The Glorious Revolution and Ireland

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In a reconsideration of the Glorious Revolution on its tercentenary, what should one say about Ireland? First of all, that the “revolution” was, like so much of Anglo-Irish history, an essentially English event with collateral Irish consequences. Unlike that other and earlier seventeenth-century revolution, sometimes called “Puritan,” occurrences in Ireland were not causative. If rampant Catholophobia played a part in 1688, it was not because the Protestants of Ireland believed to have been slaughtered as an appetizer on the way to a main course consisting of Protestant England. The unapologetic and aggressive Catholicism of James II eclipsed all contributory Irish causes. It was, rather, that the Glorious Revolution in England set in train a series of events which marked – one might better say scarred – Anglo-Irish relations for generations to come.

The late J. G. Simms of Trinity College, Dublin, remains the authoritative commentator on the subject, which, in his final summation, he termed “The War of the Two Kings, 1685-91.” Simms portrayed a Catholic Ireland whose great hopes of James were cruelly dashed. French assistance to the Jacobite cause was far less than expected or needed. Irish Catholics, as in the 1640s, remained divided between those who were willing to back an English king and those who were restrained by doubt. Simms concluded that the Catholics lost the war because “the securing of Ireland was a more important objective for William and his supporters than the buttressing of the Jacobite regime was for Louis.” He viewed James and William as equally indifferent to their partisans in Ireland, whom they saw as mere means to achieving the English throne.

If this remains the received view of what happened in Ireland between 1685 and 1691, where does it fit into the broad legacy of the Revolution? Simms’s title for his chapter in A New History of Ireland, “The War of the Two Kings, 1685–91,” gives a clue. It was not a “revolution” in Ireland at all. Rever-


2 Ibid., p. 508. See also the same author’s earlier monograph, Jacobite Ireland, 1688–1691 (London, Routledge and


Barrington recounted, had

secreted some little articles of their paraphernalia and privately assembled in an alehouse in a very obscure part of the capital: here they continued to hold Anti-Jacobite meetings; elected their own lord mayor and officers; and got a marble bust of King William [after his accession], which they regarded as a sort of deity! These meetings were carried on till the battle of the Boyne put William in possession of Dublin, when James’ aldermen were immediately cashiered, and the Aldermen of Skinner’s Alley [were] reinvited with their mace and aldermanic robes.

When Barrington joined this organization in the 1780s, it claimed to be nearly a hundred years old. Barrington called it “the first Orange association ever formed.” Whether it was or not – the formal “Orange Order” is usually dated from 1795 – the Aldermen of Skinner’s Alley exhibited much of what came to be characteristic of the Orange tradition through the years. Barrington further explained the success of the group:

To make the general influence of his association the greater, the number of members was unlimited, and the mode of admission solely by the proposal and seconding of two aldermen. For the same reason, no class, however humble, was excluded – equally reigning in its most perfect state at the assemblies. Generals and wig-makers – King Counsel and hackney clerks, etc. all mingled without distinction as brother-aldermen: the lord mayor was annually appointed; and regularity and decorum always prevailed – until at least, towards the conclusion of the meetings, when the aldermen became more than usually noisy and exhilarated, – King William’s bust being placed in the centre of the supper-table, to overlook their extreme loyalty.

The meetings seemed to have been held in conjunction with a dinner which included sheep’s trotters (an allusion to King James’s running away from Dublin), and a good deal of strong drink. Everything on these ceremonial occasions led up to what Barrington called the “Grand Engine” of the “Charter Toast” when “every man unbuttoned the knees of his breeches, and drank the toast on his bare joints.” Barrington provides a garrulous versi
of what he terms "this most ancient and unparalleled sentiment" of the Orange Toast, but a more fastidious wording is found in the eleventh edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (sub Orangemen): "The glorious, pious and immortal memory of the great and good King William who saved us from popery, slavery, brass money, and wooden shoes" with (the editor comments) "grotesque or truculent additions according to the orator's taste." Should anyone doubt the usual flavor of these accretions, Barrington's toast includes the following:

May we never want a Williamite to kick the [arse] of a Jacobite! - and a [art] for the Bishop of Cork! And he that won't drink this, whether he be priest, bishop, deacon, bellows-blower, grave-digger, or any other of the fraternity of the clergy - may a north wind blow him to the south, and a west wind blow him to the east! May he have a dark night - a lee shore - a rank storm - and a leaky vessel to carry him over the river Styx! May the dog Cerberus make a meal of his rump, and Pluto a snuff-box of his skull; and may the devil jump down his throat with a red-hot harrow, with every pin tear out a gut, and blow him with a clean carcase to hell?

All of this blasphemy ended solemnly, of course, with "Amen."

The implication of this inflamed rhetoric, which by no means characterized all Protestant opinion in post-"revolutionary" Ireland but, rather, the opinion of an enduring "Orange" element (plate 12), is that it imprisons the legacy of the Revolution in a mental strait-jacket. It reduces the Revolution to an uncomplicated struggle between nefarious ultra-montane Catholicism and heroic settler Protestantism. J. G. Simms devoted much of his scholarly career to challenging this parochialism, but in the popular culture of Ireland, both north and south, it remains firmly entrenched despite Simms's efforts.

The Catholic nationalist obverse of the Orange triumphalist view is equally uncomplicated. In it the Revolution provided merely the occasion for perfidious Albion to perpetrate further crimes and betrayals on a prostrate - but still defiant - Irish Catholic population. The defeat at the Boyne, the slaughter at Aughrim, the evasion of the civil articles of the Treaty of Limerick, and the *sequelae* of confiscation and penal legislation are the principal chapters of that saga of iron-heeled oppression. It might be added that in both the Orange and Catholic nationalist versions the Revolution in Ireland was far from bloodless. On the contrary, Ireland was its sanguinary battle-ground, and "glorious" only to those who would celebrate a further effusion of Catholic blood.

What has all this to do with profound political and intellectual changes occurring in England in the 1690s? The temptation has always been to dismiss the Irish parallel like some base relative, familiar in form but wholly contrary by nature; and never is that instinct stronger than on the occasion of a family feast when one wishes to recall what is most sustaining and noble in the past, rather than what is most sordid and dividing. But England is an island-nation, and it shares its archipelago with other peoples. As the author

of the guide to the Tercentenary Exhibition ("The Age of William III and Mary II") accurately observes, "Though the invasion and accession [of William] had been bloodless, 1690 was not... The Battle of the Boyne on July 1 routed [James II's] troops... and the aftermath opened religious wounds that still fester today." It did so because the issues which animated the Glorious Revolution in England were irrelevancies in Ireland. The only issue to awareness was whether the Protestant regime would...
We expect historical interpretation to change over time, and when we return to a series of dramatic events, like those which occurred in Ireland between 1685 and 1691, and find their interpretation virtually unchanged, we are disappointed. But that is essentially the case with regard to Ireland and the Glorious Revolution. The humane, Protestant account published twenty years ago remains substantially unchallenged. In it both William and James are portrayed as lacking any specific interest in Ireland or in their enthusiastic supporters there. To be in Ireland under such circumstances was simply the two kings' bad luck.

The “history” of this episode is relentlessly narrative. It is a story of unfolding events and of personalities reacting to them. We hear little or nothing about communities, towns, provinces, or classes; only of amorphous, polar “interests,” Protestants, Catholics, and their respective heroes. (These are subjects that await their historian.) Like the story of King Alfred and the cakes, the events of the Glorious Revolution in Ireland long ago assumed mythic proportions. Even very recent tellers of the tale, such as Patrick Macrory in The Siege of Derry (1988), are unapologetic about not being able to know (due to scant documentation) what actually happened, because, they contend, it is more important to know what people at the time (and ever since) believed had happened, of which there is abundant evidence. This is particularly true of the many alleged atrocities on both sides.

To sample the quality of the narrative, let us look at one of the stock characters in this celebrated drama: Richard Talbot (1690–91), Earl and titular Duke of Tyrconnell. Talbot is sometimes portrayed as a figure midway between a buffoon and a villain. Macaulay dismissed his ancestry as being “one of those degenerate families of the Pale which were popularly classed with the aboriginal population of Ireland.” In fact, the “aboriginal population”—if that is a suitable term for Patrick Sarsfield and the Gaelic foes of William III—distrusted Talbot during the wars as too much a courtier and an Old English aristocrat. But Talbot, a great swearer of oaths, was the uncontested bête noire of the Protestant interest in his capacity as James II’s Catholicizing agent in Ireland from 1685–88. Even a would-be rescuer of his reputation calls him “God’s gift to wig-makers, being accustomed, when provoked, to throw his wig down on the floor and stamp on it, and in cases of extreme provocation to hurl it into the fire.”

Talbot’s first interview in Dublin with the new Lord Lieutenant, the Protestant Henry Hyde, second Earl of Clarendon (James II’s brother-in-law), is usually portrayed as an exhibition of his “insolent contempt” or outrageous bluster. The appointment of Clarendon in early 1686 signified the continuation of the Cromwellian/Restoration land settlement which had expropriated virtually all Catholic land. Sensitive to the implications, at their meeting Tyrconnell reportedly told Clarendon:

My Lord, I am sent hither to view this army; and to give the King an account of it... You must know, my Lord, the King, who is a Roman Catholic, is resolved to employ his subjects of that religion, as you will find by the letters I have brought you, and therefore some must be put out to make room for such as the King likes.10

Passing onto the land settlement, he observed, “By God, my Lord, these Acts of Settlement and this New Interest are damned things!” and when Clarendon replied that “neither you nor I am well informed of all the motives and inducements which carried on those affairs twenty-six years ago,” Talbot spluttered in reply “Yes, we do know all those arts and damned rogues contrivances which procured those Acts.” When Clarendon demurred further, Talbot stomped off (without, apparently, on this occasion jumping on his wig) with the parting words: “Well, I will say no more at present; but by God, my Lord, there have been foul damned things done here!”11 Six months later Clarendon was recalled to England and Tyrconnell appointed in his place.

Even in the most sympathetic light, Talbot remains an unappealing hero—and the events of 1685–91 revealed him to be an ineffectual one as well—but on the merits of the land settlement his outrage was justified. “Foul dammed things” had been done in Ireland and the land settlement rather than religion is the key to understanding the Irish role in 1689. To point this out is not, at this distance in time, so much to excruciate the land settlement as to emphasize its disruptive, destabilizing effect. From an English Protestant point of view, the massive Cromwellian expropriations, confirmed for the most part by Charles II, were no less than justice for the rebellion and associated atrocities committed by Irish Catholics in 1641 and after. But the atrocities were almost impossible to investigate until many years later, and in any case they were not exclusively the work of those expropriated, many of whom were quite innocent. As for the alleged act of “rebellion” at a moment (October 1641) when Charles I was facing the veritable insurrection of his House of Commons, was partially actuated by feelings of loyalty to the crown. As Charles I confided to Clarendon at a Privy Council meeting in late 1661, “rebell & rebel, I had rather trust a papist rebel than a presbyterian one.” Clarendon somewhat trimming reply was, “The difference is that you have wiped out the memory of the rebellion of the one, whilst the other is liable to all its reproaches.”12

Charles II and James II never entirely lost sight of this irony, and the ne proprietary class could never forget that its title to Irish land required that its irony be overlooked. If Charles II declined to set matters right, it was simp that he feared to provoke the new Protestant proprietors who controlled Ireland in the late 1650s and facilitated the Restoration.13 But James rushed in where Charles had feared to tread. At least in prospect (although....

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10 Ibid.
11 Ibid.
after 1688 he changed his mind), he was willing to question the entire moral basis of the Cromwellian and Restoration land settlements. This put the new proprietary at risk of annihilation. In theory, it left the earlier Elizabethan and Jacobean proprietors unprotected, but after the traumas of the 1640s, they were unlikely to view equably the return of their Catholic neighbors, and the removal of their Cromwellian co-religionists. James II’s intended reopening of the land question thus threatened the continuing formation of a Protestant ascendency and raised the specter of Catholic revenge.

That was the issue posed by the Glorious Revolution in Ireland. If William and James were fighting for the throne and possessed (as Simms insists) little intrinsic interest in Irish affairs, their Irish partisans were fighting for two antithetical notions of Ireland. One would set back the clock to at least 1640, and Protestant proprietors would be left with less than half of the profitable agricultural land of the island. The other would confirm the Cromwellian settlement, and extend the hegemony of Protestants over Catholics that it had established.

We cannot be sure of the form which a Jacobite triumph would have taken. Some have argued that it would have resulted in a more tolerant and less sectarian island than the Williamite victory produced. But it is only the victors who can be judged, and in the instance their success riveted, rather than reversed, the landed constitution of the 1650s and 1660s, and the expulsions which were at its heart. It is true that the Catholic tenantry were little better served by Catholic lords than by Protestant ones, and that the adjustment finally achieved by the land reform acts of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century did not, at a stroke, resolve the island’s problems. But it remains appropriate to see the Williamite victory in Ireland as the charter of the “Protestant Nation,” first, in its island-wide eighteenth-century incarnation; and since 1921 in its truncated six-county form of Northern Ireland. This may not have been what William necessarily intended, but it is his legacy nevertheless.

The Orange tradition then, however “grotesque or truculent” its embroidery upon the facts, is not at serious variance from them. Far from being a vulgar embarrassment, the Orangemen’s beatification of William, the Derry apprentice-boys, and a host of lesser heroes is appropriate to the sense of the “Revolution” in Ireland as a “war” which was won by Protestants and lost by Catholics. The lines were drawn with extreme clarity; the outcome of the struggle was unambiguous.

An old Irish story tells of an Aer Lingus pilot who, on the London to Dublin route, came on the public-address system as the plane was beginning its descent into Dublin Airport and reminded the passengers that there was a change in time: would they please set back their watches 300 years. This may be both fanciful and unjust, but it captures the point that the Irish dynamic retains seventeenth-century elements which have died out almost everywhere else. Two “interests” have contended for possession and control of almost these two interests, there were also ethnic differences within them. Half the old interest was Gaelic; the other half was “Old English.” Half the new interest was English; the other half was Scottish. The denominator which most efficiently distinguished the two interests thus became religion rather than race or culture.

With an effort, we can imagine the sectarian passions of 1685–91. That period began not only with the accession of James II, but with the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes, and the flight of French Huguenots to many Protestants, including, ironically, Ireland. The refugees brought a congeal: (to their Protestant neighbors) Catholophobia based on often-bitter experience. The aggressive foreign and military policies of Louis XIV in the 1670 and 1680s lent renewed substance to what Hugh Trevor-Roper calls Le Grand Peur, a dread of Catholic subjection amounting very nearly to paranoia. It was not difficult to tar James II with this brush, to portray him as the knowing or witless agent of a French-driven imperialist Catholicism. In that event, after 1688 James was unwilling to support drastic revision of the Irish land settlement, because he feared it would alienate him from his English Protestant gentry whose support he required to recover his throne, but in the Orange tradition he is denied any redeeming credit for their pragmatism.

The Orangemen believe they (and their ancestors) were saved by Providence, and by their own exertions, as, most notably, at Derry. Nicholl Canny has suggested that their crisis in 1685–91 constituted a “Machiavellian Moment,” a species of nation-forming trauma out of which emerged a commitment to “liberty.” 14 But at the moment of their salvation — whether Providence, King William, or their own valor — their dependence upon Protestant Britain was undeniable. When William King, later Church of Ireland Archbishop of Dublin, published in 1691 his now-classic State of the Protestants of Ireland under the late King James Government, he argued that Ireland was “a kingdom dependent on the crown of England and part of the inheritance thereof and therefore must follow its state which it cannot decline without much apparent ruin to the English interest in it.” 15

The subsequent eighteenth-century experiment with a semi-autonomous “Protestant Nation” founded on this inconvenient fact. The political milieu (from 1691–1800) was constituted of an Anglo-Scottish, Protestant landholding class whose title was based on conquest. The Union of 1800 was required to protect that hegemony of which the Williamite Settlement was the capstone. As Simms expressed it, “The Williamite confiscation reinforced territorial predominance which Protestants had enjoyed since the Cromwellian settlement and which had been maintained, although in a diminished form, after the restoration.” 16 Simms estimated that the Catholic share

15 Quoted in Simms, Kingdom and Colony, 119.
16 Quoted in Simms, Kingdom and Colony, 119.
profitable land declined from 22 per cent in 1688 to 14 per cent in 1703; and by the operation of the penal laws it was further reduced in the first three-quarters of the eighteenth century. Thus was created the society described by the young Frenchman, Alexis de Tocqueville, on his visit to Ireland in 1835:

"If you want to know what can be done by the spirit of conquest and religious hatred combined with the abuses of aristocracy, but without any of its advantages, go to Ireland."17

For the Catholics of Ireland, the "Revolution" of 1688 had thoroughly inglorious consequences. It completed, and sealed, their dispossession. If this affected at first hand a relatively small number of Catholic landowners, it nevertheless came to have for the broader Catholic population a symbolic significance which cannot be argued away. For the Protestants of Ireland, the glorious tunes of 1688-91 could be modulated from *sotto voce* all the way up to *fortissimo*. For the most secure and affluent, *sotto voce* was often sufficient. But for those whose station and livelihood visibly required keeping Catholics in their place, the Orange tradition of ostentatiously commemorating Williamite victories had enduring appeal.

We see the operation of this principle in Northern Ireland today. Whereas the Irish dimensions of the Glorious Revolution have been generally downplayed during its tercentenary celebration in British portions of the United Kingdom, 1688-91 has seen in Ulster spirited commemorations and reenactments of the great Protestant victories of three centuries ago. The rituals and regalia do not have to be manufactured, but can simply be adapted from the elaborate annual celebrations which are an ingrained part of the province’s Protestant culture. “King Billy” is not a distant, unknown figure—some dusty, ancient, foreign soldier— but a ubiquitous presence to whom praise is constantly due for the deliverance of the Protestant interest. The Orange Lodges and their incessant parades colorfully demonstrate the vitality of this version of a truly glorious revolution, and keep alive the watchwords of the Boyne, Aughrim, Londonderry, and their Protestant heroes. Unlike the annual celebrations of the fourth of July in the United States, these are not politically insignificant, or neutral, events which draw the population together. In the public life of the United States, the enemies of the Revolution—the American Tories and their British allies—are no longer a factor. The British have long since surrendered and gone home, to become in the twentieth century trusted allies. The Tories too have disappeared, so that celebrating their defeat affronts no constituents of the American Republic.

By contrast, the Williamite legacy remains a sectarian weapon in Northern Ireland. Its celebration does not unite the community as a whole, but only its Protestant majority against its substantial Catholic minority. It evokes, and is meant to evoke, that early-modern European world in which Catholics and Protestants feared and loathed one another; in which a Spanish Philip II or a French Louis XIV could be regarded by northern Protestants as a latter-day

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