Introduction

Medieval Ireland is increasingly viewed within its wider social context, including its experiences framed as a pan-European phenomenon, or even in the context of a globalised Middle Ages. This book seeks to push such developments even further, to argue that tower houses are a remarkably effective means of understanding the socio-economic actions of the majority of people within late medieval Ireland. In part, this is due to who built tower houses – a type of castle dating from the later Middle Ages and opening decades of the early modern period. The small size of tower houses meant their construction was within the financial reach of many, including lords, ecclesiastics and merchants. They were also popular with the emerging gentry class. As prominent features of both rural and urban Ireland, they can be used to understand not only the people who lived inside them, but also the individuals who lived and worked around them. Few studies have looked at Gaelic-Irish, Anglo-Irish and early modern building forms as a unified whole. Fewer still have sought to locate tower houses within a wider tradition. Ó Danachair suggested several decades ago that the tower house originated with a continental influence, and this, alongside other interpretations of their origins, has been fought over by archaeologists (1977–79). Turning inwards to debate the structure's origins may be another manifestation of Celtic exceptionalism, possibly encouraged by the fact that some of the most visually arresting examples of tower houses were constructed by the Gaelic-Irish. It also might explain why most studies stop abruptly at the end of the Middle Ages, even though tower houses were being constructed until the middle of the seventeenth century, well within the early modern period. Inserting such temporal boundaries into research ignores the lived experience (McAlister, 2015).

The sheer number of tower houses means they can assist us in being better students of history by bringing us closer to this lived experience. Those living in and around tower houses viewed themselves as having

a place within the wider medieval and early modern worlds, and used their built environment to maintain their identities. Ireland over the time period of tower house construction shifted from being on the medieval periphery to being a secondary, but still important, element within the Atlantic World. Throughout, we see that people wished to profit from their place in the world and used tower houses in an often unique manner to accomplish this. Far from suffering from isolation and neglect from the English government, Irish tower house builders turned the political reality to their advantage to create a dynamic and increasingly modern society.

Another unusual facet of this volume is that it examines the entirety of Ireland, with case studies and supporting examples from across the country. Until now, the majority of publications about tower houses have had a regional focus, including this author's own work. In large part, the reluctance to write a book on the tower houses of Ireland is due simply to the thousands of standing remains associated with the monument type, which has discouraged an inclusive approach, since a life's work would not even allow visiting every site recognised in the *Archaeological Survey of Ireland* (ASI) of the National Monuments Service and the *Northern Ireland Sites and Monuments Record*. It is thanks to generous research funding from the American Philosophical Society and Southeast Missouri State University, alongside the groundwork prepared during doctoral study at Trinity College Dublin, that enabled the scope necessary for this work.

A new approach to tower studies

This is not a simple overview of tower house chronology and architecture; rather, it demonstrates how tower houses, and material culture more generally, can be used in under-documented societies like late medieval Ireland to expose historical processes. The people living around tower houses were not the elites of political and religious life who dominate the surviving documentation, so this research provides new insights. There are many limitations to both the archaeological and historical records when examining the social experience of late medieval and early modern Ireland. A multidisciplinary methodology at times provides contrasting evidence that needs to be reconciled, but also compensates for each discipline's limitations. Tower houses provide a unique and appropriate focal point for such methodological efforts.

Tower houses also provide a way of synthesising distinct fields within historical study, hence the sub-title of this volume: 'society, economy and environment'. A book could easily be written on each of these themes with regard to later medieval Ireland, but the tower house provides

a discrete means to compare and contrast these differing topics. Tower houses were built by the wealthy (or, at least, the increasingly wealthy) from both lay and religious backgrounds, while people from other social backgrounds, both rural and urban, lived around them. Few other monument types are this numerous while being a part of everyday life for so many people. Perhaps the only potential parallel is parish churches, but their survival is less evenly spread than the tower house and they tell us only of religious life. As tower houses were occupied by merchants, we could perceive them as having some overlap with vernacular architecture. In Ireland, we have no upstanding medieval vernacular buildings surviving; our knowledge of them instead comes from excavation and analogy. Tower houses also come from both urban and rural contexts. In short, if we are looking for an example of medieval material culture that transcends divides, then the tower house is the best option.

This volume examines the multitude of contexts present at tower house sites, and uses the tower house as a methodological tool through which to examine these contexts. A number of arguments unite the book, some of which implicitly challenge the historiography of tower houses. Foremost is tower house function. This has long been of interest to those studying tower houses, but has proved a struggle to securely determine. Different means have been utilised to determine the functions of spaces within the tower house, with most attention focussed on the hall, the central room of elite medieval society. While it is important to examine the tower house's interior, few have looked at what went on around the tower house. This book does precisely that, progressively widening the scope to the point where we reach international networks.

The traditional explanation for the existence of tower houses looks inwards and not outside to the wider world. This arguably reduces their inhabitants to passivity; by interpreting the tower house as a built response to threat and instability, its occupants are reduced to pawns sequestering themselves inside. People living inside tower houses instead used them to engage with the outside world – and not solely as a means of exploiting their landed estates for personal profit, but in many cases enabling them to act on a regional, national or international stage. Therefore, it cannot be stated that tower houses are defensive; rather, they are offensive – but not with a military function. These buildings served an active offensive role in social advancement, and reflect the ambitions of individuals who saw them as investments to secure their place in society and improve their economic fortune. As such, we can read them, and thereby understand something of the people who commissioned them. In the unstable political environment of the tower house centuries, ordinary people capitalised on unsettled conditions to carve out a new path for themselves as their usual social restrictions were removed.

Another issue is that the existing body of literature tends to focus on rural tower houses. However, there has generally been more willingness to recognise a diversity of purpose in the urban examples than has been granted to the rural. This has accompanied recognition that urban sites were occupied by merchants and wealthy town dwellers, whereas the rural ones are almost exclusively seen as the homes of local lords. It is increasingly appreciated by scholars that town and country were mutually dependent, particularly from an economic standpoint. This volume argues that there are often similarities between rural and urban tower houses when we approach them from a social perspective.

Some scholars have attempted to create a typology of tower houses based on architectural features, such as vaults and entrance ways. Overall, these have had minimal success and tell us little about the motivations behind the building. These classifications reduce the buildings to the sum of their parts, and drastically oversimplify complex social patterns that existed in the background. Even the most innocuous of these generalisations can obscure our understanding of the past. For example, it has often been remarked that western tower houses, especially those in Munster, were usually larger and more elaborate than eastern examples, particularly those located within the Pale (the counties surrounding the capital city of Dublin that by the late Middle Ages were the realised and cultural remnants of the Anglo-Irish colony) (McNeill, 1997; O'Keeffe, 2015; Sweetman, 2000). But to categorise them into simple dichotomy ignores the processes acting behind them.

The years following the catastrophic mid-fourteenth-century Black Death led to social transformations across Europe and Asia. Ireland was no exception. Coupled with political instability, Ireland's changes manifested in one form as the tower house. Thousands of tower houses were built, and although they were not particularly expensive to build, nor were they cheap and quick to construct. While some scholars have wondered how much of a meaningful impact a £10 government subsidy created in the mid-fifteenth century really had on encouraging construction, others have commented how unlikely it seems that there was sufficient wealth in small inland Irish towns to warrant as many tower houses as there were (McNeill, 1997). Wealth and an upwardly mobile society overlapped in the form of the tower house. The tower house may even reflect the growth of capitalistic elements during a commercialising economy. As Pirenne commented in his seminal work, 'that famous "capitalistic spirit" (*spiritus capitalisticus*) which some would have us believe dates only from the Renaissance … It is not employing too modern an expression to say that the profits [people] realized were put to work as fast as possible to augment [their] revolving capital' (Pirenne, 1925: 118). While Ireland after the Black Death was not a capitalist

economy, certainly elements of capitalism existed, with the tower house used as a means of advancement. In particular, it is reflective of consumption and was used as both an investment and a statement.

The use of the tower house as a declaration of social advancement was nothing new: material culture and the built environment have been used throughout time and space to make a visual statement of being in the world. This practice continued in the twentieth century in the form of aspirational country house purchasing, or what Evelyn Waugh called the 'cult' of the country house. In the twenty-first century, it is the upper middle classes striving to buy a second home in the country, reflecting 'a distinct bourgeois culture' (Ganesh, 2017). This can be paralleled with tower house builders striving to improve their position.

It is also a trend seen in many other medieval contexts. Landlords in medieval London with sufficient assets maintained sometimes extensive country estates. These assisted in connecting town and country, and sustained London's hinterland. At the most basic level, they used their country estate to supply their town home (Rees Jones, 2008). This process has been termed the 'urban manor' (*ibid*.: 91). Merchants were particularly involved in purchasing land outside cities from the fifteenth century. They either occupied these estates themselves or leased them to others as a 'commercial venture'. Therefore, in the later Middle Ages, rural mercantile enterprise was not unheard of; though it is very difficult to isolate exactly what impacts this had on the agricultural economy (Britnell, 1996). In Flanders this trend became particularly apparent after 1250 (Nicholas, 1976).

There are a few references to this occurring in Ireland, especially after the Dissolution of the Monasteries and in the seventeenth century when landholding was more in flux. But it can be argued that it was present earlier and instead went undocumented, like so many other social processes of the day. In the late sixteenth century, the traditional Gaelic-Irish property tenures began to cease, and in areas near major port towns this enabled merchants to become landholders. In feudal society landholding was a mark of social ascent, and even if facets of feudalism were decreasing, the cachet of possessing land remained. Possibly other manorial assets were likewise in demand; hence the merchant of Galway who was given the right to erect water mills (*Irish fiants*, vol. 3). That such actions changed the lifestyle of Ireland's merchant classes is reflected in statements like that made in 1586 that many Galway merchants had 'relinquished their mansions in towns and keep themselves in the country' (Gillespie, 1991: 21). A complaint from 1622 states that once merchants had accumulated wealth they moved into the country to farm and consequently neglected their trade, which presumably had negative impacts on the towns they left behind (*ibid*.). Comments

like these might suggest trade was part time for many. This could also be applied to those dwelling in the countryside, who generated part-time income from dabbling in trade. This shows that merchants were not solely resident in Ireland's towns. Others leased tower houses in rural areas, as indicated by an entry in the *Annals of the four masters* (hereafter AFM) that 'Teige took Dunbeg, one of his own castles, from a Limerick merchant, who had it in his possession, in lieu of debt' (AFM, 1598, vol. 6). Grants of land included in the Tudor Fiants include a 1541 grant of 'Anee' in County Limerick to merchants from Kilmallock (*Irish fiants*, vol. 1). Aney, nowadays known as Knockainy, was the site of two tower houses only two hundred metres apart.

The Gaelic-Irish particularly experienced this pressure from predominantly Anglo-Irish merchants (Galloway, 2011; Naessens, 2009), although mercantile land expansion was also known within the Anglo-Irish-dominated Pale. The best known case is the Dowdall family, whose members included many merchants whose deeds for land in counties Louth and Meath survive (*Dowdall deeds*). The earls of Ormond assisted Waterford merchants in 'colonising' the lands north of the River Suir in County Kilkenny. In comparison with medieval London, we can state that this will have assisted in integrating that area into the city's hinterland. Some merchant families purchased land, while others leased it from the earl. This also increased the earls' control over the port and assured loyalty from the mercantile class (Galloway, 2011). Tower houses associated with this process might include Ballinlaw Castle, County Kilkenny, which is a tower house with attached early modern house, having a visual command over the salmon weirs on the River Suir.

This was not simple social emulation by the new social classes created by economic opportunity, but rather a more complex phenomenon. Several scholars have argued against a theory of social emulation in the Middle Ages, among them Gardiner (Gardiner, 2000; Rees Jones, 2008). Regarding England, Gardiner states against the theory of social emulation that:

> Pearson has noted that in Kent the wealthy yeomen were in the vanguard of innovation in the early 16th century. They were able to be more innovative in building design because they did not need the open hall for ceremonial purposes, and were able to experiment with fully two-storied buildings. Traditional plans might therefore persist amongst the gentry and nobility for reasons of social space or a desire to adhere to the symbolism of earlier forms, at a time when they were being abandoned by other classes. (Gardiner, 2000: 160)

That the merchant class had their own, extremely culturally influential, material culture has been explored by Gaimster in his studies of the

Hanseatic League. The Hanse, resident in port towns and outside of the local population, formed a mercantile diaspora. They displayed their separateness through both their built environment and their domestic goods (Gaimster, 2005, 2014). Their settlement and material culture forms especially 'allude to the shared religious and social values of the urban bourgeois elite' (Gaimster, 2007: 34). Following this, I tentatively propose that Irish medieval urbanites created a material culture that was then copied.

Tower houses represent the actions and perceptions of individuals. However, we need to remember that agency always has restraints. One of these was the technological abilities of the builders and workmen. This might in part explain the regional schools of tower house building noted in places like County Down, and the 'sectionally constructed' tower houses of the west, if the patrons were limited by what their architects could do (Donnelly, 1998; Eadie, 2015; O'Keeffe, 2015). Tower house construction needed some level of specialised skills. For example, in 1409, those building Mountgarrett Castle in County Wexford, outside the port town of New Ross, came from the counties of Kilkenny, Waterford and Wexford, indicating that it could not be built by local craftsmen alone (Colfer, 2013). Another possible limitation was the cost of builders' wages. Although in post-plague England, the wages of skilled workers, like masons, did not increase relative to those of agricultural workers, which ensured a relative reduction in building costs there. Increased pastoralism could reflect the applicability of this conclusion from post-plague England to Ireland. We also are uncertain of the cost of building materials, including stone, timber and tiles. The cost of tiles may have fallen (Gardiner, 2014), but the availability of building-quality timber in Ireland at that time is uncertain.

Regardless, the proliferation of tower houses after 1400 indicates a healthy economy, and that the cost limitations were mainly outweighed by the benefits. In the early 1600s Matthew de Renzy wrote that it cost £600–£700 to build the 'meanest' castle in County Offaly. Some think this cost exaggerated, as twenty-five years earlier it had cost £300–£400 in County Down. Indeed, a £10 government subsidy would be more impactful in the latter scenario than the former (Colfer, 2013; O'Keeffe, 2015). Tower house owners could further save significant costs by billeting their builders and workmen on their tenants (Colfer, 2013; O'Keeffe, 2015). Castles could be constructed expediently when it mattered, too, as the *Annals of Ulster* (AU) record Maghnus O'Domnaill building a castle of wood and stone at 'Port-na-tri-namat' (unidentified) over the course of the summer in 1527. That this was an unusual procedure is implied by the inclusion of the statement that it was 'finished in a short space' (AU, 1527, p. 567).

Overall then, personal agency outweighed the restrictions on building, but what features can we consult to gain the best insight into the former? Some have argued that there were a growing number of tower house contractors who could build based on lordly specifications. The evidence is not terribly detailed though. The planned construction of a castle in Enniscorthy, County Wexford, in 1582 is one such example, although it was never actually built. The owner here specified the dimensions, as well as that he wanted ogee-headed windows and murder holes and that he wanted it completed within the year. This indicates that the finer features on tower houses might be taken as reliable reflections of lordly demands, and so can be used as an insight into their perspective (Colfer, 2013).

Another example of a lord requesting specific design comes from 1547, when Richard Butler gave instructions to his construction supervisor, Derby Ryan, regarding dimensions. He also wanted a slate roof, two chimneys, a yett (an iron gate or grill that closed over the doorway to a tower house) over the door, a bawn (courtyard), and doors and windows. Unfortunately, no more precision is given regarding the doors and windows, and it was stated that the rest of the building details were to be resolved on site (McNeill, 1997). This unidentified castle of 'Bretasse' is at one point in the document likened to Poulakerry Castle, County Tipperary, especially that the barbican be modelled after it (*Calendar of Ormond deeds*, 1547–84, vol. 5). Presumably it was intended to appear broadly similar to this extant (and restored) tower house.

This second document, in contrast to the first, gives the impression that the owner did not dictate many of the more ornamental features, and indeed may not have been present for these decisions if they were determined on site. McNeill concludes that size and plan would definitely have been the remit of owners, as they were the ones who needed to identify function and how much they had to spend. However, he believes that decoration was also the owner's responsibility and that this could vary based on regional taste (McNeill, 1997). This leaves a great deal to the owner rather than the architect or builder; instead, technicalities (especially timberwork and flooring arrangements) may have been the latter's business (*ibid*.).

These same patterns of aspirational building are witnessed outside Ireland, even in terms of a shared chronology. In Dyer's study of cruck building in the Midlands of England (2013b), a peak construction period of the 1430s to 1470s was noted, echoing Pearson's finding for the entirety of England and Wales, which concluded that there was a building boom before the end of the fifteenth century. In both of these studies, solidly constructed buildings were over-represented, and this is again similar to the tower house's position in Ireland. The late medieval English

building boom reflects higher incomes – when coupled with declining food costs, regardless of other problems in the agricultural economy, periods of increased building activity ensued (Gardiner, 2014).

Residents of Ireland also had increased political freedom, stemming from decentralisation, that enabled them to build fortifications. The Irish late medieval building boom went unchecked except by the market (represented by availability and cost of building materials and expertise). In fact, such building was explicitly encouraged, since the Dublin government provided a financial incentive in the form of the £10 subsidy to builders within the Pale.

The 'castle-building craze' arrived in Ireland with the advent of the tower house, reflecting a new class consciousness among the freeholders that accompanied new-found prosperity (Empey, 1981). This meant that the right, 'or more accurately perhaps, the capacity', to possess a castle 'trickled lower down the social hierarchy in English parts of Ireland than it had previously: people whom we do not "see" in the archaeological record prior to the fifteenth century announce themselves to us through their possession of castles, mainly tower-houses, in the late Middle ages' (O'Keeffe, 2015: 255). The widespread construction of tower houses was likewise the first stone-built-monument boom that the Gaelic-Irish enthusiastically contributed to (Breen, 2005).

In many settings the tower house was used in an outright attempt to control the landscape, often for personal or financial profit. Placement of the more visually ornate architectural features of tower houses (machicolations, larger moulded window headings, etc.) reflects the builders' priorities, and can be used to assess their intent regarding landscape command. We might observe that a greater number of more expensive building features are oriented towards a bridge, or a river route or a valley pass. A lack of building investment in the tower house faces that overlook rising land or less productive farmland has also been observed during the course of fieldwork. Such decisions decidedly reflect priorities, such as not to spend money on expensive architecture that nobody will appreciate. This also ties into themes of 'conspicuous consumption'. Assessing the exterior ornamentation of castles can therefore assist us in determining the worldview of their occupants.

This interpretation has a longer application in studies of internal arrangements. McNeill (cited in Creighton, 2010) has illustrated how access to the rooftops could be tightly controlled by spatial planning. Sherlock (2015) has also demonstrated access to halls vis-à-vis private space, and proposed methods for identifying the hall within towers. Creighton has described the use of large windows in such high-status rooms as the tower house internal hall to provide an 'artificially elevated gaze over the landscape', which 'was something special and unusual,

to be experienced by a privileged minority'. He especially emphasised the use of window seats in enabling this, since it allowed command from a place of comfort, and therefore may also have been a female space, which are usually difficult to identify (Creighton, 2010: 38). Observed throughout fieldwork has been the architectural placement of the largest and most ornate windows to face out over a river or other communication route. This indicates that the biggest building investment was reserved for where the most people might have seen it, as well as for the most picturesque view for those inside.

At Creighton's example, Stokesay Castle in Shropshire, the view from the rooftop included 'all the symbols of rural lordship': mill, dovecote and parish church (*ibid*.: 40). Yet the castle was built by an urbanite merchant. This scenario can be paralleled with the tower house. Aspects of the landscape emphasised by castle views are parkland and water, as well as historic sites that might have had symbolic connotations. To take another perspective, the castle itself is visible from these locations. Creighton further argues that 'the availability of elevated views could influence the organisation of the tract of landscape immediately surrounding the castle' (*ibid*.: 45).

It was not a one-way process; a simple display of wealth was not the sole benefit tower house patrons received from their expenditure. Instead, tower houses offered a significant return on investment, and this also explains enthusiasm for them. Tower houses were an upfront outlay, but with the ultimate goal of creating more income. The tower house made a strong visual statement as to the occupier's wealth and ability; they exercised command both symbolically and practically, and used this command for wealth generation.

Many benefits came from a lack of centralised government oversight, as well as downsides. Residents of late medieval Ireland had the ability to enact measures that were restricted elsewhere in Europe during the same period to ensure the government retained control of them. In the absence of strong government, responsibility was instead delegated to locals, who kept the income from tolls and taxes that was otherwise the remit of central government (discussed in chapter 3 in particular). In this way, there was localised control over communication routes and environmental resources. Such localised control could expand as far as international relations; the best examples of this are trading customs and dues. The 'glocal' is increasingly discussed in medieval studies, and the tower house is a perfect embodiment (McAlister, 2016).

All of this reeks of a new economic and social confidence not usually associated with the medieval period. Tower houses could consequently represent a transition from medieval to modern. They reflect new landholders, ranging from merchants and gentry to adventurers and

colonists. They also indicate that the traditional separation of medieval society into those who work, those who fight and those who pray is a gross oversimplification. Instead, within the one structure of the tower house we can witness the interplay between all three of these positions to greater or lesser extent. Certainly we might argue that 'those who work' are well represented.

Not only do we see a transition, particularly visible with the appearance of early modern architectural features, but it is evident that much of what we have considered 'high medieval' in character continued in use well into the later Middle Ages. The most overt manifestation of this is in the use of an accepted vocabulary of castle architecture past the time when much of England had ceased castle building. This alone reflects a medieval outlook and view of oneself in the world. The agrarian economy of Ireland also remained distinctively medieval arguably until the second half of the seventeenth century (though it was transforming in certain places before that time). This includes the continued presence of manorial features at tower houses, particularly manifested in their collocation with water mills.

Defining the Irish tower house

The tower house is the defining monument of the Irish Middle Ages. This book examines the context of this remarkable building, a part of material culture through which we can examine much larger issues. This includes studying the actions of historical people, a difficult task, as anyone already familiar with the vagaries of research into medieval Ireland is well aware. This is therefore not just a castle book, nor is it solely descriptive, but it illustrates how hidden aspects of history can be exposed through new methodologies.

Thousands of tower houses were constructed across Ireland over a period roughly 1350–1640. While the final dates of their construction are documented – one of the last was Bangor, County Down, in 1637 – their origins are much more contested. Certainly we know they were numerous by the fifteenth century and were symptomatic of social and political changes following the Black Death of the mid-fourteenth century. This makes them a tantalising reflection of the tumultuous later Middle Ages.

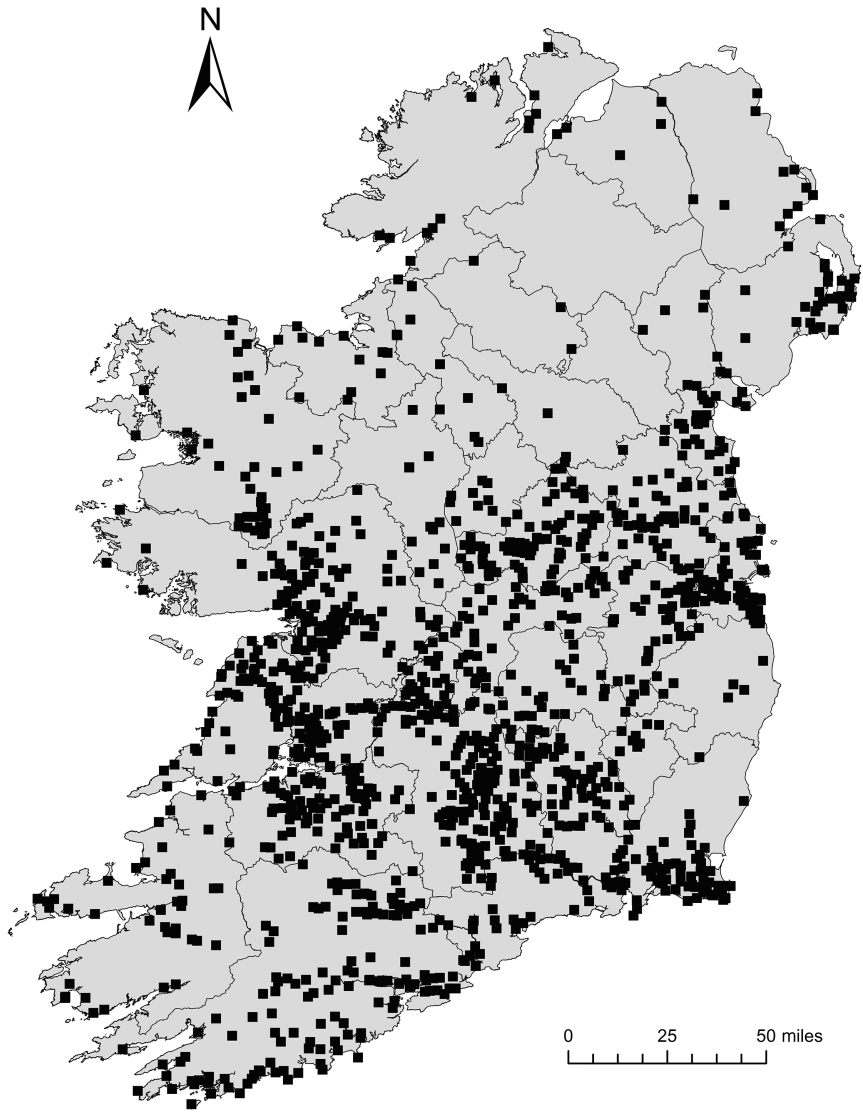
Despite their historical appeal, at first glance they do not appear to have such potential. Ornamentation, both interior and exterior, is frequently minimal, often in contrast to the status of the occupant. This plainness unfortunately regularly prevents reliable dating based on architectural features. We do not know the exact number that appeared in the medieval landscape, nor how many were in use at any specific

time – as this book will show, destruction rates could be extremely high. Barry has adapted Cairns's numbers from his case study in County Tipperary (410 stone castles, all tower houses save a dozen; Cairns, 1987) to the rest of the country, concluding that between three and seven thousand tower houses were constructed (Barry, 1996). This led him to state that Ireland was the most encastellated part of the British Isles by the later Middle Ages (Barry, 1987). Leask's estimate of three thousand is probably severely under-representative, as it is based on Ordnance Survey (hereafter OS) maps, which only record those still extant by the mid-nineteenth century.

Looking at a site distribution map (see figure I.1), it is immediately apparent that tower houses are not evenly spread across the country. Rather, densities occur along coasts and rivers, within southern counties where there was fertile agricultural land and in the great late medieval lordships. County Limerick is one of the counties with the densest distribution of tower houses, with '[0].380 towers per square mile, followed by Kilkenny with [0].245 and Tipperary with [0].154' (Mac Curtain, 1988: 440). There is a notable absence of tower houses in the north, particularly within the Gaelic-Irish O'Neill lordship.

Tower houses were constructed of stone, though it seems likely that timber versions were built that simply have not survived. They are usually rectangular in plan, with a lesser amount of square and circular examples, while others have side turrets that project. The entrance was usually on the ground floor, but there are some interesting exceptions to this rule. They were several storeys in height with a vault, usually barrel shaped, over at least one floor – which floor seems to be dependent on regional and county-level building styles. Therefore their overall appearance is vertical. Upper floors tended to have better windows, fireplaces and other features indicative of comfort. The internal layout may have a single chamber at each level or have ancillary rooms to the main chamber. While tower houses today tend to have exposed stonework, contemporary references indicate that they were once limewashed or harled, so they would have been white coloured (there are several references to 'white castles' and 'white-washed edifices' – AFM, 1572, vol. 5; 1580, vol. 5; 1583, vol. 5 – and to castles being built of lime and stone – AFM, 1601, vol. 6).

The historiography has emphasised the tower house's proliferation as a direct consequence of the turbulent history of late medieval and early modern Ireland (McNeill, 1997). Politics of the period roughly 1300–1600 can be best described as decentralised, with periods of open warfare accompanying the Tudor Conquest and in response to rebellions against the authority of the English Crown. These years are popularly viewed as unsettled, lawless and violent. Taking this perspective, then,



I.1 Distribution map of tower houses across Ireland based on site classification within the *Archaeological Survey of Ireland* and *Northern Ireland Sites and Monuments Record*.

the tower house becomes a constructed response to such conditions, offering defence to a lord, his family and their possessions. A common attribution for the proliferation of tower houses is the decline of central authority from Dublin, which allowed for local power bases (Barry,

1987, 1993a). But reducing the tower house to its essential political context ignores its many manifestations.

The aforementioned lordly 'possessions' are usually taken to mean cattle herds. The 'creaght', or cattle herd, conferred status and wealth on both Gaelic-Irish and Anglo-Irish lords, following Gaelic cultural practices (Mac Curtain, 1988; McNeill, 1997). Tower houses have also tended to be viewed as typical of rural Ireland, and many are associated with low-lying fertile land. They are virtually unknown more than five hundred metres above sea level (Donnelly, 2001; McAuliffe, 1991). These agriculturally productive lands tended to overlap with the centres of the great lordships, meaning that they were not the most violent and unstable parts of the country. However, tower houses are not known from all of the magnate lordships – as noted, they are largely absent from northern O'Neill territory for reasons we still do not fully understand.

In the late Middle Ages an advancement in tenant status led to increased prosperity, a factor contributing to the sheer number of tower houses (McNeill, 1997). Increased status and prosperity caused more tower houses to be built, while at the same time more tower houses led to a growth in status and prosperity, but it is impossible to know which was the causal factor. Several families could effectively live under one tower house roof, thanks to the Gaelic-Irish system that apportioned inheritance among heirs (Mac Curtain, 1988). Donnelly (2001) has suggested that this practice of partible inheritance also contributed to the density of tower houses. The buildings are further associated with the fragmentation of large lordly estates, with tower houses located in a situation convenient for their lordly occupant (McNeill, 1997; O'Keeffe, 2000a). In addition, tower houses were frequently built by wealthy town inhabitants (such as merchants) and ecclesiastics. Prior to the later Middle Ages, castles were most commonly constructed by the king or by great magnates and were therefore truly elite structures. But tower houses had popularity beyond this tiny and ultra-elite percentage of medieval people and, as will be shown, many ordinary people lived around them.

Tower houses and other residential towers physically resembling them are not exclusive to Ireland. The best studied contemporaries are the pele towers and bastles of the Scottish-English borders. These were located exclusively on good agricultural land, especially on coastal plains, with more in Scotland than England (Dixon, 1979). It has been suggested that the opportunity for tower house construction arose after the cessation of raiding across this border, which, combined with continued low rents, provided a significant increase in personal wealth (*ibid*.; Dixon, 1992). Medieval residential towers are also known beyond the British Isles, on the European continent, in diverse places from the Netherlands to Greece.

They are even known outside Europe, in Arabia, the Caucasus, Afghanistan and West Africa (Mac Curtain, 1988).

A much-debated theory is that tower houses originate in government incentive. Leask was the first proponent, identifying a statute from the eighth year of the reign of Henry VI (1429) which gave a building grant of £10 to residents of the Pale. The description accompanying the legislation evokes a tower house: embattled or fortified, at least six metres (twenty feet) by five metres (sixteen feet) in ground dimension, with a minimum height of about twelve metres (forty feet). This description fits one tower house in County Meath in particular – Donore Castle (see figure I.2). As the statute dates from 1429, it is probable that this grant did not create tower houses, but rather assists in explaining their popularity (Leask, 1944; Mac Curtain, 1988; Sweetman, 2000). However, it has also been argued that such a comparatively trivial sum was unlikely to have had much impact on either the development or cessation of tower house building (McNeill, 1997; O'Keeffe, 2015).

Both the terms 'tower house' and 'castle' are used within the text. Tower houses are usually viewed as a type of castle: one of the latter types within a chronology that commences with earthwork castles. Like other forms of castle, such as mottes and the great masonry castles, tower houses have the same three intrinsic functions: residence, defence and administration. These were present to greater or lesser extents at different sites. In the case of the tower house, defence is probably the most debated function, despite a pervasive argument that it is this defensive appearance that explains their acceptance as a form of castle (McNeill, 1997). The inclusion of the term 'residence' indicates that castles are definitively private constructions, not communal or public fortifications like citadels or encampments. 'Castle' can therefore be understood as a more inclusive word to describe the whole range of medieval fortified architecture, whereas 'tower house' refers to the specific monument type.

The term 'tower house' was not coined until the mid-nineteenth century; however, it is an apt phrase in terms of the castle form it describes (*ibid*.). In documentation contemporary to their construction we find them described as castles; most often '*castellum*', '*cúirt*' and '*fortalicium*', the latter sometimes written as 'fortalice'. Consequently, despite their small size, it is apparent that late medieval society viewed them as a continuation of the castle-building tradition – one reason why they are addressed in castle studies (*ibid*.; O'Keeffe, 2015).

Because of the number and distribution of tower houses, even with financial support a sampling strategy had to be adopted. This focussed on tower houses with significant standing remains – those with just foundations or fewer remains were not studied, except in the rare

I.2 Donore Castle, County Meath, is the tower house that aligns most closely with the description given in the £10 subsidy for builders in the Pale. It is located above the River Boyne and is architecturally very plain, its only notable feature being the one circular corner turret.

circumstance that they were well documented. The reason for this limitation was to provide a precise location within the landscape: most documented tower house sites with no archaeological remains do not have a specific location beyond the townland (Ireland's historical smallest land unit). Aspects of this study required exact locations to draw convincing conclusions; and although not an architectural history it also needed some building fabric to interpret. In this way, remains can be used to determine orientation, outlook and function.

Within this basic criterion we are still left with ample prospects. Due to the research questions at the heart of this project, most of which concentrate on the tower house's role within the larger landscape, those sites located in proximity to other medieval or natural features of interest were prioritised. For example, in sections analysing maritime and riverine tower house distributions, sites within half a kilometre of a major river or coast were identified using a Euclidian distance buffer within geographic information systems (GIS). Tower houses that were within half a kilometre of a medieval parish church, earlier castle site, deserted or current settlement, historical field system, or bridge were also prioritised. This produced a list of over two hundred sites from across the country – an achievable if large number. The sample size means that conclusions have been developed with a range of experiences and landscapes in mind. At each site the tower house itself was surveyed and recorded. Fieldwalking in the vicinity of the tower house was undertaken, and investigation of any associated archaeological or natural features (whether previously identified or observed on the ground). Each site was extensively photographed and measured.

This sampling methodology ensured that detailed records from a range of tower house contexts were studied and included. However, there are some limitations. One of these is a geographical bias, since the primary factor when selecting sites was standing remains. Unfortunately, urban tower houses are the least likely to have survived, as it is Ireland's cities that have undergone the greatest transformation since the Middle Ages. This does not apply equally to all towns in Ireland, but a notable example is Dublin city. There is no surviving tower house standing in this city today, though some extant suburban examples have been included. Instead, generalisations based on the historical record tend to dominate for Ireland's major cities. The comparative documentation surviving for Ireland's cities contrasts with under-documentation for its medieval countryside, meaning that it is tempting to accord the cities a significance not necessarily warranted.

This study rests on both the archaeological and historical records; again, a goal from the outset despite the difficulty of reconciling this sometimes contrasting evidence. As well as working with a very large

archaeological corpus in the form of thousands of monument examples, it would be easy to get lost in the written documentation for these thousands of sites, searching for the proverbial needles in haystacks. Again, this is the enormous benefit in identifying just two hundred sites upon which to focus analysis. Hopefully this book will act as a call to arms to encourage historical archaeologists to be ambitious in their goals, and over time new evidence will prove (or disprove!) many of the arguments presented here.

A significant limitation on documentary research is the poor survival rate of official written records from the Middle Ages in Ireland. This unavoidable bias favours the major landholding families of Ireland, whose estate records have survived to the present day, mainly because they managed to retain at least some of their original lands into the modern era. The Ormond family papers in the National Library of Ireland (NLI) in Dublin and the Lismore Castle papers from the earl of Cork's estate have proved particularly valuable. The surviving records also prioritise the later period of tower house construction, since there is a notable uptick in surviving government-produced documentation following Tudor interest in the country. Fortunately, scholars conclude that we can usually extrapolate later records regarding the Irish landscape to earlier centuries, with some restrictions and awareness.

The events that have destroyed much of the documentary record are too numerous to detail here, but the most famous episode is the Four Courts fire of 1922. This catastrophic fire burned almost all the medieval documents housed in the Irish Public Records Office, creating a huge break in the material available to modern-day historians. Even before this fire, there were impactful losses of medieval records. Herbert Wood, who authored his guide to the Irish Public Records Office in 1919, noted the poor condition of documents, and their inadequate storage facilities before his time. Many government documents by the eighteenth century were stored at Dublin Castle, where exposure to rain and fire damage led to dreadful preservation conditions. Records were also lost, a significant cause being the tradition of the Lords Lieutenant of Ireland taking their official governmental materials with them when they left the country. Wood's guide gives an overview of the records that existed shortly before 1922. Through this publication we know that Chancery and Exchequer records; wills; parliament records; and plea, pipe and other rolls, among many other records, were destroyed in the fire (Wood, 1919). The Four Courts fire was not the only one of the 1920s affecting medieval documents, as the Custom House was also set alight, as were many Anglo-Irish Protestant country houses. The immolation of the latter meant the loss of private records as well as public ones.

Investigating tower houses is especially problematic given that this research relies on specific places being mentioned in the historical records. It also presumes that documentation was originally created. For instance, as can be seen in the *Kildare rental*, even as late as the sixteenth century customs collection in the port towns was leased out to individuals, who did not report their numbers to a central authority. Although interest from the English Crown affects the volume and nature of the written records, there are still serious problems with what was documented in the first place. In particular, records are primarily concerned with the Irish counties that underwent Plantation and political events. For example, much of the sixteenth-century government records regarding land concern the Dissolution of the Monasteries (Crooks, n.d.; Dryburgh and Smith, 2004; Edwards and Donovan, 1997; Mac Niocaill, 1992).

The history of tower house studies

Recent years have witnessed a reassessment of the role of castles within medieval society, and this change in the theoretical framework has affected tower house studies no less than other topics. Much of this reinterpretation has moved away from a military emphasis and instead is more landscape based, recognising that castles were raised for a variety of social and economic reasons rather than as a response to a singular threat with 'the castle site represent[ing] some level of compromise between the needs to protect property, administer estates and generate revenue' (Liddiard, 2005: 24). Defensive architecture has been argued to represent lordly symbolic power more than real offensive military might, though in more recent years this pendulum is swinging back (Coulson, 2003; Johnson, 2002). Much of this work has concentrated on English elite sites (often royal), and subsequently been applied elsewhere, including to Ireland. The analysis of castle distribution as part of this trend led to the proposition that the true motivation behind castle location was the control and ownership of territory. A common conclusion was that topography was specifically selected in order to make the castle more prominent and thus emphasise it as a symbol of power, or provide proximity to communication routes (Creighton, 2002). Where there were large numbers of freeholding tenants, that would probably have been a deterrent to the construction of castles, as would large and influential ecclesiastical estates (*ibid*.; Liddiard, 2005). We have already seen that the presence of large numbers of wealthy tenants encouraged tower house building in Ireland, which reminds us to be cautious when applying conclusions derived from other countries.

A tower has been interpreted as presenting a certain kind of lordship concurrent with an accepted symbolic vocabulary of the Middle Ages

(Johnson, 2002; O'Keeffe, 2000a). As a highly visible manifestation of authority, the tower made an impact on, and perhaps reshaped, the surrounding landscape (Creighton, 2002; O'Keeffe, 2000a). In the Middle Ages, the resources required to support a lord and his castle came ultimately from his landed wealth, thus the immediate landscape reflected the elite pursuit of maintaining or advancing social rank (Liddiard, 2005). As a result, castles were often constructed at interfaces between different productive landscapes so as to maximise available profits. As with the Irish tower house, however, there tends to be little correlation between castle density and pastoral land (Aalen, 1978; Creighton, 2002). Certain features are frequently associated with castle sites to assist with exploitation, including mills, parish churches, villages and deer parks. These receive special attention in this volume as unique manifestations of the relationship between the tower house lord and his world.

Many of these broad ideas about castle use have been applied to Ireland and tower houses. However, there are some notable differences. One is that tower houses are usually not viewed as symbolising invasion or the subjugation of the native population, unlike Anglo-Norman earth-and-timber castles. The Anglo-Normans are often credited with a surge in castle building in the wake of their late twelfth-century invasion of Ireland. Their castles mark administrative centres, although they may not have been centres of population or agricultural production, as this depended on the success of each lordly conquest (O'Conor, 1998). Accompanying the arrival of the Anglo-Normans was the emergence of a number of dominant noble families as a consequence of their feudal society, which followed them across the Irish Sea (Mallory and McNeill, 1991).

This is intended as an extremely brief overview of Irish history as it directly affected tower house construction, and is a vast oversimplification of the social processes governing the daily lives of tower house builders and occupants. It removes their agency entirely, leaving them no more than pawns passive to outside events, when, as shown here, these people were in fact seeking to improve their socio-economic status, their social connections and much more. Their lives were not ruled by forces beyond their control.

The socio-political backdrop created following the Anglo-Norman Invasion was changing by the era of the tower house. The lands held by the descendants of the Anglo-Normans progressively shrank in area until their main area of influence became the Pale. This was the real and imagined region of control of the Anglo-Irish (as the Anglo-Norman descendants came to be known, as their connections with their original homelands weakened over time), centred on Ireland's main city, Dublin. The area within the Pale continued to decrease over the

later Middle Ages, so that parts of counties Dublin, Meath and Kildare were effectively all that remained by the end of the period. There were other isolated pockets of Anglo-Irish control outside the Pale, including eastern County Down in the northeast and parts of Munster in south Ireland. Accompanying this process, the influence of royal government from Dublin waned, particularly from the fourteenth century. Edward Bruce landed at Larne in the south of County Antrim in 1315, and the ensuing Bruce Wars lasted until his death in 1318; the Black Death killed at least one-third of the population, if not more, causing further untold numbers to relocate to better social and agricultural conditions elsewhere in Ireland (Gwynn, 1935). Outside of the Anglo-Irish centres, Ireland was dominated by Gaelic-Irish culture – that is, the native Irish population. Many of the Anglo-Irish came to adopt Gaelic-Irish customs and habits, in a process termed 'degeneracy', also referred to as Gaelicisation. This advance of Gaelic-Irish culture is often referred to as the Gaelic Resurgence. Throughout this text, the terms Anglo-Irish and Gaelic-Irish are preferred to refer to these two cultural groups. 'English' and 'Scottish' designate people who came from those countries during their lifetimes, therefore they tend to be most frequently encountered in the early modern period.

Conditions were ripe for these socio-political processes, largely owing to the declining effectiveness of government imposed from England. Faced with internal problems between the fourteenth century and the Tudor Conquest, the English Crown paid only sporadic attention to Ireland. Traditionally, the explanation for the existence of the tower house in Irish society has been that it was a material-culture response to this climate. Within this intellectual framework, tower houses were private defensive responses to political insecurity and the ever-present threat of violence, especially at a local level. In the power vacuum that formed from the decline of Crown authority, great magnate lordships coalesced. This enabled certain lords, both Anglo-Irish and Gaelic-Irish, to act effectively as petty kings over their areas of jurisdiction. These included the Anglo-Irish Geraldine lordships of the earls of Kildare in the east and of Desmond in the southwest, as well as the Butler lordship of the earldom of Ormond in the centre of the country. The largest of the Gaelic-Irish lordships in the later Middle Ages was the O'Neill territory, comprising a large chunk of the north, especially around modern County Tyrone. Numerous prominent families controlled other parts of the country and they are discussed throughout this text in their capacity as tower house builders.

Despite historians claiming this to have been a period of unrest, there were few pitched battles or extensive periods of open warfare. Instead, cattle raiding is the most frequently documented martial activity.

A frequent assumption is that tower houses were ideally suited to defence against raiding, since they could provide protection for a lord and his family against a small badly equipped group seeking a speedy attack. In this interpretation of tower house function, the bawn was important, since it could act as a corral for animals. However, the number of extant or documented bawns is quite low, with potentially only twenty per cent of tower houses having them (Barry, 2006; McNeill, 1997). Their scarcity might be explained by the disassembly and removal of bawn walls for their good building stone (Leask, 1944).

Large-scale and bloody warfare was, however, a feature of the Tudor Conquest of Ireland. This was a lengthy war, intermittently raging during the sixteenth century. It included the pivotal events of the Desmond Rebellion, which transformed the political landscape of Munster in 1569–73 and 1579–83, and the Nine Years' War of 1593–1603, which was particularly focussed on Gaelic-Irish Ulster. Conquest was followed by Plantation (both official and informal) in certain Irish counties. The effectiveness of this process, whereby confiscated land was granted to English and Scots settlers loyal to the Crown, varied across the country. The process demarcates a cultural sea change affecting the landholding classes and thus, by extension, the social groups responsible for tower house construction. The attractiveness of Ireland to these colonists was socio-economic – ambitious men were actively seeking new places to gain land and to trade with (Gillespie, 1985).

Tower house construction was minimal during the most intense periods of the Tudor Conquest, which has sometimes been used as evidence that low-level endemic violence motivated tower house creation. A secondary tower house building boom occurred in the financially more successful opening decades of the seventeenth century, and economic crises in the 1630s are mirrored in tower house construction patterns. Repeated harvest failures and attempts at increased control by the Crown served to increase tensions (Gillespie, 1985; McAlister, 2015), and in 1641 rebellion broke out, rapidly becoming a series of massacres and attacks on settlers. In the aftermath of the 1641 Rebellion and the Confederate Wars, Irish society was rather different. A wave of new colonists had arrived by the 1660s and local government was overhauled by the Cromwellian administration. Increased taxes put many landlords in a weakened financial position, causing many to sell their Irish lands. By the middle of the seventeenth century, the period of tower house construction was over.

The published literature on tower houses has emphasised their chronology and architecture. This book steps away from both issues, which might seem unusual in the first ever book dedicated to tower houses. By doing so, the findings will resonate in geographic and temporal

zones beyond late medieval Ireland. This is despite a not uncommon scholarly belief that tower houses do not resemble their contemporary buildings in England, and that they do not form part of the European Gothic architectural narrative (Breen, 2005; McNeill, 1997; Ronnes, 2007).[1] This study instead shows that when we use tower houses as a mirror to their world, they reflect a great deal.

The work of Sherlock and Eadie, among others, has done much to increase our knowledge of the interior uses of tower houses, and enables this project to turn its attention to beyond the building proper. Thanks to these authors we have a clearer understanding of the use of space and function of features inside the tower house (see, for example, Eadie, 2009, 2015; Sherlock, 2006, 2010). They have also utilised comparisons between different counties in Ireland, encompassing sites held by both Anglo-Irish and Gaelic-Irish from east and west alike. This makes their work particularly valuable, since most publications on tower houses have been regional case studies, owing partly to the intimidating number of extant tower houses in the landscape today. Possibly as a consequence of sample size limitations, many previous tower house studies have been reluctant to draw larger conclusions about the landscape.

Ní Loingsigh's study of County Donegal tower houses was one of the first to make extensive remarks upon the non-military aspects of the tower house. Her study aimed to explain their concentration in relation to landowning. The conclusion was that landscape had a major influence on tower house distribution, with an 'overwhelming incidence of siting with access to the sea or to a navigable river' (1994: 148). Economics in the form of trade, rather than politics, was determined as the motivating factor behind tower house siting (*ibid.*). Naessens's studies of the coastal tower houses of south Connemara continued the scholarly emphasis on the maritime landscape. He identified a strong link between the building of tower houses and an increase in trade (2007). He observed a desire to control fishing grounds, in addition to a number of other social functions of the tower house, such as acting as a status symbol (*ibid.*; Naessens, 2009). The relationship of tower houses to other settlement forms of the Middle Ages has also been recognised. Literary and historical examination has shown them to be 'anything but isolated strongholds. In fact they were the focal point of their respective communities' (Barry, 2006; Budd, 2004: 278).

Summary

The layout of this book has been deliberately structured to mirror the different extents of the tower house's influence. It commences at the most local level and culminates with a discussion of their use in

maintaining contact with the wider world. In this way it also echoes the environmental goods that were the backbone of Ireland's economy. Though this approach oversimplifies what was in reality a complex web of networks, it reminds us that tower houses and by extension medieval society did not stand isolated in any of their landscapes. Furthermore, there are two interconnecting themes running throughout that can be summarised under the headings of 'land' and 'water'.

Chapter 1 examines what was around the castle walls. It has long been believed that tower houses were not solitary masonry towers, as they appear to us today, but rather were the focal point of more diverse arrangements. But concrete evidence for this has been minimal to date. The book opens with a discussion of what we could expect to find by the tower house, often within the bawn (the enclosing courtyard). Tower house dwellers needed people to work the surrounding land as well as to service the castle itself. It is possible to calculate where these people lived in relation to the tower house, as often it was the centre of rural settlement, especially rural nucleated settlement. Broadening the scope further, chapter 2 then discusses what agriculture was being practised in the vicinity of the tower house. In short, it discusses the economy that supported the tower house at a grassroots level.

Mills bridge the gap between landed interests and the use of water. The evidence presented in chapter 3 is for a strong association between tower houses and mills, which challenges previous views of the Irish economy becoming increasingly pastoral in the wake of the Black Death. Many tower houses are located close to Ireland's major rivers. These same rivers were frequently used as boundaries and borders, which obscures tower house distribution patterns and functionality. By viewing rivers as purely political we overemphasise the defensive role of castles. Instead, rivers were economically productive and valuable. This is particularly true because of their fish, which were elite icons; rivers both provided income and reinforced status. This role was often fulfilled by fishponds elsewhere in Europe, but in Ireland efforts instead concentrated on exploitation of rivers. Marine fishing was also a major source of income, albeit without the status connotations. Several other scholars have previously noted the relationship between tower houses and Ireland's coastlines, but control of maritime resources was even more widespread than heretofore believed.

Water was also the basis of networks. Tower houses that controlled water therefore controlled these networks. Tower houses seized the nodal points within these networks, and operated as navigational aids, supervised ferries and restricted access to bridges and fords. Their control included both water-based and terrestrial communication and transportation routes. These routes bring us to the urban tower houses of chapter 4.

Tower houses had a role as the interface between the rural and the urban. At the same time, many urban tower houses were different to their rural counterparts. In medieval towns, the lines between tower houses and other types of fortification blur – here they were not only lordly residences but the homes and businesses of merchants. They also were not wholly private structures, but had a valuable role within the urban community.

Finally, it is from these port towns that most of Ireland's connections with the wider world were made, particularly in the form of international trade. The historical and archaeological records are limited here, but they hint at a fascinating web that tied Ireland to the rest of the British Isles and beyond, to the European continent. This network was potentially more elaborate than has previously been recognised, and it is argued that connections were sustained by the presence of the tower house.

Note

1 Although McNeill likens tower house design to the late Gothic styles of Irish friaries, and from this derives an earliest-origin date for tower houses in the early fourteenth century (1997).