ "Canadians Look to Emerald Isle for Golden Prospects," *Financial Post* (Toronto), 6 November 1989.

⁶⁷ Elizabeth Hennessey, e-mail message to author, 25 September 2009; Peter Woods, *Seeking the Mother Lode*, RTÉ radio documentary, June 2008 (recording on file with author; see review of the documentary at <http://www.thepost.ie/archives/2008/0608/radio-review-theres-gold-in-them-thar-wicklow-hills-33385.html>).

was often so much wanting in this country.”⁶⁸ By recovering these different meanings of a mostly forgotten gold rush in county Wicklow, it is possible also to recover some of the complicated senses in which nineteenth-century Ireland belonged—and insistently did not belong—to the United Kingdom.

⁶⁸ Calvert, *Gold Rocks of Great Britain and Ireland*, 173; “Tourists’ Advertiser,” appended to W. F. Wakeman, *Three Days on the Shannon: from Limerick to Lough Key* (Dublin, 1852), 15; *Freeman’s Journal*, quoted in *The Times*, 14 September 1844; *The Times*, 21 October 1867; “An Irish Present to the Queen,” *John Bull*, 15 September 1849; William Nolan, “Land and Landscape in County Wicklow,” in Hannigan and Nolan, *Wicklow History and Society*, 657–58, 689.