

## THE GREAT CATTLE MASSACRE: HUMOR AND RITUAL IN THE IRISH RISING OF 1641

William A. Brooks, Jr.

*William A. Brooks, Jr. presented this paper to both the Fighting Irish Studies in America Conference at Notre Dame and the Phi Alpha Theta Lower Illinois Regional Conference at Illinois State University. At the latter conference, he won the award for best graduate paper in the European category. Mr. Brooks recently received his M.A. in history at Eastern.*

Soon after the Irish Rebellion of 1641, pamphlets appeared throughout England describing barbarous acts committed by Irish Catholic rebels against English and Scottish Protestants. These pamphlets, coupled with Sir John Temple's *A History of the Irish Rebellion*, published five years later, confirmed the stereotypical English opinion of the Irish as ungovernable savages. With the eventual suppression of the rebellion in 1649-50, and the subsequent trial of the leaders, depositions describing the atrocities reinforced the barbaric image of the Irish in the eyes of the English. Atrocities did occur, though probably with nowhere near the magnitude suggested by published accounts and depositions. This paper does not confirm or deny the allegations, nor does it offer an alternative explanation for the rebellion. Most historians now agree that the rebellion began as a political rising by the Irish lords though it quickly escaped their control. I will instead argue that the pamphlet accounts can be read in terms of symbolic ritual and liturgy. Within the rebels' violent behavior was an attempt to re-establish, rather than undermine a traditional social order in Ireland.

Of course, prior to 1641, there was no unchanging traditional social order. English attempts at conquest had produced a shifting patchwork of settled areas

protected by the Dublin government mixed with remnants of nomadic society with feudal overlays.<sup>1</sup> The Tudor government introduced tillage agriculture, individual landholding and a formal legal system to modernize and pacify Ireland.<sup>2</sup> By 1603, with the surrender of the Earl of Tyrone and the introduction of the plantation system, traditional, pastoral Gaelic society was coming to an end.<sup>3</sup>

Stripped of many vestiges of their old civilization, the Irish clung to their Catholic faith as a means of local and communal identity.<sup>4</sup> The plantation scheme coincided with the Irish counter-reformation and both encouraged a religious tradition hostile to Protestant settlers. The Irish viewed the English and their Scottish brethren as heretics.<sup>5</sup> Pivotal in this religious rebirth were the newly established Ulster Franciscan Foundation and the Jesuits. Though both orders were newly educated on the continent, they preached in Gaelic, and directed popular antagonism against the reformed church. To the Irish peasant, they represented the traditional Irish ecclesiastical structure.<sup>6</sup> Sharing their economic deprivation, legal and religious discrimination, the Franciscans provided the Irish a theological and ideological justification for armed insurrection.<sup>7</sup>

This, then, is the background to the Irish Rebellion of 1641 and the flood of pamphlets thereafter. I have examined some sixty depositions, twenty pamphlets, and Sir John Temple's *The Irish Rebellion*. Virtually all accounts retell the same brutal behavior of the rebels and the clerics. Other historians have emphasized the bias of the pamphlets reflecting their English audience. But by applying the anthropological method of other social historians, I want to suggest that they can be used to reflect the *mentalité* and conflict of two diverging cultures.

Deponents at the trials of 1651-52 claimed the Catholic clergy instigated and encouraged acts of cruelty. Julian Johnson, Anglican parson of Athenry and

1 Aileen Clarke, "The 1641 Rebellion and Anti-Popery in Ireland," in *Ulster 1641: Aspects of the Rising*, Brian MacCuarta ed., (Belfast: Queens University Press, 1993), 141.

2 Clarke, "1641 Rising," 142.

3 Patrick O'Farrell, *Ireland's English Question: Anglo-Irish Relations, 1534-1970* (New York: Schocken Books, 1971), 30.

4 *Ibid.*, 30.

5 *Ibid.*, 44.

6 M. Perceval-Maxwell, *The Outbreak of the Irish Rebellion of 1641* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1996), 14.

7 *Ibid.*

Donmore in county Galway, testified that a friar was the principal man in a "robbery and slaughter" of a Protestant family, encouraging the rebels with the words "it was brave sport" to see the young Englishmen slain while defending themselves "their eyes burning in their heads."<sup>8</sup> Sir John Temple's book reported "Priests had now charmed the Irish! and laid such bloody impressions in them, as it was held, according to the maxims they received, a mortal sin to give any manner of relief or protection to any of the English."<sup>9</sup> On the one hand, this is just stock anti-popery and Protestant anti-clericalism. On the other hand, it could be said that the priests legitimized rebel actions, actions which constituted a Holy Crusade to exterminate the heretic.<sup>10</sup> Raymond Gillespie asserts that "religious differences which had been acceptable and accommodated in times of stability quickly came to the fore in times of uncertainty and instability. Protestant symbols such as the Bible were foci for attacks by Catholic rebels. The religious difference was not about ecclesiastical organization, but rather about interpretations of what was holy and therefore a mediation of divine will."<sup>11</sup> Churches, Bibles, and other religious symbols may have represented a territorial encroachment by outsiders. By destroying their enemies' territorial markers, the rebels reasserted domination in their ancestral community.

Especially chilling are testimonies which depict the mutilation of corpses and the desecration of Protestant graves. The pamphlet, *Doleful Newes from Ireland*, printed in 1642, describes just such an incident:

Not are these all the cruelties that are here committed, for in the very fields, men, women and children be scattered up and down, most of them naked, being murdered and starved, and many of them mangled and dismembered, some having their hands and feet cut off, others their eyes and tongues pulled out . . .<sup>12</sup>

In her study of religious riots in sixteenth century France, Natalie Zemon Davis contends that corpse mutilation was primarily a characteristic of Catholic crowds. Whereas Protestants believed that the "souls of the dead experience either salvation or the torments of the damned," the body no longer posed a threat to the community.<sup>13</sup> For Catholics, however, further degradation and humiliation of the body was necessary to exorcise the evil spirits.<sup>14</sup>

8 Mary Hickson, *Ireland in the Seventeenth Century or the Irish Massacre of 1641-42* vol.II (London: Green and Co., 1884), 14.

9 Sir John Temple, *The Irish Rebellion* (London, 1646), 69.

10 Natalie Zemon Davis, "The Rites of Violence: Religious Riot in Sixteenth-Century France," *Past and Present* 59 (1973): 65.

11 Raymond Gillespie, "De-stabilizing Ulster, 1641-42," in *Ulster 1641: Aspects of the Rising*, Brian MacCuarta ed. (Belfast: Queen's University Press, 1993), 114.

12 *Doleful Newes from Ireland* printed for T. Bates, (London, 1642), 2.

13 Davis, 82.

14 *Ibid.*, 82-83.

Perhaps the most notorious incident symbolizing religious antipathy in the rebellion was the massacre at Portadowne. According to the testimony of George Littlefield and Edward Saltinghall of county Armaugh, seventy English Protestants "were rounded up" and kept under guard at the church of Loughgall for two days and nights. "Afterwards, under the escort of one hundred rebels, they were herded to the bridge at Portadowne and thrown into the water and miserably drowned."<sup>15</sup> On the surface, this, like the burning of inhabited churches, may appear only as a convenient means of mass execution. However, the use of fire and water takes on a liturgical significance as well. The river acted as a cleansing solution of Holy water, while fire represented the purifying rite of exorcism.<sup>16</sup> These were not spontaneous acts of violence and wanton savagery, but premeditated acts with clear objectives. Protestants were evil. This was an unmistakable attack upon the reformed religion. To the Catholic Irish, Protestantism was clearly a threat to the traditional religious order. Through purification rites and the destruction of Protestant symbols under seemingly official church sanction, the rebels defended the fundamental values and self-definition of their community.<sup>17</sup>

If humor could be found amongst tales of unspeakable barbarity, it would indeed be black humor. One incident surfaces in the testimony of Thomas Johnson, Vicar of Tullagh and Killycormen:

The rebels in the barony of Costello and Gallen, in the said county of Mayo, in mere hatred and derision of the English and their very cattle, and in the contempt and derision of the English, did ordinarily and commonly prefer, or seem to prefer bills of indictment, and brought the English breed of cattle to be tried by juries, and having in their fashion arraigned these cattle, their scornful judges, then sitting amongst them would say "They look as if they could speak English! give them the book and see if they can read," pronouncing the words, '*Legit aut non*', to the jury. And then, because these cattle stood mute and did not read, the Irish judges would pronounce sentence of death against them, and so they were committed and put to slaughtering.<sup>18</sup>

To the seventeenth century English reader, this deposition, along with several others describing the torture and burning of cattle, might well have appeared as just one more case of senseless depravity. But this mock trial can be seen as an extended joke upon the newly established institutions the colonists brought with them. While it may strike the modern reader as pointless, it

15 Hickson, vol.I, 85.

16 Davis, 82.

17 Davis, 90.

18 Hickson, vol.II, 5.

illustrates the difference between us and the people of early modern Europe.<sup>19</sup> Robert Darnton argues that "the best point of entry in an attempt to penetrate an alien culture can be those where it seems to be most opaque-- a joke, a proverb, a ceremony-- that is particularly meaningful to the natives."<sup>20</sup> The criminal prosecution of these animals serves as a bitter comment on the English legal and economic institutions, at whose hands the Irish peasant suffered. This "trial" illustrates the depth to which an outside force as powerful as the law had penetrated popular Irish society, thus demonstrating the interaction and division between the two cultures.<sup>21</sup>

The trial embodied an oblique attack on all English. It was an attack on the outsiders who had deprived them of their ancient liberties and customary rights. It exemplified an attack on tithes, landlords, and restrictions of the English law they had come to equate with oppression. The phrase uttered by the "judge," *Legit aut non* (can you read), illustrates the level of understanding the native peasant had acquired of the English judicial system. Evidence reveals that during the 1620's and 1630's litigation in the Irish courts had increased dramatically. Land disputes and tenurial agreement made up the bulk of the cases.<sup>22</sup> From the peasant perspective, the cattle served as the perfect proxy for the colonists, who deemed their cattle more significant than their tenants.<sup>23</sup> The imposition of the English legal system, deprived them of their land, forcing them into tenantry and taxes. By trying the English cattle, the Irish condemned the English legal institution. Perhaps they even yearned for the traditional law and order reinforced by the chieftains.<sup>24</sup> Indeed, studies have revealed that many of the Ulster tenants were descendants of 16th century inhabitants (those who had not fled between 1603 and 1607), and regarded some of the rebellion's leaders as their true overlords.<sup>25</sup>

19 Robert Darnton, "Workers Revolt: The Great Cat Massacre of the Rue Saint Severin." *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History* (New York: 1970), 77-78.

20 *Ibid.*, 78.

21 Perceval-Maxwell, 232.

22 Raymond Gillespie, "The End of an Era: Ulster and the Outbreak of the 1641 Rising," in *Natives and Newcomers*, Clairn Brady and Raymond Gillespie eds., (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1986), 196.

23 Darnton, 78.

24 *Ibid.*, 82.

25 Gillespie, "End of an Era," 209.

This morbid sense of justice is not simply a matter of condemning and executing the English metaphorically. The importance the Irish peasant placed on cattle cannot be overstated. Cattle represented their livelihood: Milk and curd sustained them; dung heated their stone huts; land could be obtained and dowries presented with cattle. They housed their cattle in their huts at night for fear of wolves and spells cast by fairies. In fact, some even placed wreaths of mountain ash around the udders of their cows to ward off vexations by fairies.<sup>26</sup> Tales like "The Cattle Raid of Cooley" formed the basis of heroic folklore and legends. In short, cattle defined the traditional Gaelic community, they saw the English cattle, just as they saw the English colonists, as interlopers.

After the establishment of the plantation system, a gradual economic transformation took place in Ireland. A transformation from a subsistence to a market economy.<sup>27</sup> While the Ulster plantation was instrumental in affecting this transformation, the basic structure had not changed. Lands they previously held as free-holders under Irish lords, were now rented to them as tenants.<sup>28</sup> Donald Woodward's study of the seventeenth century Anglo-Irish livestock trade reveals that the Irish exported 30,000 head of cattle annually by 1641.<sup>29</sup> The explanation for this meteoric rise in livestock exportation in so short a period lies with the plantation colonists. The settlers, brought with them to Ireland superior breeds of cattle, and successfully established them there.<sup>30</sup> These larger and heartier animals caused further economic distress to the poor tenant by destroying their foreign hide market. Further aggravating the peasant's plight, were higher rent demands after the poor harvests of 1638-1641.<sup>31</sup>

One further dimension of the "massacre" needs to be explored if we are to understand the Irish *mentalité*-- the traditional folk customs of the Irish peasant. Two forms of traditional belief emerge--one ecclesiastical, the other secular. In the Middle Ages it was popularly held that demons could take diabolic possession of human beings and animals.<sup>32</sup> A homicidal boar or bull may very well be

26 Brian MacLysaght, *Irish Life in the Seventeenth Century* (New York: Barnes and Noble Inc., 1969), 178.

27 Perceval-Maxwell, 45.

28 Donald Woodward, "The Anglo-Irish Livestock Trade in the Seventeenth Century," *Irish Historical Review* 72 (September 1973): 490.

29 *Ibid.*, 515.

31 *Ibid.*

32 E.P. Evans, *The Criminal Prosecution and Capital Punishment of Animals* (London: William Heineman, 1906), 6.

the incarnation of a demon. If left unpunished, the demon could enter human beings through the possessed animal. Cattle and poultry were particularly vulnerable to these vexations.<sup>33</sup> If the animal passed to other hands in the form of an inheritance or sale, the spell remained.<sup>34</sup> This helps interpret why the rebels chose to execute the cattle in such elaborate fashion, instead of confiscating the beasts for their own use. The cattle were manifestations of the heretical English, contaminated enemies of God.<sup>35</sup> The Franciscans and Jesuits perpetuated this superstition as a means of strengthening their influence and power over the peasants.<sup>36</sup>

In the secular sense, the prosecution of animals was by no means rare, often practiced by isolated tribes of Europe. Animal trials reinforced the natural order of man over beast. This was a ritual performed by a primitive people whose crude man's dominion over animals in "the great chain of being."<sup>37</sup> In a time when men's fortunes were more susceptible to the forces of nature, any perceived threat to that delicate balance was subject to man's justice.<sup>38</sup> Thus, the English cattle which thrived in the lush Ulster meadows were convicted of usurping man in the natural order.

Every community or society has its own conception of proper order. The Church, be it Catholic or Reformed, imposes a doctrinal order to insure salvation. Governments impose order in the form of laws and courts to maintain a civil and just society. Sometimes order comes in a form of inherited customs and traditions. Often, however, order is maintained in a form not so clearly defined. It only surfaces when disorder manifests itself in form of an external threat. This is an order that transcends all human experience and defies definition, a subconscious sense of uniformity. They saw themselves as defending the traditional customs and institutions that the English colonists had replaced. Like the Nu-Pieds of seventeenth-century France, the rebels perceived the settlers as outsiders, people who destroyed their way of life, or at least life as they preferred to remember it.<sup>39</sup> They wanted to return to that mythical "Golden Age,"

33 *Ibid.*, 6-7.

34 *Ibid.*, 7.

35 Clarke, "1641 Rising," 152.

36 Evans, 41.

37 *Ibid.*, 40-41.

38 *Ibid.*, 34-35.

39 Robert Mousnier, "The Nu-Pieds--1639," in *Peasant Uprisings in Seventeenth Century France, Russia and China* (New York: Harper and Row, 1970), 109.

described by their ancestors, when life was simple and harmonious.<sup>40</sup> The Irish Rebellion of 1641 surely appeared to the English and Scotch as a "world turned upside down," a violent overthrow of the proper social order. To the Irish peasant this was an attempt to restore order, in the form in which they knew it. This was the clash of two notions of a well ordered society. The ritual and liturgy, found not only in the church but in the belief system of the community, illustrates man's desires and fears in an uncertain age. But black humor in the midst of horrible destruction, adds a new dimension to the understanding of seventeenth century Irish life and rebellion.

40 Yves-Marie Beres, *History of Peasant Revolt: The Social Origins of Rebellion in Early Modern France* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), 169.