

# The Politics of Catholic versus Protestant and Understandings of Personal Affairs in Restoration Ireland

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*Abstract:*

Between 1641 and 1652, Ireland was ravaged by war and monarchy was replaced by the Cromwellian Commonwealth and Protectorate regimes. The armies of Oliver Cromwell conquered Ireland and Catholic landowners were dispossessed and transplanted. The restoration of the Stuarts in 1660 opened up the prospect that these changes might be undone. Catholics set the tone for debate in the 1660s, challenging Protestant dominance. Catholic assertiveness led to panic throughout the Protestant colonies, and the interpretation of domestic strife and personal tragedy in the context of competition between Catholic and Protestant. This article will recreate the climate of mistrust which obtained within the community before moving to a unique analysis of the impact which this could have on the family.

*Keywords:* Early modern Ireland, marriage, political history, sectarianism, Stuart restoration

On 29 May 1660, the Stuart monarchy was officially restored in Ireland, Scotland and England, following eleven years of Interregnum. Throughout the Interregnum, the monarch, Charles II, who had been crowned king of the three kingdoms by the Scots in 1649, had been in exile on the European continent. Officially, the Stuart restoration marked a return to the *status quo ante* and the obliteration of the constitutional changes that had been wrought during the 1650s by the Cromwellian Commonwealth and Protectorate regimes. In reality, the wars and conflicts of the 1640s and 1650s had left an indelible mark on the political fabric of each of the three kingdoms and the restoration period was characterised by memory of bloodshed and debate which mirrored and recalled the acrimony of previous decades. A monarch who carried the

baggage of long exile, association with Catholic princes on the European continent, and a host of followers and associates seeking to be rewarded would add a complicating dimension in this period of supposed reconciliation and healing. Politically, the 1660s was characterised by fierce competition between Protestants and Catholics over the nature of the settlement. Debate centred on the suitability of each group for power and was informed by interpretation of past actions, with particular attention focused on the 1641 rebellion and supposed Catholic untrustworthiness. This article is a recreation of the climate of fear and distrust in which Irish denizens lived in the restoration period. It discusses the contours of political debate but also demonstrates that politics became manifest in the household. Distrust between Catholic and Protestant was expressed in intimate settings and, by means of a case study of marital breakdown in County Fermanagh in Ulster, this article will demonstrate that the discourse of Catholic versus Protestant could be used by spouses against one another to precipitate the termination of their relationship.

In 1641, a rebellion of Catholic lords and gentlemen in Ulster had unleashed popular resentment against British plantation in the kingdom and a massacre of Protestant settlers there occurred. Violence spread into north Leinster and the breakdown in the relationship between the traditional Old English Catholic *élites* and the Dublin government precipitated the establishment of the Catholic Confederation of Kilkenny in 1642. This body was established for Catholic mutual self-defence. It controlled much of the kingdom and waged war against Irish Protestants and royalists until it was eventually dissolved in January 1649 in favour of an alliance with the royalists. The defeat of this Confederate and royalist alliance by the armies of Oliver Cromwell by 1652 led to major changes to the socio-political fabric of the kingdom.

The rebellion and massacres of 1641 caused Irish Catholics to come to personify the 'popish' threat to the security of England and of Protestantism. With the outbreak of the English civil wars, suppression of the Irish rebellion came to be a cause of contention between king and parliament. The latter sought to wrest authority for the waging of war in Ireland from the former. The absence of King Charles I in Scotland allowed parliament to assert control and thus take over the suppression of Irish rebellion. This enabled it to consolidate its position as an effective government in England (Armstrong 2005, 45-46). Ireland was conquered by the armies of Oliver Cromwell by 1652. The administrative basis for the mass confiscation of Catholic and royalist property that followed, was provided by the Adventurers Act of 1642 and the Act for the Settlement of Ireland of 1652. The 1652 Act exempted all those Catholics involved in the initial stages of the 1641 rebellion from pardon in respect of life and estate. Also exempted from pardon were any Roman Catholic priests who had been involved with the rebellion in any way, certain named noblemen, anyone who had killed a civilian, and any who did not give up their arms within twenty-eight days of publication of the act.

The universalising character of the 1652 Act for the Settlement of Ireland led to a massive process of land transfer which was implemented by the Cromwellian regime. Those Irish Catholics who were deemed 'deserving' were allocated smaller plots of land west of the River Shannon, in Connacht and County Clare. By 1659, Ireland was largely settled on the Protestant interest. Kevin McKenny's analysis of the land transfers of the middle of the seventeenth century indicates that, in 1641, 1,756 Catholics possessed 66% of all land in Ireland. By c.1675, 1,353 Catholics held just 29%. Thus, the Catholic share of property not only decreased, but the scale of Catholic holdings and, consequently, the social power associated with them, declined significantly too (McKenny 2008, 40).

Following the death of Oliver Cromwell, he was succeeded by his son, Richard, as Lord Protector. However, in April of 1659, the English army expelled Richard Cromwell. The 'rump' parliament was recalled, which was then expelled in October. For Irish Protestants, this meant the end of the lord deputyship that had been conducted by Oliver Cromwell's son, Henry. The rapidity with which Henry's administration – which had favoured pre-1641 Protestant settlers – could fall and be replaced by a radical regime, was a cause for alarm. The crumbling of the army regime in England that succeeded the Cromwellian protectorate was anticipated by officers of the army in Ireland, who took the initiative and seized Dublin Castle in a bloodless coup on 13 December 1659. Ireland was then governed by a council of state from Dublin, which impeached republican leaders. In February of 1660, the Long Parliament was reinstated in England, and in Ireland, a Convention was held. It was this exclusively Protestant representative body that shaped the Irish aspect of Charles II's restoration and it represented a determination to ensure that the Cromwellian land settlement would not be threatened by the king's return (Clarke 1999, 19-20; 42-43).

Despite the best efforts of agents of the Irish Convention, the return of Stuart monarchy ushered in a period in which the validity of the land transfer and of Protestant political and social dominance could be questioned and challenged. Charles' ascent to the throne immediately restored to Ireland its position as a separate kingdom. Initially, Catholics greeted the Stuart restoration with enthusiasm. Some assumed that restoration of monarchy would automatically result in Catholic restoration to property and to positions of political and social prestige. In the heady days of 1660 and 1661, some Catholics turned up at their former properties demanding entry (British Library, Hardwicke Papers, Add. Mss 35851, vol. 503, fo. 66). Certain of these had decrees of restoration signed by the king, which caused frictions with the Dublin government. Charles II had committed to ensuring the satisfaction of certain of his Irish Catholic followers. Moreover, to grant favour to certain Irish Catholics was a means by which to create a loyal constituency interspersed among Protestant landowners who owed their position to Cromwell. Charles was amenable to Catholic representations for restitution but he was also constrained by his reliance upon advisors *in situ* who were

determined to maintain the Cromwellian settlement. The king's perceived favour for Catholics rankled with the Protestants of Ireland who wished for the king to show himself fully aligned with the Protestant interest. A court of claims, which sat in Dublin in 1663 to settle the matter of Catholic restoration to property, returned to Catholics about one third of the land that they had held in 1641 (Harris 2006, 53). By 1665, with the passing of the Act of Explanation which attempted to clarify issues arising from the 1662 Act of Settlement, Ireland had come through a tortuous political process in which the restoration land settlement was largely fixed.

Nonetheless, Charles' facilitation of Catholic arguments against a restoration settlement based upon the Protestant interest forced Protestants to engage in debate and to justify their position. It is evident that Catholics had the discursive advantage, as they were able to refute the changes of the 1650s as both illegal and immoral. The jolt that this gave to Protestants meant that they had to defend and justify their position, leading to the consolidation of the notion of two groups in the kingdom: the Irish Catholics versus the English, or occasionally, British, Protestants.

A discourse that centred on the importance of forgetting past animosities prevailed in official circles. James Butler, duke of Ormond, was appointed by the king as lord lieutenant of the kingdom. He returned to Ireland in July 1662. The Irish House of Lords wrote to Charles that "Never did Kingdom conceive a greater Hope of a Lieutenant, that he will prove a Repairer of all our Breaches, and a Restorer of our former Peace and Tranquillity"<sup>1</sup>. Upon giving up the sword to Ormond, the lord justice, Roger Boyle, earl of Orrery, spoke of former conflict as a temporary aberration and asked that the lord lieutenant "bee pleased therefore to pass by what wee did when wee were not our selves, and to acc[o]mpt of what wee now doe when wee are our selves" (British Library, Sloane Mss. 1008, fo. 186).

However, this was the kingdom in which hatred was least likely to be forgotten or concealed. Even the personnel of the 1660s administration had been deeply involved in the recent conflicts. Ormond had served as lord deputy throughout the tumults of the 1640s and had accompanied Charles II into exile. He had been a staunch representative of King Charles I and had spent the 1640s as leader of the royalist effort and in attempts to reach a compromise with the Catholic Confederation of Kilkenny. Orrery had supported the invasion of Oliver Cromwell, later serving as Lord President of the Council of Scotland between 1655-1656 on behalf of the Protectorate regime. He was also deeply involved in the offer of the crown to Oliver Cromwell (Little 2000, 51). Debates about a restoration settlement were conducted on the

<sup>1</sup> "The House of Lords to the King" (Dec. 1661), in Irish Parliamentary Records, 1634-1800 (1779-1800), *Journals of the House of Lords of the Kingdom of Ireland* (Dublin) i, 283.

understanding that justification of past actions was integral to both the Protestant and Catholic cases. However, Catholic versus Protestant competition and the bitterness of the two parties towards one another was not confined to the realms of high politics. Mutual distrust permeated society at all levels, even into the most intimate realm of the family and home.

The rebellion and massacres had been the subjects of considerable propaganda against Irish Catholics throughout the 1640s. Of particular note was Sir John Temple's 1646 *The Irish Rebellion*, which recounted in gruesome detail versions of the cruelties and indignities suffered by Protestants in Ulster in the winter of 1641. The inculcation of notions of the horror of these events was important to encourage British Protestants to contribute to the cause of conquering Ireland and to justify intervention there. These occurrences were regarded by Protestants in Ireland and Britain as the ultimate evidence of the untrustworthiness of Irish Catholics.

Although these events were horrific in their extent and brutality, they were not represented as surprising in the 1660s. The aforementioned earl of Orrery, who emerged as a major Protestant spokesman in the restoration period wrote:

[T]he late unparallel'd Massacres, though far greater in number than any upon record of Story, yet had no newer cause or Occasion then that of the Roman Citizens of the lesser Asia, that of the French in Scicily, that of the Danes in England, and the frequent ones of the European colonies in the Indies. (Boyle 1662a, 6)

Black propaganda concerning the massacres and rebellion was the heir to the colonial and anti-Gaelic thought that had underpinned Tudor intervention in Ireland in the sixteenth century. Irish Catholics of Irish Gaelic origin, were already understood by English colonial writers as barbarous. Notions of Gaelic inferiority had been cultivated and disseminated by authors such as Fynes Moryson, Barnaby Rich and Edmund Spenser. Rich had written of the idea that Irish culture and barbarism were closely linked:

Custome is a Metall amongst them, that standeth which way soever it bee bent; Checke them for their uncleanliness, and they plead Custome: reprehend them for their Idolatry, they say thus did our Fathers before us: and I think it bee Custome that draweth them so often into rebellion, because they would do as their fathers have done before them. (Rich 1610, 27)

However, the crucial change that had taken place in colonial works between the period of the Tudor conquest at the start of the seventeenth century and that of Cromwell fifty years later, was the increasing importance of religion in characterisations of the Irish. This allowed the other Irish group of Catholics, who were ethnically of Anglo-Norman descent, to be included in derisory propaganda. Religion became increasingly important in anti-Irish

propaganda due to concern with the rising power of France and imaginings of Irish Catholics as agents of international popery.

Protestants in Ireland in the 1660s lived in a climate of distrust and fear for their lives. Confessionalised political and economic competition permeated their mentality and could even shape the way in which they understood personal problems. The discourse of Protestant versus Catholic that was carried on by politicians in the Irish House of Commons and in Whitehall manifested itself among all sectors of society. South Ulster was an area of particular tension between Protestants and Catholics. Counties Cavan, Fermanagh, and Monaghan had witnessed large-scale British immigration in the early seventeenth century. These areas also bore deep wounds from the period of rebellion and massacre in the early 1640s. At the time of the restoration, news from south Ulster indicated that tensions between Protestants and Catholics, and between government agents and Catholics were particularly high. The lord justice, the earl of Mountrath, reported that a Catholic priest arrested while conducting mass in County Cavan was rescued by his congregants, who also disarmed and beat the arresting soldiers (National Archives, State Papers, Ireland 63, 304, fo. 71). Members of the House of Commons also heard that the dispersal of a mass in Killeevan, County Monaghan, descended into violence.

By 1665, the time of the case study, the matter of the land and political settlement had not been fully resolved. Nonetheless, the government had come through its greatest crisis of stability of the 1660s, having passed the Act of Settlement in 1662 and weathered the storm that accompanied the sitting of the court of claims in Dublin in 1663. Nonetheless, Irish politics continued to be dominated by rhetoric that made use of past animosities to justify contemporary positions. In the mid-1660s, the most contentious issues were the Irish Remonstrance; an uncertain international situation with the Anglo-Dutch war and outbreak of war with France in 1666; and the outbreak of toriyism.

The Irish Remonstrance was a document drafted by the royalist Catholic Sir Richard Bellings in order to further a formula by which Irish Catholics could assert that their confessional position was compatible with loyalty to the Stuart monarchy. Signatories to the Remonstrance promised to maintain allegiance to the king regardless of any sentence passed against him by the pope. A convocation of the Roman Catholic clergy was held in June 1666, while the activity of Catholic priests was reported on in 1664 (National Library of Ireland, Lane Papers, Ms. 8643, 7).

Meanwhile, war between England and France led to official fears of Ireland being invaded by the French and assisted by Catholic there, seeking to improve their position. In 1666, the king was moved to express such fears to the lord lieutenant, who responded that he thought that certain of the Irish would be in favour of a French invasion. Elsewhere, however, he wrote that "the French will not find that conjunction of Irish w[hi]ch they may be made to believe, some I am confident will serve against them" (Bodleian Library,

Carte Papers 48, fo. 395). The possibility of Irish Catholic support for foreign invasion is difficult to quantify. However, it was certainly a matter that was much-discussed and that served to escalate the Protestant sense of insecurity.

Fears of Irish Catholic violence were furthered by the fact that certain former landowners had taken to toryism, meaning that they engaged in raiding on the peripheries of their former properties. Toryism could present a problem of law and order to the government and was a particular nuisance in north Connacht and in Ulster in 1666 and 1667. Furthermore, in the case of some tories, their activity could escalate into one of small-scale rebellion. This was the case with regard to the toryism of Dudley Costello and Edmund Nangle, who challenged the government's authority throughout 1666 and issued the 'Catholic Declaration', which condemned the restoration land settlement (The National Archives, State Papers, Ireland 63, 320, fo. 71).

Among the papers of the secretary to the lord lieutenant, Sir George Lane, is a deposition made by one John Flacke, a gentleman farmer in Mullaghmore in County Fermanagh. Flacke had made his way to the assizes in County Tyrone on 3 March 1665 (New Style) in order to offer the government his personal insight into the relationship between Catholics and Protestants in his locality. In his deposition, he alleged that certain Irish Catholics were not only plotting against the regime, but that his life was in particular danger. His observations and suspicions were compounded by the reported speech of his wife, who, as a convert to Catholicism, had confirmed his fears for both his own safety and that of the kingdom.

Flacke deposed that he lived among many Irish inhabitants in his parish and that he had observed that there were lately "more frequent Masses & fastings then formerly" (National Library of Ireland, Lane Papers, Ms. 8643, fo. 8). The retrospectively imposed idea that frequent masses and fasts had been the preamble to the 1641 rebellion had gained great currency and was often used in the period as an indicator that rebellion was being planned by Catholics. In the summer of 1661, the Irish House of Commons had discussed the supposed keeping of fasts among the Irish, as the sign of imminent rebellion<sup>2</sup>.

Flacke continued that his neighbours in Mullaghmore were "very much discounted that Philip Mac Emeric Mac James Oge & Tirlagh Mac Caffery have been sent up unto Dublin" Philip Mac Henry Mac James Ó Maguire and Tirlagh Mac Caffery were both then being interrogated by a committee of the Irish privy council. Mac Caffery had informed the government that, while in the woods in the Barony of Lurg, he had come across the parish priest of Magheraculmony, Cormuck O'Cassedy, who informed him that there was to be a general rising of the Irish against the Protestants. Mac Caffery also in-

<sup>2</sup> Irish Parliamentary Records, 1634-1800 (1779-1800), *Journal of the House of Commons of the Kingdom of Ireland* (Dublin), i, 430.

formed the authorities that Mac Enerie Maguire was present with the priest, all which the latter denied. This matter was considered a serious one by the council in Dublin and they wrote to the lord lieutenant of the plans of the Irish in Fermanagh “for raising some publique disturbance”<sup>3</sup>.

Flacke also claimed that “one Knogher [Conchúbhair] O Conner who came lately out of France or Spain said he would have this Examin[an]ts life” (National Library of Ireland, Lane Papers, Ms. 8643, fo. 8). In the 1640s, the return of Irishmen who had been serving in armies on the European continent had been crucial to Catholic military strength and had enabled the Catholic Confederation of Kilkenny to wage war effectively and control most of the kingdom. Thus, this was a reference both to fear of returning emigrés and to fear of Irish Catholic collusion with European Catholic powers. There is evidence that the exchanges reported on were conducted in the Irish language and that the deponent could speak Irish. The word ‘Pet’, used in the document, is a rendering of ‘peitirne’, which means a strong, robust, child. Thus, Flacke was making very strong allegations that serious violence against Protestants, including against children, was intended.

Flacke also raised the issue of his personal relationship with his wife in this deposition. He informed the assizes that his wife had “turn’d Papist, by the perversion of the Popish Priests, who doe swarm in that part of the Country” (National Library of Ireland, Lane Papers, Ms. 8643, fo. 8). Flacke’s reference to the ‘perversion’ of Catholic priests was a standard one, but he was also calling up than black propaganda. He was referring to the supposed ability of Catholic priests to inculcate in Irish Catholics a blind loyalty, which they put to evil uses. Orrery wrote that Roman Catholicism not only taught disobedience and regicide, but provided the very “Instrument of [Catholics’] Iniquity” (Boyle 1662a, 23: 7) by providing a hierarchy of priests to channel and direct that disobedience. Further, this reference had the effect of consigning his wife to imbecility, as a blind follower of Catholicism and as its agent.

Flacke and his wife evidently argued over the threats that had been made against him and Flacke deposed that “aftr much importunity, she [his wife] said, that when you heare of any shipping that are come into Castle Doe then fly away, & shift for your selfe” (National Library of Ireland, Lane Papers, Ms. 8643, fo. 8). Flacke conflated his fear for his personal safety with concern for the security of the kingdom and in doing so, attempted to add greater and broader import to his personal problems. In this way, he could attract official attention to them.

<sup>3</sup> “The examination of Coll Mc Caufrey of Lisnaroge in ye Countie of Fermanagh labourer” (31 Dec., 1664), National Archives, State Papers 63, 319, f. 30, 1. “Further Examination of Coll Mc Caufrey” (10 Feb., 1665), National Archives, State Papers 63, 319, fo. 30, 3. “Examination of Philip Mc James Oge” (Dublin, 10 Feb., 1664 [1665]), National Archives, State Papers 63, 319, fo. 30, 4.



The insight into his relationship with his wife that he provided holds much of interest. Clearly, the couple did not have a good relationship, and the use which Flacke's wife made of the fear of a plot to hasten her husband's departure is telling. According to the deposition, she also said "that many of the Irish yt have been absent out of ye Country many yeeres, have within this week last past or thereabouts appear'd furnish'd with Armes, & other weapons fitt for to doe mischeife & they are very bold & domineering & threatening ye British, all which this examin[an]t hath observ'd & daily doe observe of them" (National Library of Ireland, Lane Papers, Ms. 8643, fo. 8).

It is clear that the Flacke's marriage had broken down. They had not married as Catholic and Protestant. The wife's conversion to Catholicism brought her into different society and moreover, the members of her social circle regarded Flacke with particular hostility. The deposition is notable for Flacke's lack of inhibition with regard to his loss of patriarchal authority in the household. Rather, he conflated the loss of domestic harmony with a loss of order in the kingdom. The language he utilised was directly informed by political discourse nurtured since the 1640s and revived with debate of the restoration settlement. It indicates that the demarcations between the political and personal sphere were unclear and that the worldview of Ireland's denizens – in which inter-denominational rivalry was dominant – pervaded all aspects of life. Conversely, with regard to Flacke's wife, her conversion to Catholicism and utilisation of the matter of potential Catholic rebellion against him can be read as an attempt to defy her spouse. It would seem that she equated Catholic defiance of the Protestant monopoly of land and power with her defiance of her husband.

Restoration Ireland was a place dominated by memory of conflict drawn along confessional lines. High political discourse was conducted on the understanding that interpretation of past events was crucial to the achievement of present aims. Argumentation about the past was furthered in pamphlet literature too but, importantly, in discussion at all levels of society. The matter of Catholic inclusion within or challenge to the political nation and the land settlement exercised an extremely strong grip on the imaginations of Ireland's denizens. It was of such potency that understandings of political affairs and personal affairs were conceived of in similar terms. The case of John Flacke and his wife indicates that personal matters could be conflated with wider politics and that, significantly, the language of Protestant versus Catholic could be used by parties in order to further their personal agendas.

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