

ROOTS OF SECTARIANISM IN IRELAND  
**CHRONOLOGY AND REFLECTIONS**  
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## INTRODUCTION

Any attempt to give an overview of the development of Irish sectarianism must begin with a few cautions and guidelines for readers. First, the story of sectarianism is almost always more complicated than can be told in this brief account. The incidents discussed here are intended to form a representative and fair portrayal of sectarianism, but they are in no way comprehensive. Second, readers should not expect a full account and analysis of all the themes and incidents that are explored. The more modest purpose of this account is to highlight some of the ways in which religion has interacted with other forces to create sectarianism. Finally, given the emphasis on division and conflict, an alternative title might have been *Irish History: The Bad Parts Version*. Another story remains to be told, a very important one, about heroic attempts to overcome division and about the day-to-day efforts by ordinary people to accommodate differences and get along with one another. However, any attempt to come to terms with the legacy of sectarianism must begin by facing up to the depth and complexity of the problem: "If a way to the better there be, it exacts a look at the worst", wrote Thomas Hardy. In the same spirit, this brief look at the worst of sectarianism is offered as a step along the "way to the better".

## BACKGROUND

**Strictly speaking, sectarianism cannot arise before rival Churches, Protestant and Catholic, emerge from the sixteenth-century reformation. However, sectarianism typically involves the mingling of religion with other factors, and some of these dated back to the Anglo-Norman conquest of Ireland.**

Three themes were of particular importance as background to sectarianism. **First**, although the conquest involved negotiation and alliance as well as warfare, the Anglo-Normans were among the most formidable warriors in

Europe, and the Irish were not inclined to submit meekly, **so blood, shed in the pursuit of power, soaked the foundations of political relationships between England and Ireland. Another lasting theme was a radical imbalance of interests between English and Irish parties to the conflict**, which was fought out entirely on Irish soil. In Henry II's scale of political priorities, Ireland was a minor sideshow to his main interests in France, but for the Irish, Anglo-Norman aggression in Ireland was apolitical fact of great significance. The Anglo-Norman presence did not inspire unified political or military resistance from the Irish, but it did reinforce a potent unity of national identity defined in terms of the Gael against the foreigner. Over the centuries, both bloodshed and imbalance of interest pervaded the text of Irish/English relations, imbalance as a constant theme and bloodshed as an all too frequent punctuation. Such was the political tradition with which religion, in the form of Catholic/Protestant division, would interact to create sectarianism.

**A third enduring theme concerned a characteristically English view of the Irish. From the beginning of their presence in Ireland, the Anglo-Normans condemned Irish culture, so different from their own, as barbarous, with the effect that their efforts to subdue Ireland were justified in their own minds as a civilising and Christianising mission.** Long before the reformation, Ireland was divided into two societies, the Gaelic Irish and the community of those who were Irish-born but of English extraction, variously known to historians as the Anglo-Normans, the Anglo-Irish, or, at a later date, the Old English (each term has its merits and difficulties, proponents and detractors). The social division, though frequently crossed, was clear and persistent, and it also shaped the pre-reformation Church, with its Gaelic Irish and Anglo-Irish spheres of influence. Along with the enduring division in church and society came persistent condemnation of the Irish as barbarous, which eventually became conventional wisdom among both the English and the Anglo-Irish. Historian Nicholas Canny argues that right down to the eve of the reformation the English interest in Ireland, now long accustomed to assuming the barbarism of the Irish, believed that "the struggle being pursued in Ireland between Anglo-Norman and Gael was a conflict between the forces of good and evil." After the reformation, the traditional English-equals-civilised, Irish-equals-barbarian equations remained as before; in the 1800s the English satirical journal *Punch* made explicit use of these stereotypes, so offensive to the Irish. But the reformation era also provided a new twist to the 'barbarism' legacy by transmuting it into the terms of conflict

between Protestant and Catholic. For centuries, many an anti-Catholic sermon spoke in the idiom of barbarism, and it does not require an especially sensitive ear to catch continuing resonances.

**1536 The reformation in Ireland can be dated from May 1536, when the Irish parliament passed an act declaring Henry VIII the "only supreme head in earth of the whole church of Ireland".** An act for suppressing monasteries took a year longer to negotiate, because many members of parliament had an interest in monastic lands, but once assured by the king that their material welfare would not suffer, parliament passed this reformation act, also. Most members of this reformation parliament were from Old English families of the Pale; ironically, within two or three generations, many of the descendants of these families would be among the leaders of the Catholic counter reformation. The king's "Irish enemies" were excluded from parliament, so no native Irish took part in the initial reformation deliberations. However, beginning in 1540, anew English initiative, later labelled "surrender and regrant" by historians, offered the Gaelic chiefs English titles, formal recognition of their land tenure, legal rights, and the right to sit in parliament; in return they would submit to Henry VIII as king of Ireland and reject the Pope's jurisdiction in Ireland. One after another the Gaelic chiefs accepted these terms (although it is open to question exactly what they understood their submission to mean). By such actions did Henry VIII's reformation in Ireland combine religious, political, and economic interests in a close bond. In different forms and combinations, these three forces have been visibly and tightly entwined at many points in Irish history down to the present day.

**1560 Coercion and violence were also soon linked with religion in the reformation era.** In the sixteenth century, established churches everywhere maintained their supremacy with the assistance of coercive penal laws, and the reformation Church in Ireland was no exception. Coercion accompanied the reformation in the form of acts forbidding anyone to uphold the Pope's authority or to accuse King Henry VIII of being a heretic, schismatic, or usurper - the latter was a treasonable offence and therefore punishable by death. Only the state-established Church of Ireland was legal, and by 1560 the penalties for failing to conform to it were clear, although sporadically enforced. As a condition of office, all church personnel and many public officials were required to take an oath of supremacy recognising the supreme

authority of the crown in all matters, spiritual and temporal. Laws also governed religious observance, with penalties ranging from a twelve pence fine for failing to attend worship, to a sentence of six months imprisonment and a fine of one year's income (the penalty stiffened for additional offences) for clergy who led worship according to the old Roman rite, not the new one prescribed by the Church of Ireland.

Where coercion led, violence eventually followed. Under Anthony St Leger, governor of Ireland for most of the years 1540-56, the Tudor approach to extending the crown's authority through the whole of Ireland was essentially conciliatory. But during the reign of Queen Elizabeth I (1558-1603), government attitudes hardened and warfare was rife. Up to the mid-1500s, the English and Anglo-Norman perception of the native Irish as barbaric was alive and well, but it was limited - Irish culture might be barbaric, but the people themselves were reformable. About this time English attitudes began to change. Influenced by the literature spawned by increased European contact with very different cultures (the Spanish colonial experience in particular) and by contemporary infatuation with the example of ancient Rome, some leading English adventurers and thinkers came to regard Irish culture and the Irish as so fundamentally barbaric and pagan that they could not be directly reformed; the native Irish must first be subdued by the sword and trained by the yoke of colonisation before they could accept English standards of civility (meaning a properly ordered society) and the mild precepts of the Christian faith. At the same time, the English government was coming to realise that given the intensely local nature of the Gaelic political structure, government plans to centralise authority would require military subjugation, not just surrender and regrant. This combination of forces was a formula for a kind of total war unprecedented in Ireland: atrocities, despoliation of land, the slaughter of noncombatants, including women and children. The Irish committed counter atrocities, and there is evidence of intensified hatred of the English, an attitude which was increasingly shared by the more Gaelicised of the Catholic Old English lords. In 1575 the earl of Kildare, whose ancestors had recently been pillars of the English interest in Ireland, was reported to have declared "that if the callioght [hag] of Englande [meaning the queen I were once dead, they in England wolde be with their horns one against another and that then the Erle of Kyldare and they his followers wolde kill all the Englishe churles or dryve them to the sea; and that so the worlde be all theirs."<sup>2</sup> A good number of the architects and implementers of the new English policy

were fiercely committed to Protestantism and regarded their efforts as directed to godly ends. Reflecting on an Ulster military campaign in 1574 which was marked by atrocities against Irish and Scottish inhabitants, one English officer concluded, "how godly a dede it is to overthrowe so wicked a race the world may judge: for my part I thinke there cannot be a greater sacryfice to God."<sup>3</sup> In the government's repertoire of strategies for subduing the Irish, reformed religion became linked to colonisation and brutal military campaigns.

**1579 Protestants had no monopoly on linking violence and religion.** From 1534, all armed resistance to the Tudors' increasing efforts to extend the crown's authority in Ireland was accompanied by some raising of the banner of religion in support of the Pope and the old religion and in opposition to the reformed religion. But according to Catholic historian Canice Mooney, it was the expedition led by James Fitzmaurice Fitzgerald in 1579 that "partook more of the nature of a religious crusade than any other Irish movement of the century."<sup>4</sup> Beginning in 1575 Fitzmaurice spent four years on the continent, busily negotiating with Spain, France, and Rome for support for a military expedition to Ireland. In July 1579 Fitzmaurice and an armed company finally landed in Kerry to mount a campaign against the crown in Ireland. Fitzmaurice returned to Ireland as a convinced holy warrior in the cause of the counter reformation. Although many of his compatriots in arms had distinctly more secular goals, and perhaps his own motives were more complex than he admitted, he protested that the "only object" of his military efforts was "to secure the administration of Christ's Sacraments to a Catholic people in a Catholic rite".<sup>5</sup> Disembarking at Dingle, the first ashore were two banner-bearing Franciscans (one banner, marked by the image of Christ on the cross, had been blessed by the Pope); they were followed by a bishop in mitre and crozier, and only then by Fitzmaurice and seven hundred soldiers paid for by Pope Gregory XIII.

Fitzmaurice was also armed with a letter of support from the Pope to the bishops and faithful of Ireland. In 1570 Elizabeth had become the first postreformation English monarch to be excommunicated and deposed by Rome, and now Pope Gregory reminded the people of Ireland that "these last few years we have encouraged you by our letters to regain your liberty and defend and preserve it against the heretics." He urged people to support the Fitzmaurice campaign in whatever way possible, offering in return "to all who confess and communicate ... the same plenary indulgence and remission of

sins that those receive who fight against the Turks and for the recovery of the Holy Land."<sup>6</sup>

Fitzmaurice's campaign was a failure. He died in a minor skirmish in August 1579, and after the campaign had been put down, the huge Munster lands of his cousin, the earl of Desmond, who joined the cause after Fitzmaurice's death, were forfeited to the state and planted with English colonists. What might have galled Fitzmaurice most was the very limited response to the religious exhortations he presented to the Irish people. Nonetheless, the tone and content of the Pope's letter was significant: war against the heretical Protestants was couched in the concepts of the crusades.

**1579 (or thereabouts) When and why the Irish reformation failed** is a question historians love to debate. Historian Patrick Corish judges that the fate of the reformation in Gaelic Ireland was evident by 1579, but he acknowledges the difficulties of being precise as to date or outcome:

*By this date it might he safely said that Gaelic and Gaelicised Ireland would not become Protestant. It was not Yet altogether clear in what sense it would be Catholic.*<sup>7</sup>

But estimates vary dramatically. An older historiographical tradition believed that the reformation was effectively stillborn, meeting immediate and continual resistance from all the people of Ireland; at the opposite extreme, Nicholas Canny has argued that the reformation cannot be said to have failed until the mid nineteenth century, when an intensive Protestant campaign to convert Catholics had clearly been successfully resisted by the Catholic Church. **In searching for roots of sectarianism, however, the key point is not to determine when and why the reformation failed, but simply to observe that the church by law established, the Church of Ireland, was always the Church of a small minority.** Hard numbers are not available until the nineteenth century, but prior to the influx of English and Scottish Protestant settlers in the seventeenth century, Church of Ireland members could not have numbered more than a few percentage points of the Irish population. In 1834 the first reliable religious census discovered that in a total population of almost eight million, 80.9 per cent were Catholic, 10.7 per cent Church of Ireland, and 8.1 per cent Presbyterian; something roughly like this denominational balance was probably typical for most of the previous two centuries. **Most of the forces we have discussed thus far - the interaction of religion with coercion, violence, colonisation, politics, economics, and conflict**

**between communities - were simply Irish variations on themes common throughout Europe.** For abundant confirmation, we need look no further than to Ireland's near neighbour, France, and the history of conflict between the Catholic state and the Protestant minority. **In most places, however, the established Church was the Church of a majority of the population. In Ireland the established Church was a minority Church, and the implications were immense.**

**Three consequences in particular stand out.** First, although Ireland's penal laws, from the reformation through the end of the eighteenth century, were roughly typical of similar laws elsewhere and those who suffered under such laws were everywhere bitter about it, in most places the resentment of a small minority was of no great public consequence, because it could be ignored or suppressed by the establishment. In Ireland, however, a **large Catholic majority chafing under various restrictions and penalties was a political and social fact of the utmost importance.** Even though increasingly removed from formal political power, sheer numbers conferred a degree of potential political power on the Catholic community and created a corresponding sense of threat among the Protestant minority.

Although Catholics did not at this time gain substantial or lasting redress of their grievances, their majority status gave them a more realistic prospect that they might do so, whether by negotiation or by force of arms, than was the case for minorities in other countries. And when Irish Catholics looked abroad for assistance (as the opponents of establishments in church and state typically did), first to Spain and later to France, their numbers made them more attractive recipients of assistance from foreign governments calculating the international balance of power than if they had been an insignificant minority. Thus attempting to calculate or divine Catholic intentions and devising strategies for thwarting them were never far from the centre of the government's political calculations. **Second, Church of Ireland membership was not only small, it was widely scattered. Its members were never the majority population of even one county; in most places they lived among an overwhelming and resentful Catholic majority, and in parts of Ulster they lived among a resentful if not overwhelming, Presbyterian majority.** Anxiety was a frequent corollary for Protestants living in these circumstances. It was also a significant political force, although difficult to measure. **Third, because the Church of Ireland fell short in a fundamental purpose of a state Church - to be the Church of the majority - it always had an unfulfilled missionary**

**task to make Ireland Protestant.** At most points in the Church of Ireland's history, the difficulties it faced in simply providing pastoral care for its existing members, coupled with the immensity of the mission task and the lethargy of many leaders appointed more for political than pastoral reasons, meant that it did little or nothing about increasing numbers in the Church of Ireland. When it did make missionary efforts, and to the extent that it did, the Catholic response was correspondingly vigorous. Because these missionary efforts never actually succeeded in converting large numbers of Catholics to Protestantism, the unintended consequence was to stir up religious controversy and thereby to raise tension between Catholics and Protestants.

**1610 The plantation of Ulster is central to the communal memories of both Ulster Protestants and Catholics,** but it bears exactly opposite meanings of possession and dispossession in the two cases. For Protestants the plantation and its results are the source of pride. Thomas Hamilton's popular *History of Presbyterianism in Ireland*, written in the late nineteenth century, contains a brief, typically Protestant account of plantation. Protestant settlers entered an underpopulated Ulster and filled the land with well-tended farms and the beginnings of prosperous towns, "developing the resources of the country by their industry and enterprise, as the natives had failed to do," wrote Hamilton. The settlers transformed Ulster into "the most prosperous, the most industrious, the most law-abiding, and the most loyal part of all Ireland", an achievement that was all the more impressive, Hamilton thought, because Ulster possessed "fewer natural advantages" than the other provinces.<sup>8</sup> The only blights in the happy land were packs of wolves and sullen Catholic woodkern lurking in the woods and occasionally attacking the settlers. For Catholics the plantation of Ulster is cause for anger. By a Catholic telling, if the land was underpopulated, it was only as the consequence of brutal war, and Protestant prosperity was built on the unjust foundation of Catholic dispossession; the story of the English crown in Ireland is understood as the story of Irish dispossession, and the colonisation of Ulster is perhaps the central symbol of that story. In truth the plantation was neither the beginning nor the end of colonisation, but it did give new vigour and impetus to a process that would eventually see Irish Catholics reduced to an almost landless community. From 1556, the English made several attempts at gaining political control and promoting civility, as they saw it, by displacing native Irish inhabitants through the systematic plantation of English settlers. None succeeded, although the

Munster plantation, begun in 1586, did make a lasting impression. In 1603 the submission of the Ulster Gaelic lords at the end of the Nine Years War did not provide an opportunity to try plantation again, because the newly crowned King James I dealt leniently with the losers, who retained their land - to the fury of the New English officials of the Irish administration, who saw this as a complete betrayal of their efforts on the crown's behalf.

In 1607 everything was changed by the famous and surprising flight of the earls, led by Hugh O'Neill, earl of Tyrone and greatest of the Irish leaders, and Rory O'Donnell, earl of Tyrconnell. Accompanied by about one hundred followers and family members, they fled to the continent for a complicated and not completely discernible mix of reasons. After 1603 New English officials had hounded their old enemy O'Neill, relentlessly searching for some way to bring him down. The chink in O'Neill's armour was perhaps his ally O'Donnell, who had maintained compromising contact with Spain, which could be used, however falsely, to implicate O'Neill as well. For his part, O'Donnell cited religious persecution, and he suffered some harassment from government and much more from powerful dynastic rivals keen to oust him. To the English the flight amounted to a confession of treason; to the Irish it was evidence of intolerable English persecution.

The departure of O'Neill, O'Donnell, and their followers immediately left Tyrone, Tyrconnell, and half of Fermanagh forfeit to the crown. When supplemented by a series of additional confiscations and surrenders, the state soon had at its disposal most of six Ulster counties: Donegal, Coleraine, Tyrone, Armagh, Cavan, and Fermanagh. In the same period, Down and Antrim were undergoing a process of more informal Protestant settlement and smaller scale plantation. For the English, Ulster had long been the most troublesome and Irish of provinces, so the plantation of Ulster was to be the means of further imposing English rule and subjugating the Irish. By 1609 a plantation scheme had been settled upon, and by 1610 it was being implemented.

Popular memory of plantation tends to assume that all native Irish immediately and totally opposed plantation and that they were immediately shunted from their traditional lands into the high and barren hills. This, however, is to confuse the end of the process with the beginning, for the initial situation was more complicated. One fact strongly influencing the course of plantation was that native Irish formed a large majority of the Ulster population throughout the plantation period and well into the eighteenth century. Thus even where

plantation policy seemed to work most harshly against Irish tenants - in refusing them places on land owned by English and Scottish undertakers and by the London companies - the rules were never applied more than half-heartedly, because plantation could never have got off the ground without Irish tenants. When in 1628 legislation allowed Irish tenants on undertakers' estates, it only legalised what had always been the case. Furthermore, the departure of the great earls was not a disaster from every Gaelic point of view, particularly for those septes which had continually to deal with the expansionist encroachments of Tyrconnell and Tyrone. While some Irish leaders had adopted a policy of straightforward resistance to English authority, others took a more pragmatic approach, attempting some sort of working accommodation to the English system. During the Nine Years War, a good number of Irish chiefs had fought on the English side, and some of these were rewarded with plantation land. Native Irish were granted 20 per cent of plantation land, and it was equal in quality to that given to other classes of grantees. If Irish landowners usually got less land than they had held previously, it should theoretically have been held more securely under English law than under the Gaelic system of occasional redistribution and frequently conflicting claims. At the beginning of plantation, it might have appeared that enough Irish would submit to its structures to allow plantation to achieve its ends.

In the rebellion of 1641, however, the Ulster instigators were precisely those Irish Catholic landowners who would seem to have done best from plantation. The reasons for their disillusionment and desperation were many, but perhaps their core logic is suggested by a remark made by King James, who in 1615 had to remind undertakers relying on Irish tenants that the "fundamental reason" for plantation was "removal of natives".<sup>9</sup> Exactly what this meant and when it might be said to be accomplished was never clear, and that was the `problem': short of total capitulation to the colonial programme and total assimilation to the colonial culture, Irish Catholics could never rest secure, never know that a point of lasting accommodation had been reached. To achieve its purposes, plantation needed to strike a `pragmatic' balance between leaving Catholics with enough land that they would not immediately rebel again out of grievance, and reducing their land enough that they would not have a power base for rebellion. But when opportunity allowed for additional clawing back of liberties and land, it would be done, because the `logic' of "removal of natives" always remained. By 1641 the eventual outcome of the process symbolised by plantation was clear, and any Catholic hope of surviving intact

within the system was gone. "No section of Irish society was gaining from the plantation," writes the plantation historian Philip Robinson, "while many had suffered considerable loss. Even the Irish grantees who might have had something to lose from a rebellion could feel their influence and status being continuously eroded." <sup>10</sup> Failed rebellion hastened the erosion, but the eventual outcome would probably have been the same, anyway. **In the end two communities were shaped by, and still contest, the power relations issuing from their opposite experiences of colonisation and all that flowed from it. Most fundamentally, law enforcement and the state itself have been experienced in decisively different ways.**

And what of religion? As the original plantation of Leix and Offaly in 1556 had been established by the Catholic Queen Mary, religion was clearly not part of the initial motivation. By the time of plantation in Ulster, however, religion had come to be a key to community identity. As the counter reformation took hold, the Irish increasingly defined themselves as Catholic, and holding fast to the old Catholic faith became an integral part of resisting English attempts to break down Irish culture. Thus conforming to the Church of Ireland was not a narrowly religious decision, it was regarded as a betrayal of the community. For Protestants, the idea that Catholics were inherently politically treacherous had become a fixed pillar of Protestant outlook by the early seventeenth century, and plantation proceeded accordingly: the natives were seen as untrustworthy not merely because they were Irish, but because they were Catholics; settlers were to be not merely British, but Protestant. Scottish settlers in particular brought with them a religious perspective in which anti-Catholicism was of central importance. **The failure of undertakers and the London companies to remove Catholic tenants, combined with robust and unassimilable religious identities, created numerous flashpoints where Protestant and Catholic would live side by side for centuries but without integrating, their fear and anger always capable of igniting a violent conflict.**

**1615 In 1615, the Church of Ireland issued the *Irish Articles*, the first distinctively Irish Protestant doctrinal statement.** The early reformation in Ireland, being primarily a state-sponsored, top-down phenomenon, had been far more concerned with issues of political control and church structure than with doctrine. In fact for many years Irish interest in the heated theological controversies of the English and continental reformations lagged far behind,

in time and intensity. **By the late 1500s, however, Church of Ireland leaders were working hard to create a reformed Church that would be vigorously Protestant, in clergy, laity, and theology.** *The Irish Articles* revealed the course Irish Protestantism was taking.<sup>11</sup>

The *104 Irish Articles* were much influenced by English theological formulations. Chief among these was the Church of England's official doctrinal statement, the *Thirty-Nine Articles of 1562 - the Irish Articles* used thirty-eight of them. However, the *Irish Articles* differed in two important areas: their stance toward Catholicism and the related issue of predestination. Articles 59 and 60 condemned the Pope's claimed power to depose princes; article 67 condemned the Catholic doctrine of equivocation, whereby oaths made with mental reservations were not binding; and article 80 identified the Pope as the anti-Christ. None of these articles had an equivalent in the English Articles. On the doctrine of predestination, the English *Articles* taught that the elect are predestined to salvation by the grace of God alone, but whether or not God also predestined some to hell was deliberately and artfully evaded. By contrast, the *Irish Articles* made it clear that some people are reprobate: predestined by God to eternal damnation.

These teachings both informed and reflected the bitter struggle between the Church of Ireland and counter-reformation Catholicism. Church of Ireland leaders held a range of views about the Catholic Church, but the range was narrow. The most positive assessment was that the Catholic Church, although desperately corrupt, was a true Church, and membership did not necessarily preclude the possibility of salvation. By a more negative judgment, Catholicism was a false Church or no Church at all and to remain a member of it after having heard the reformed version of the gospel preached was sure evidence of being hell-bound. Even the most able and vigorous preachers in the Church of Ireland could be overcome by the difficulties of persuading the Irish people to commit themselves to the reformed Church, the most diligent efforts yielding a pitifully small return.

In *The Protestant Reformation in Ireland, 1590-1641*, Alan Ford argues that the doctrine of reprobation provided a comforting theological explanation for the scant success of the Church of Ireland mission: Catholics did not respond to the gospel, these preachers believed, because they were predestined to damnation. Among their own people, Protestant preachers used the doctrine of predestination pastorally by encouraging their parishioners to know and recognise the signs of God's grace in their lives, thus obtaining the assurance

of salvation so important to the puritans. Of course the negative version of this idea - that those who did not show signs of grace were eternally damned - was theologically invalid, because God could give grace to sinners at any time. Bad theology or not, for the Protestant preacher frustrated by his inability to convert people from the Catholic Church he despised, it was tempting and easy to conclude that the vast bulk of the Irish people were reprobate, cursed by God. **One enduring result of the intense conflict between Catholic and Protestant was a tendency to define one's own group over against the other** - the theologian Alan Falconer argues that "the role of the Churches ... in the situation of conflict in Ireland has been to reinforce the alienation of the different communities by developing theologies-in-opposition."<sup>12</sup> Patrick Corish says of early-seventeenth-century Catholics, to be a Catholic now was to know why one was not a Protestant,<sup>13</sup> and the reverse applied equally to Protestants. When Trinity College Dublin established its chair of divinity, the holder was called Professor of Theological Controversies. The men who held the post between 1607 and 1641 lived up to the title, focussing their lectures on refuting Cardinal Bellarmine, the foremost Catholic apologist of the time, who himself once held the chair of Controversial Theology at the Jesuit college in Rome. From 1600 to 1614, the Jesuit Henry Fitzsimon and the Church of Ireland Bishop of Killaloe, John Rider, conducted a running debate that produced five publications and prefigured numerous similar contests. At times both Churches drew diametrically opposed conclusions from shared premises. Both believed in one true Church outside of which is no salvation, and both believed that error has no rights-they simply drew mirror-image conclusions as to which was the true Church, who was outside salvation, and who had no rights.

**1641 During the first half of the seventeenth century, Europe was wracked by wars of religion, and Ireland did not escape.** From the beginning of the Irish rising of 1641, one prominent Protestant line of interpretation understood it as a priest-inspired and priest-ridden rebellion, intended to exterminate Protestants. The initial reality was very different, but

religion was a factor from the beginning and soon a prominent one. Some of the atrocities suffered by Protestants had a religious motivation or aspect. The insurgents were riddled with cultural and political divisions, most fundamentally between Irish and Old English parties; they joined together under the only banner that could unite them, calling themselves the Confederate Catholics of

Ireland. After three decades on the continent, the Irish leader Owen Roe O'Neill returned to Ireland bolstered by a letter of support from the Pope praising O'Neill's "excelling fervour, that is, your constancy against the heretics and mind of true faith" and offering his blessing to all "who would help the cause of catholics".<sup>14</sup>

The savagely sectarian disposition of the times was captured in extreme form by the exhortations of Cornelius O'Mahony, a Jesuit. Writing from Portugal in 1645, he urged the Confederate forces to "kill your heretic adversaries." He believed that they had killed up to 150,000 between 1641 and 1645, "as the heretics themselves, mooing like cows, openly say and you do not deny, and I believe that more of the heretic enemy were killed, and I wish they all were." The task before the Confederates was "to kill the rest of the heretics or expel them from the territory of Ireland".<sup>15</sup> When O'Mahony's book got to Ireland, it was roundly condemned by the Confederate Catholics, who had it burned by the common hangman. The source of scandal, however, seems to have been more O'Mahony's politics - he called for not only a Catholic king, but a native Catholic king, and he refused to recognise a heretical king as a legitimate sovereign - than his sectarianism. It should also be noted that O'Mahony's estimate that 150,000 or more Protestants had been killed by 1645 was wildly inaccurate. The best contemporary account estimates that 112,000 of English extraction and 504,000 Irish died from sword, plague, and famine between 1641 and 1652, so the number of Protestants killed by 1645 could not have been close to 150,000. Such hugely exaggerated numbers were common at the time. The first exaggerations were deliberate propaganda designed to magnify outrage against Irish Catholics. In this they succeeded, and in the process, inflated numbers became widely circulated and widely accepted. "At this date, towards the end of the religious wars", writes Patrick Corish, "men were ready to believe the worst."<sup>16</sup>

The autumn of 1649 brought more savage sectarianism, as Oliver Cromwell's blend of religious and military ferocity found expression in massacres of Catholics at Drogheda (where a good number of English Catholics were among the victims) and Wexford. His victims were not only surrendered soldiers but civilians, including clergy, women, and children. Even Edmund Ludlow, who was for a time leader of the parliamentary army in Ireland and was not squeamish about harsh measures, judged Cromwell's actions to be "extraordinary severity", and all resistance collapsed in the face of it. Cromwell was in Ireland to prevent a royalist resurgence and to guarantee the confiscation of

Irish land he needed to pay off his army and his financial backers, but he publicly defended his deeds as godly vengeance for Catholic massacres of Protestants at the beginning of the rising, thus imparting a bloody symmetry to the decade.

The massacres of 1641 and 1649 exerted a long influence in Irish history. For Catholics, Cromwell's massacres (and confiscations) were the source of long and bitter anger, becoming not only a key component in their communal memory of domination and victimisation, but a symbol of what they saw as the genocidal intentions of the English in Ireland. Protestant memories of 1641 were equally potent. In 1662 the first restoration Irish parliament passed an act establishing 23 October, the date for a foiled conspiracy to seize Dublin at the beginning of the rising, as a national holy day. The act anathematised the plot as "a conspiracy so generally inhumane, barbarous and cruel, as the like was never before heard of in any age or kingdom", fomented by "many malignant and rebellious papists and Jesuits, fryers, seminary priests and other superstitious orders of the popish pretended clergy".<sup>17</sup> For more than a century the holy day was widely observed, and in Dublin with great pomp and circumstance. The Irish administration and the House of Lords processed to Christ Church Cathedral, where they worshipped according to the form of a specially composed liturgy and heard a sermon by a Church of Ireland dignitary, usually a bishop. These sermons, which were often published, rarely strayed far from the themes of: why Catholics cannot be trusted, why the nature of Catholicism inevitably yields barbarous acts like the massacre being remembered, and why Protestants must be eternally vigilant if 1641 was not to be visited upon them again. The Protestant community understood itself as perpetually under siege. **Both sets of memories, of 1641 and of 1649, served exactly the same function for their communities, passing from generation to generation a graphic image of the true nature of the enemy.** The memories were also mutually exclusive. Protestants remembered 1641 and Catholics remembered 1649, but neither community remembered the other event (except sometimes to diminish the exaggerations of the other side). In this way the purity of communal pain and the consequent righteousness of the communal cause were preserved unsullied. A divided society produced divided memories, thus widening the divisions which were their source. The Scottish poet Iain Crichton Smith writes,

*The anthology of memories of the other  
is a book I hadn't reckoned on ...*<sup>18</sup>

In Ireland, "the anthology of memories of the other" remains a book that is rarely even opened.

**1642 Presbyterianism was the form of Christianity favoured by Scottish settlers**, most of whom arrived in Ireland from the early 1600s onward, some as part of the formal plantation of Ulster, others part of informal immigration. Initially Presbyterianism was not a separate church, it was a party within the established Church of Ireland. In 1642 the first Presbytery in Ireland was organised by chaplains and soldiers of the Scottish army sent to Ulster to put down the Irish rising. After the turmoil of the commonwealth period, the restoration of Charles I I brought with it the restoration of the Church of Ireland, and Presbyterians (along with much smaller groups like Baptists, Quakers, and Independents (or Congregationalists)) were cast in the role of a dissenting Church, hedged in by penal laws and hounded by the established Church. From this point onward, using the term 'Protestant' to refer to all churches derived from the reformation tradition becomes problematic, although sometimes helpful. The interests of dissenting Churches were very different from those of the established Church, hence the classic distinction between Catholic, Protestant, and Dissenter. But some convictions did unite all Protestants, dissenting and established. Particularly in times of crisis - and most notably during the Williamite wars of 1688-91 - members of the Church of Ireland and Presbyterians could make common cause against the Catholic foe, but division and antagonism blossomed again as soon as the threat was over. Not until well into the nineteenth century would established and dissenting Protestant Churches be united enough to make 'Protestant' a frequently useful generic term.

**1655 Cromwell had decreed that in this year dispossessed Catholic landowners were to be transplanted to the barren lands of Connacht and Clare.** The property of rebels was deemed forfeit to the state, and since virtually all Catholic landowners were classified as rebels, their property went to pay the vast war debts Cromwell had accumulated. **Eventually almost all Catholic landowners were deprived of their land** and most were transplanted west to much smaller and poorer holdings, although the huge undertaking took longer than planned and some Catholics found ways to stay as tenants on the land they had once owned. In 1641 Catholics still held 59 per cent of the land in Ireland; two decades later, at the close of the Cromwellian

period, they were reduced to about 10 per cent. Transplantation; the suppression of Catholic practices and structures, principally through the virtual elimination of priests, some killed and many more banished to the continent; the deporting of other Catholics; a huge death toll due to war, disease, and famine: all these combined to create a stunning trauma of dislocation. Sometime in this period Fear Dorcha O Meallain, probably from Down and perhaps a priest, wrote a poem comforting the Catholic exiles to the West. They would be travelling light.

*Our sole possessions: Michael (?f miracles,  
the virgin Mary, the twelve apostles,  
Brigid, Patrick and Saint John  
- and fine rations: faith in God.*

*Sweet Colm Cille of miracles too,  
and Colman Mac Aoidh, poets'  
patron, will all be with us on our  
way.*

This was good company and reason for hope. He further urged his readers to

*Consider a parable of this:  
Israel's people, God's own,  
although they were in bonds in Egypt,  
found in time a prompt release.*

Israel had received a miraculous way through the sea and miraculous sustenance in the desert, and Catholics could expect a like inheritance.

*People of my heart, stand steady, don't complain of your  
distress. Moses got what he requested,  
religious freedom - and from Pharaoh.*

*Identical their God and ours.  
One God there was and still remains.  
Here or Westward God is one,  
one God ever and shall be.<sup>19</sup>*

Many a seventeenth-century Catholic poet employed the theme of Israel in bondage, which provided both solace in suffering and hope for deliverance. Ironically, seventeenth-century Protestants also made frequent use of the Israel theme. Assuming that Israel in the promised land was a close analogy for Protestants in Ireland, preachers often spoke of Ireland as "our Israel" and

based sermons on Old Testament texts about the relationships between Israel and God and Israel and her heathen neighbours. A 1692 sermon by Edward Walkinton, chaplain to the Irish House of Commons, was typical. His text was Isaiah 5.3-4, an image of God chastising his children for their ingratitude.

*And now, O inhabitants of Jerusalem, and men of Judah, judge, I pray you, betwixt me and my vineyard. What could have been done more to my vineyard, that I have not done in it? Wherefore when I looked that it should bring, forth grapes, brought it forth wild grapes.*

Walkinton first established the theme of God's goodness and Israel's ingratitude as a recurring biblical theme and then asked, "How far our case is Parallel with that of the Jews?" As always the answer was, closely parallel, and Walkinton developed the story of God's mercy to Irish Protestants, especially in deliverance from their Catholic enemies, "an Enemy Treacherous, Ingrateful, Secret, Bloody and Implacable", who would always practice "all Barbarity, and Cruelty, that their own vile Inclinations, or their viler Religion could suggest to `em."<sup>20</sup> God had allowed Catholics to have their bloody way because Protestants had been ungrateful and disobedient, so Walkinton's proposed sign of gratitude was simply more faithful adherence to reformed religion. Once again Catholics and Protestants claimed the same spiritual inheritance, but put it to opposite uses. The same events that Catholic Israel mourned as Egyptian captivity, Protestant Israel celebrated as delivery by God into the promised land.

**1688 When on 7 December 1688, the gates of Derry were closed against King James's troops, one powerful motivating force was sectarian fear.** The Comber letter, dated 3 December 1688 and addressed to a Protestant nobleman, Lord Mount Alexander, raised Protestant fears of 1641 come again. Although now known to be a fake, at the time it was widely circulated and widely believed, "for it spoke in the ancestral voice" says the Ulster historian A. T. Q. Stewart.

*Good my Lord,  
I have written to let you know that all our Irishmen through Ireland is sworn: that on the ninth day of this month they are all to fall on to kill and murder man, wife and child; and I desire your lordship to take care of yourself, and all others that are judged by our men to be heads, for whosoever of them can kill any of you, they are to have a captain's place; so my desire to your honour is, to look to yourself, and give other*

*noblemen warning, and go not out either night or day without a good guard with you, and let no Irishman come near you, whatsoever he be; so this is all from him who was your father's friend, and is your friend, and will be, though I dare not be known, as yet, for fear of my life.<sup>21</sup>*

This letter arrived in Derry on 7 December, the same day that James's troops arrived to replace the garrison withdrawn a few weeks earlier. The old troops had comprised mostly Protestants; their replacements, commanded by the Catholic earl of Antrim, were a new regiment composed exclusively of Catholics from Ulster and Scotland. While the troops demanded entrance and Derry's leaders were paralysed in indecisive debate, the apprentice boys took matters into their own hands and closed the gates. At a time when not only was James the rightful king, but William was denying that he was going to claim the crown, the Comber letter and the sectarian fear it roused probably tipped the balance from loyalty to defiance.

**1695 Beginning in 1695, the Irish parliament, now drawn exclusively from the Church of Ireland, began building up the body of fierce laws that would cause the eighteenth century to be remembered as the Penal Era. For the next two decades, parliament passed many laws directed against Catholic religion, land, and political power.** Although the penal laws were far from systematic, a consistent, undergirding reasoning is discernible. It ran as follows: twice within the memory of the living, in the 1640s and 1680s, Catholics had proven themselves politically treacherous, and now they must be kept weak so they could not rebel again; it was their religion that made them rebels, so Catholicism must be eliminated, or at least tightly controlled; land ownership was the foundation of political power, so Catholic capacity to rebel could be checked by eliminating or reducing Catholic land ownership. In this logic, the union of political, economic, and religious considerations was seamless.

The various laws passed against Catholic clergy and religious practice might have eliminated church structures within a generation if strictly applied. However, like most of the post-reformation penal laws against Catholicism, they were not enforced consistently, perhaps because of a lack of political will, or perhaps because the practical difficulties of enforcement were all but insuperable. The more effective legislation against Catholic landholding, with its connection of land, religion, and politics, was epitomised by the provisions of the far-reaching Popery Act of 1704. One frequently cited aspect of this act

required Catholics to pass on land in equal portions to all sons, which would eventually reduce holdings to an unviable size; if, however, the eldest son joined the Church of Ireland, he gained all the property and his father only retained the land as tenant-for-life. In fact there is little evidence that this particular provision, for all its ingenuity, had much effect, but the result of a whole complex of similarly intended laws was to reduce Catholic land ownership still further. At the close of Elizabeth's reign, Catholics had owned 90 per cent of the land, which after the Ulster plantation had fallen to 59 per cent by 1641 and all the way to 10 per cent at the close of the Cromwellian era. Under Charles II Catholics regained some of this land, rising to 22 per cent by 1685, but falling again to 14 per cent as a result of the Williamite war. Now the new penal laws took over, eventually eroding Catholic landholding to a mere 5 per cent by 1778, when the penal laws began to be dismantled. The familiar themes of possession and dispossession were powerfully reinforced, with enduring consequences. "We have everything to dread from the dispossessed", wrote the twentieth-century Irish author Elizabeth Bowen, herself the descendant of Cromwellian settlers. "It is in dispossession that the hurt, Protestant and Catholic, lies."<sup>22</sup>

Presbyterians also suffered laws directed against them. The Popery Act of 1704 required Catholic and Presbyterian alike to take communion according to the Church of Ireland rite as a condition of public office, which effectively excluded them from local government. Another long-running problem was that Presbyterian marriages were not recognised as valid. For marriages between Presbyterians, the law was rarely enforced, but when the marriage was between a Presbyterian and a Church of Ireland member, it was applied more frequently. The threat of this law was always worrisome, and when enforced it was devastating.

None of these laws, against Catholics or Presbyterians, were English penal laws, they were made by an Irish parliament whose members represented a Church of Ireland elite later labelled the Protestant Ascendancy. England had its own penal laws, sometimes less harsh, sometimes more. In Ireland, however, the effect of English review of Irish parliamentary acts was generally to soften Irish stridency. Church of Ireland leaders were among the strongest supporters of penal laws. Shortly after the Treaty of Limerick was signed in 1691, Anthony Dopping, Bishop of Meath, preached so violently against what he regarded as the soft treatment of Catholics that the English government removed him from the Irish privy council. It was an early indication of how

vehemently the Irish establishment in church and state would oppose concessions to Catholics. **Penal laws were a European commonplace, but the Irish ones were the product of local forces, not an outside imposition.**

**1766 Until the death in 1766 of the Old Pretender, James III, the Vatican had recognised the Stuarts as the legitimate kings of Britain and Ireland.** In fact from the time of James I onward, Irish Catholics always placed their hope for recovery of their losses on the Stuart kings, especially on the unflinchingly Catholic James II. When James II was deposed and replaced by the Protestant William III, Irish Catholic support for the Stuart, or Jacobite, cause remained as ever: James and his descendants were rightful kings of Britain and Ireland, William and his successors were unlawful usurpers. Historical memory has a way of turning causes that eventually fail into inevitably lost causes, but the failure of the Stuarts was far from inevitable. Not only did James II have the support of the Pope and Louis XIV of France, but across England, Scotland, and Ireland the Stuart cause retained many fervent supporters. It is also true that after backing the losing side in 1688-91, Irish Catholics really had nowhere else to turn for redress of their grievances. **Vatican and Irish Catholic support for the Stuarts had far-reaching consequences. Almost inevitably, Catholics looked outward for political salvation.** Expressed in the form of the aisling, or vision poem, Catholic hopes typically took the form of yearning for a Stuart saviour, who would come from across the water to deliver Ireland, often depicted as a suffering woman.

*O, fear not, fair mourner! - thy lord and thy lover,  
Prince Charles, with his armies, will cross the seas over.  
Once more, lo! the Spirit of Liberty rallies  
Aloft on thy mountains, and calls from thy valleys.  
Thy children will rise and will take, one and all,  
Revenge on the murderous tribe of the Gall,  
And to thee shall return each renowned castle hall;  
And again thou shalt revel in plenty and treasure,  
And the wealth of the land shall be thine without measure.<sup>23</sup>*

Some of the consequences were immediate and practical. Catholics could not take oaths of loyalty to William, Anne, or the Hanoverians, which copperfastened their political marginality. The Catholic hierarchy's position was also rendered more precarious, because the Pope granted the Stuarts the right to nominate Irish Catholic bishops up to 1766. Traffic between Ireland and the Stuart

headquarters in France was constant, Irish Catholic exiles were regulars at the Stuart court, the Stuart armies recruited in Ireland, and in the last great Stuart attempt to regain their dominions, the failed invasion by Prince Charles of Scotland and England in 1745, Irish emigres played a significant part as advisors to the prince and as soldiers in Irish regiments of the French army. One effect of Vatican and Irish Catholic attachment to the Stuarts was to reinforce Protestant fears, which from the late sixteenth century had involved complaints against the subversive tendency of Catholic politico-religious doctrines. However, unlike their English and Scottish counterparts, Irish Jacobites never actually rose in support of the Stuarts, despite rumours and mutterings. Their continuing restraint helped to make the case for the penal laws increasingly untenable.

**1786-8 During these years, a great pamphlet war raged on the subject of tithes, which, until 1838, all Irish people needed to pay to the Church of Ireland. The content of the debate revealed much about relationships between the Churches.**

The alignment of sides was not Protestant vs. Catholic, but Presbyterian and Catholic vs. Church of Ireland. Both Presbyterians and Catholics resented tithes in particular and Church of Ireland privileges in general, and they were disdainful of the established Church's weakness and reliance upon state support. However, this did not mean that Presbyterians and Catholics were united. Their chief bond was the negative one of shared grievances, which sometimes tantalised with the possibility of a shared programme of action, most famously in the 1780s and 1790s. But in the end differences always outweighed commonalities, preventing effective joint efforts.

The Church of Ireland's sense of being trapped between Catholics and Presbyterians was central to the pamphlet war. This would eventually be most memorably expressed by William Magee, Archbishop of Dublin, in an 1822 address to his clergy.

*We, My Reverend Brethren, are placed in a station in which we are hemmed in by two opposite descriptions of professing Christians; the one, possessing a Church, without what we can properly call a Religion; and the other, possessing a Religion, without what we can properly call a Church..<sup>24</sup>*

The same dynamics, however, had applied from the mid-seventeenth century, when Presbyterianism was established in Ulster as a separate Church. In the

1780s pamphlet war, Church of Ireland writers regarded Presbyterians as innately rebellious and Catholics as a strange combination of slavish and rebellious - slavish in their adherence to the dictatorial Catholic Church, and rebellious because their adherence was to a foreign power with political designs. Many of the traditional Protestant complaints against Catholicism were aired, especially the politico-religious ones.

Because the immediate occasion for the pamphlet war was renewed Whiteboy agitation in Munster, which Protestants regarded as a popish plot, Catholic pamphleteers were essentially on the defensive. One early respondent was Archbishop James Butler of Cashel, who argued that Catholic clergy in Munster had suffered at least as much as their Protestant counterparts from Whiteboy outrages, and they had worked hard to suppress rebellion. As for the disloyalty supposedly inherent in Catholic doctrine, Bishop Butler said the point could only be sustained by falsely imputing the doctrines of individuals to the Catholic Church as a whole, and he contrasted their supposed disloyalty with repeated professions and a hundred years' experience of loyalty. Another pamphleteer, Arthur O'Leary, a Capuchin friar and experienced controversialist, dismissed accusations of subversive intrigue as groundless paranoia. Catholics and Presbyterians, he said, were "two classes of subjects more interested in improving *thirty-nine* acres of ground for the support of their families, than in abolishing the *thirty-nine articles*".<sup>25</sup>

Church of Ireland pamphlets had accused Presbyterians of inherent disloyalty, also, so Presbyterian responses needed to do some defending on this front. But Presbyterians were in no way implicated in the immediate Whiteboy crisis, so they could also go on the offensive. One of the more pungent pamphlets was written by Samuel Barber, a Presbyterian minister, who let loose a freeswinging assault on ecclesiastical establishments in general and Irish tithes in particular.

*In no county of Ireland is the established religion the faith of the people. It was no doubt, to prevent oppression of this kind, that the Roman Catholic religion was established in Canada [by the Quebec Act of 1774]. The legislature of England saw the absurdity of establishing any religion there but that professed by the province, or that they should support a body of men from whom they received no benefit.<sup>26</sup>*

But Barber would have been even happier with no establishment at all. Established Church pamphlets frequently warned that the Church of Ireland would collapse without state support, "that ecclesiastical establishments may

be necessary on the present day, though entirely unnecessary in the first ages" of the early Church.<sup>27</sup> To such talk Barber responded incredulously that Irish Catholics showed no signs of going away, and Ulster Presbyterians were well taught, all without tithes and without establishment. **While the Church of Ireland was estranged from both the Catholic Church and the Presbyterian Church, they were different kinds of estrangement.** Bitter as relations between the Church of Ireland and Presbyterianism could be, it was the bitterness of warring siblings. In times of crisis, most notably in 1688-91, differences could be set aside to face the common Catholic foe, and at many other times the breach in Protestant unity was lamented, although to little effect. The estrangement between the Catholic Church and the Church of Ireland was of a different order. At best, relationships between individuals were warm. On the whole, however, the estrangement could be characterised as a wary separation between vanquisher and unreconciled foe, the other party now grown distant and difficult to comprehend, with distance the necessary condition for a tolerable relationship. At worst, Church of Ireland preachers required the language of devils to express the depth of their antipathy for the Catholic Church, although this faded as distance from 1641 and 1688-91 increased.

**1795 Ireland in the 1790s was superheated and heading toward an explosion.** Nowhere was the situation more volatile than in Co. Armagh, which was heavily populated, equally divided between Catholics and Protestants, subject to intense competition for land and all too well armed. It was here, in September 1795, that the Orange Order emerged as the Protestant consolidation of victory over the Catholic Defenders at the Battle of the Diamond. `Battle' might seem a slightly pretentious term for one more crossroads affray between Catholic and Protestant gangs, but the larger conflict of which it was one episode was very important, mingling potent draughts of economics, politics, religion, and violence, all the essential ingredients of sectarianism.

**The Orange Order** means many things to its many members. Of course, it exists primarily to support the Union and its understanding of Protestant faith, but it also serves a whole range of social and socialising functions, especially in rural Northern Ireland. However, Catholics have typically experienced the Orange Order as an agent of Protestant dominion over them. **The key themes of Orange-Catholic conflict were established very early in the Order's**

**existence. The Orange Order was always a marching movement, and it was always involved in patrolling Catholics.** The marching and patrolling were often difficult to distinguish, and in fact the historian David W. Miller argues that even before the Orange Order began, "parades in the north of Ireland were often not merely recreation, but also serious ritual assertions of dominance by parading groups over the territory along their route."<sup>28</sup> In the 1790s and early 1800s, Orange Order patrolling of Catholics also took the more substantial form of Orange dominance in the yeomanry. **Another theme established early was that the Orange Order quickly became a significant influence and rallying point among some Protestant leaders (exclusively Church of Ireland landlords at first).** As Belfast rapidly grew and industrialised during the nineteenth century, migrants from rural Ireland brought with them the territorial imperative and Catholic/Protestant rivalries. Sectarian division in Belfast encompassed religion, politics, and economics. The Protestant working class came to dominate skilled jobs while the Catholic working class were left mainly with unskilled work; in addition the middle and upper classes were largely Protestant. In these circumstances, the Orange Order not only found a strong base in the Protestant working class, it also served to smooth class divisions in the Protestant community. **As the political contest between Catholic and Protestant intensified in the nineteenth century, the Orange Order grew in importance.**

**1798 On one level, the 1798 rising was relatively secular. Its goals were political and nonsectarian, and the ideological backdrop was the `liberty, equality, fraternity' emphases of the French Revolution.** The whole rationale of the society of United Irishmen was to involve and to represent the interests of Catholic, Protestant, and Dissenter, and it succeeded to a degree unmatched by any Irish reform or revolutionary movement before or after. **Given the sectarian elements of Irish society, however, no conflict could be expected to transcend sectarianism entirely, and indeed 1798 was littered with sectarian language, events, and significance. The role of religion was extremely complex.** In the runup to 1798, the Orange Order grew enormously, including many recruits who jumped straight from the anti-sectarian United Irishmen, and some of their activities made `Orange' a synonym for `terror' among Catholics. A catechism of the chief Catholic secret society, the Defenders, suggests the patchwork of political and religious

impulses working among the future insurgents:

*'What do you design by that cause?'*

*'To quell all nations, dethrone all kings, and to plant the true religion that was lost at the Reformation. 'Who sent you?'*

*'Simon Peter, the head of the Church.'*<sup>29</sup>

The Catholic hierarchy wanted nothing to do with this, consistently and emphatically denouncing rebellion, while insurgent priests were few and mostly marginal in the Church, although prominent and important in the rising. Although the Presbyterian General Assembly condemned rebellion, a much higher percentage of Presbyterian ministers, conservatives and liberals, turned out than did Catholic priests. Conflict was bloodiest and most sectarian in Wexford. It also began earlier there than in Ulster, and heavily publicised reports of sectarian bloodshed undoubtedly had the effect of reducing the number of northern Protestants turning out. The rising in Ulster was smaller, lasted only a week, and went off with relatively few deaths and without sectarian incident. It was marked, however, by a denominational absence - it was an almost exclusively Presbyterian rising. Catholic United Irishmen, former Defenders, did not answer the call to arms, and one reason may have been that they were too recently incorporated to have overcome their ingrained mistrust of Protestants.

**1822 In 1822 the Church of Ireland Archbishop of Dublin, William Magee, included some remarks offensive to Presbyterians and Catholics in his visitation address to his clergy.** James Doyle, Catholic Bishop of Kildare and Leighlin, issued a riposte, and a vigorous public controversy ensued. Archbishop Magee expressed surprise that his remarks should have caused such offence, because he had said nothing new. He was right. His comments were conventional Church of Ireland wisdom about the inadequacies of Catholicism, and twenty years earlier they would have been unlikely to cause a fuss. **By the 1820s, however, Irish Catholicism was undergoing a religious and political renewal, and Bishop Doyle's response was evidence of a new communal self-confidence and assertiveness. During the nineteenth century, the Catholic community in Ireland was transformed. In religious terms, the level of lay religious practice improved dramatically, new church structures and organisations proliferated,**

**erated, many new churches were built, the number of priests increased, ecclesiastical discipline became more consistent and rigorous.** The timing of these changes is disputed, but in the early nineteenth century the foundations were certainly being laid. Catholic political transformation is easier to date. In 1823 Daniel O'Connell started the Catholic Association and launched a new strategy to **achieve the long-delayed goal of Catholic emancipation.** It was a brilliant campaign. By judiciously mixing grassroots, participatory democracy, the nation-wide organisation of the Catholic Church, and the natural communal authority of Catholic priests, all welded together by O'Connell's charismatic leadership, the Catholic Association mobilised Irish Catholics as an effective mass movement for political change for the first time ever. They attained Catholic emancipation in just six years and against the vehement opposition of most Protestants (although official Presbyterian support for emancipation remained) and the English establishment. By forming Catholics into a coherent political force and introducing the tactic of constitutional agitation backed by the veiled threat of violence, the Catholic Association ensured that Irish politics would never be the same again.

**O'Connell's success came at a price.** It may well be that he could only have achieved his goals by using the structures of the Catholic Church, but this had the effect of alienating Protestants and reducing the possibility that they would or could work with him. **At the end of the process, political and religious identity were more firmly bound together than ever. The pursuit of an Irish nation, which had been dominated by Protestants thirty years earlier, was becoming an almost exclusively Catholic enterprise.**

The political influence of the Catholic clergy, so feared by contemporary Protestants, is easily exaggerated. In a study of nineteenth-century elections, political scientist John Whyte concluded that "on the whole ... the Irish clergy could lead their people only in the direction that they wanted to go."<sup>30</sup> However, when clergy and laity were going in the same direction, as they often were, it was a formidable alliance. On the great constitutional issue of home rule, Catholic clergy and people were, on the whole, of one mind. In 1886 the hierarchy gave its firm support to home rule as the only way to meet "the wants and wishes of the Irish people".

<sup>31</sup> The Parnell crisis complicated the situation, but by 1905 the bishops were ready once again to encourage Catholics to "rally round our Parliamentary representatives and give them the whole strength of the nation's support in their endeavour to secure ordinary civil rights for Irish Catholics".<sup>32</sup> "The

nation's support": Protestants were consistently absent from such formulations, **as Irish nationalism became all but indistinguishable from Catholic nationalism.**

The great problem facing a Catholic nationalism focussed on Britain as the source of Ireland's woes was what to make of Irish Protestants, especially Ulster Protestants. According to historian Oliver MacDonagh, the classic solution of traditional Irish nationalism, physical force and constitutional alike, has been to make "blind assumptions that Ireland was one and indivisible politically, and that religion was a false divider of Irishmen, used as such by British governments intent on maintaining control of the island".<sup>33</sup> Given these assumptions it was easy to overlook unionists as beside the point, dupes who would see the error of their ways once the real problems with Britain were sorted out. As a result of such thinking, generations of nationalist leaders, including the great ones like O'Connell, Parnell, Connolly, Pearse, and de Valera, consistently ignored, underestimated, or misunderstood unionists, with predictably distorting effects on political analysis. "In this matter", writes the historian Kenneth Hoppen, "history was to repeat itself with cyclical regularity: first as tragedy and then as tragedy again."<sup>34</sup>

**1827 From 19 to 25 April 1827 in the Dublin Institute in Sackville (now O'Connell) Street, Catholic and Protestant advocates spent four hours a day arguing the differences between them.** The debate had a high public profile, featuring Daniel O'Connell as one of the Catholic chairmen and playing to a full house every day. The intense and wide public interest in doctrinal debate was a new feature in Irish society, but the issues at stake were long-standing, as suggested by the course of this debate, which turned on a rerun of a century-old controversy. A supporter of the Catholic combatant, Fr. Tom Maguire, discovered that the Protestant champion, Rev. Richard Pope, was basing his arguments on an early-eighteenth-century anti-Catholic polemic. Maguire's supporter then acquired the original Catholic retort to the Protestant case, which allowed Maguire to refute Pope's case as it emerged. This debate was not an isolated event. **By the 1820s a Protestant campaign to convert Catholics, unprecedented in the intensity of its efforts, was running at full throttle.** It encountered a Catholic community that was not only flexing its political muscles under O'Connell's leadership, it was also undergoing a religious renewal. **The clash between Protestant and Catholic was long and bitter, a contest for the hearts and minds of the Irish people.**

Religious controversy became a regular feature of public life as never before. Doctrinal debates like the one in the Dublin Institute could run for days with thousands attending, and the same issues also featured in newspapers, magazines, and pamphlets. While these controversies may have changed some minds, the greater effect was probably to affirm tradition and strengthen communal identity - but always over against the other. The Protestant campaign was much influenced by the 1798 rising. It had been the bloodiest episode in Irish history, with about 30,000 casualties in less than three months. A shocked population produced many proposals for how to solve the desperate problems the war had revealed, and one response was a Protestant campaign to convert Catholics. The rising did not create the campaign - several Protestant reform groups were well underway, and some of these (a variety of Church of Ireland groups and evangelicals from several denominations) had as a goal making Ireland a Protestant nation. But 1798 did serve as a catalyst, accelerating the process and also highlighting the political aspect of the campaign.

One reason for the evangelistic campaign was concern for personal salvation: Catholics, these Protestants believed, needed to hear the pure gospel message denied them by their Church, and if their salvation did not absolutely depend on joining a Protestant Church, that was surely the obvious response to having their eyes opened to what many Protestants saw as the corruption and false doctrine of Catholicism. Another reason was political: sound religion was the necessary basis of a stable, peaceful society. "Those who are most under the influence of the word of God, ° said the respected evangelical leader Peter Roe, "are most anxious that its [government's] administration should proceed steadily and uninterrupted - while, on the contrary, those who are unacquainted with, or neglect, or oppose that word, are dissatisfied, turbulent and rebellious."<sup>35</sup> In Protestant eyes, 1798 had revealed Irish Catholics, once again, as "dissatisfied, turbulent, and rebellious"; these were the inevitable fruits of their religion, and Protestant faith was the obvious answer. The issue was accentuated for many Protestants by the increasing political assertiveness of nineteenth-century Catholics, which always seemed to focus on dissatisfaction with the establishment. Different Protestants undoubtedly weighted the religious and political aspects of their campaign differently, some more concerned about salvation, others about Protestant ascendancy. But most probably made little of the distinction, if they were conscious of it at all: personal salvation and social stability were simply two desirable goals of their

campaign. In 1851 Church of Ireland evangelical leader Henry Irwin rejoiced to attend a confirmation service in Co. Limerick for converts from Rome, who at the close of the service "joined in singing an appropriate hymn to the air of our national anthem, which was most judiciously chosen to cast a beam of loyalty over their minds."<sup>36</sup>

In this atmosphere, conversion became more than ever a highly-charged and contentious issue. Conversions of Catholics, especially priests, were paraded in the religious press, for they were the very lifeblood of Protestant efforts, proving the worth of their work. Catholics responded by denying or denigrating the conversions, or noting Protestant conversions to Catholicism; one Catholic argument was that while a pitiable few from the Catholic underclass might be converting due to venality, Protestants of quality were converting to Catholicism out of spiritual integrity. In 1826 a satirical Catholic magazine congratulated a former Catholic priest who had obtained a Church of Ireland chaplaincy worth £300 a year—not bad, they thought, "for an old `turncoat". But they warned him not to hope for richer rewards.

*No, no, these are fat things which good Protestants want for themselves; and though the church endures such apostates as you, believe me that it suspects their sincerity. . . . Enjoy yourself for awhile, and never forget that, like hundreds of your predecessors, you will one day be likely to seek refuge in the church you have abandoned.*<sup>37</sup>

These were typical Catholic responses to conversion: it was probably insincere, perhaps for material reasons, and the supposed convert was likely only lapsed and would return to the true Church eventually. The Protestant campaign effectively came to an end when the 1861 census revealed that decades of intense efforts had left Ireland's religious demography essentially unchanged. **Hoping to convert large numbers of Catholics, the campaigners did far better at revitalising their own Protestant Churches; hoping to bequeath to future generations a legacy of social peace, they left behind instead an intensified sectarian animosity.**<sup>38</sup>

**1845-9 During these years, failure of the potato crop precipitated a horrible famine, resulting in one million deaths and the emigration of another million people.** Shock and numbness were perhaps the dominant responses to the famine, but aspects of the tragedy also left behind enduring anger. Famine hit hardest in poor agricultural regions of the west which were most dependent on the potato, while wealthier Ulster, with its more diverse

economy, was relatively unaffected, which meant that Catholic experience of famine was radically different from Protestant experience. Noting that famine victims were almost exclusively poor Catholics and that the relief efforts of the British government were totally inadequate, the radical nationalist John Mitchel concluded, while the famine was still in progress, that the famine deaths were the result of a British policy of genocide, the purpose being to clear Ireland of excess population so that Irish land could fulfill its primary purpose of putting food on British tables. Few of Mitchel's nationalist contemporaries were so extreme, and historians, while acknowledging British culpability for the scale of death, find no evidence of deliberate murder. Writing in the most recent volume of *A New History of Ireland*, James Donnelly sums up the findings of historians.

*If the charge of genocide could be sustained simply by showing that blind adherence to the doctrines of laissez-faire led to countless thousands of deaths ... in Ireland during the late 1840s, then it may be taken as proved. But i f . . . there must also be a demonstration that British statesmen and their agents in Ireland were knowing and willing collaborators in a deliberate campaign of extermination, then the allegation of genocide is not only unproven but not even worth making."*<sup>39</sup>

**In the popular memory of the famine, however, genocidal interpretations remain,** and in any case popular memory blurs the difference between genocidal intent and culpability for the scale of death -- or finds the difference morally insignificant. The famine, remembered as an exceptionally brutal example of British colonialism, has been the source of exceptional anger.

If the famine was to have a religious legacy, it probably ought to have been a happy one, insofar as a tragedy of this magnitude can leave any positive legacy. Christians of several Churches, Catholic and Protestant, worked heroically and indefatigably - and frequently cooperatively - to relieve suffering. Even though their efforts could not possibly match the scale of need, the consequences of the famine would have been far worse without their work. However, the coincidence of the famine and the Protestant campaign to convert Catholics ensured that service and cooperation would take second place in popular memory to `souperism': the charge that some Protestants offered food (usually soup, hence 'souperism') or other material aid to desperate Catholics only on the condition that they convert or, more likely, fulfill some religious condition, perhaps attending a bible class or worship service. Desmond

Bowen's study of *Souperism: Myth or Reality* demonstrates that clerical cooperation was the norm and that charges of souperism were exaggerated, but they were also extremely difficult to prove or disprove, one person's souperism being another's disinterested benevolence. In 1847 James Collins, Church of Ireland Dean of Killala and a diligent co-worker with the Catholic priest of Killala in the cause of famine relief, was accused of souperism by another Catholic priest in the area. While admitting that Catholics had joined his Church, Collins denied souperism, saying that conversions were "a consequence and not a condition of the relief afforded".<sup>40</sup> Such ambiguous stories allowed whatever interpretation the interpreter was inclined to give them. The characteristic outlook of the evangelical party among Protestants left them particularly wide open to charges of souperism. The 1847 annual report of the Baptist Irish Society affirmed that its primary work was evangelism, not famine relief, and described how the two were related.

*Large numbers of the peasantry have offered to join our churches, supposing that thereby they would be provided for. In all such cases they have been told the entrance into the church of Christ is by sincere repentance and faith in Jesus Christ and in him alone. Having first corrected the mistake, the agents have not allowed these children of want to go unrelieved. And, while carefully abstaining from any effort to proselytise, they have not, through fear of misrepresentation, refrained from making known the truth as it is in Jesus, while distributing the bounty of the British churches.<sup>41</sup>*

This typically evangelical effort to distinguish between proselytising and evangelising would almost inevitably lead to charges of souperism - as they realised, judging by the 'fear of misrepresentation' remark - and yet famine relief was far from being merely an occasion to make converts. British Churches that gave nothing to the Baptist Irish Society for evangelism, gave generously for famine relief. Grey areas abounded in both doctrine and practice.

What can be said with certainty is that **resentful memories of souperism long outlived the famine era**. From the reformation onwards, conversion to Protestantism often held the promise of some material benefit, and long before the famine Catholics were reflexively suspicious that greed was the motive for conversion. The notion of souperism summed up this tradition in an image invested with particular potency because of the total vulnerability of its victims.

**1886 In 1834 Presbyterian evangelical leader Henry Cooke spoke at a huge Protestant rally in Co. Down, pronouncing the banns of a "sacred marriage" between the divided Churches.**<sup>42</sup> Of course the Catholic Church was not among the divided Churches he had in mind, and in fact the purpose of the "sacred marriage" was to build a common Protestant front against what most Protestants saw as the enemies of true Christian faith and a sound society: Catholic clergy and laity, doctrinal heresy, and infidelity. Although Cooke's announcement of the banns preceded the actual marriage by a long time, by **the end of the century the old tensions between dissenting and established Protestantism had paled to insignificance in the face of a pan-Protestant union to fight Catholic nationalism and home rule.**

One important force in mending Protestant divisions was **evangelicalism**, which from its eighteenth-century entry into Ireland was an interdenominational movement. Evangelicals were naturally inclined to find fellowship with others who shared their characteristic conversion and spiritual experience, regardless of denomination, and they were correspondingly nonchalant about ecclesiastical boundaries and structures. In the 1800s evangelicalism did prove more amenable to denominational control than Church leaders had believed possible. But even while contributing to denominational structures, evangelicals also built evangelical organisations with their counterparts in other Churches, and the Churches themselves gradually became more evangelical in tone. Evangelicalism also fostered unity between classes. The Ulster revival of 1859 was particularly important in this regard, because it cemented the Protestantism of the Protestant working class. Evangelicalism, which was prone to anti-Catholicism, also promoted class unity by nurturing a sense of shared Protestant superiority to Catholicism. Certainly after the 1859 revival and perhaps before, the ethos of Irish Protestantism was predominantly, though far from exclusively, evangelical.

The other great force uniting Protestants was **resistance to Catholic nationalism**, which during the 1800s grew increasingly strong, self-confident, and assertive. It seemed to Protestants that Irish Catholics drew from a bottomless well of grievances, and when a craven British government sacrificed principle to meet one demand, Catholics, far from being satisfied, immediately drew up a greater one. Like evangelicalism, resisting Catholic claims united Protestants across class boundaries. If working class Protestants were badly off, they could at least regard themselves as better off than the Catholic working class, and, they feared, as much better off than if Catholics came into power. The Orange

Order was especially important in uniting Protestants against Catholic demands. From its beginning, the Order had included both gentry and peasantry, and by the late 1800s it involved all classes and denominations of Protestants.

Opposition to Gladstone's Home Rule Bill of 1886 was the issue that finally focussed and fixed Protestant unity. Home rule, most Protestants firmly believed, would inevitably mean Rome rule, and Rome rule would be an unqualified disaster, religiously, economically and politically. "Home Rule for Ireland", wrote the Methodist denominational paper the *Christian Advocate* in 1886, "means not only war against the Crown rights of England, but war against the Crown rights of Christ.... Its inspiration is religious antipathy, its methods plunder, its object Protestant annihilation."<sup>43</sup> When Irish Protestants looked around the world, they saw a global order in which they judged Protestant nations to be progressive, free, and wealthy and Catholic nations the opposite. Faced by the stark fact of a huge Catholic majority, Protestants argued that Ireland was not a viable political unit because Catholics would not, by their nature, protect minority rights. As for Ulster's wealth, it was the fruit of a Protestant work ethic, they believed, and it would be first plundered and finally eliminated under a home rule government.

The unionist umbrella covered diverse approaches. Conservative unionists understood themselves lobe maintaining the status quo, while liberal unionists were resisting what they believed was the ultimate illiberal force, Irish Catholic nationalism. Depending on perspective, an individual could oppose home rule for political, economic, religious, or cultural reasons; more typically all these reasons were indissolubly bound together. David Hempton and Myrtle Hill, authors of *Evangelical Protestantism in Ulster Society, 1740-1890*, observe that many British Protestant Nonconformists, forced by their Irish counterparts to confront the home rule issue, tried to solve the problem by drawing **"boundaries between religion and politics. The trouble with the Irish Question was that no such boundary existed."**<sup>44</sup> Gladstone was elected in February 1886, he introduced the first Home Rule Bill in April, and after its defeat in June, he was bounced out of power in the general election of July 1886. But the home rule issue remained, providing a focus for Protestant unity for decades to come.

**1908 In 1907 Pope Pius X issued the *Ne Temere* decree, which was designed to tidv up some inconsistencies in Catholic marriage law.** Among

other provisions, *Ne Temere* reaffirmed and applied universally the teaching that "only those marriages are valid that are contracted before the parish-priest ... and at least two witnesses" and it also added that this condition of validity applied even if one partner was not Catholic. *Ne Temere* came into effect quietly enough in 1908, but it soon became the occasion for enormous sectarian controversy. "In simple terms," summarises Fr. Eoin de Bhaldraithe in a study of *Ne Temere*, "a mixed marriage in Ireland would not be valid in Roman Catholic eyes after *Ne Temere* unless witnessed by the Parish Priest. In practice the Catholic clergy would not officiate unless both parties had promised that all the children would be Catholic."<sup>45</sup>

In 1910 the implications came to public attention in the celebrated McCann case in Belfast. Alexander McCann was Catholic, his wife Agnes a Presbyterian. They married in her Presbyterian church and had two children before he left with the children in 1910. Protestant and Catholic accounts of the situation had that much in common, but little else. The Protestant interpretation first came to public attention through the intervention of Agnes McCann's minister, William Corkey, in November 1910. According to Corkey, a happy marriage had been ruined by a meddling priest who told the McCanns their marriage was invalid in light of *Ne Temere* and would require a proper Catholic ceremony; when Mrs. McCann refused, her husband became abusive and finally left her. This story became the subject of sermons, pamphlets, debates in Westminster, and public rallies through Ireland and Scotland, and Protestants understood it as confirming their every fear about priestcraft and Romanism: the Catholic Church was a domineering, manipulative institution, insinuating itself into all areas of life; since *Ne Temere* allowed for national exceptions which had been granted for Germany but not for Ireland, the McCann case represented the attempt of a hostile foreign power to undermine British law. To Protestants, the whole story provided a cautionary, prophetic parable about life in a home rule Ireland, and Presbyterian historian John Barkley argues that the McCann case was the final nail in the coffin of Presbyterian support for home rule. Catholics disputed some of the basic facts and derived from them a totally different interpretation. According to a letter from Alexander McCann which was read out in the House of Commons by Nationalist MPs, the marriage was always unhappy because Agnes McCann was a meddling sectarian shrew who "cursed the Pope and sang hymns all day".<sup>46</sup> Furthermore, he left her of his own volition and without any prompting from any priest, a claim that gained additional credence when Mrs. McCann and her supporters failed to name the

priest supposedly involved. Joseph Devlin, Nationalist MP for West Belfast, dismissed Protestant hysteria not only as totally unfounded, but as the manipulation of an unfortunate event for political purposes—he claimed that election posters in his constituency read, "Will you vote for Devlin and have your Protestant children kidnapped by the Priest?"<sup>47</sup> All parties involved found suitable facts and interpretations, and the effect of the whole affair was to deepen pre-existing convictions and divisions.

Long after the McCann furore died down, *Ne Temere* remained a contentious issue because of its effect on Protestant numbers in the South of Ireland, where Protestants made up only 10 per cent of the population at the time of partition. It was always likely that some Protestants would want to marry Catholics, and the effect of *Ne Temere's* requirement that the Protestant partner consent to raising the children as Catholics was to reduce the Protestant population. Because several factors contributed to declining Protestant numbers, it is difficult to calculate the exact role of *Ne Temere*, but in 1974 a study by Garret Fitzgerald, then Foreign Minister of the Irish government, concluded that from 1946 to 1961 the effects of the *Ne Temere* decree caused Protestant population to fall at the rate of 1 per cent per year. In 1970, however, the situation was dramatically improved when the papal decree *Matrimonia Mixta* removed any requirement that the Protestant partner promise that children would be raised Catholic. In 1983 tension was further eased, though far from eliminated, when the Irish Catholic bishops specifically applied *Matrimonia Mixta* to the Irish situation, saying:

*The religious upbringing of the children is the joint responsibility of both parents. The obligations of the Catholic do not, and cannot, cancel out, or in any way call into question, the conscientious duties of the other party.*<sup>48</sup>

**1912 By 1911 home rule legislation was inevitable.** In December 1910 a tight general election left Irish Nationalists holding the balance of power, and the price they exacted for supporting the Liberals was, as always, home rule. Before home rule could be enacted, the House of Lords' veto power had to be removed, because the Lords had vetoed the second Home Rule Bill in 1893, and they certainly would have done so again in the 1910s. With Nationalist support and the King's consent, the Lords' veto was duly abolished in August 1911. In April 1912 a third Home Rule Bill began its slow, but this time inexorable, course through parliament.

The years since 1886 and the first Home Rule Bill had done nothing to diminish Ulster unionist opposition to home rule. The issue now was, how far would they go in resisting the legal imposition of home rule? In 1886 and 1893 the anti-home rule formula had involved an all but seamless joining of political, economic, and religious factors. In the 1910s these remained as before, but now unionists added the threat of physical force to the equation. Already by the autumn of 1911, unionist leader Edward Carson announced to a wildly enthusiastic crowd of over 50,000 Ulster Protestants that he would lead them into self-government should home rule become law. Winston Churchill, then a Liberal cabinet minister, spoke for many when he disdained "these frothings", believing that "when the worst comes to the worst we shall find that civil war evaporates in uncivil words".<sup>49</sup> But as events unfolded, Protestant resolve to resist home rule became increasingly undeniable. In addition to providing the personnel for resistance, the **Protestant Churches also helped to provide legitimacy.** On Easter Tuesday 1912, in anticipation of the imminent introduction of the Home Rule Bill, the Unionist Council organised another mass protest rally, this one attended by more than 100,000 people. The event began with prayers offered by the Presbyterian moderator and the Church of Ireland Archbishop of Armagh, thus blessing resistance with the support of the two largest Protestant Churches. The course of events was heating popular passions, which in the summer of 1912 sometimes spilled over into the well-worn groove of sectarian antagonism. The single worst incident, at a Celtic-Linfield football match in Celtic Park, sent sixty casualties to hospital. In addition to finding such actions personally abhorrent, Carson thought that they were a waste of energy and politically counter-productive, as they would diminish the unionist cause in the eyes of the world, especially in the eyes of British Conservatives and others whose support the unionists urgently needed. **The method unionist leaders chose to elevate and focus home rule resistance was to cast it in the rubric of the ancient Scottish covenanting tradition.** The idea of covenanting enjoyed unrivalled cachet among Presbyterians, because in the 1500s and 1600s, national covenants had been the form whereby Scottish Calvinists joined together under God the cause of church and nation, and these covenants were central to Presbyterian memory and identity. Now the unionists, Church of Ireland and Nonconformist alike, formulated the basis of their resistance to home rule in a Solemn League and Covenant for Ulster, which had been submitted to the Protestant churches for editing and approval. For Ulster Protestants Covenant Day, Saturday, 28

September 1912, was essentially a holy day: work ceased, and the day began with congregations meeting for worship. About noon in Belfast City Hall Carson was the first to sign the Covenant, followed by Lord Londonderry and church representatives. When it was all over 218,206 Ulstermen had signed the Covenant, 228,991 women had signed a parallel Declaration, and resistance to home rule was firmly cast as the cause of God and Ulster.

The more concrete method of channelling passions was military organisation. Military drilling began spontaneously among some Orange Order lodges, but in January 1913, all the separate efforts were harnessed together in an Ulster Volunteer Force. At first, all this enthusiastic but ill-equipped drilling was the source of mirth for outsiders, but the U VF rapidly became a large, committed, and well-organised force. After April 1914, when a carefully plotted gunrunning effort brought in 20,000 rifles and 2,000,000 rounds of ammunition, it was also a well-armed force.

The extent of Ulster Protestant military organisation was an innovation observed with great interest by Irish nationalists, who soon responded in kind. In the midst of a violent labour dispute in the summer of 1913, union leader James Larkin suggested that Dublin workers should follow the Ulster Protestant example, and one of his deputies organised a UVF-inspired citizen army. The arming of Ulster coincided with Patrick Pearse's transformation from cultural and constitutional nationalist to physical force republican, and the autumn of 1913 found him enthusing about the UVF:

*I am glad that the Orangemen have armed, for it is a goodly thing to see arms in Irish hands.... I should like to see any and every body of Irish citizens armed. We must accustom ourselves to the thought of arms, to the sight of arms, to the use of arms. We may make mistakes in the beginning and shoot the wrong people; but bloodshed is a cleansing and a sanctifying thing, and the nation which regards it as the final horror has lost its manhood. 50*

That same autumn, a force of National Volunteers emerged, explicitly following the UVF example and soon flourishing. In the summer of 1914, the National Volunteers once again followed the UVF example, this time with their own gun-running effort into Howth harbour. In 1916 most U V F members and many from the National Volunteers fought in the British forces against Germany. The Irish Volunteers, a radical splinter group from the National Volunteers, took over the GPO and declared an Irish republic.

**1916 Consistent with the French revolution roots of Irish republicanism, the proclamation of a republic on Easter Monday 1916**, drafted by Patrick Pearse, was impeccably **secular and nonsectarian**. On another level, however, Pearse's revolutionary thought throbbled with **religious rhetoric and imagery, a heretical union of Christianity and nationalism**. In Pearse's thought "national freedom" was "like a divine religion" bearing "the marks of unity, of sanctity, of catholicity, of apostolic succession"; the message of Irish republicanism was a gospel, and the four advocates he admired most - Wolfe Tone, Thomas Davis, John Mitchel, and James Fintan Lalor - were its four evangelists, prophets who spoke the word of the Lord; three deaths resulting from a gun-running episode were a national rebaptism by blood; the impending rising was the exulted "day of the Lord". He gave liturgical expression to the "religion of Irish nationality" in an oath-prayer.<sup>51</sup>

*In the name of God,  
By Christ His only Son,  
By Mary His gentle Mother,  
By Patrick the Apostle of the  
Irish, By the loyalty of Colm  
Cille, By the glory of our race,  
By the blood of our ancestors, By  
the murder of Red Hugh, By the  
sad death of Hugh O'Neill, By  
the tragic death of Owen Roe, By  
the dying wish of Sarsfield,  
By the anguished sigh of  
Fitzgerald, By the bloody wounds  
of Tone, By the Noble blood of  
Emmet, By the Famine corpses, By  
the tears of Irish exiles,  
We swear the oaths our ancestors swore,  
That we will free our race from  
bondage, Or that we will fall fighting  
hand to hand.  
Amen<sup>52</sup>*

None of Pearse's compatriots matched the intensity or consistency of his revolutionary mysticism, and some had no faith at all. But a general Catholic piety - mostly more orthodox than Pearse's - was common among the idealist

revolutionaries gathered in the General Post Office. One of Pearse's first acts in the GPO was to summon a priest to hear confession, and the last act of the surrendered men was to say the rosary, beads in one hand, rifles in the other. And Pearse's fusion of Christ's sacrifice and national sacrifice was seductive. Even James Connolly, always the rigorous and faithless socialist, required the Pearsean language of Calvary, blood and redemption, to express the meaning of the imminent rising. Such imagery could be applied to the trivial and the profound. In the confusion after the rising, when the mayor of Dublin, a moderate member of the Irish Parliamentary Party suffered a brief false arrest, he "could use the incident to compare himself to Christ",<sup>53</sup> observes historian Roy Foster. Terence MacSwiney, the lord mayor of Cork who would die on hunger strike in 1920, reflected on the significance of those republican martyrs who preceded him in dying for the cause of Irish freedom.

*[It] is because they were our best and bravest that they had to die. No lesser sacrifice would save us. Because of it our struggle is holy - our battle is sanctified by their blood, and our victory is assured by their martyrdom. We, taking up the work they left incomplete, confident in God, offer in turn sacrifice from ourselves. It is not we who take innocent blood, but we offer it, sustained by the example of our immortal dead and that Divine example which inspires us all -for the redemption of our Country. 54*

Political scientist Frank Wright argued that "nationalisms are not merely 'like' religions - they are religions."<sup>55</sup> It is a startling claim, but entirely plausible in light of the Pearsean tradition of Irish republicanism. Sean Farrell Moran, author of a recent study of republican martyrdom, concludes that the influence of Pearse's ideas is the key to understanding IRA violence, which "is hardly inexplicable terrorism; it functions in a tradition in Western culture which, out of a deep sense of grievance and a hope to institute a new age, will not surrender its notion of the holy and the true."<sup>56</sup> **In any case, the founding events of the modern Irish state found religion, politics, and bloodshed mingled once again.**

**1921 The partition of Ireland took effect in 1921 with the establishment of a six-county Northern Ireland; a year later a twenty-six county Irish Free State came into being. The long-standing division between Protestant and Catholic communities had now taken a constitutional form.**

Both states created a **new conjunction of majority community with political power**. In the North Protestants were for the first time a majority within a jurisdiction; in the South Catholics finally had political power commensurate with their numbers. And both states reflected the interests and ethos of the majority. In 1934 James Craig, Prime Minister of Northern Ireland, declared, "All I boast of is that we are a Protestant Parliament and a Protestant State",<sup>57</sup> while three years later the new Irish Constitution formally acknowledged what had long been obvious, the "special position" of the Catholic Church.

How the minority communities fared (and fare) in the new states is a subject that remains extremely difficult to handle. In the North, Catholics have made few complaints about a Protestant religious ethos being institutionalised-apart from some instances of sabbatarian laws - and in fact the founding Government of Ireland Act expressly forbade laws discriminating against Catholics as such. But however laws may be framed, it is how they are applied that matters most, and from 1921 to the present Northern Catholics have made repeated charges of systematic discrimination. Amid all the contradictory claims for and against Northern Ireland, the judicious and authoritative John Whyte is able to discern "a bunching towards the centre" <sup>58</sup> among writers on the issue: after exaggeration and mitigating circumstances have been acknowledged and taken into account, there remains undeniable evidence of deliberate and consistent Unionist discrimination against Catholics in the familiar categories of employment, housing, education, and relationship to the security forces.

In the South, the small Protestant minority has suffered little deliberate discrimination. The historian F. S. L. Lyons cites a few instances of postpartition sectarian discrimination, but only in the context of "the generally favourable position of Protestants in the community", which was, he concludes, "secure - not to say privileged".<sup>59</sup> The complaints of Southern Protestants have had more to do with living in a society in which the Catholic Church is by far the most important institution in the state and a pervasive Catholic ethos is sometimes enshrined in law, and even in the Constitution. In this setting, Protestants have been a quiet community, declining numerically and frequently holding back from a full role in public life. The quintessential example of apparent Catholic social control was the Mother and Child controversy of 1950-1, when the Irish government withdrew health legislation because the bishops had informed them that it contravened Catholic social teaching. As John Whyte's careful study in *Church and State in Modern Ireland, 1923-1979* has revealed, the incident was not the comprehensive

Home-Rule-is-Rome-Rule horror that it is sometimes claimed to be. But it did reveal that when the bishops spoke, the politicians listened. The bishops always possessed a significant influence, and on some issues it could be conclusive.

## EPILOGUE

Page after page on the historical roots of sectarianism can make for unpleasant, even painful reading. **Does history offer no hope, no countervailing story of the forces that have defied sectarianism? Yes, there is another story to be told, of efforts to cross the sectarian divide and to tackle its root causes.** Not nearly enough work, however, has been done to recover this aspect of Irish history.

Reconciling Memories, an ongoing series of publications, conferences, and seminars under the leadership of Alan Falconer, has done much to encourage a new way of thinking about Irish history. In one of these publications, *Reconciling Memories*, the political scientist Frank Wright issued a powerful call to seek out the events and dynamics that will serve reconciling purpose. **We have all, says Wright, been mesmerised by what he calls "the vortex of antagonism",<sup>60</sup> that spiral of conflict that figures so prominently in Irish history. The vortex is undeniably important, but Wright argues that not until we overcome our fascination with it will we be free to discover those historical characters and events - however weak, failed, or apparently insignificant - that deserve to be remembered because they have challenged sectarianism.**

One effort to recover a few pieces of this history has been a series of lectures, held in Bessbrook town hall and sponsored by Newry and Mourne District Council, called 'Protestant Visions of Ireland'. Each lecture has presented an historical character who in some way lived out an unusually brave, creative vision for Ireland, refusing to accept the usual sectarian divisions of Irish society. In the third lecture, Fr. Patrick Hickey spoke on Robert Traill, an Ulsterman who was Church of Ireland rector of Schull from 1832 to 1847. Traill did not have the kind of moderate, tolerant personality our modern assumptions might lead us to connect with anti-sectarianism, he was a combative evangelical preacher. His attitude toward Catholicism was typical of the day, and he fought a "war against popery in its thousand forms of wickedness". The threatening response of overwhelmingly Catholic Schull was also typical of the day, and Traill soon required police protection. Traill was ecumenical in his religious combat. As a strong Calvinist, he was as contemptuous of Arminian Methodism as he was of Catholicism, deriding Methodist chapels, in language drawn from the book of Revelation, as "synagogues of Satan". These and similar comments led to a three-day public debate with the local Methodist preacher.

## END NOTES

Given Traill's religious views and his combative relationship with the local people, the famine of 1845 to 1849 was likely to provide a searching test of character. The test came from the conjunction of famine geography with the typical mental outlook of the time. The impact of the famine was geographically skewed, striking hardest at parts of Ireland that were almost completely Catholic, while the parts of Ulster where most Protestants lived suffered little. As for mental outlook, to a degree that we can hardly imagine, Irish people of that day, Protestant and Catholic alike, thought in terms of providential explanations for events in the world around them. Given these characteristics of geography and outlook, amplified by his anti-Catholicism, Traill] might naturally and easily have interpreted the famine as God's providential judgement "against popery in its thousand forms of wickedness". But he did not. Instead he interpreted the famine as a shared disaster for all the people of Ireland and threw all his considerable energy and ability into war against famine in its many forms of suffering. He attempted, fruitlessly but in good faith, to design a storage pit that would keep potatoes from rotting, and he and his family were indefatigable in feeding as many people as they possibly could. But perhaps Traill's greatest contribution was his ceaseless, eloquent flow of correspondence to the press in Britain and Ireland, which did so much to make known the magnitude of the disaster and to raise relief subscriptions. It was all grossly inadequate to the scale of suffering, of course, but Traill] probably did all that he could have done before he died of famine fever in the spring of 1847. Perhaps Robert Traill's story can stand as a **representation of all the Irish people who have overcome the sectarianism of their society, and perhaps of their own hearts, to serve all their neighbours, without sectarian distinction.**

1Nicholas Canny, *From Reformation to Restoration: Ireland, 1534-1660* (Dublin, 1987), p. 10.

2Quoted in Nicholas P. Canny, *The Elizabethan Conquest of Ireland: A Pattern Established* (Hassocks, England, 1976), p. 153.

3Quoted *ibid.*, p. 121.

4Canice Mooney, "The First Impact of the Reformation", in *A History of Irish Catholicism, vol. iii*, ed. Patrick J. Corish (Dublin and Melbourne, 1967), p. 33.

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