

Dewilding 'Wolf-land': Exploring the Historical Dimensions of Human-Wildlife Conflict and Coexistence in Ireland

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Abstract

Fostering coexistence between people and wildlife is crucial to both the conservation and restoration of wildlife populations across the globe. Yet, so far research exploring human-wildlife conflict and coexistence has been largely ahistorical, with little focus on the historical trajectories through which human-wildlife interactions have shifted from coexistence to conflicts which have led to wildlife eradication in the past. This paper responds by examining the historical drivers of change which disrupted a long history of human-wolf coexistence in Ireland. Drawing on an extensive review of primary historical sources and secondary literature and applying analytical tools from environmental history, the paper first illustrates the diverse practices and attitudes which helped sustain a continuous period of coexistence up to the seventeenth century. The paper then illustrates how coexistence unravelled during the early modern period following the island's integration into an expanding global capitalist system under a colonial regime who redefined Ireland as a primitive 'Wolf-land'. By engaging with the historical dimensions of human-wildlife interactions and drawing attention to how wildlife has become enrolled in past social conflicts, the article highlights the importance of historical perspectives for informing current strategies aimed at positively transforming human-wildlife conflict towards inclusive and socially just forms of coexistence.

Keywords: Rewilding, human-wildlife conflict, coexistence, wolves, Ireland, environmental history

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INTRODUCTION

...it is vital, when encountering a serious problem, not merely to try to solve the problem in itself but to confront and transform the processes that gave rise to the problem in the first place. (Harvey 1996: 401)

Concerned with the reasons why wildlife has been eradicated from places with long histories of human-wildlife

coexistence, this article seeks to provide insights into the historical dimensions of contemporary conflicts surrounding proposals to reintroduce wolves into Ireland. Calls for the wolf's return to Ireland follow the ongoing recovery of large carnivore populations across continental Europe (Chapron et al. 2014) and reflect growing support for rewilding, one of the most influential approaches today to environmental conservation (Perino et al. 2019). Although it remains a highly diverse (Gammon 2018) and often divisive concept (Jørgensen 2015), many rewilding advocates consider the reintroduction of functionally important wildlife, including predators such as wolves, essential for contributing towards global conservation targets to reverse biodiversity loss and restore self-regulating ecosystems (Soulé and Noss 1998; Svenning et al. 2016). Moreover, faced with an accelerating ecological crisis (Díaz et al. 2019), some argue that rewilding offers a transformative pathway for reimagining human relationships with the rest of nature through a shift which,

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according to Wapner (2020: 59), “involves individually and collectively pulling back and reducing humanity’s footprint on the more-than-human world”.

Yet the prevalence of conflicts among people with different, and often opposing, interests and attitudes to wildlife poses a major challenge for both rewilding and the conservation of existing wildlife populations (Dickman 2010; Redpath et al. 2013). The 2007 reintroduction of white-tailed sea eagles to Ireland after an absence of over a century, for example, led to a high-profile social conflict involving conservationists, farmers, politicians, and tourism interests (O’Rourke 2014). Furthermore, calls to reintroduce wolves to Ireland by the Green Party in the Irish Parliament in 2019 have faced strong resistance, with opposition framed around concerns about a lack of suitable habitat and the negative impacts of a potentially dangerous predator on rural communities, agricultural interests, and existing conservation projects.

Rewilding projects and proposals involving reintroductions inevitably generate concerns given wildlife can have significant material and non-material impacts on human lives and livelihoods, particularly on people living in rural areas (Thondhlana et al. 2020; Lecuyer et al. 2022). However, research has highlighted how such conflicts over wildlife conservation, commonly referred to as human-wildlife conflicts, are primarily driven by social and political issues and are often rooted in contentious human-human relations (Madden 2004; Hodgson et al. 2020). The importance of understanding the human dimensions of these conflicts is increasingly recognised in the rewilding literature (e.g. Wynne-Jones et al. 2018; Fry 2020; Drouilly and O’Riain 2021) and in recent studies of human-wildlife interactions, which have drawn attention to the different ways conflicts over wildlife are influenced by institutions, political economic structures, social constructions of landscape, power relations, and diverse values, attitudes, and interests (Skogen et al. 2017; De Silva and Srinivasan 2019; Fletcher and Toncheva 2021).

Over the past decade, research within this field has also started to broaden its focus from conflict and negative interactions with wildlife towards the challenge of advancing socially just and inclusive forms of human-wildlife coexistence (Frank et al. 2019; Pettersson et al. 2021). Whilst coexistence has been conceptualised in numerous ways, in the context of large carnivore conservation, Carter and Linnell (2016: 575) refer to it as a “dynamic but sustainable state in which humans and large carnivores co-adapt to living in shared landscapes where human interactions with carnivores are governed by effective institutions that ensure long-term carnivore population persistence, social legitimacy, and tolerable levels of risk”. Definitions of coexistence which foreground humans and wildlife sharing landscapes in this way could be argued to be of little relevance to rewilding given its associations with wilderness and minimising human presence (Ward 2019). However, where the human dimensions and environmental-justice implications of rewilding are recognised (Holmes et al. 2020), fostering coexistence emerges as a key challenge, particularly in areas where the experience of coexistence no longer exists (Pooley 2021).

So far, however, research into the human dimensions of human-wildlife conflict and coexistence has been primarily concerned with examining the contemporary social and political contexts in which human-wildlife interactions play out. In contrast, the historical dimensions of human-wildlife conflict and coexistence have received relatively little attention, despite broad acknowledgement of the utility of historical analysis for understanding how and why particular human-wildlife conflicts have emerged and escalated over time (Lambert 2015; Pooley et al. 2017; Bennett et al. 2017). In addition, historical knowledge is regarded as being vital for informing ‘future-oriented’ conservation and restoration agendas such as rewilding, with perspectives about local histories of human land use (Alagona et al. 2012; Higgs et al. 2014).

Identifying this historical blind spot in their transdisciplinary framework for diagnosing complex conservation conflicts, Harrison and Loring (2020: 4) stress that conflicts typically “exist on longer temporal scales than many people may at first realize”. Furthermore, they also point out the importance of recognising that “previous episodes of conflict result in an ‘aftermath’ that affects future episodes” (2020: 4). Conceptualising conflicts in this way, i.e. as arising through history and having legacies which can significantly influence the present, demands taking the past seriously to better understand the historical processes and dynamics which possibly act as key underlying drivers of contemporary rewilding and human-wildlife conflicts (Madden and McQuinn 2014).

Environmental History and Human-Wildlife Interactions

Environmental history—a broad interdisciplinary field concerned with how interactions between nature and human cultures have changed through time (Hughes 2008)—offers a potentially fruitful approach for exploring histories of coexistence and tracing the deeper temporal scales of conflicts and identifying links between past and present contestations. Studies of environmental history typically examine the reciprocal relationship between human societies and nature across three themes or levels of analysis: (1) nature and how it shapes human actions, (2) the way socio-economic activity, including political economy, power relations, and modes of production, influences environmental change, and (3) the evolving history of environmental thought and ideas about nature (Worster 1988). Instead of placing people at the centre of history and subordinating the rest of nature to the role of ‘neutral’ background, environmental history, according to Cronon (1993: 13), contends “that human beings are not the only actors who make history. Other creatures do too, as do large natural processes, and any history that ignores their effects is likely to be woefully incomplete”. This commitment to treating human life and history as being rooted in and entangled with the non-human world (Aisher and Damodaran 2016) is especially pertinent in the context of criticism of rewilding

for reproducing and perpetuating troubling nature-culture dichotomies linked to top-down approaches to biodiversity conservation (Denevan 1992; Agrawal and Redford 2009).

Guided by this principal assumption, studies of environmental history aim to develop more comprehensive and nuanced understandings of past social and environmental change by documenting shared stories about human and non-human natures and their dynamic and evolving relationships with the world around them (Grove et al. 1998). Interpreting history as the co-evolution of people and nature is relevant to contemporary conflicts over wildlife conservation because it can help reveal the different actors, interests, events, ideologies, politics, and other historical forces which have influenced past transformations in human-wildlife interactions from tolerance and coexistence to conflict and extermination (Lambert 2015). For example, exploring the history of human-wolf relationships in Japan, Walker (2009) explains how the eighteenth and nineteenth century campaigns to eradicate the “Japanese wolf” were driven by the emergence of dominant new ways of relating to and valuing the natural world based on its control and commodification. Repeated in various forms across the world (e.g. Coleman 2008), this transformation and simplification of previously complex human-nature relations—a process referred to by environmental historian Carolyn Merchant (1983) as the ‘Death of Nature’—has been identified as a crucial turning point in human interactions with the rest of nature and is widely regarded as a, if not the, root cause of the current ecological crisis (Büscher and Fletcher 2020; Hickel 2020).

Hence, drawing on environmental history’s three broad categories of analysis (Worster 1988), with a particular emphasis on critically evaluating how different ideas, knowledge, and ways of viewing and using nature have changed over time, this research sets out to investigate how and why human-wolf relations in early modern Ireland shifted from coexistence to conflict. The primary aim of the article is to identify the historical factors which disrupted a long history of coexistence and to determine how these factors generated conflict and legitimated the extirpation of wolves from Ireland. Adopting a *longue durée* perspective of human-wolf relations, the paper first traces the various ways human societies and wolves negotiated coexistence in Ireland up to the seventeenth century. The paper then turns its focus to the early modern period and examines how wolves became entangled in an escalating human-human conflict. The paper concludes by arguing that viewing human-wildlife interactions through the lens of environmental history can offer valuable insights into how people coexisted with wildlife in the past, and provide important perspectives into the root causes of conflict over wildlife in the present.

METHODOLOGY AND MATERIALS

Data Collection and Analysis

Applied to the case of human-wolf relations in Ireland, environmental history’s broad framework has been deployed

as a method to guide both the paper’s analytical approach and as a starting point for considering the different types of data needed to address the paper’s main aim, as outlined above. According to van Dam and Versteegen (2009: 28), “the classic sources of information for the historian, environmental or otherwise, are texts.” Thus, preliminary data collection for the paper involved a close examination of the existing literature on the history of wolves in Ireland and archival field research to gather historical texts related to wolves and human-nature interactions, which was conducted during June and July 2019 at various libraries and public archives in Ireland. Additional material and sources were then collected over the course of August 2019 to December 2020 using keyword searches in online databases and digital libraries, including JStor, Google Scholar, HathiTrust, The National Archives, University College Cork’s (UCC) Corpus of Electronic Texts (CELT), and University College Dublin’s (UCD) National Folklore Collection.

From this process, key texts and secondary sources were selected based on their relevance to the paper’s aim, encompassing an extensive range of books, travel accounts, letters, diaries, maps, poems, manuscripts, surveys, tenancy contracts, and legislative records. Although caution and a critical perspective are required when interpreting historical evidence, particularly that deriving from the colonial period which potentially reflects culturally prejudiced and racist worldviews, this material provided detailed insights into the history of interactions between people, wolves, and environmental change in Ireland. The dataset was then organised thematically, according to environmental history’s three themes, and into two historical periods—1) the period of coexistence in pre-colonial Ireland and 2) the early modern period, which marked the escalation of human-wolf conflict.

Next, the historical data were analysed using a grounded theory approach similar to Cronon (1983) in order to identify the historical factors which influenced the breakdown of human-wolf relations in early modern Ireland. Adams’s assertion that “many conservation conflicts are underpinned by differences in ideas about nature” (2020: 248) was instructive in centring the analysis around understanding how the shift from coexistence to conflict was determined by the emergence of new ways of thinking about nature associated with the early modern period and what Moore (2017: 594) refers to as “early capitalism’s environment-making revolution”. By interrogating the historical production of environmental knowledge (Turnhout 2018) and the ways in which dominant ideas shape human-nature relationships, the article takes inspiration from Collard et al. (2015: 327)’s vision for advancing abundant socioecological futures by confronting violent past processes of “colonial-capitalist ruination”.

Study Area

Although Ireland has received relatively little attention in the literature on human-wildlife interactions (O’Rourke 2014), it has the potential to offer important insights into the historical

dimensions of human-wildlife conflict and coexistence. Human societies in Ireland have lived alongside and interacted with wildlife for c. 10,000 years and the presence and distribution of the island's contemporary wildlife populations have been significantly influenced by past human activity (Mitchell and Ryan 1997). For example, since the Mesolithic, people have introduced a wide range of wildlife into Ireland for a variety of reasons, e.g. as sources of food and materials (Montgomery et al. 2014) and owing to their symbolic and cultural importance (Warren 2022). Yet direct exploitation (Evans et al. 2012) and the conversion of natural habitats to support human development (McCormick 2014) have also contributed to the decline and extirpation of many wildlife populations from their historical ranges (D'Arcy 1999). In recent years, calls to reintroduce wolves and the reintroduction of birds of prey, including white-tailed sea eagles, golden eagles, and red kites, have sparked nationwide debates and attracted considerable interest from the general public (O'Toole et al. 2002). Environmental history can provide such debates with important historical context, and as Adelman and Ludlow (2014: 389) note "Ireland has a large literature and enviable source material upon which to build environmental histories." Even so, coherently tracing the complex history of human-wolf interactions in Ireland remains a challenging task and entails making broad generalisations about how and why this relationship has changed over time.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Navigating Human-Wolf Coexistence in Pre-Colonial Ireland

Located in the northern Atlantic off the coast of western Europe, the island of Ireland served as the dynamic setting for a long history of human-wolf coexistence until relatively recently times. Prior to the last Ice Age (c. 26,000 to 11,700 years ago), during which time the island was connected to Britain and Europe by ephemeral land or ice bridges and mostly covered by an extensive ice sheet, wolves (*Canis lupus*), and other large carnivores including brown bear (*Ursus arctos*) and spotted hyena (*Crocuta crocuta*), were present in Ireland (Monaghan 2017). Whilst many mammal species did not survive the unstable environmental conditions which characterised the last Ice Age in Ireland (Montgomery et al. 2014), wolves may have sustained a viable population throughout owing to their ability to successfully adapt to a variety of habitats, provided sufficient food is available (Darimont et al. 2003; Watts et al. 2010; Gable et al. 2017). Although now most often associated with woodland and protected areas and considered synonymous with remote wilderness (López-Bao et al. 2017), Mech (2017) contends that, where human societies allow it, wolves could live almost anywhere.

Rising temperatures and the gradual transformation of much of Ireland's post-glacial landscape from open tundra to temperate woodland provided suitable conditions for human

settlement towards the end of the Ice Age (Mitchell 2006). Whilst there is some evidence of human presence in Ireland around 12,500 years ago (Dowd and Carden 2016) and possibly much earlier, the current evidence indicates that the first human settlers arrived at the beginning of the Irish Mesolithic period, c. 10,000 years ago (Woodman 2015). Living in small, mobile groups, Mesolithic people were well-adapted to their local environments and settled in riverine and coastal locations to facilitate the optimal exploitation of a wide range of resources and movement by boat via the sea and island's inland waterways (Tune 2020). Although human population densities remained low throughout the Mesolithic, the subsistence and cultural practices of Mesolithic hunter-gatherers are thought to have played a potentially significant role in reshaping the island's woodland ecosystems through, for example, introducing species such as wild boar and domestic dogs (Warren 2022).

Evidence of wolf remains from Mesolithic sites suggests hunting constituted an important element of the earliest interactions between humans and wolves (Hickey 2011). Yet while the Mesolithic comprises c. 40% of Ireland's total settlement history (Mallory 2013), little is known about the specific ways in which human-wolf relationships evolved during this period. Considering the deep roots of human-wolf interactions beyond the island's shores (Shipman 2015; Pierotti and Fogg 2017), it seems highly likely that Mesolithic people arriving in Ireland from surrounding areas would have already been intimately familiar with wolf behaviour. As such, in Mesolithic Ireland, human-wolf relationships were likely multifaceted, with wolves perceived as competitors for the few prey species found on the island at this time, valuable scavengers, a source of food and fur, and important animals in the formation of nature-centred, animistic belief systems (Ingold 2000; Overton and Taylor 2018). Moreover, as early human cultures who shared a range with wolves are thought to have viewed the wolf with reverence and even as behavioural role models (Fritts et al. 2010), it is possible that similar attitudes may have been held by some people in Mesolithic Ireland.

The shift from the Mesolithic to the Neolithic period, beginning in Ireland c. 6,000 years ago, is defined by the adoption of agriculture and widely considered one of the most significant transformations in human history (Whitehouse et al. 2014). Major anthropogenic changes to Ireland's landscapes were initiated by the introduction of domestic plants and animals, including cattle, sheep, goats, and pigs, along with wild species such as red deer (Cooney 2012). In many past landscapes where people lived alongside wolves, the arrival of livestock farming is thought to have motivated campaigns to eradicate wolves (Boitani 1995). However, in Ireland the emphasis instead appears to have been on reducing the negative impacts of wolf predation on an expanding mixed-agricultural economy, rather than on wolf elimination. For example, evidence from seventh and eighth century law-tracts indicates wolf-hunting was institutionalised and viewed as an important public duty to control wolf numbers and protect livestock (Kelly 1997). Rath, or ringforts, and stone wall enclosures were ubiquitous features in the Irish landscape, particularly in the Early Medieval

period, and offered protection against both human and wolf depredation (Stout 1997). Moreover, guardian animals, including large dogs (McCormick 1991; O'Reilly 1889) and powerful wolf-fighting bulls (Kelly 1997), were used to protect livestock. Patterson (1994: 83) also suggests that pigs, in contrast to cattle and sheep, could be left safely untended in their woodland habitat during winter by early farmers as they could defend themselves against wolf attacks.

Meanwhile, the gradual clearance and exploitation of Ireland's woodlands for agriculture and grazing, and to provide the wood vital for the development of early human societies (Perlin 1989), created more open landscapes with greater visibility (O'Connell and Molloy 2001). As wolf hunting success appears to be influenced by their ability to closely approach potential prey undetected, i.e. utilising the element of surprise (Kunkel and Pletscher 2001), the reduction in woodland cover may have helped farmers and shepherds protect livestock from wolf predation. In other parts of the world where there has been continuous coexistence between people and wolves, the use of such diverse practices, along with experiential knowledge of wolf behaviour, has been documented to successfully reduce human-wolf conflicts (e.g. Laugrand and Oosten 2014; Kikvidze and Tevzadze 2015).

With regards to historical attitudes towards wolves, the proliferation of megalithic tombs, most likely centres of religious ceremony, across the Irish Neolithic landscape points to a potentially major change which took place during this period in terms of ways of thinking about the non-human world (Bradley 2019). According to Russell (2011), the spread of agriculture was integral in transforming how human societies thought about other animals based on dualistic cosmologies which saw certain animals categorised as either 'wild' or 'domestic'. Yet, as Cummings (2017) argues, overstating the changes associated with the introduction of agriculture risks obscuring the potential continuities in practices and belief systems developed by Mesolithic hunter-gatherers (Warren 2022). For example, evidence of wolf-teeth pendants uncovered from Neolithic caves, places associated with death, the unknown and the supernatural, indicates that wolves were still viewed as spiritually important animals, at least by some (Dowd 2015). Moreover, a letter written in 1713 suggests that wolf teeth were considered "very lucky things" up to the eighteenth century (Fairley 1975: 183). It therefore appears that old and new ways of culturally relating to wolves prevailed in parallel, due in part to the continuation of Mesolithic practices and ideas into and beyond the Irish Neolithic.

The historical emergence of negative attitudes towards wolves, and the non-human world in general, is often attributed to the advent of Christianity and its supplanting of more pluralistic ways of relating to nature (Lopez 1978). In tracing how the anthropocentrism of Christian discourse has influenced this change, White (1967: 5) explains how writings about the legends of saints, "especially the Irish saints", have long been used to show "human dominance over creatures". Yet in Ireland, where Christianity was introduced c. 1,500 years ago, early Christian poetry (Kinsella 1986)

and a rich body of hagiographical literature about the lives of saints (Plummer 1997) also appear to convey a strong ethic of stewardship, care, and reciprocity towards nature and wild animals, including wolves (Bratton 1989). Whilst there are many such examples within this historical material, one notable example involves a wolf nursing the infant Saint Ailbe, who later in his life protects the mother wolf and her cubs (McCone 1984).

Similar themes are also evident in Irish mythology, including the legend, *Cath Maige Mucrama*, about high-king Cormac Mac Airt who was raised in a cave by wolves as a child. Interpreting this story, Ó Cathasaigh (1977) suggests Cormac's return to human society and 'civilisation' represents a return from an unknown and otherworldly place characterised by the wolf's presence. The wolf's association with 'wild' and unfamiliar cultural spaces is also reflected in an Irish term for the grey wolf, *cú glas*, which was used to describe a person who existed beyond the sphere of civilised human society. Put another way, the wolf, according to Charles-Edwards (2000: 222) was the "characteristic outsider". While cultural constructions of the wolf vary across time and space, many cultures share closely related views of wolves representing the autonomy of a natural world existing outside the realm of human order and control (Lopez 1978).

Following the Anglo-Norman conquest of Ireland in the twelfth century and the island's designation as a lordship of the English Crown (Davies 2000), such conceptualisations of wolves as belonging outside society were extended to the human inhabitants of Ireland by colonising invaders convinced of their own cultural superiority (Connolly 2016). As postcolonial scholar Edward Said (2012: 20) observes, from this point in time onwards, "an amazingly persistent cultural attitude existed toward Ireland as a place whose inhabitants were a barbarian and degenerate race". This attitude was notably articulated by Giraldus Cambrensis, a royal clerk who visited parts of the island with the Norman invaders in the 1180s. In his influential *Topographia Hibernica*, Giraldus describes Ireland as a country "secluded from civilized nations" (Wright 1905: 70) and the Irish as "a people living off beasts and like beasts. A people that still adheres to the most primitive way of pastoral living. For as humanity progresses from the forests to arable fields, and towards village life and civil society, this people is too lazy for agriculture" (quoted in Leerssen 1995: 30). The intention of Giraldus's narrative was to construct differences in Irish customs and habits as markers of inferiority in order to legitimise military conquest as a justifiable exercise in reforming a supposedly 'primitive' people and underdeveloped island (Hadfield and McVeagh 1994).

The Norman conquest of England a century earlier and the introduction of a distinctive hunting culture, which saw the enclosure of vast areas of common land, is attributed to the decline and extermination of wolves in England by the fifteenth century (Pluskowski 2010). The Norman conquerors of Ireland attempted to impose a similar hunting culture by introducing game, including rabbit and fallow deer, and creating "landscapes of lordship" (Liddiard 2000) dominated

by castles, manorial settlements, and large deer parks where hunting was predominantly an exclusive elite practice (Murphy and O’Conor 2006; Beglane et al. 2018). However, by the fourteenth century, climate deterioration, crop failure, the Black Death, and military defeats had combined to significantly reduce Anglo-Norman control in Ireland (Simms 2000; Fagan 2019). Subsequently, although English-administered territories remained along the southern and eastern coast, the ‘Old English’ descendants of the Anglo-Norman invaders became largely absorbed into the customs and culture of a Gaelic Irish world in which human-wolf coexistence successfully endured up until the beginning of the early modern period.

Dewilding Human-Wolf Relations in Early Modern Ireland

Entering the early modern period (c. 1530 to 1750) in the sixteenth century, wolves and humans had coexisted for c. 10,000 years in Irish landscapes coproduced over millennia by dynamic interactions between cultural and natural processes (Aalen et al. 1997). Romantic assumptions about harmonious, conflict-free human-wolf relations are undoubtedly misplaced, however, as from the introduction of farming onwards, wolves posed a potential threat to livestock and were viewed by some as dangerous animals for this reason (O’Sullivan 2009). Evidence also suggests that humans occasionally served as a “meaty prey species” (Walker 2013: 45) for wolves, with the *Annals of Connacht* documenting in 1420 that “wolves killed many people this year” (Freeman 1983). Yet the development of effective strategies to mitigate adverse wolf impacts, a degree of societal tolerance, and the likelihood that wolves exercised their own agency and adapted their behaviour to avoid encountering people (Carricondo-Sanchez et al. 2020) appear to have been important factors in supporting coexistence. By the end of the seventeenth century, however, Ireland’s wolf population was in terminal decline following the erosion of the practices, attitudes, and knowledge systems which had historically sustained coexistence.

This critical turning point in human-wolf relationships took place alongside fundamental changes to the island’s diverse ecosystems, economies, cultures, demographics, settlement patterns, and political structures (Canny 1976). Against the backdrop of the coldest sustained spell of the Little Ice Age (Ludlow and Crampsie 2018), these rapid transformations were initiated by an English colonial regime intent on finally securing full territorial control over Ireland (Rolston 1993). Following the Reformation and Henry VIII’s break from Rome, the Tudor monarchy viewed Ireland’s geopolitical location as a strategic threat, as the island represented a potential launchpad for invasion by their European rivals, but also as a stepping stone for supporting English imperialist aspirations across the Atlantic in North America (Horning 2013; Ohlmeyer 2016). Faced with resistance by the rulers of a “literate, highly organized” (Connolly 2009: 10) Gaelic Irish society, England’s strategy for subduing Ireland involved military conquest,

dispossession, displacement of local populations, and a ‘plantation’ policy involving the resettlement of confiscated Irish land by English and Scottish settlers who, it was reasoned, would put it to more productive use under private ownership (Smyth 2006). According to Wood (2002: 153), the ultimate goal of this new form of market-oriented colonial capitalism “was to establish an English-style commercial order, a new kind of economy based on new social relations on the land, new relations between landlord and tenant, like the ones driving improvement in England”.

A prerequisite for ‘clearing the ground’ to create this new order was to again exaggerate the differences between an ostensibly primitive, less rational people and the ‘improved’ lands of southeast England and qualities of reason and civilisation attributed to the colonisers. For example, a transhumance pastoralism system, known as ‘booleying’ in Ireland, which was a mainstay of rural economies and based on the seasonal migration of livestock and people between upland and lowland pastures and developed in response to specific ecological conditions (Costello 2020), was condemned as a sign of a savage and ‘nomadic’ people. As Richards (2003: 198) explains, “Pastoralism was equated with barbarism—an attitude that colored British attitudes toward other pastoral peoples around the world as the British empire expanded.” In 1608, Lord Deputy Arthur Chichester, motivated by a desire to convert Irish pastoralists into settled rent-paying tenants, articulated this view by demanding the Ulster Irish be “drawn from their course of running up and down the country with their cattle...and are to settle themselves in towns and villages” (Russell and Prendergast 1874: 10).

The presence of wolves in Ireland was also used to justify the interventions of colonisers who had successfully ‘tamed’ England’s landscapes by eliminating wolves. Although Ireland was known to England since prehistoric times (Bradley 2019), efforts to reinforce the colonial perception of Ireland as a backwards and barbaric ‘wilderness’ saw it disparagingly referred to as a ‘Wolf-land’ (Harting 1880) and a “horrible desert...where the she wolf still littered” (Macauley 1848: 136). Indeed, wolves were a recurring concern to the colonial regime, and according to travel-writer Fynes Moryson, at the beginning of the seventeenth century, Ireland’s wolf population had “... so much grown in number as sometimes in winter nights they will come to prey in villages and the suburbs of the cities” (Falkiner 1904: 222). Examining the history of human-wolf relations in France, Moriceau (2011) discerns “crisis periods”, such as times of war, when wolf populations and wolf attacks proliferate owing to reduced hunting pressure, which may account for increasing wolf numbers during this period of social upheaval in Ireland. Whether or not the Irish wolf population was growing, however, the 1610 writings of English politician and propagandist Thomas Blenerhasset suggest both wolves and Irish rebels were considered the most serious threats to English and Scottish settlers and the forging of “our new worlde” (quoted in Farrell 2017: 27).

Throughout the seventeenth century, Irish rebellions were brutally suppressed, most notably by Oliver Cromwell’s

New Model Army during the 1649–1653 ‘war that finished Ireland’. Smyth (2006: 161) estimates that the population of Ireland may have been reduced by around one-third during this time, from 1.8 million in 1641 to 1.2 million by 1654, as a result of the combined effects of war, famine, and plague. Inescapably entangled in this conflict over territorial control of Ireland, a conflict which transformed the island’s “biologically diverse bogs and forests into rationalised sites of capitalist monoculture” (Deckard 2016: 150), wolves were targeted by professional bounty hunters and through numerous pieces of legislation providing substantial rewards for their extermination (Harting 1880). Significantly, rewards were also offered for hunting down Irish rebels and priests (Bishop 2018). Furthermore, newly drafted laws also sought to suppress local traditions, knowledge, and customs (Cullen 1986), including the Irish language, about which Fynes Moryson declared “if no such tongue were in the world I think it would never be missed either for pleasure or necessity” (quoted in Kew 1998: 107).

This simultaneous othering of humans and wolves in Ireland occurred within the context of a period described by Gómez-Baggethun (2021: 3) as arguably “the most prominent episode in the history of attacks on indigenous cultures and related knowledge systems”. The animistic beliefs of so-called traditional societies were deemed incompatible with the mechanical and dualistic philosophies of an early modern scientific revolution which sought to render the natural world more amenable to human manipulation (Merchant 1983). A sixteenth century account of a fire-breathing wolf of “huge size” attacking English soldiers who had desecrated an Irish church indicates animistic conceptions were once prevalent in Ireland too, and wolves were perceived by some as being endowed with magical properties (O’Sullivan-Beare 1970: 4). Yet to the English colonisers such thinking was ‘irrational’ and as pioneers of the new scientific rationalism they considered it their duty to bring order and control to Ireland and the rest of the ‘New World’ (Foster 1997).

At the forefront of this ‘civilising mission’ in seventeenth century Ireland was the surveyor Sir William Petty—dubbed the “father of English political economy” by Karl Marx and the “chief scientist of dispossession” by Simon Schama (2012: 215). Petty’s scientific surveys of confiscated Irish land rendered bioculturally diverse territories into homogenous ‘empty’ spaces which could be readily controlled, commodified, and redistributed (McNally 1990; Mrozowski 1999). Through this mapping process, place names in the Irish language, including many referring to wolves (Hickey 2011), were renamed in English, thus obscuring prior relationships with the land (Plumwood 2003). The massive redistribution of land, power, and property which followed Petty’s surveys in the 1650s facilitated resettlement by a new hegemonic landowning class, who transformed the physical landscape, enclosed once-communal lands, and promoted a shift to a commodity-based capitalist economy (O’Hearn 2001).

In the dawning ‘Age of Improvement’, wolves were perceived as an intolerable threat to the interests of this elite class of landlords. Moreover, similar dualist perspectives were

also extended to other forms of human and non-human life considered to stand in the way of the rise of modernity, including a Gaelic Irish society influenced by enchanted conceptions of the natural world (Gillespie 1997). The consequence of these perspectives for the wolf was a systematic dewilding campaign involving relentless hunting and the implementation of leases binding tenants to kill wolves (McCracken 1971). In combination with these direct pressures, growing competition for land forced displaced Irish peasants into marginal areas and on to mountain slopes (Whelan 1997), where they adopted a “pig and potato” economy (Nally and Kearns 2020), which pushed wolves into increasingly shrinking spaces in the Irish landscape. As a result, Ireland’s wolf population appears to have been in terminal decline by the end of the seventeenth century. While a small number of individuals may have survived longer, as intimated by various claims about where Ireland’s last wolf was killed, “there is no sign that the beasts were anything but scarce after 1707” (Fairley 1975: 183).

CONCLUSION

Researchers examining the human dimensions of human-wildlife interactions frequently highlight the importance of understanding how contemporary conflicts over wildlife are influenced by the past (Pooley et al. 2017; Hodgson et al. 2020). Yet so far the focus of this research field remains largely ahistorical and centred around how interactions between humans and wildlife are shaped by, through, and within their immediate contexts. By exploring the historical dimensions of human-wolf relations in Ireland, this article has showcased the potential value of historically informed perspectives for understanding how and why wildlife has become enrolled in complex and deep-rooted social conflicts.

With humans and wildlife increasingly coming into contact and rewilding and restoration agendas gaining considerable momentum across the globe, such historical perspectives have the potential to provide several important lessons for efforts to positively transform human-wildlife conflicts in the direction of sustainable, inclusive, and socially just coexistence. Firstly, historical knowledge can help illuminate the diverse cultural beliefs, knowledge systems, attitudes, and practices which helped past societies navigate coexistence with wildlife who had the potential to negatively impact human livelihoods and well-being. For example, to protect human interests from wolves in Ireland, predator control was widespread and necessary and appears to have been practiced since the earliest encounters between humans and wolves. Thus, although rewilding is typically framed as offering triple-win outcomes for people, nature, and climate, the challenge of coexisting with wildlife is well-known and history suggests it will be necessary for reintroduction strategies to integrate measures to control ‘problem’ wildlife in order to mitigate negative impacts and promote social legitimacy.

Secondly, looking beyond narrow approaches to ‘managing’ human-wildlife conflict, the past can also offer rich and

detailed insights into complex local histories of human-wildlife coexistence. According to Van Dooren (2014: 12) the extinction of species represents a “slow unravelling of intimately entangled ways of life”. Yet, through historical knowledge of placenames, folklore, and spiritual beliefs pertaining to wildlife, it may be possible to help re-establish connections between past and present societies, whilst also providing an important reminder of how wildlife has influenced the historical co-production of cultural landscapes. The past also offers a window into lost worlds in which local and indigenous cultures often viewed animals as possessing magical properties, with Holmes et al. (2018) arguing that such perspectives warrant wider consideration within conservation debates. The meaningful integration of local historical knowledge of wildlife and landscapes into rewilding decision-making processes may, therefore, help facilitate coexistence and counteract claims that rewilding seeks to erase human history and involvement with the land (Jørgensen 2015).

Finally, examining the historical dimensions of human-wildlife interactions directs focus to the historical episodes and past forces which underpin contemporary conflicts over wildlife conservation and rewilding. In the case of early modern Ireland, looking back reveals how the island’s systematic colonisation and integration into an expanding capitalist world-system was characterised by the exploitation and domination of non-human nature and some human beings. Understanding how such past changes have altered histories of coexistence in Ireland, and other places around the world, is crucial for confronting and dismantling the deep ideological legacies of colonialism and capitalism, and for ensuring they are not reproduced through rewilding and other forms of conservation. Moreover, through deeper engagements with enduring legacies of the past, researchers may discover opportunities to imagine alternative, convivial pathways for reconceptualising and decolonising human-wildlife relations in a manner which promotes coexistence and flourishing, bioculturally diverse futures.

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The author declares no competing interests in the conduct of this research.

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This research did not require formal ethical approval regarding data collection and processing.

Data Availability

All relevant data are included within the paper.

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