

CHAPTER ONE

“The blood of an Irishman”

THE ENGLISH CONSTRUCTION OF THE IRISH RACE, 1534–1801

From the later sixteenth century, when Edmund Spenser walked the plantations of Munster, the English have presented themselves to the world as controlled, refined and rooted; and so it suited them to find the Irish hot-headed, rude and nomadic, the perfect foil to set off their own virtues.

—Declan Kiberd, 1995

IN RECENT YEARS scholars from a wide range of academic disciplines have noted that for the architects of empire, the process of identity formation seems to require the creation, and demonization, of a colonized Other whose vices serve to highlight the virtues of the colonizer. Apparently, no matter what our station in life, we need to imagine the Other in order to envision ourselves not only as literal, flesh-and-blood creatures but also as bearers of a set of characteristics—above all, a set of virtues—that define the collective entity we call the nation and the race. In *Inventing Ireland*, Declan Kiberd has identified a process that many have called the racialization of the Irish—the reduction of a culturally and biologically diverse people to a monolithic whole and the designation of their racial or national characteristics as the antithesis of Anglo-Saxon virtue. Kiberd locates this process in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, but its roots go back much further, at least to the twelfth century, when the Paris-trained cleric Giraldus Cambrensis (Gerald of Wales) reported to the English king Henry II that the Irish were

a people living off beasts and like beasts; a people that yet adheres to the most primitive way of pastoral living. For as humanity progresses from the forests to the arable fields, and thence towards village life and civil society, this people, spurning agricultural exertions, having all too little regard for material comfort and a positive dislike of the rules and legalities of civil intercourse, has been able neither to give up nor abandon the life of forests and pastures which it has hitherto been living.

Cambrensis had ventured across the Irish Sea as a servant of the English Crown, and, increasingly, the purpose of his treatises was to justify English conquest. Thus it became necessary to present the native inhabitants of Ireland in the worst possible light. In his *Topographia Hibernica*, he characterized the Irish as incorrigibly savage and barbaric. “This people,” he concluded, “is a . . . truly barbarous one, . . . being not only barbarous in their dress, but suffering

their hair and beards to grow enormously in an uncouth manner. . . . Indeed, all their habits are barbarisms.” Cambrensis also gave voice to what became an indelible impression of the Irish as fundamentally devious and untrustworthy in their relations with the Norman adventurers who had come to civilize them. He concluded that “one must fear their craftiness far more than their warfare; their quietude more than their fieriness; their sweet talk more than their invective; malice rather than pugnacity; treason more than open war; hypocritical friendliness rather than contemptible enmity.”¹

Over the centuries there was also a quite different tendency—to exoticize the Irish and give expression to a kind of premodern primitivism that saw in the lifestyle and folkways of the Gael an attractive, even compelling, alternative to the way of life that prevailed in England and within the Anglicized Pale of Settlement in Ireland itself. Whereas Cambrensis had condemned Irishmen for “suffering their hair and beards to grow enormously in an uncouth manner,” others found the self-presentation of the Gael alluring, symbolizing a state of noble savagery. It was evident not only in men’s dress and hairstyles, but also in the frank and seemingly reflexive sensuality that was said to characterize Irishwomen. Indeed, it could extend even to as controversial a figure as the Gaelic chieftain Shane O’Neill, one of the most ruthless and effective adversaries of the English military in Ireland, who was denounced by a late nineteenth-century biographer as “a glutton, a drunkard, a coward, a bully, an adulterer, and a murderer.” In 1562 O’Neill was granted an audience at the court of Queen Elizabeth, where his presence created quite a stir. Unlike his father, who had submitted to Henry VIII in 1542 wearing English clothes and accompanied by English noblemen, Shane came dressed in native garb, surrounded by a retinue of Scots mercenaries, all of them displaying “bare heads, ash-coloured hanging curls, golden saffron undershirts, . . . loose sleeves, short tunics, and shaggy lace.” According to a seventeenth-century chronicler, “The English nobility followed [all of this] with as much wonderment as if they had come from China or America.”²

A fascination with the more exotic dimensions of “Irishness” would remain a secondary countercurrent of the English discourse on Ireland and the Irish for centuries. It was most likely to surface during periods of relative calm in the relations between colony and metropole, and it found a distinctive outlet in the celebration of the “grandeur” and “sublimity” of the Irish landscape that flourished during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.³ For the most part, however, when the English needed to extend their authority, control more territory, and lay claim to more arable land, then the barbarism and savagery, even the alleged paganism, of the Irish became a justification for policies of brutal suppression.

A pivotal moment in this process of development was the sixteenth century, especially after 1534, when the Tudor monarch Henry VIII broke with Rome and created a Protestant kingdom that was increasingly at odds with the

Catholic powers on the European continent. Henry and his successors feared England's vulnerability to attack by France and Spain and saw Ireland not only as a stepping-stone to the English heartland but as a nation whose stubbornly Catholic population might be willing, even eager, to collude with England's enemies. Ultimately, perceiving a land and a people in desperate need of reformation, they decided to bring all of Ireland under English control.⁴

In simplest terms, the government's goal was to extend the reach of the Pale, the region around Dublin where the English language, English common law, and English land-use patterns had long prevailed. In the longer term, the hope was that all of Ireland could be brought from “a state of savagery to a state of civilisation.”⁵ Undeniably, many English observers experienced culture shock when they encountered the native, or Gaelic, Irish in areas characterized by traditional ways of living. It seemed to these observers that the Irish “live[d] brutally . . . more like beasts than men”; that they were “licentious” and “given to idleness”; that some of them were “half naked for want of clothes to cover them,” and others wore loose-fitting garments and allowed their hair to cover their eyes in order to conceal their devious designs. As Cambrensis had noted in the twelfth century, they continued to follow their cattle and obstinately refused “to descend to husbandry . . . or to learn any mechanical art or science.” Insofar as they had a system of law, it appeared to be a form of lawlessness, for it was decentralized, seemingly arbitrary, and administered by men (brehons) who, in English eyes, were “unlearned and barbarous.” Worst of all, perhaps, Irishwomen demonstrated a freedom from constraint that was dangerous to the maintenance of civil society and civilization itself. Because divorce was readily accessible under brehon law, the Irish could move easily from one partner to the next—hence the frequent charge of “incest” in Irish sexual relations. At best, then, the Irish appeared to be “a people altogether stubborn and untamed”; at worst, they were “wild, barbarous and treacherous.”⁶

The goal of re-forming the Irish led to policies that alternated between conciliation and coercion—or, in Jane Ohlmeyer's more provocative phrasing, between “assimilation” and “annihilation.”⁷ Insofar as the latter is concerned, some historians have charged that the Irish themselves, above all the Gaelic lords and chieftains who ruled the lands beyond the Pale, were prone to gruesome acts of violence, and that the instability created by their constant fratricidal warfare played a vital role in drawing the Tudor monarchy into Ireland in the first place.⁸ According to Kenneth Nicholls, however, “The crown's commitment to military intervention helped to change Ireland from a country suffering from an excess of violence into one utterly devoured by it.” The devastation that accompanied the government's scorched-earth campaigns in southwest Munster and in Ulster became especially notorious, thanks in large measure to the chilling but unapologetic testimony offered by English chroniclers such as Edmund Spenser and Fynes Moryson. In southwest Munster, from 1569 to 1573 and again from 1579 to 1583, the “systematic burning of the people's corn,

the spoiling of their harvests and the killing and driving of their cattle” created famine conditions that—over a six-month period in 1582 alone—may have taken more than thirty thousand lives. According to Spenser, the “Prince of Poets in his tyme” and the author of *A View of the Present State of Ireland*, “in short space . . . a most populous country suddenly [was] left void of man or beast.”⁹

A similar policy of conquest was applied in Ulster, where the forces of the Crown set out to subdue the Gaelic lords, above all the O’Neills, the preeminent symbol of the power and culture of Gaeldom. Actually, Hugh O’Neill, England’s most charismatic and effective adversary in the Elizabethan era, had tried to “remain loyal to the crown for as long as possible and . . . was amenable to aspects of royal policy in Ulster.”¹⁰ But O’Neill’s determination to keep his lordship intact, and to enjoy the political and military power that flowed from it, brought him into irreconcilable conflict with the government. During the latter stages of the Nine Years’ War (1594–1603), the government again pursued a draconian policy that involved the burning of crops, the killing of cattle, and the starving of the population in order to undermine the base that sustained O’Neill’s resistance. When peace finally came, it was, in David B. Quinn’s memorable words, “the peace of death and exhaustion.” Although no accurate estimate of the loss of human life is possible, Ulster was, to a significant extent, depopulated.¹¹

For many Englishmen, the Catholicism of the Irish became definitive proof of their inferiority as a nation and a race. But others were not convinced that the Irish even qualified as Catholic. Their worship and devotional life seemed to embody more primitive forms of religious practice—something much closer to paganism than to any variant of Christianity. This accusation derived in large measure from the fact that Irish religious observance, especially in the rural areas beyond the English Pale of Settlement, incorporated many pre-Christian practices and continued to reflect the intertwining of a folk religion attuned to the rhythms and wonders of the natural world with normative Catholicism. “They are all Papists, by their profession,” Spenser acknowledged, “but . . . so blindly and brutishly informed for the most part . . . that you would rather think them atheists or infidels.”¹² The English military commander Sir Arthur Chichester agreed, calling the Irish “the most treacherous infidels in the world,” while his superior officer, Lord Deputy Mountjoy, expressed the opinion that “even the very best of the Irish people were in their nature little better than devils.”¹³ These characterizations were way stations on a slippery slope that led to the very depths of degradation. After comparing Shane O’Neill to “Huns and Turks,” one English official went even further and called him “that cannibal.” Others repeated Cambrensis’s characterization of the Irish as “a people living off beasts and like beasts.” If indeed they were “little better than devils,” and even “like beasts,” then the moral precepts that placed limits on indiscriminate killing did not apply to them.¹⁴ Thus Chichester could report from County Tyrone in 1601, “We have burned and destroyed along . . . Lough [Neagh] even

within four miles of Dungannon where we killed man, woman, child, horse, beast and whatever we found.”¹⁵

If the sixteenth century was a time of “incomplete conquest,” in the next century the process was completed. By the 1690s the English had constructed the foundations of an enduring and multifaceted Protestant Ascendancy.¹⁶ The seventeenth century was marked by two major—and appallingly destructive—wars, one of them lasting more than a decade. It was also marked by successive waves of dispossession, which ultimately meant that almost all Catholics east of the River Shannon ceased to be landowners. Increasingly, it appeared that Ireland was a nation defined by a fundamental antagonism between Irish Catholics and English (and Irish) Protestants. The events that played the key role in consolidating this perception were the Catholic rebellion of 1641 and the Cromwellian invasion of 1649. The rebellion, which began in Ulster, occurred after several decades of relative calm, during which the “plantation” of much of that province appeared to have won the acquiescence, if not the enthusiastic support, of the native Irish population. The suddenness of the rising, and the fury that accompanied it, served only to reinforce Protestant perceptions of the Catholic Irish as treacherous and innately savage. On the other side of the religious divide, Oliver Cromwell became a byword for English cruelty and injustice, and the “curse of Cromwell” assumed a prominent place in Irish legend.

The uprising of 1641 actually began as a limited engagement, initiated by eminent Catholic landowners, notably Hugh O’Neill’s grandson Sir Phelim O’Neill, whose objectives were also limited—mainly, to secure their property and win greater freedom to practice their religion. But O’Neill and his associates quickly lost control of the rebellion, as much of the Catholic population rose up and turned on Protestant settlers, who, in many cases, had displaced and exploited them. A lively pamphlet literature developed immediately after the first reports of atrocities reached London, and in 1646 Sir John Temple published *àe Irish Rebellion*, which soon took on iconic status and was reprinted regularly over the centuries whenever Protestant rule in Ireland appeared to be in jeopardy.¹⁷ Temple and other chroniclers of the rebellion claimed that as many as three hundred thousand Protestants were murdered, even though in 1641 the Protestant population of Ulster probably did not exceed thirty-four thousand.¹⁸ According to Temple, “Jesuits, friars, and priests told the Irish that the Protestants were heretics and were ‘not to be suffered any longer to live among them: that it was no more a sin to kill an English-man, than to kill a dog.’”¹⁹

For more than a decade, war ravaged much of Ireland. It reached a crescendo with the Cromwellian invasion in August 1649. Oliver Cromwell spent forty weeks on Irish soil, and during that time he and his forces captured twenty-five fortified towns and castles. But he became most famous—or infamous—for the siege of Drogheda (and to a lesser extent the siege of Wexford), which resulted

in thousands of deaths and enduring images of cruelty and barbarism. John Morrill estimates that at least thirty-five hundred people were killed by Cromwell's forces at Drogheda, including large numbers of civilians. In perhaps the most infamous act of the siege, the governor and three hundred of his soldiers were executed in cold blood soon after they had surrendered with assurances that their lives would be spared. The governor, an English Royalist, "had his 'brains beat out' with his own wooden leg." According to Morrill, Drogheda "was a massacre . . . without . . . parallel in seventeenth-century British and Irish history. . . . There was nothing which matched it in scale or in the range of its brutalities."²⁰

In the aftermath of a decade of war, the victorious Cromwellians imposed a thoroughly repressive regime on the defeated Irish Catholics. Among its essential features were the dispossession of Catholic landowners in three of Ireland's four provinces and their removal to Connacht; the wholesale expulsion of soldiers, priests, and vagrants; and the ban on "popery." The Act of Settlement of 1652 mandated that "all 'priests and Jesuits' involved in any way in the rebellion were to forfeit their lives." Some were executed, but many more, perhaps a thousand, went into exile, mostly in Catholic Europe.²¹ The central issue was land. The more radical elements of the new regime envisioned a society of small agricultural holdings owned and worked by a pious Protestant yeomanry. Their goal was to cleanse much of Ireland of its Catholic population. But as in the Ulster plantation scheme earlier in the century, their plans ran afoul of reality. It soon became evident—at least to the larger Protestant landowners—that the continued presence of Catholic "earth-tillers and herdsmen" on their estates was essential. Nonetheless, the overall trend was clear. Catholics owned 59 percent of the land in 1641, even after the plantations of the early seventeenth century. By 1660 their holdings had been reduced to 22 percent of the total, and much of that was in Connacht, where an uprooted and often traumatized Catholic community was hemmed in between the Shannon and the sea.²²

The remainder of the seventeenth century offers abundant evidence to bear out David Hayton's assertion that although Ireland's early modern history was one of conquest and colonization, it proceeded by "fits and starts."²³ The restoration of the monarchy in 1660, and the return of Charles II to the throne, led to a period of relaxation after two decades of upheaval and to renewed opportunities for Catholics in politics and society. This development took a major leap forward with the accession to the throne of Charles's brother James II in 1685. James, a convert to Catholicism, was determined to restore freedom of religion and the rights of citizenship to his Catholic subjects.²⁴ But while his supporters triumphed for the moment in Ireland, he was under siege in England, where less than 1 percent of the population was Catholic and the majority was fiercely hostile to "popery." James fled London in December 1688, on the same day that his Dutch son-in-law, William of Orange, entered the city and prepared to succeed him as king of England.

What followed was a war on Irish soil that mobilized troops from seven European nations. William defeated James at the famed Battle of the Boyne in July 1690. The decisive battle came a year later, at Aughrim in County Galway, where the Williamites won a decisive victory on what one historian has called “the bloodiest day in Irish history.” The Treaty of Limerick, which ended the war, appeared to guarantee that “the Roman-Catholics of this Kingdom” would be free to “exercise . . . their Religion.”²⁵ But vengeful Protestants made sure that the terms of the treaty were never honored. Acting through an Irish parliament cleansed of its Catholic members, they created what Hayton has called “a savage code of discriminatory legislation” aimed at the definitive, and permanent, subjugation of Ireland’s Catholic community.²⁶

The penal, or popery, laws further circumscribed Catholic ownership of land (which fell to 14 percent of the total by 1703 and slipped even further later in the eighteenth century). They also placed sweeping constraints on the institutional life of the Catholic Church and the freedom of Catholics to practice their religion. Catholics were excluded from Parliament by an English statute passed in 1691 but did not finally lose the right to vote until 1728. Some historians have argued that the penal laws were unevenly enforced and have demonstrated that priests and bishops were able to operate “freely, if discreetly, in most areas” by the 1720s. Nonetheless, for more than a century, Irish Catholics felt the oppressive weight of a Protestant Ascendancy that was founded on their dispossession and seemed to require their demonization.²⁷

In spite of the magnitude of their victories at the Boyne and Aughrim, and their success in crafting draconian penal legislation, few Irish Protestants could forget that they constituted a small island in a vast sea of “popery.” Indeed, fear of the malevolent—even murderous—intentions of the Catholic majority became integral to the Protestant psyche. Jonathan Swift, the Anglican dean of Dublin’s Saint Patrick’s Cathedral and the author of *Gulliver’s Travels*, put the matter succinctly in 1729, lamenting that “it is almost impossible [to find] a country gentleman . . . who does not live among his own tenants in continual fear of having his plantations destroyed, his cattle stolen, and his goods pilfered.” But Swift was well aware that by 1729 there had been no Catholic rebellion against Protestant governance in Ireland in nearly forty years. Thus, while commenting on the “Rapine, Sloth, Ignorance, as well as Poverty of the Natives,” he denied that the Catholic population represented a significant threat to the survival of the Protestant Ascendancy. “The Papists are wholly disarmed,” Swift concluded. “They have neither Courage, Leaders, Money, or Inclinations to Rebel.”²⁸

The relative absence of tension in the relations between Protestants and Catholics for much of the eighteenth century helped to facilitate a new appreciation not only of the majesty of the Irish landscape but also of the culture and educational achievements of the ancient Gaels. As early as 1716, in her *Irish Tales*, the mysterious Sarah Butler reminded her readers that “once *Ireland* was

esteem'd one of the Principal Nations in *Europe* for Piety and Learning."²⁹ The distinguished agricultural reformer Arthur Young, who traveled and worked in Ireland in the late 1770s, found virtue not only in the ancient Irish but also in their descendants. Although accepting some of the timeworn stereotypes of the "common Irish" as dirty, lazy, and uncivilized, he nonetheless constructed an idealized portrait of a vibrant and praiseworthy people characterized by "vivacity and a great eloquent volubility of speech," combined with "hospitality to all comers, be their poverty ever so pinching."³⁰

These positive portraits—and there were many of them in the eighteenth century—competed with but were ultimately overwhelmed by the more traditional and hostile representations of the Irish. Dean Swift earnestly searched for ways to wean "this uncultivated people from that idle, savage, beastly, thievish manner of life, in which they continue sunk" to a degree that it was almost impossible for his proverbial "country gentleman" to employ "a servant of human capacity, or the least tincture of natural honesty." Swift wondered if banning the use of the Irish language "would, in a great measure, civilize the most barbarous among them, [and] reconcile them to our customs." His fellow churchman Bishop George Berkeley offered a similar view. He asked in print "whether there be upon earth any Christian or civilized people so beggarly, wretched, and destitute as the common Irish," and "whether their habitations and furniture are not more sordid than those of the savage Americans." The controversial Scottish historian John Pinkerton injected a biological element into this age-old discourse on Irish savagery, asserting that the Celts "are savages, have been savages since the world began, and will forever be savages while a separate people; that is, while themselves and of unmixed blood."³¹ Pinkerton's introduction of blood into the equation anticipated nineteenth-century scientific speculation on the nature of the races of mankind, but his objection to the Celts as a "separate people" also harked back to Edmund Spenser and other colonizers of the Tudor and Stuart eras who believed that the Irish could overcome their savagery only when they ceased to be Irish.

As deeply rooted as these cultural polarities were, Ireland was not immune to the revolutionary currents emanating from France and the North American colonies. In the course of the eighteenth century, many Irish Protestants had come to resent the restrictions on trade imposed by the British government and the subordinate status of the Irish legislature relative to the British Parliament at Westminster. They also took offense at "the large numbers of Englishmen being appointed to desirable positions in the Irish civil, military, and ecclesiastical establishments."³² These accumulating resentments helped to precipitate a major sea change in the identity of many Protestants. In the 1770s "patriotism"—a new sense of Irishness and a staunch commitment to the defense of Irish interests—emerged as a vital force in Irish political life, and a Patriot party in the Dublin Parliament offered an increasingly formidable challenge to the status quo. Irish patriots saw the American Revolution as a "mirror-image" of their own

struggle for self-government.³³ In the context of Britain’s imperial crisis, they won major victories—the right to trade freely with the American colonies in 1779 and the right to “legislative independence” in 1782. But for the most part the patriot phenomenon failed to transcend the sectarian definitions of self and society that had long permeated Ireland. “The patriot conception of the Irish nation was an exclusively Protestant one,” Ian McBride has argued, and Jim Smyth has pointed out that “support for legislative independence proved contingent on the maintenance of Protestant Ascendancy.”³⁴

Presbyterians, who had succeeded in transforming Counties Antrim and Down into a kind of “Scottish nation” in the north of Ireland, had an ambivalent relationship to the Protestant Ascendancy. Knit together by shared origins, they were also united by their anger at legislation that sought to limit the rights of Dissenters in Irish society. As one Presbyterian clergyman complained, members of his family had “assisted in conquering the Roman Catholicks, and [then] were reduced to the same servitude.” Over the course of the century, Ulster Presbyterians’ grievances against the established order continued to fester, and they in turn were widely regarded as a “turbulent, disorderly set of people whom no people can govern or no God please.”³⁵ Many of them would come to believe that the exercise of economic, political, and religious liberty in Ireland required the severing of the British connection and the establishment of an independent republic. But they arrived at that conclusion only after seeking to achieve parliamentary reform and religious liberty within the existing system. Their instrument was the Society of United Irishmen, founded in Belfast and Dublin in 1791. Their preeminent spokesman was Theobald Wolfe Tone, an Anglican and graduate of Trinity College who prepared for a legal career at the Middle Temple in London but soon grew “sick and weary of the law” and turned to politics and pamphleteering. From the very beginning of his engagement with the political issues that inflamed the 1790s, Tone flirted with separatism; as early as July 1791 he asserted that separation from Britain “would be the regeneration of this country.” A month later he published *An Argument on Behalf of the Catholics of Ireland*, which, according to Thomas Bartlett, remains “the most famous pamphlet in Irish history.” In it Tone argued that “not only were Catholics capable of liberty but that there could be no liberty for anyone in Ireland until ‘Irishmen of all denominations’ united against the ‘boobies and blockheads’ that governed them.”³⁶

Tone made Catholic Emancipation, and the complete revocation of the penal laws, central to his political agenda, and the United Irishmen concurred—in principle. But many of those who became committed republicans found it difficult to countenance the empowerment of Ireland’s Catholic majority and the unshackling of “popery.” After all, they had long believed that Catholic doctrine was sharply at odds with true religion and Enlightenment ideals, and that the message preached by Catholic priests represented the antithesis of reason and toleration. Tone himself shared the widespread perception that the institutional

power of the Catholic Church was in decline. He even made mocking references to the “rusty and extinguished thunderbolts of the Vatican.”³⁷

Few, if any, “thunderbolts” had emanated from the Catholic hierarchy in Ireland during the eighteenth century. Its leaders had conducted themselves with remarkable restraint and proclaimed their loyalty to the British state at every opportunity. But as Britain’s imperial crisis accelerated, many members of the Catholic middle class assumed an aggressive stance in pursuing the goal of full Catholic Emancipation. By the 1790s, they were prepared to challenge the hierarchy and its allies for leadership of the movement, and they “succeeded in mobilising virtually the entire Catholic adult male population” in the process. The result was a significant step toward full emancipation, as a legislative enactment of 1793 gave Catholics the right to vote and to hold most, but not all, civil and military offices.³⁸

In spite of these gains, or perhaps to some degree because of them, Ireland remained a profoundly divided society in the 1790s—one in which issues of land, religion, and the rights of citizenship continued to polarize the Irish people—and rival forces at the grassroots level prepared for armed confrontation. By the spring of 1798, after years of intense government repression, members of the Society of United Irishmen had become convinced that the time was ripe to strike a decisive blow for liberty. Many remained optimistic that a successful nationwide offensive was possible; many also believed—or hoped—that a French landing was imminent, and that it would provide the spark and the resources the movement so badly needed. As it turned out, there was no nationwide offensive, and the French landing did not take place until August, in County Mayo, where it was easily suppressed.³⁹ In the meantime, counties along Ireland’s eastern seaboard, from Antrim in the north to Wexford in the south, had become the site of a historic but failed rebellion. It began on May 23 in Counties Dublin, Meath, and Kildare; from there it spread to Wexford and belatedly moved north to Antrim and Down, which should have represented the insurgents’ best hope for a decisive military victory. These two counties—disproportionately literate, prosperous, and Presbyterian—had been the great bastions of republicanism. But when the moment of truth arrived, northeast Ulster proved to be the scene of bitter failure and defeat.⁴⁰

Wexford—or the area of the county north and east of the River Slaney, along with parts of north Carlow and south Wicklow—presented an altogether different picture.⁴¹ The fighting in Wexford lasted more than six weeks, and for three of those weeks the rebels were able to construct the rudiments of a Wexford republic, the first and only republican regime on Irish soil before the Easter Rising of 1916.⁴² But Wexford also witnessed grisly acts of sectarian violence that provided Protestant polemicists with the ammunition they needed to portray the uprising—in Wexford and elsewhere—as a massive Catholic assault on Protestants: “1641 renewed.”⁴³

In recent years, however, historians such as Louis Cullen, Kevin Whelan, and Daniel Gahan have called into question the enduring mythology of an uprising that was essentially sectarian.⁴⁴ They have pointed out that Catholics and Protestants shared the leadership of the movement in Wexford and mingled amicably among its rank and file. But they have also acknowledged the moments of sectarian horror, above all at Scullabogue, a townland in the southern part of the county where rebel forces slaughtered "well over a hundred" loyalists. Most of them were burned to death in a barn by guards who set the building on fire and prevented their captives from escaping. Although the victims at Scullabogue were mostly Protestants, they apparently included about twenty Catholics, and there were Protestants as well as Catholics in the ranks of those who carried out the killings.⁴⁵ Although the evidence needed to flesh out the full story of this atrocity is largely absent, we do know that any sectarian atrocities, no matter what the source, represented a clear violation of the policies of the United Irishmen, who sought to overcome, not exacerbate, the religious divisions that were a part of Wexford's ethnocultural geography.

Overall, according to Thomas Bartlett, "Around ten thousand rebels (including a high proportion of non-combatants), and about six hundred soldiers [were] slain, and large areas of the country [were] effectively laid waste."⁴⁶ Many United Irish leaders were tried in courts-martial, found guilty, and executed. Others from the ranks who survived the uprising fell victim to the counter-revolutionary onslaught that followed it, most notably in Wexford, where a self-styled "Black Mob" of militant loyalists "sought to carry out a 'White Terror.'"⁴⁷

But the most vigorous and important campaign that followed the rebellion was more literary than military, as a host of commentators burst into print with contrasting interpretations of the uprising and the factors that had caused it. Much of the British press was remarkably conciliatory, as were elements within the British government. Many observers believed that the rebellion had been an act of desperation by a minority within Irish society, not a rising of the Irish people. Some expressed a new respect for the Catholic hierarchy, which had demonstrated its loyalty throughout the crisis. And many pointed first and foremost to the culpability of revolutionary France and the deleterious effect of the "French disease." Soon after arriving in Ireland, the newly appointed viceroy, Lord Cornwallis, noted "the folly which has been too prevalent in this quarter of substituting the word Catholicism, instead of Jacobinism, as the foundation of the present rebellion."⁴⁸

Cornwallis was strongly opposed by a conservative faction of Irish Protestants who were determined to defend the Protestant Ascendancy and, in the service of that objective, to portray the rebellion as "a popish plot to extirpate all Protestants." Their strident claims were hardly new; they built on a traditional narrative centered on the trauma of 1641 and exploited a recurring fear that Catholics were always and everywhere on the verge of launching another round of atrocities directed at their heretical enemies.⁴⁹ In addition, the growing

commitment of the British government to Catholic relief and to the elimination of most, if not all, of the penal laws proved deeply unsettling to Irish Protestants. The government's commitment grew out of a pragmatic calculation that with the fires of rebellion burning in North America and Jacobinism convulsing France, the loyalty of Ireland's Catholic population was absolutely vital to Britain's security. For Protestant conservatives, this was more than disorienting; it was outright betrayal, but a betrayal that could be reversed. In this regard, the uprising of 1798 was a godsend. Insofar as it could be portrayed as a *Catholic* rebellion whose ultimate goal was the annihilation or expulsion of Irish Protestants and the separation of Ireland from Britain, perhaps the Protestant Ascendancy could be restored.

In constructing such a narrative, its proponents had to explain away many inconvenient realities. After all, Protestants had played the leading role in the rebellion in Ulster and had been present among the leadership and rank and file in Wexford. The Society of United Irishmen, the organization that planned and led the rebellion, was widely recognized as predominantly Protestant. And then there was the unequivocal opposition of Ireland's Catholic hierarchy to the uprising. How could all of this be written out of the script? The person who came to the fore in taking on this monumental task was Sir Richard Musgrave, a devout Anglican, member of Parliament for Lismore, County Waterford, grand master of the Orange Order in the county, and, according to Jim Smyth, "Ireland's premier conspiracy theorist of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries." For Musgrave and his conservative allies, it was axiomatic that Catholics were by nature untrustworthy. To conceal their evil designs, they might resort to Jesuitical argument, or they might simply lie. But the fruits of their labors were inscribed in history: in France, the massacre of the Huguenots on Saint Bartholomew's Day in 1572; in England, the Gunpowder Treason Plot of 1605; in Ireland, the atrocities of 1641; in Scotland, the Jacobite rising of 1745; in Ireland again, the agrarian disturbances of the late eighteenth century, with their appearance of sectarian antagonism; and, finally, 1798. Three years later Musgrave published his *Memoirs of the Different Rebellions in Ireland*. According to Smyth, "Every aspect of the book, its argument and digressions, the structure of the narrative, the piling up of page after page of blood-stained detail, the value-charged language and strident invective, is calculated to serve as a warning that Catholics can never be trusted and that their demands must always be resisted."⁵⁰

Although Musgrave claimed to believe that popery was always and everywhere the same, he also argued that "no parallel can be drawn between the popery of Ireland and that of any other country in Europe." Emphasizing the congenital savagery and disloyalty of Irish Catholics, he characterized the rural poor of Munster as "but one step above animal instinct" and the rebels in Connacht as "vermin . . . whose object is blood." Harking back to centuries-old schemes aimed at pacifying and cleansing Ireland, he recommended the

creation of exclusively Protestant towns and the immediate expansion of the number of Protestant clergymen, for, as the London Hibernian Society reasoned, "the hope . . . that the Irish will be a tranquil and a loyal people . . . must be built on the anticipated reduction of popery."⁵¹

Musgrave's *Memoirs* became one of the canonical texts of conservatism in nineteenth-century Britain. But ultimately the book's utility went well beyond a particular religious denomination or political party, for whenever the Irish Question flared up in ways that frightened, outraged, or even amused a broad swath of British public opinion, Musgrave's argument that the perversity of the Irish was rooted in an inextricable mix of Roman Catholicism and native savagery achieved a new resonance. Even among those who professed sympathy for "unhappy Erin," there remained a fundamental, and seemingly eternal, question. "Is there anything particular in the blood of an Irishman that disposes him to shed that of his fellow men?" *Bell's Weekly Messenger* had asked in October 1798. If not, then "where are we to seek for the everlasting barbarism and brutality by which Ireland is disgraced?"⁵²