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The Cataclysmic Desire for Power:

The Irish Rebellion of 1641

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The history of the Irish Rebellion of 1641 is one that is extremely relevant to understanding the social, political, and religious dynamics of Northern Ireland today, as the tensions that derived from this rebellion have carried onward since the 17th century. The rebellion was preceded by the implementation of the Ulster Plantation system that began as far back as 1610.¹ It's important to keep in mind that England ruled over three kingdoms at this time: England, Scotland, and Ireland. In 1610, England was ruled by King James I (1566-1625), who moved forward in the migration and plantation of English Protestants onto the primarily Catholic lands of Northern Ireland.² This caused a substantial amount of tension between the native Irish population and the new, English settlers. Although the Irish lords still held a degree of power over the land, there was a significant rift between the two different cultures in many ways. As the discord grew, the Irish began to resist the English rule, which incrementally gave rise over the next few decades to set the scene for the Irish Rebellion of 1641.³ This event led to

¹ Henry Jones Ford, "The Ulster Plantation- Scottish-Irish in America," Library Ireland: History, Genealogy, Culture, accessed March 20, 2020, <https://www.libraryireland.com/ScotchIrishAmerica/I.php>.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

some of the bloodiest massacres in Irish history with a significant loss of lives, and it brought the central constructions of religion, social status, culture, and land ownership into play.

The evolution of historical thought regarding this event is particularly interesting, as the portrayal of the Irish and the English settlers has shifted throughout time, and has been shaped to its audience members. This essay seeks to investigate primary and secondary sources to contextualize the English standpoint, the victims, in juxtaposition with and the Irish testimonies, the rebels, taken during the Irish Rebellion of 1641. With a specific focus on contrasting the depositions from the Northern counties with those of the South, this paper will begin with the examination of the victims in Northern Ireland first, then move into an analysis of the rebel testimonies from counties, then analyze the depositions of victims and rebels from Southern Ireland. This juxtaposition will highlight the ways in which these sources reveal that there is not one answer behind the motives or actions taken by the Irish rebels against the English, Protestant settlers other than power.

To delve into this topic, one must understand the political and social conditions that the native Irish settlers faced, as well as the rights of the English that contributed to the acceleration of violence and uproar. The Ulster Plantation dispossessed “tens of thousands” of Native Irish people from their plantations and land. As historians have recounted the implementation of force and law that the Irish people were subject to, many note that the English rule used “extensive use of martial law and the wide-ranging powers of summary execution of ‘offenders’”.⁴ Thus, an incredible amount of tension arose from the dueling forces of power, as the Irish people felt that they lost power and control of their own land. However, on the other hand, the English rule felt

⁴ David Edwards, “Out of the blue? Provincial unrest in Ireland before 1641,” in *Ireland: 1641: Contexts and Reactions* (Manchester University Press, 2016), 97.

that their power was attributed to the rights of the crown which ruled the kingdom of Ireland from afar. The 1641 Irish Rebellion gave way to decades of brutality, corruption, and violence throughout the entire country. Jane Ohlmeyer and Micheal O Siochru state that “the conflict resulted in a greater demographic catastrophe than the potato famine of the 1840s, with the population loss estimated at over 20%”.⁵ Moreover, the rise of violence throughout the 1640s and 1650s is significant to both Irish and English history, because the remaining depositions and testimonies declare a substantial amount of violence on both sides of the opposition.

Beginning with the Northern counties of Ireland, which is where the conflict and tensions first began, one can detract that the rebellion as told through the testimonies of the victims reveal the specific targeting of the English settlers upon the Irish lands to regain their power. One example of this is shown in the deposition of James Nickson who was a victim in Derry in Northern Ireland in 1653. Nickson recounts that when the rebellion first broke out in Ireland that he was living with his parents at the age of 35. His family, primarily his father, was aiding the rebels with land and other assistance in lieu of protection for roughly six weeks.⁶ This indicates that at this time the conflict had grown to be so aggressive and violent that the English settlers were actually willing to ally with the Irish rebels in order to merely survive. After the six weeks, the rebels turned on the family and gruesomely murdered his mother and father.⁷ Nickson states that the rebels attacked his father first when they “cutt into the head with a brode sword and three stabbs into the belly with a skeine, & to his said mother the said Gilloone, gaue one cutt into the head with same sword that it did cleaue her head to the teeth, & then cutt her into the Arme &

⁵ Jane Ohlmeyer and Micheal O Siochru, “Introduction 1641: Fresh Contexts and Perspectives,” in *Ireland: 1641 : Contexts and Reactions* (Manchester University Press, 2016), 1-16.

⁶ James Nickson, “Examination of James Nickson,” 1641 Depositions Project, Trinity College Dublin, accessed April 15, 2020, <http://1641.tcd.ie/deposition.php?deplID=839116r079>.

⁷ Ibid.

then gaue her two stabbs about the heart whereof they dyed imediatly before he left them.”⁸ This deposition attests to the gruesome nature of the violence inflicted upon the English, because it wasn’t a simple matter of murder. This story suggests torture, slaughter, and intent. It also reveals that the Irish rebels didn’t consider their alliance to be one of legitimacy, because they knew that since they were providing protection to this family, they had the upper hand in regards to the power dynamic. This also implies the desperate nature for power and security that the English settlers found themselves in at this time.

Another example of a victim deposition from Northern Ireland is that of John Gibbs in 1653 in the county of Tyrone against a man named John Allen. Gibbs lived near Benborbe when the rebellion broke out, and witnessed a couple murders of the English settlers, and heard numerous tales of more. His wife was a nurse for some of the rebels and informed him of three murders that she knew that John Allen committed.⁹ He states, “George Blundell his Mason, his two Sonns and seuerall others were Murdered in the Church of Benbor{be} by the said Bryen o Donellye and his Companie” and that “after [he] liued in the said Allens house, and possessed his goods.”¹⁰ This example is significant because it highlights the religious tension that was involved with these murders, since the victims were killed inside of a church. Thus, one would be likely to assume the murders stem from a place of religious difference, and that the victims were targets of the rebels because of their religion. However, it is crucial to note that at this time the English Protestants had previously held the power over the native, Irish, Catholics within

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ John Gibbs. “Examination of John Gibbs,” 1641 Depositions Project, Trinity College Dublin, accessed April 15, 2020, <http://1641.tcd.ie/deposition.php?depID=839058r040>.

¹⁰ Ibid.

Ireland prior to the rebellion. Whether religion was the primary drive for the murders remains unknown. However, one could argue that it was not so much the religion itself as it was what the religion represented in the eyes of the native, Irish, Catholics: power.

The rebel depositions from this database typically reveal one of two things: they are either written from the perspective or deposition of the rebel being tried in court, in which case they deny all accusations. Or they are written from the perspective of outside sources such as the English settlers as charges against the rebels. It's important to note that people were largely killed during this time of conflict, so historians face numerous difficulties when evaluating these sources since they lack an inclusion of all voices. In addition to this, they faced factors such as fear, retaliation, etc. for coming forth with information, and as evident in the later in the Southern Ireland depositions, there was corruption on numerous levels of the state and government.

One example of a rebel deposition taken from an individual in Northern Ireland is that of Michael Butts in 1653, in the county of Antrim. In 1653 Michael Butts was twenty three years old and swore under oath that he witnessed Irish rebels appear at the castle in which he resided at about five o'clock in the morning.¹¹ They claimed that cattle had been stolen and wanted to search the premises, but they "surprized the sayd castle, and he together with the rest of his rabble seized upon *the same* and all the houses of Mountjoy robbed, Stripped and dispoyled them all, and imprisoned and bound all the old souldiers there being 50 persons or thereabout."¹² Moreover, this example shows that there was no clear motive for this attack, as the rebels targeted their possessions, sought to humiliate them physically, and took them prisoner against their wills. This specific example shows that the aim of the attack was to take control over the

¹¹ Michael Butts, "Examination of Michael Butts," 1641 Depositions Project, Trinity College Dublin, accessed April 15, 2020, <http://1641.tcd.ie/deposition.php?depID=839085r056>.

¹² Ibid.

English, and to presumably target them as backlash as the oppressive forces of power held within society.

In addition to this example is the examination of Bryan O'Levertie of the county of Donegal in 1653 against rebel Shane o Neile reveals a similar narrative and criminalization of the Irish rebels.¹³ O'Levertie testifies that five years prior the Irish rebels attacked this small group of English settlers, took their horses, guns, and eventually took them hostage. He claims that the Irish took the English as prisoners for a month before hanging Edmund McCarmick. This hanging was done under the orders and "Command of the Captain Shane Oge o Neile then Gouvernor at Charliamont as aforesaid for that it was then alleadged against him (and hee an Irish) that hee was a spie against the Ireish partie."¹⁴ This quote is one of the most significant components of the testimony itself because it reveals that the individual who was hanged was believed to be a spy for the English against the Irish. It emphasizes the notion of distrust and corruption that was within these parties, and shows the anxiety that this rebellion imposed over all people in Ireland at this time. Thus, the Irish sought to eradicate the English power within the society in any way that they could: robbery, murder, public humiliation, and imprisonment.

There is a sparse amount of victim depositions taken from the English victims from most counties in the Southern region of Ireland, being that there are roughly less than fifteen victim testimonies from each area alone. This amount is significantly smaller than the number of deponents and even rebels in this area with regards to written testimony. As one can infer, there are numerous reasons for the depletion in victim testimonies, such as the fact that the casualties of the 1641 Irish Rebellion were likely fatal, and there weren't many survivors to recount their

¹³ Bryan O' Levertie, "Examination of Bryan O'Levertie," 1641 Depositions Project, Trinity College Dublin, accessed April 15, 2020, <http://1641.tcd.ie/deposition.php?depID=839122r082>.

¹⁴ Ibid.

stories. On the other hand, if they did survive, they possibly feared the retaliation of the rebels against them. Another reason may be due to the location of the county. Since Ireland is a rather large country and the rebellion began in Northern Ireland, presumably it would've taken a long time to matriculate problems down throughout the mid and southern regions. It is important to note that besides the small quantity of victim reports, the first ones were recorded as late as 1653-1654, which reveals that the rebellion wasn't merely one event in history, but rather that the effects were long term and impacted the people of Ireland long after the beginning of 1641.¹⁵

Two specific examples of victim depositions within county Cork that are particularly compelling in the accounts of interwoven depositions about the same event. The first account is that of Mary Bowler of Cork, who gave a victim deposition regarding "Capt. Clerke" in 1653 regarding the following crimes: assault, captivity, military action, murder, robbery, etc.¹⁶ Bowler is described as a "spinster" who was in her 20s at the time of the deposition, and she was questioned in regards to her relationship with the defendant, "Capt. Clerke."¹⁷ She stated that she "doth know Capt Clerke, and hath knowne him ever since the first yeare of the Rebellion."¹⁸ Bowler later explains that this Captain brought a ship into the harbor of Galway and that this ship was "laden with Salt and Gunpowder and Armes."¹⁹ This seemed to be a well-known piece of information, as many of the townsmen were allegedly the ones who paid him to bring these

¹⁵ "1641 Depositions Project". Trinity College Dublin, accessed April 2, 2020, http://1641.tcd.ie/searchresults.php?sort=person_type_desc&dir=desc&msID=830&StartAge=0&StartDate=&start=0.

¹⁶ Mary Bowler, "Examination of Mary Bowler," 1641 Depositions Project, Trinity College Dublin, accessed April 2, 2020, <http://1641.tcd.ie/deposition.php?depID=830244v171>.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

materials in, likely as protection or to inflict violence. At the time in which this deposition was taken, it was likely the latter, since the violence had been ongoing since the 1640s.

Bowler goes on to imply that the lawyers and other members of the government in town were involved to some degree with the movement of gunpowder and arms over into Galway. These men boarded the Captain's ship, captured her, killed four of the captain's men, and wounded five others. Weeks after the ship incident, Bowler states in the deposition that "one John Fox and his wife, and a Seaman, and a gentlewoman, and a young youth (some to mr John fisher late of Tuam in the said County gentleman) ~~be~~[were] all ~~kill~~ English Protestants were murdered in the towne of Galway, by the Irish."²⁰ Also she says that the mayor of the town, as well as the other natively Irish council members were all involved in the scandalous plot. This testimony reveals the extent of the meticulous nature of the plots against the English, Protestant settlers who lived in Northern Ireland. It also shows the premeditation of the murders and bloodshed of the Protestants, as well as reinstates the issue of power since it trickles over into areas of the government and state officials. Bowler's narrative is extremely important in the context of the Irish Rebellion, because it highlights diversity of the targets of these crimes, and it also shows the embedded nature of corruption that invaded the social and political structures of Ireland during this time.

The second victim testimony is by Charles Conway of Cork adds a new layer of depth into the analysis of the "Capt. Clerke" story that Bowler testifies about. Conway had been living in Galway since the rebellion started in 1641, and his recount of the ship differs from Bowler, because he states that he did not know about the weapons on board.²¹ He claims that the men

²⁰ May Bowler, "Examination of Mary Bowler."

²¹ Charles Conway, "Examination of Charles Conway," 1641 Depositions Project, Trinity College Dublin, accessed April 2, 2020, <http://1641.tcd.ie/deposition.php?depID=830244v171>.

who boarded the ship were “man{y} boatmen and Soldiers, with boats and boards, went aboard the said shippe, as if they had gone to vnlade the Salt, and surprised the shippe, and killed twoe or three of the said shippes company.”²² Conway also corroborates Bowler’s sentiment about the level of internal corruption within the county itself, and the ways in which the people involved within the government were also in alliance with some of the rebel forces. He states that the guns were brought onshore and that he believed that all orders were made under “the direccion of Patricke Darcy, and the rest of the lawyers then there in the Towne.”²³ Furthermore, Conway’s testimony as a Protestant, English settler in Northern Ireland builds the credibility of the story shared by Mary Bowler’s testimony, and they both work in conjunction with one another to highlight the embedded conflict of the power struggle that fueled the rebellion and the years that subsequently followed.

The rebel testimonies during this time were mainly given from the perspective of the English, Protestant settlers against the native Irish rebels. More specifically they reveal that the Irish population not only rebelled with the infliction of violence upon the English, Protestant settlers, but also through the reclamation of land occupation, as well as robbery of English wealth in the forms of animals, possessions, and more. One example of this emerges within the testimony deposition of Joseph Hamptom against rebel Henrie Linch in the county of Galway. Hamptom claims that the year that the rebellion began, 1641, Linch “forcibly deprived robbed and dispoyled of a lease of the Castle and fiue quarters of land of Clanbowe for and during the naturall life of his two sonnes John & Joseph Hamptom.”²⁴ Thus, the rebels impacted the English

²² Charles Conway, “Examination of Charles Conway.”

²³ Ibid

²⁴ Joseph Hamptom, “Examination of Joseph Hamptom,” 1641 Depositions Project, Trinity College Dublin, accessed April 2, 2020, <http://1641.tcd.ie/deposition.php?depID=830244v171>.

settlers in more ways than one, and sought to regain their land and power within the country of Ireland. From this example, the notion of land ownership is a particularly important concept to the rivalry between these two groups of people, and the rebellion itself enacted a power struggle between them. Building from the previous example is the deposition of Michael Smith against rebel John Madden in the county of Galway in 1644. Smith claims that John Madden amongst his “rebellious” servants forced entry into a castle and took up arms against the English people, stealing “eight to tenn” cows, bulls, and more.²⁵ Smith describes these individuals as “rebellious people” which is indicative that they are natively Irish.²⁶ He states that the rebels also took “of the possession rents & proffits of his reall estate ~~worth~~ debts and other meanes goods & chattells of the value and to his losse of nyne thowsand twoe hundred pownds at the least.”²⁷ Moreover, it is important to note, again, that the rebels were interested in more than mere violence, they were interested in power and control. Thus, they took over the English estates, stole possessions, and took back the power in which they had lost in order to regain some of this power identity within society.

The Irish Rebellion of 1641 is critical for understanding the social, political, and religious tensions that still remain today, primarily in Northern Ireland. But it is also important for people to understand the widescope impact that this rebellion had over Ireland as a nation and one of England’s three kingdoms at the time. After exploring testimonies of both victims and rebels of Northern and Southern Ireland, one can conclude that there is no one answer or rationale for this rebellion or the events that subsequently followed other than power. These testimonies and

²⁵ Michael Smith, “Deposition of Michael Smith,” 1641 Depositions Project, Trinity College Dublin, accessed April 2, 2020, <http://1641.tcd.ie/deposition.php?depID=830143r110>.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

depositions are important because they give firsthand accounts of the rebellion, and provide insight into the instability that Ireland faced at this time. Like most historical events, there are a multitude of different narratives hidden beneath the surface, but the one commonality that is laced amongst all of the documents examined is the desire for power and control within the Irish society. Furthermore, it does not defend the actions taken by neither the Irish Catholics or the English Protestants, it merely serves as a reminder of the impact that social, political, and religious tension can cause a nation to endure.

About the author

Clare Nee is a recent graduate from Siena College in Loudonville, N.Y., where she majored in English and minored in Psychology. Her grandfather's family was from Ireland.

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