Late medieval sixteenth-century Ireland presents a singularly difficult field of historical study, especially for workaday activities like fishing. At least four disparate and latently antagonistic sociocultural groups—indigenous Gaels, long-settled “Old English”/Anglo-Irish, self-defined “loyal” English settlers periodically augmented by visiting fishers, and the nominally authoritative English colonial government—lived in at best uneasy coexistence. This coexistence broke down after the 1534 rebellion of the hereditary Old English Earl of Kildare, initiating some two centuries of violence. A modicum of the written records commonly useful for environmental history was kept mainly by English administrators and nearly all of those were destroyed by fire in Dublin’s Easter Rising of 1916. It takes a brave and innovative historian to fish in these thin and troubled waters.

The period is also, however, a critical one, in transition from a world of local and regional fisheries to a course leading to global exploitation of aquatic life for commonly distant human consumers, a vector initiated out of late medieval maritime western Europe. While trying to negotiate the difference between Ireland as a place for (inshore) marine fishing and that carried out by peoples of Ireland, Patrick W. Hayes has managed to conduct a useful and productive inquiry into a little-known region potentially situated in the midst of this incipient transformation. By ingenious effort, he wrings from fragmentary surviving Irish sources and other-directed references elsewhere at least some general features, local cases, and “bold” quantitative parameters of the evolving Irish situation. Hayes’s findings are certainly important for Irish history in general and regional environmental history in particular, if, as they seem to appear, probably documenting an outlier in the larger early modern fish tale.

The introduction sets up the context and some literature in fisheries history, little regarding Ireland but more, often retrospectively, maritime
Europe in general. Hayes employs “digital humanities” methods, meaning that he constructs two databases of qualitative evidence, undertakes several computer-based maps, and creates a quantitative index of “fishing trends.”

Chapter 1 sketches the development of fisheries around Ireland in the fifteenth century, really the earliest to allow meaningful description. Salmon (taken inland) and newly emergent (or exploited?) herring were taken by Irish and foreign fishers based in towns and small ports in several coastal areas, regionally diverse in their emphasis. This activity was linked to the trade and export of fish. The century was one of relative peace, encouraging the fisheries sector to peak in the decades around 1500.

The second chapter examines diversity and cooperation among the Irish and visitors most generally during the first third or half of the sixteenth century. The overall pattern of territories and catches resembles but is better documented than the previous century, despite a bias of the written record toward areas in dispute. Herring dominated the eastern and southern coasts, while salmon exports came mainly from the Bann (northern) and Shannon (western) estuaries. French and Basque visitors showed rising interest in fishing hake, especially in the South. While foreigners mainly fished for export, Gaelic fishers served domestic subsistence. Gaelic lords profited by providing protection, even in collaboration with English authorities.

Chapter 3 argues that the fish trade probably comprised sixteenth-century Ireland’s largest export commodity, as measured by import accounts kept elsewhere, notably ports in western Britain, with very little evidence available from France or Spain. The total peaked between the 1480s and 1520s. Herring led late fifteenth-century exports, followed by salmon and hake; in the ensuing half-century hake replaced salmon in second place. This business was strongly seasonal, driven by Lenten dietary customs (retained even in Reform-
ring for rations. Gaelic poetry depicts salmon as an elite dietary element and alludes to herring as food for lower social orders. The role, if any, of salt cod from Newfoundland remains obscure.

Environmental aspects are taken up in chapter 6. Hayes rightly debunks the myth shared by medieval commentators and some biologically naive modern writers that herring schools migrated between the Baltic and North Sea to change local fisheries. The plausible effect of natural changes on Irish fishing in the period is tested by correlating trends in the fishery (as now abstracted from chapters 2 and 3) against three differently located reconstructions in sea surface temperatures of the eastern Atlantic. Results considered at decadal or generational scales suggest that Irish herring were more productive in colder periods but hake more abundant in warmer times. This corresponds, Hayes observes, with fisheries off the south coast of England, where herring catches made during chilly decades were supplanted by pilchard (a species of Biscayan waters as was hake) when warmer. Sixteenth-century contemporaries voiced concern for salmon stocks but not herring. Recent fisheries science literature disputes using Total Allowable Catch (TAC) as a benchmark for assessing historical human impact on fish stocks.[2] Hayes, concurring with other scholarship on herring, doubts that this historic fishery came anywhere near present-day TAC but points out that past fishers exploited a smaller range of stocks and concentrated on known spawning aggregations with possible differential genetic effect.

The author concludes by emphasizing the importance of late medieval and early modern developments to fisheries history. He sees in Ireland a “confluence” of causal events and conditions in relations between coastal communities and visiting fishers for export markets. Internal and larger conflicts resulted in the late sixteenth-century Irish crash, but this also occurred simultaneously with competition from Newfoundland, changes in consuming cultures, effects of climate change, and human fishing pressure.

Careful readers will continue into the appendices, which delineate the digital humanities methods underlying much of the book. Qualitative methods involve three relational data sets. A “Qualitative Fishing Data” searched ninety published documents made machine readable with optical character recognition software to establish keywords and code the sources for qualitative data analysis and export to Excel for further study. The two other data sets were related to fishing as such and to piracy. Quantitative methods include a Fish Trade Data set based on historical records of imports from Ireland in English port books with all historical units converted to tonnes of live weight (TLW), the present-day standard for comparing quantities of traded fish. This entailed ascertaining the weights of fish species and of the numbers of fish in the late medieval units (with some adjustments). The fishing trends (1400-1604) discussed in chapter 3 were created by combining the trade data in five-year increments and scoring the relative level on a five-point scale. But where the trade data or other quantitative sources were lacking (as in twenty-one of the forty-one quinquennia), “the score was based on a careful assessment of the available qualitative evidence” (p. 265). A single table then provides the score for each period and identifies the method applied.

As an enthusiastic, experienced, and critical user of quantitative methods in premodern history, this last feature disturbs me. If I rightly understand Hayes’s approach, his table of “fishing trend scores” mixes two different and methodologically independent kinds of information, which violates all principles of consilience. Had Hayes also tabulated his qualitative assessments for periods that do have quantitative sources, he would have two parallel series (one with gaps, the other without) and could examine the extent to which they did or did not coincide. Is the already manipulated trade data a proxy for the trends in the
qualitative data or vice versa? If so, fine; if not, why not? There is a point at which the drive to do digital humanities (once called “quantitative history”) increasingly departs from levels of confidence. Every author needs to consider the limits and constraints of each genre of source before manipulating the findings into some kind of trend. From that perspective, what do the trend scores measure?

A second area of concern is a sparse context to help understand the Irish findings. Fishing is simultaneously an ecological and economic activity, both occurring in relation to adjacent and comparable situations. European fisheries ecology deserves more attention. Herring in general and the Irish stock in particular have ranges, tolerances, and seasonalities, all of which differentially position the species for human predation and its susceptibility to impacts of human and natural origin. The inverse relationship of herring and pilchard in Ireland and southern England does suggest a different response to temperature than those at the northern limits of their range. In a similar vein, nowhere does Hayes explain why his book on “sea fisheries” treats salmon (which are born in fresh water, grow big in the sea, and are captured in the rivers to which they return) but not eel (which are born in the sea, grow big inland, and are captured as they return to the sea). If the rationale is not ecological, how does this make sense? Likewise, the larger European fisheries economy of the late medieval period needs consideration. Just before 1400 herring production from the western Baltic was the largest of any European fishery, but by 1500 Netherlandish fishers in the North Sea were outcompeting the former leaders on both continental and English markets. Multiple regional producers of herring, cod, and hake supplied various markets. How did Irish products fit? If, as Hayes suggests, fishers of French and Spanish origin were important around fifteenth-century Ireland, what was happening to their products? And what happened to those markets when English power drove off those competit-

ors? By relying solely on English-language literature, Hayes essentially makes no use of Spanish or French scholarship, much less any primary materials from their ports and markets. The original project thus leads to issues larger than can be handled from the Irish viewpoint alone. Perhaps a future publication can fill out commercial and dietary seascapes around Ireland.

From a Hiberno-centric perspective this book is a success, for it probably captures nearly all that can be said about late medieval fishing along the Irish coasts. It clearly delineates what the historical sources can tell us about the fish, fishers, and eaters of fish from these stocks. In many ways, there are no surprises, and that is much better than a blank fog of historical ignorance or mythic confabulation. Anyone truly interested in the fisheries of the British Isles during the late preindustrial age or in Irish economic life before intense English colonization should read and learn from the scholarship of Hayes.

Notes


[2]. TAC is the maximum catch of a fish species allowed in a period of time from a defined water as specified by the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization, commonly thought to approximate something sustainable.
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