A Choice to Engage: Selective Marginality and Dynamic Households on the 18th-19th Century Irish Coast

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Abstract:

This research explores the nature of marginality on the peripheries of empire in 18th and 19th century rural Ireland. These shifting imperial borders, both cultural and geographic, are historically fluid spaces that have potential to impact individual decision-making, spark cultural change, and alter social dynamics under the pressures of foreign rule. This project focuses on individual rural households off the coast of western Ireland to understand the selective engagement (choices to accept or reject externally generated ideologies) of households in transnational systems, and the ways islanders generated a material reaction to prescribed narratives of marginality from the imperial epicenter. Expressions of selective engagement in transnational processes, materialized through acts of improvement and consumer choices, provide a way to understand the presence, connection, and engagement to broader global networks of economic trade and access experienced by rural Irish communities during the eighteenth to nineteenth centuries. This research challenges the pre-existing narrative of passive acceptance of imperial rule by those inhabiting the geographic fringes of Ireland, and instead proposes a historical account which incorporates the complexity and agency of everyday life in rural Irish communities of the past. This approach can help to understand how imperialism, both real and imagined, truly affected the daily lives of people living on the margins.