Language in Fourteenth-Century Ireland

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ABSTRACT

The fourteenth century in Ireland (Watt 2008) is a period in which at least three major languages were spoken: Irish, French and English. The Irish language continued from Middle Irish into the Early Modern Irish period, one in which there was a classical form of the language used for praise poetry (McManus 1994; Doyle 2015) and for higher register prose. The English language continued from its modest beginnings in the wake of the Norman invasion of the late twelfth century (after 1169) to become the medium for writing as is attested in the early fourteenth-century collection of poetry known as the *Kildare Poems* (Hickey 2007: Chapter 2) and contained in the Harley 913 manuscript in the British Museum. The French language is also attested in this period in a few minor pieces of narrative poetry, but most of all French is to be seen in the *Statutes of Kilkenny* (1366), a set of laws which, among many other things, proscribed the use of Irish by the Anglo-Normans in Ireland and insisted that they use English. In order to be understood, the statutes were written in French (Crowley 2000).

The fourteenth century in Ireland is a period of political upheaval as well. The century opens with the Bruce campaign in Ireland (1315-18) and continues with various power struggles, chiefly between the increasingly Gaelicised Norman landowners of Ireland and the English monarchy to which they owed at least nominal allegiance. The geography of Ireland is also interesting in that it is the Pale (Dudley Edwards 2005) along the east coast which formed the stronghold of English power with the native Irish and Normans beyond this region enjoying relative independence.

For this presentation the external situation of Ireland will be examined and the developments of language will be seen in this context. The interactions of the three main languages (Hickey 1997; 2010) will form a focus for the presentation with many language examples presented in a non-technical manner.

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