French Connections in Late Medieval Ireland:
The Case of Geoffrey de Geneville (c. 1226–1314)¹

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Men can never altogether forget their nomadic past; even when necessity no longer drives the tribe, they do not rest quietly for all their lives in the corner of the earth they have made their own. Beyond the next hill lies always a new Jerusalem: such is the romance of life.
Evans, Life in Medieval France, 99

The extent, position and wealth of France in the Middle Ages were all factors that facilitated the movement of its people into neighboring lands and further afield. Commerce, pilgrimage and crusades stimulated travel to more distant places, and the expansion of Norman control into southern Italy, Sicily, the Near East and north Africa established firm contacts and provided incentives for speculators, mercenaries and the religious, among others, to exploit the opportunities presented by these new-found connections. England fell quickly to the Normans after the Battle of Hastings in 1066, with Scotland and Wales soon coming under increasing Norman influence and control (Rowley, The Norman Heritage). In the decades that followed, direct contact and trade increased between Ireland on the one hand, and particularly England and coastal France on the other (Richter 121-39; Martin, “Diarmait Mac Murchada,” 53; Wallace 217-18, 233-34). It was only a matter of time before the Anglo-Normans (the England-based descendants of the Normans of 1066 and later) arrived on Irish shores (Martin, “Diarmait Mac Murchada”; Martin, “Allies and an Overlord”; Otway-Ruthven, A History 35-65). They came in increasing numbers in the late 1160s and early 1170s, at which time Henry II, king of England, intervened personally and claimed authority in Ireland.

While the route-ways of later medieval Europe may have been well-trodden by itinerant merchants, migrant tradesmen, messengers, pilgrims, soldiers and refugees, a notable feature of this period was the migration of members of noble families and the establishment by them of powerful networks of wealth, land tenure and intermarriage. Robert Bartlett has referred to this movement of western European nobles into new areas as an “aristocratic diaspora,” pointing out that the migrants came mainly from the former Carolingian Empire (The Making of Europe 24-59). So influential was this aspect of the aristocratic diaspora that, by the mid-fourteenth century, 80 per cent of Europe’s kings and queens were French (42). Among the families that came to prominence in the eleventh and twelfth centuries were the Drengots from near Rouen; the Grandmesnls from Calvados, who established themselves in Wales, Italy, Syria and Constantinople; and the Hautevilles (especially Robert Guiscard) from the Contentin, who left indelible marks on the Mezzogiorno and Sicily (Norwich; Gravett and Nicolle; Bartlett, The Making of Europe 28-29). French influence abroad can be

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traced in different ways in architecture, literature, art, music, language, religion and politics, but behind all of this influence (itself a French word borrowed into English) were the people whose movement across the borders of Europe and beyond enabled French culture – in its broadest sense – to become one of the most pervasive the world has ever known.

Robin Frame has written about the “aristocratic nexus” that spread itself throughout much of Britain and Ireland in the eleventh, twelfth and thirteenth centuries (The Political Development 50-71). He also remarks on the “aristocratic colonization” of Ireland after 1170 by a “land-hungry upper class whose leading members belonged to an international elite” (Colonial Ireland 1-2), and he noted in 1988 that “the extension of the Anglo–French aristocratic world into Ireland in the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries must be one of the most neglected of the major themes in medieval British history” (“Aristocracies” 145).

Richard de Clare (Strongbow; d. 1176), Hugh de Lacy (d. 1186) and William Marshal (d. 1219) were among the first and best-known international property tycoons in Ireland, but they were followed by many more. Among the first rank of Continental figures who received lands in Ireland in the thirteenth century were Peter de Genève (d. 1249), Geoffrey de Lusignan (Henry III’s Poitevin half-brother, d. 1264), the Savoyard Otto de Grandison (d. 1328) and William de Valence (first earl of Pembroke [in its second incarnation], d. 1296) (Hartland, “Vaucouleurs, Ludlow and Trim,” 457-58; Frame, Ireland and Britain 151-69; Watson; Ridgeway). Perhaps the most intriguing European aristocrat to turn up in Ireland at this time, however, was the Savoyard courtier,

Figure 1: An impression of the official seal of Geoffrey de Geneville, c. 1259, from BL MS Harley ch50G38 (courtesy of the British Library).