

Memory, story and balladry: 1798 and its place in popular memory in pre-Famine Ireland

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How were political ideas and popular memories transmitted in early nineteenth century Ireland? More specifically from the vantage point of this chapter, how widely was the rebellion of 1798 remembered in the decades before the Famine? The changing treatment of the rebellion by historians and political apologists has already been considered by Whelan and Cullen while Dunne has examined both contemporary 'subaltern' voices as well as the politics of commemoration in both 1898 and the recent bicentenary. However, there has been little serious attempt to explore nineteenth century memories 'from below' – that is, from the *cos mhuintir*, those sections of the population whose opinions were rendered inaccessible to both contemporaries and historians by reason of social status, language, or a combination of the two.¹ There is, of course, no clear-cut divide between élite and popular memories. We know that those writing 'from above', whether hostile or sympathetic towards the rebellion, took much of their evidence 'from below' – either from loyalist or rebel survivors of '98 or from those who experienced the ensuing pacification.² Equally – though this still remains a matter of conjecture – memoirs and commentaries on the rebellion must have percolated downwards to determine what was 'remembered' about the event. On the other hand, there were vital differences between the memories from above and from below, and it is on these differences that the present chapter concentrates.

The opinions 'from above' must be considered first. The process of sentimentalising rebellion was evident even before the hoped-for event had begun, the United Irishmen's *Paddy's Resource*, published in 1795, stressing the onset of a 'bright reforming age', the impending triumph of 'Sweet Liberty' and the courage of 'Erin's sons'.³ However, it was in the immediate aftermath of the rebellion that the

1 L.M. Cullen, 'The United Irishmen in Wexford' in Dáire Keogh and Nicholas Furlong (eds), *The Mighty Wave* (Dublin, 1996), pp. 50–4; Kevin Whelan, '98 after '98: the politics of memory' in *The Tree of Liberty* (Cork, 1996), pp. 133–176; Tom Dunne, 'Wexford's Comóradh '98: politics, heritage and history' in *History Ireland*, 6/2 (Summer 1998), pp. 52–3. 2 Richard Musgrave, *Memoirs of the Irish Rebellion of 1798*, 4th edition (Fort Wayne and Enniscorthy, 1995), foreword by David Dickson, pp. ii–iii; R.R. Madden, *The United Irishmen: Their Lives and Times*, 4 vols. (Dublin, 1857–60), passim; John Molony, *A Soul Came into Ireland: Thomas Davis 1814–1845* (Dublin, 1995), p. 235. 3 Tom Dunne, 'Popular Ballads, Revolutionary Rhetoric and Politicisation' in Hugh Gough and David Dickson (eds), *Ireland and the French*

dual process of demonisation and romanticisation of the rebels began in earnest, two rival versions of events competing even within the ranks of loyalism. Richard Musgrave's sensational *Memoirs of the Different Rebellions in Ireland* published in 1801 presented an image of barbaric rebels motivated by sectarian hatreds. Against this stood the more moderate interpretations of Joseph Stock (1800), James Gordon (1801) and Francis Plowden (1803) which emphasised the inherent loyalty of Catholics, downplayed both the sectarian and republican elements of the rebellion, and stressed that its draconian suppression would irreparably divide Irish society.⁴ This liberal strand of Irish loyalism was echoed over the following three decades by literary figures, including W.R. Le Fanu and Samuel Lover, with stories like 'Reminiscences of an Irish Landlord: the Rebel Chief' and 'The Lost One' and poems like 'Shamus O'Brien' presenting a caricature of the 'paddy-ish' but good hearted rebel:

Just after the war, in the year 'Ninety-Eight,
As soon as the boys were all scattered and bate,
'Twas the custom, whenever a peasant was caught
To hang him by trial, barring such as was shot.
There was trial by jury going on by daylight
And the martial law hanging the *lavings* by night.
It's them was hard times for an honest gossoon:
If he missed in the judges he'd meet a dragon:
And whether the judge or the soldiers gave sentence,
The divil a much time they allowed for repentance.⁵

If the tenor was stage-Irish, the setting was surprisingly authentic in its mirroring of Cornwallis's despairing comments to General Ross in the late summer of 1798: 'The violence of our friends . . . added to the ferocity of our troops who delight in murder, most powerfully counteract all plans of conciliation'.⁶

As commentators and writers from Gordon to Le Fanu in their own way began the transition from demonisation to romanticisation, poets of the romantic nationalist school transformed the deluded peasant and 'broth of a boy' rebel into a much

Revolution (Dublin 1990), pp. 144-6; 'Plant, Plant the Tree', George-Denis Zimmermann, *Songs of Irish Rebellion: Political Street Ballads and Rebel Songs 1780-1900* (Dublin, 1967), p. 127.

4 Whelan, '98 after '98', pp. 145-7; Joseph Stock, *A Narrative of what passed at Killala in the County of Mayo* (Dublin, 1800); James Gordon, *A History of the Rebellion in Ireland in the Year 1798* (Dublin, 1801); Francis Plowden, *An Historical Account of the State of Ireland* (London, 1803). 5 'Shamus O'Brien' was written by Le Fanu's brother and popularised by Samuel Lover in the United States. W.R. Le Fanu, *Seventy Years of Irish Life* (London, 1901), pp. 131-2. 'The Rebel Chief' by 'P.D.H.' and 'The Lost One' by 'J.M.L.' appeared in Samuel Lover's *Popular Tales and Legends of the Irish Peasantry* (Dublin, 1834). 6 Cornwallis to Ross, 1 July 1798, quoted in John Killen, *The Decade of the United Irishmen: Contemporary Accounts 1791-1801* (Belfast, 1997), pp. 144-51.

more genteel figure – the tragic hero-patriot. Thomas Moore's 'O Breathe not His Name' and 'She is Far from the Land', admittedly centred on 1803 rather than 1798, helped to set this pattern, stressing the obligation to remember the dead patriot:

And the night dew that falls, though in secret it rolls,
Shall long keep his memory green in our souls.⁷

This lionising of the rebel as apostle of patriotism reached its apogée with Young Ireland in the 1840s. Davis helped initiate a veritable cult of Wolfe Tone by marking the latter's neglected grave in Bodenstown and composing the poem 'Tone's Grave', while the rebel as patriotic role model was the core of Ingram's 'Memory of the Dead':

Then here's their memory, may it be
For us a guiding light,
To cheer our path to liberty
And teach us to unite.⁸

But Young Ireland was, with the exception of those moving into the revolutionary camp in the heady days of 1848, in something of a moral bind when exhuming the skeletons of 1798. Davis and others might well subscribe to Tone's vision of an Irish nation free from sectarian divisions, but there were other aspects of the rebellion that caused them considerable unease. What, for instance, about those secular sentiments, inherited from the Enlightenment and the French Revolution, which had been so fundamental to United Irish thinking? Although the most determined downplaying of these elements occurred from 1850 onwards, as Paul Cullen's Catholic nationalism and Kavanagh's 1870 *Popular History of the Insurrection of 1798* equated faith with fatherland, signs of disquiet were already apparent in the ranks of Young Ireland itself. Madden, for instance, was extremely cautious in selecting songs for his *Literary Remains of the United Irishmen*, 'Dermot's Delight' being included by him *despite* what he considered as its 'impious character' and then only 'for the purpose of showing up the authorship of one of the worst of [such songs]'.⁹

The other issue that placed Young Ireland on a sticky wicket regarding 1798

⁷ Thomas Moore, *The Poetical Works of Thomas Moore* (Edinburgh, 1862), p. 437. ⁸ Molony, *A Soul Came into Ireland*, pp. 235-7; John Kells Ingram, 'The Memory of the Dead', Zimmermann, *Songs of Rebellion*, p. 226. ⁹ R.R. Madden, *Literary Remains of the United Irishmen*, 2nd edition (Dublin, 1887). The first edition was published in 1846. Madden, who claimed that this song had been composed by Thomas Stott of Dromore who later wrote loyalist songs, was unaware that the transition from United Irish principles to loyalism was not so illogical once the rebellion had come to be regarded as a popish rising. Whelan, '98 after '98', pp. 151-4.

was its violence, some of it, at least, sectarian in nature.¹⁰ Davis, for instance, was torn between abhorrence of the alleged atrocities committed by the rebels and admiration for their courage and his prose piece 'Memorials of Wexford' attempted – not very convincingly – to square the circle:

[Wexford] rose in 'ninety-eight with little organisation against intolerable wrong; and though it was finally beaten by superior forces, it taught its aristocracy and government a lesson not easily forgiven, to be sure, but far harder to be forgotten – a lesson that popular anger could strike hard as well as sigh deeply; and that it was better to conciliate than provoke those who even for an hour had felt their strength. The red rain made Wexford's harvest grow. There was no treacherous assassination – theirs no stupid riot – theirs no pale mutiny. They rose in mass and swept the country by sheer force. Nor in their sinking fortunes is there anything to blush for. Scullabogue was not burned by the fighting men.¹¹

Davis was actually reflecting a general contemporary malaise regarding the terrible divisions opened in 1798. Patrick Kennedy, writing in 1855 but remembering the Wexford of his childhood, portrayed a similar attitude in his godmother's termination of a discussion on the potentially painful topic of the rebellion by making one of the company 'read a chapter of the heart-touching work of the good and gentle St Francis of Sales'.¹² That Kennedy was accurately reflecting attitudes of the earlier nineteenth century rather than projecting backwards from the 1850s is supported by another aspect of this 'remembering' of 1798, that is the fact that patriotic Young Ireland writers, constitutional O'Connellite politicians and 'respectable' Catholic folk who wished to live in harmony with their Protestant neighbours, all actually wanted to *forget* the whole distressing business. Indeed, so fervently did they wish the darker side of the rebellion forgotten that they almost convinced themselves that everyone else had forgotten it too. Is this why Davis, for instance, lamented the neglect of Wolfe Tone's memory and grave; why Ingram found it necessary to pose the rhetorical question – 'Who fears to speak of '98?'; and why Madden saw himself as rescuing 'from oblivion' the original songs and poems of the rebellion, claiming that it was

very possible to be gratified at hearing an old song, however political its tendencies, well sung, or to find it rescued from oblivion in a modern collection, without having one's spirit excited to the frenzy of a passion for

¹⁰ On the sectarian interpretation of the 1798 rebellion, see Dáire Keogh, 'Sectarianism in the Rebellion of 1798: The Eighteenth Century Context' in Keogh and Furlong (eds) *The Mighty Wave*, pp. 34–47. ¹¹ Arthur Griffith (ed.), *Thomas Davis: the Thinker and Teacher* (Dublin, 1916), p. 116. ¹² Patrick Kennedy, *Legends of Mount Leinster: Tales and Sketches* (Dublin, 1855), p. 137.

rebellion by the poetry, which stimulated the souls of our fathers and grand-fathers to acts of violence and desperation. The sense of wrong which breathed it died with the oppressors and the oppressed.¹³

Patrick Kennedy took up the theme in his portrayal of the fireside conversation of his childhood where one man declared:

... I hope you'll let Mr. James now repeat his treason song ['Father Murphy of County Wexford'] for us; and as our people don't seem to wish much for another war, not to keep up bad feeling, you may as well write it down some day; you need not fear it will bring about another rising.¹⁴

This sense of collective amnesia regarding 1798 is supported from another quarter, the Ordnance Survey letters compiled between 1838 and 1841 by John O'Donovan, Eugene O'Curry and others. Though the purpose of the Ordnance Survey was to clarify and standardise townland names and identify historical remains rather than record popular memories, the dearth of references to 1798-related sites and memories is striking. Indeed, stories gathered by O'Donovan and the other surveyors were more likely to concern long past incidents relative to the Vikings, Cromwell, the Williamite War, or even Fionn Mac Chumail, than the more recent events of the 1798 rebellion. For instance, the Meath survey made only the briefest reference to the Battle of Tara, while the Waterford survey letters dealing with the parish of Crooke mentioned a 'much frequented graveyard' but made no reference to the Croppy Boy's grave, although W.J. Fitzpatrick claimed a quarter century later that this grave was 'still shown' to visitors, a tradition that continued well into the twentieth century.¹⁵ Similarly, the initial impression given by street ballads sung in the two decades leading up to the Great Famine is the predominance of short-term memory. Almost all the ballads reported to Dublin Castle in this period dealt with events that had occurred less than six months previously – Repeal meetings, incidents in the tithe war, and electoral contests. The 1798 rebellion seemed to be forgotten. In fact, only one street ballad ('The Lamentation of Michael Boylan') transmitted to the Castle in the twenty years before the Famine was written specifically about the events of the insurrection, and just over twenty per cent (17 out of a total of 78) make any mention of the rebellion.¹⁶ Even then, the references are either brief, oblique, or both:

¹³ Madden, *Literary Remains*, p. ix. ¹⁴ Madden, *Literary Remains*, p. xii; Kennedy, *Legends*, p. 132. ¹⁵ Ordnance Letters, County Meath, letter 234, County Waterford, letters 6–12; W. J. Fitzpatrick, *The Sham Squire and Informers of 1798*, Third Edition (Dublin, 1866), p. 179. My own memories date back to the early 1960s when children in the local school learned to sing William McBurney's 'Croppy Boy' and were told that the said Croppy Boy was buried in the local graveyard. ¹⁶ Chief Secretary's Office Registered Papers, Outrage Reports (cited hereafter as CSORP.OR) 1835, 955/3; Zimmermann, *Songs of Rebellion*, pp. 154–5. Of

Dear Christians, remember the year 'ninety-eight
When pitchcaps and triangles before you were placed¹⁷

or

Prepare your croppy pikes, says the Shan Van Vucht¹⁸

or

My brother is gone off to Wexford,
In Kildare we are sure for to meet¹⁹

This apparent hiatus in popular memory may well have fitted in with Young Ireland's wishful thinking that 'faction and feud [were] passing away' but when we look further we are made aware very quickly that the problem was far from being one of forgetfulness.²⁰ It was, rather, a question of over-vivid memories. Thus, although the Ordnance Survey letters ignored the memories of the rebellion in Meath, we know that those organising and attending the great Repeal meeting there in August 1843 were very well aware of the links between the meeting site and the rebel defeat of forty-five years previously. Many of those attending the meeting picked red sorrel as a relic of the rebels buried there, while posters announced that high mass would be celebrated 'for the souls of the martyrs who were there brutally massacred in defence of their country's liberty in '98'.²¹ Other repositories of popular memory – oral evidence collected in the pre-Famine decades, incidental comments by contemporaries, and (when examined more closely) the popular songs written and sung in the forty years after 1798 – further confirm this impression of a vividly remembered rebellion. Indeed, the very brevity and obliqueness of the references to the rebellion in these compositions indicated not amnesia but highly-coloured memories that were conjured up on the utterance of code-words like 'pitchcap', 'triangle', 'yeoman', 'croppy' and – above all – 'ninety-eight'. Indeed, so potent did the date prove in touching chords of memory that there was no real need to articulate it, the context and rhyme frequently sufficing to conjure up the phantoms – 'We'll have satisfaction for the year of –',²² Nor was the power of the oblique reference unique to the popular songs. The

the 388 ballads referred to in the Castle files during the greater part of the century, less than ten per cent contain any reference to 1798. The chronological distribution of these references runs as follows: one in 1804, one in 1817, twelve in the 1830s, eight in the 1840s, four in the 1850s, and four again in the 1860s. **17** 'A New Song Called Erin the Green', CSOR.P.OR, 1843, 6/14675, Bandon, 17 July 1843. **18** 'The Young Soldier Boy', CSOR.P.OR, 1848, 12/316, Listowel, 30 September 1848. **19** CSOR.P.OR, 1834, 165/2. **20** Thomas Davis, 'Orange and Green', in Arthur Griffith (ed.), *Thomas Davis*, p. 117. **21** CSOR.P.OR, 1843, 22/15, 371, 15763. **22** CSOR.P.OR, 1843, 11/14217.

nationalist rhymers of the *United Irishman* in 1848 understood that a brief recall was all that was needed to bring forth the phantoms of the past:

Think of Hangman Hempenstal,
And the Hessian's trumpet call,
And the Yeoman's musket ball,
Go ahead!²³

'Everyone knew' that Hempenstal was the 'walking gallows'. 'Everyone knew' the role of the Hessians in the suppression of the Wicklow and Wexford rebellions. 'Everyone knew' that the yeomanry had been infamous for chapel burning and the hunting down of the defeated croppies. How did they know? Did their knowledge come from hostile writers like Musgrave, more moderate commentators like the Revd Gordon, pro-rebel apologists like Walter Cox and his illustrator, Brocas, and Young Ireland's romantic nationalist exhumers of the past?²⁴ Or did they come from memories and interpretations transmitted within the *cos mhuintir* itself? We don't know. But there are indications that vivid (if not necessarily accurate) memories of the rebellion and its immediate aftermath were preserved through songs and anecdotes noted down before the last eye-witnesses of the rebellion died and before the Famine swept away many of those who had told the stories and sang or listened to the street ballads.

How many people alive between 1820 and the Famine could actually remember the rebellion? Assuming that individuals who were over ten years of age in 1798 could most effectively carry memories of that year into their adult life, roughly one-third of the population in 1821 could conceivably remember the year of rebellion – a proportion that had fallen to one-tenth by 1841. However, if we concentrate on those counties where the rebellion had actually taken place, or where draconian counter-measures had made their mark, then the number of individuals with direct memories of the insurrection and its fall-out was much smaller – perhaps one-seventh of the country's population in 1821 and as low as one-fortieth by 1841.²⁵ This was, admittedly, a small proportion of the total population. On the other hand, it could provide a major source of direct memory to act as a powerful leaven for communal recall. Such seems to have, indeed, been the case, since contemporaries among the political élite were only too well aware that such memories were very much alive and sought desperately to remould them in a form

²³ *United Irishman*, 15 April 1848. ²⁴ Whelan, '98 after '98', pp. 164–5. ²⁵ *Census of Ireland 1841. Appendix to the Report of the Census Commissioners; Tables of Ages, Showing in Actual Numbers the Comparative Population of 1821 and 1841*. In 1821 there were 2,028,213 people over thirty years of age out of a total population of 6,401,827. In 1841 there were 843,496 people over fifty years of age in a population of 8,175,124. Confining our attention to the counties of Carlow, Dublin, Kildare, Meath, Wexford, Wicklow, Tipperary, Antrim, Down, Mayo, Roscommon and Leitrim and Dublin City, we get a total of 645,873 people in 1821 who were ten years or over in 1798, and in 1841 277,507 who were ten years or over at the time of the rebellion.

more acceptable to O'Connellite and romantic nationalism alike. Why, otherwise, did William Smith O'Brien warn a Limerick crowd in late 1843 that 'we do not want another '98' and Edmund Burke Roche declare in the same city twelve months later:

Who fears to speak of 'ninety-eight? Not we, the descendants of the honest but mistaken patriots of that luckless day, but the villain government that by all base and treacherous arts fomented a rebellion.²⁶

What were these popular memories that occasioned such fluttering in the dovescotes of Young Ireland and the Repeal Association? And what were the sources of such memories? Vitally important were the popular songs, of which three different but overlapping types can be identified. Firstly came songs like 'Plant, Plant the Tree' or 'Freedom Triumphant' composed before 1798 (mostly though not totally in English), which attempted to spread French revolutionary ideas.²⁷ Then there were the post-rebellion songs in both English and Irish which described the events of the rebellion and/or lamented its failure. These included 'Prosperous', 'Billy Byrne of Ballymanus', 'Blaris Moor', 'The Croppy Boy', 'Beir Litir Uaim don Mhumhain Leat', 'Sliabh na mBan' and 'Fr Murphy of County Wexford', the song most easily traceable to the aftermath of the rebellion and otherwise entitled 'Come All You Warriors', 'Some Treat of David', and 'Near Monaseed of a Summer's Morning'.²⁸ Support for the authenticity of this song comes from a number of sources, all bunched around the 1840s. Luke Cullen, writing some time in the 1840s, claimed that it 'was made immediately after the defeat. It was, perhaps, the most popular of all the Wexford songs'.²⁹ Patrick Kennedy's 1855 reminiscences of his County Wexford childhood described a visitor to his godmother's house presenting this song as 'one of the rebel songs that I used to hear sung, scores of times . . .'.³⁰ Indeed, the fact that Madden collected seven variants of the song in the 1840s suggests not only its popularity but also its capacity for self-regeneration over a number of decades – a good example of living, and changing – memory.³¹

Finally there were the broadside ballads already mentioned, mostly in English, which were sung around streets, fairs and markets between the late 1820s and the Famine. Considered by magistrates, police and concerned citizens as conducive to public disorder, these broadsides were frequently transmitted for scrutiny to Dublin Castle and can be used (with some caution) by historians as a barometer of public feeling.³²

²⁶ *Tipperary Chronicle*, 26 May 1843; *Cork Examiner* 22 November 1844. ²⁷ Zimmermann, *Songs of Rebellion*, pp. 125–8. ²⁸ Madden, *Literary Remains*, pp. 9, 11, 13, 27, 50, 175. ²⁹ Brother Luke Cullen, *Personal Recollections of Wexford and Wicklow Insurgents of 1798*, edited by Miles Ronan (Enniscorthy, 1959), p. 79. ³⁰ Kennedy, *Legends of Mount Leinster*, p. 132. ³¹ Madden, *Literary Remains*, pp. 9, 11, 13, 26, 27, 50, 175. ³² For more detail on the singing of broadside ballads in nineteenth century Ireland, see Maura Murphy, 'The Ballad Singer and the Role of the Seditious Ballad in Nineteenth Century Ireland: Dublin Castle's

The songs must be examined in conjunction with the personal testimonies collected by interested writers and historians from the 1830s onwards. Luke Cullen, a Carmelite friar, for instance, spent considerable time between 1838 and 1858 collecting memories of the rebellion in Wicklow and Wexford.³³ Around the same time R.R. Madden integrated a considerable amount of oral evidence in his *United Irishmen: Their Lives and Times* and *Literary Remains of the United Irishmen*, while, twenty years later, W.J. Fitzpatrick's *Sham Squire* was written with considerable emphasis on personal testimonies regarding the rebellion itself and popular memories of its aftermath.³⁴

The memories transmitted by these songs and personal testimonies owed little to those enlightened sentiments so central to United Irish thinking, which in the mid-1790s had presented a brief vision (or mirage?) of an egalitarian and secular society. Among the common people the propaganda songs collected in *Paddy's Resource* did not long outlive the rebellion itself, although a few squeaks of egalitarianism and Francophilia continued to be heard. Drinkers in a Newry public house in 1804 were heard singing 'Liberty and Equality or Dermot's Delight' and toasting a French invasion while street ballads in the early 1830s proclaimed that 'Boney and O'Connell [would] set Old Ireland Free'.³⁵ But such sentiments had a limited impact in the long run, and the most tenacious memories centred, instead, on the violence of the rebellion, the close association of events with particular places and, above all, the bitter experience of defeat and the ensuing pacification.

In the songs, particularly, memories of the more gruesome events of the rebellion were represented through graphically violent imagery, descriptions that had far more in common with Musgrave's accounts and Cruikshank's retrospective drawings for Maxwell's *History of the Rebellion* than with the high-minded patriotism which Young Ireland wished to recall. Micheál Óg Ó Longáin's 'Beir Litir Uaim don Mhumhan Leat' declared unapologetically:

Is ba thrua mar bhídís coirp againm

Agus fuil I ndeireadh an lae.

[And wasn't it pitiful to have bodies and blood at the end of the day.]³⁶

while 'Father Murphy of County Wexford' described how

Through sheepwalks, hedgegrows and shady thickets

There were mangled bodies and broken ranks

View', *Ulster Folklife*, xxv (1979), pp. 79-102. ³³ Luke Cullen, '98 in *Wicklow: the Story as Written by Brother Luke Cullen, introduced by Rev. Miles Ronan* (ed.) Revd Miles Ronan (Wexford, 1938); *Personal Recollections*. ³⁴ Madden, *The United Irishmen; Literary Remains*; Fitzpatrick, *The Sham Squire*. ³⁵ State of the Country Papers, National Archives, Dublin (cited hereafter as SOC), 1804, 1028/7, 22 March 1804; CSORP.OR. 1842, 6/7015. ³⁶ 'Fr Murphy of County Wexford', Zimmermann, *Songs of Rebellion*, pp. 142-3; Risteard Ó Foghludha, *Mil na hÉigse* (Dublin, 1945), p. 232.

and one of its variants, 'Heroes of '98', laughed in the face of Davis's apologia for Wexford by declaring *apropos* of the battle of Ross:

... a reinforcement came down upon us,
Just in the evening, through fire and smoke.
We were forced to leave the town in blazes,
And in our retreat burned Scullabogue.³⁷

The memories collected by Cullen and Fitzpatrick, while less highly coloured, presented the same graphic and unrepentant account of bloodshed, the killing of the first yeoman at Oulart by a pike through the face, the ruthless cutting down of soldiers calling for mercy, and the boast (whether accurate or not hardly matters) by a woman who claimed many years later: 'It was I went for the lighted turf which set fire to the barn at Scullabogue.'³⁸

In the two decades preceding the Famine the largely anonymous ballad writers took up the theme. The space devoted to accounts of violence may indeed have been cut back, but the gleeful descriptions were familiar and perhaps even more highly coloured than the originals as popular excitement consequent on the tithe war, the Repeal campaign and the perennial resurrection of Pastorini's prophecies roused expectations of a replay of the carnage of '98. 'The Glories of Erin' sung at Dunmanway in 1841 described, in language reminiscent of events at the Vinegar Hill windmill and Wexford Bridge, the

Boys of old Erin for ages rejoicing
To hear all the Tories a-roaring, when piking,
Stretched on the road in sad woe when expiring
... The croppies came bouncing and boldly advanced
Put their foes to the rout and their brains out they dashed,
Crying – Liberty all over, we glory to fight them,
Come, push round the jorum and toast to the pikemen.³⁹

Equally evocative – and taking up the constantly recurring Scullabogue theme – was the snatch of a contemporary ballad sung by a drunken passenger on the mail-coach at Toomevara in South Tipperary in 1843:

Were you at Ballinamuck?
And were you at the Battle of Comber?
Were you at Scullabogue barn?
And did you see the Orangemen roasting?
Tally heigh ho!⁴⁰

37 'Heroes of '98' in Madden, *Literary Remains*, p. 175. 38 Cullen, *Personal Recollections*, pp. 18, 19; Fitzpatrick, *Sham Squire*, p. 179. 39 CSOR.P.OR. 1841, 6/7015. 40 *Limerick Chronicle*, 22 November 1843.

The popular memory of 1798, then, was remarkably similar to that of loyalists. More redolent of Musgrave than of Davis, it stressed the raw cruelty of the rebellion and, with its unabashed celebration of those cruelties, provided a very different focus to that offered by patriotic writers 'from above'.

The second emotive element in the sung and recounted memories at popular level was the appeal to place. Not as disturbing as the triumphalist language of violence, this was nonetheless significant in linking local pride to a broader popular identity. This was particularly obvious in the songs dating from the late 1790s which, building upon immediate memories of the rebellion, were particularly adept in pinpointing local detail and interweaving place, persons and patriotism. Titles and refrains of these songs centred on place names associated with the rebellion (Sliabh na mBan, Dunlavin Green, Prosperous) or, more emotively, on a combination of place and individual hero figure. Thus, County Wexford came to be personified by Fr Murphy and the anonymous 'Croppy Boy'; Wicklow by Billy Byrne of Ballymanus; Toome Bridge in Antrim by Rody McCorley; and Ballinahinch by Henry Munroe. Some of this identification of place and patriotism was, of course, imposed from outside. After all, it was a Munsterman, Micheál Óg Ó Longáin, who coined the line which made Leinster synonymous with rebellion – 'Inis go bhfuil na Laighnigh at adhaint an tine leo'. ['Declare that the Leinstermen are lighting the fire'.]⁴¹ But the genuine rooting of these songs in local memory is further suggested by the detailed knowledge they display regarding place-names. Names of larger places or places made notorious by the events of the rebellion – Enniscorthy, Kilcock, Prosperous or Vinegar Hill – could have been known by anyone even vaguely familiar with the events of the rebellion, but the stream of names of smaller places unknown to most outsiders suggests that the songs were built on popular local memory. Who, outside Gorey, had ever heard of Clough? Who outside south Wexford was familiar with the parish of Kilcavan, still less the townland of Limerick?⁴² Who outside Kildare would have heard of Wiley's Hill or Newtown Bog?⁴³ How different to the *faux-pas* of the (presumably non-Wexford) printer who, in a variation on the Fr Murphy ballad, replaced the original reference to 'the Camolin cavalry' by one to the 'Caernarvon cavalry'.⁴⁴

The incidental personal detail in the songs and narratives further emphasised this sense of immediacy, even as the events of the rebellion receded into the past. Somewhat frivolously, a 'venerable old lady' recalling her childhood in the early part of the nineteenth century remembered hearing that Oliver Bond had 'good legs' which he liked to show off in silk stockings, hardly the stuff of which history

41 Ó Foghludha, *Mil na hEigse*, p. 232; Ronán Ó Donnchadha, *Micheál Óg Ó Longáin: File* (Baile Atha Cliath, 1994), p. 91. Later versions read: 'O grá mo chroí na Laighnigh, is iad d'aidhn an tine bheo' i.e. 'The pride of my heart are the Leinstermen: it is they lit the living fire'. 42 'Some treat of David', 'The Boys of Wexford', Madden, *Literary Remains*, pp. 50-51; Zimmermann, *Songs of Rebellion*, pp. 144-5. 43 'Billy Byrne of Ballymanus', Zimmermann, *Songs of Rebellion*, pp. 12-13. 44 Zimmermann, *Songs of Rebellion*, p. 147.

is made, but probably authentic for all that.⁴⁵ On a more serious note, those who had earned popular odium during the rebellion could be named with absolute certainty (if not accuracy). Madden's version of 'Near Monaseed', for instance, collected in the mid-1840s, could still identify

Long Smith, the slater, that bloody traitor,
Who was slain that day by a Croppy gun⁴⁶

while 'The Song of Prosperous' recalled how

. . . Spark's house we burned
In recompense for Kennedy, that died there on a tree.⁴⁷

Cullen's informants in the early 1840s could name both rebels and yeomen active or killed in the rebellion, while Madden collected a fragment of verse which, in the midst of a predictable list of well-known military encounters during the rebellion, suddenly switched into what sounds like an authentically local celebration and personification of a brass canon taken from the cavalry at Tubberneering:

Were you at Vinegar Hill?
Or down at the battle of Tara?
Have you seen Holt or his men?
Or the gem we called *Tatter-a-rara*?⁴⁸

Much of this detail was omitted from the later street ballads which, written at a remove of thirty years, suggested only a very general acquaintance with the local details of rebellion. Wexford, of course, figured most prominently in the recitation of places that had 'played their part', followed by other parts of Leinster:

Success to the County Wexford boys . . .

or

Wexford, Westmeath and Kilkenny,
Their games they can count them galore . . .

⁴⁵ Fitzpatrick, *Sham Squire*, pp. 314–18. ⁴⁶ Madden, *Literary Remains*, p. 14. ⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 33. Madden's footnote filled in the detail: 'Sparks was a fellow-comrade of the monster Hempenstall, of Edenderry and Carbury. He hung a respectable honest man of the name of Kennedy [who was at the Battle of Hartland [formerly Wiley's Hill] and was on his way home when met by those bloodthirsty yeomen. They hung him without any ceremony, or knowing for what.' ⁴⁸ Cullen, '98 in *Wicklow*, pp. 13, 18, 19, 26, 45; *Personal Recollections*, pp. 18, 19; Madden, *Literary Remains*, p. 27.

or

Kildare and Sweet Wexford,
 Their children were never afraid⁴⁹

But even if the local detail was not integrated into the later ballads, the importance of place (and especially of small places) in the popular memory of the rebellion continued to figure prominently in the oral evidence collected between the 1830s and 1860s. This was particularly true of the memories and anecdotes collected in the Wexford and Wicklow regions by Luke Cullen.⁵⁰ He not only spoke to surviving participants in the rebellion and to younger people who had heard stories of those disturbed times, but – indicative of the importance of place – he also checked the accuracy of the stories as best he could by the informant's ability to pinpoint the place of occurrence, distinguishing clearly between incidents that could be thus authenticated and those that could not. Cullen, for instance, received from Peter Foley 'who fought through most of the Wexford campaign' a detailed account of the rebels' progress, townland by townland, towards Oulart. Foley could indicate the precise spot 'in the hollow of the road' near Widow Kinshela's cabin where the North Cork militia had left their shoes so as to quicken their pace after the rebels, and he could identify the townlands of origin of a number of the rebels who were killed.⁵¹ Similarly, he gathered a considerable number of place-specific memories from around Bray, recording stories about a man named Devlin shot 'opposite Miss Weldon's gate' and the wiping out of almost an entire family in the townland of Collahill, and was told the precise spot on the river bank near Newtownmountkennedy where Michael Neill of Upper Newcastle was hanged.⁵²

With such stories kept alive through re-singing and recounting, it was inevitable that the most emotive popular memory of the rebellion was that of defeat. Cullen's informants, again, provided much of this type of detail. There was, for instance, the striking pictorial memory of a woman named Dowling from Kilcool who, at the age of eight or nine, had been attacked by the Welsh Horse (or Ancient Britons) while she tended cows in her mother's field. Very indignant when Cullen hinted that the event was too distant for accurate recall, this woman who 'could not remember the recent events in her own locality . . . yet . . . had vividly before her mind the accoutrements and conduct of the Welsh Horse'.⁵³ Equally convincing was the case of Owen Keelogue and Pat Cullen of the townland of Cnocraheen in County Wicklow, still alive in 1858, who suffered from 'bad

49 'The Boys you know' sung in Moynalty in 1816; 'The Clubs' Triumph' sung in Stradbally, Queen's County in 1848; 'The County Wexford Shamrock' sung in Carlow in 1835. SOC. 1816, 1764/12; CSOR.POR. 1848, 19/233; 1835, 1955/3. 50 Louis Cullen, 'The United Irishmen in Wexford', pp. 51-4, described Cullen as 'impressive for his incidental detail' with its 'ring of truth, humanity and tragedy'. 51 Cullen, *Personal Recollections*, pp. 13, 16, 19, 21. 52 Cullen, *Ninety-Eight in Wicklow*, pp. 13, 16, 26. 53 *Ibid.*, p. 10.

legs' as a result of torture by 'spurring' in the aftermath of the rebellion.⁵⁴ Fitzpatrick's *Sham Squire*, admittedly published twenty years after Cullen's research had been completed but partially based on evidence collected in the 1840s, provided the same graphic memories. In Dunlavin the recollection of executions of United Irishmen was described as 'still green', and 'aged witnesses' to the events of 1798 could remember bodies hanging between the pillars of the market house, give the names and townlands of origin of most of those executed, could describe the killing of the McDonalds of Lemmonstown by the Ancient Britons and show the burial mounds of those killed at Old Kilcullen.⁵⁵ Dublin city also provided a rich fund of popular memories of the rebellion among people of high and low station alike. One old lady, for instance, speaking at some unspecified time before her death in 1844, remembered the dogs licking up the blood from under the execution block at the junction of Bridgefoot Street and Thomas Street, while another recalled many times seeing Major Sirr as an old man travelling in his carriage, and being told that his conscience would not allow him to sleep at night so that he had to go by day to his country residence at Cullenswood to snatch some sleep.⁵⁶ But perhaps the most heart-rending piece of memory for me, along with loyalist stories of Scullabogue and Wexford Bridge, was where a line from the song 'Sliabh na mBan' intersected with a story which the Revd Mr Gordon was told by his son, a yeoman. The song (frequently ascribed to Ó Longáin but more likely written around Mullinahone in south Tipperary) described how the defeat at New Ross ended not only in military disaster but also in the awful sufferings of the innocent:

Leanaí óga 'na smóla dóite

Is an méid a fhan beo daoibh cois claoi nó scairt.

[Small children burnt to cinders and those who still lived [hiding] in ditches and thickets.]⁵⁷

From the other side of the political divide, the Revd Gordon's story, referring to the aftermath of the battle at Ballycanoo, provided an uncanny echo of the old song:

Two yeomen coming to a brake or clump of bushes, and observing a small motion as if some persons were hiding there, one of them fired into it, and the shot was answered by a most piteous and loud screech of a child. The other yeoman was then urged by his companion to fire; but he being a gentleman, and less ferocious, instead of firing commanded the concealed

54 *Ibid.*, p. 31. 55 Fitzpatrick, *Sham Squire*, pp. 303-13. 56 *Ibid.*, pp. 314-18.

57 'Sliabh na mBan'. I had assumed that Micheál Óg was the author and am indebted for this correction to Úna Nic Einrí of Roinn na Gaelige, Mary Immaculate College, and to Pádraig Ó Cearbhaill. Another version of 'Ar Shliabh na mBan' appears in Daithí Ó hÓgáin, *Duanaire Thiobraid Arann* (Baile Atha Cliath, 1981), p. 63.

persons to appear, when a poor woman and eight children, almost naked, one of whom was severely wounded, came trembling from the brake, where they had secreted themselves for safety.⁵⁸

Had the writer of this song read Gordon's book? Was he or she envisaging that which everyone knows happens in war? Or was this an echo of horror stories that had travelled westwards from south Leinster into the heartland of south Tipperary?

This is where the song- and narrative-centred 'memories' have a more authentic ring than the high-minded compositions of Young Ireland for whom, as we have seen, remembering was either an exhortation to patriotic endeavour or a nostalgic revisiting of past times. Popular memory, on the other hand, was unburdened by either the egalitarian sentiments of the original United Irish movement, the nostalgia of Madden and Kennedy, or the moral dilemma of Davis. Thus it combined lamentation for defeat with the quest for vengeance. The early 'songs of defeat', for instance, warned all enemies – traitors, yeomen, Orangemen – of what lay in store for them.⁵⁹ Wexford loyalists were reminded that 'every man has a pike or gun'; in Wicklow an informer was promised 'lakes of fire and brimstone with sulphur to his chin'; in Kildare loyalists were threatened with 'satisfaction for the murders they did in that year'; while a Munster informer – 'an méirleach darbh ainm Néill' [the traitor named Neill] – was promised:

Go mbeamnaim I gcomhair dó le píc 's le sleá

Is go gcuirfeam yeomen ag crith 'na mbróga.

[We will be ready for him with pike and lance and we'll make yeomen shake in their shoes.]⁶⁰

Thirty years later the same troika of villains remained. Take, for instance, one Dublin lady's childhood memory of being shown the 'skeleton of Jemmy O'Brien the informer' at the Anatomy House in Trinity College where she had been taken by a woman who minded her and whose husband (as she learned many years later) had been 'done to death' by O'Brien's information.⁶¹ At the same time, while rural ballad singers concentrated their wrath on 'Orange dogs' the spectre of the yeomanry continued to haunt the popular mind in country and town.⁶² Just as Cornwallis had denounced them in mid-1798 – 'They have saved the country but they now take the lead in rapine and murder'⁶³ – the ballads of the irrepressible

58 Gordon, *History of the Rebellion*, p. 113. 59 Yeomen and Orangemen were targeted in 'Father Murphy of County Wexford', 'Billy Byrne of Ballymanus', 'The Song of Prosperous' and 'Sliabh na mBan'; traitors were blamed in 'Sliabh na mBan', 'The Song of Prosperous' and 'Rody McCorley'. 60 'Father Murphy of County Wexford', 'Billy Byrne of Ballymanus', 'Sliabh na mBan', Zimmermann, *Songs of Irish Rebellion*, pp. 140, 143, 149; Ó Brádaigh, *Bliain na bhFrancach*, p. 33. 61 Fitzpatrick, *Sham Squire*, pp. 313–25. 62 CSOR.POR., 3/12391; 5/13187; 6/17767; 11/14217; 20/21769; 27/12177, 13337; 28/20575; 29/13599. 63 Cornwallis to General Ross, 24 July 1798, quoted in Killen,

Zozimus lambasted 'the '98 yeomen who proved they were no men' when they had made 'many a scabby back' in the post-rebellion clean-up.⁶⁴ In the same decade, Cullen's informants in Wicklow could name individual yeomen who had been reputedly involved in atrocities, Smug Leasley of Leabeg and Griffin Jones of Newcastle.⁶⁵ And then there were the individual villains of higher station whose memory people loved to revile. As Connaught memories centred on *Donnchadh an Rópa* since 'is iomaí buachaill deas chuir [sé] thar saíle' ['It was many a fine boy he transported across the sea'], so from Tipperary came confirmation that the region was still, in the mid-1860s, 'full of traditions of [the] excessive zeal' of High Sheriff Thomas Judkin Fitzgerald.⁶⁶ As for the afore-mentioned Major Sirr, his role in dealing with the threat of rebellion in Dublin was (perhaps with the help of Walter Cox's writing) never forgotten by the city's poorer classes. Hence the reaction of the old Dublin woman who, convicted by him in the police court for disorderly behaviour, 'gave a weird kind of shout and commenced a long recapitulation of sundry objectionable acts committed by "the Major" in 1798'.⁶⁷

How factually 'accurate' these memories were – many of them narrated forty years after the event – is another matter. Even the songs and memories of the pre-Famine period may have been shaped, at several removes, by what Ó Cíosáin terms the 'vertical reading' of Hay, Walter Cox and Young Ireland, while those collected later in the century may have been coloured by publications like the *Spirit of the Nation*, the *Irish Felon* and the *Irish People*, so that we are even more unsure than in the pre-Famine context as to what came from local tradition and what was a distilled version of nationalist writings 'from above'.⁶⁸ Whether earlier or later in the century, those posing the questions or arranging the material for publication were not starting with a clean slate. All were influenced by what they had read (without which they would have had no questions to ask) or by some agenda of their own. Needless to say, most had a nationalist outlook which not only precluded the collection of loyalist counter-memories but also made their handling of 'rebel' evidence quite selective. Luke Cullen, for instance, though he certainly had personal memory links into the rebellion itself (born as he was in 1793), was surely influenced in his approach by having 'read all the histories he could lay hands on'. Madden, though he thought himself to be impartial, was at pains to present the rebellion as 'Greek drama. . . with the inevitable doom of those engaged in it' and

Decade of the United Irishmen, p. 149. ⁶⁴ 'Billy's Downfall' and 'Dicky in the Yeomen', in Zimmermann, *Songs of Rebellion*, pp. 218–22. ⁶⁵ Cullen, '98 in Wicklow, pp. 18–19. ⁶⁶ *Donnchadh an Rópa* (Denis of the Rope) was the nickname for Denis Browne, the Mayo magistrate, who was active in repressing disturbances in that county in the late 1790s. Ciarán Ó Coighligh, *Raiftearaí: Amhráin agus Dánta* (Baile Atha Cliath, 1987), pp. 148–9. 'It was many a fine boy he transported across the sea'; Evidence sent by Revd W. Wall, Parish Priest of Clonoulty, Cashel (September 1865) and Revd Dr Fitzgerald, Parish Priest of Ballingarry (July 1865). Fitzpatrick, *Sham Squire*, pp. 217–9. ⁶⁷ Fitzpatrick, *Sham Squire*, p. 318. ⁶⁸ Niall Ó Cíosáin, *Print and Popular Culture in Ireland 1750–1850* (London, 1997), pp. 388–9.

uncontaminated by either 'impious' doctrines or rebel excess.⁶⁹ In the case of the Ordnance Survey letters, too, inclusion or omission of 1798-related material seems to have depended on the initiative of the surveyor. John O'Donovan gave some space in his survey of the Wicklow townland of Ballymanus to Garret Byrne and his executed brother, William, but whether this information came from local informants or from some other sources accessible to O'Donovan is impossible to decide.⁷⁰ The same surveyor initiative in targeting 1798-related material was evident in the case of Wexford where 'P.K.' took a decidedly anti-rebel line in his references to the massacre on Wexford Bridge, the exodus of loyalist refugees from Enniscorthy, and the Scullabogue burning in which he claimed that one of his own relations had been killed.⁷¹

Besides, stories changed with retelling and songs with re-singing. Recent research gives some salutary warnings against placing too much trust in communal memory, especially in the matter of identifying 'traitors' and villains. Guy Beiner, for instance, has shown how twentieth-century 'memories' of supposed traitors of 1798 in Longford have not only changed over time with multiple narrations, but in some cases have more accurately represented recent inter-communal tensions than those which they tried to recount.⁷² In such cases the degree of conviction of the teller can be in almost inverse proportion to the accuracy of the story. Though Beiner's study centred on stories told over a century after 1798, we might do well to exert the same caution when looking at the memories noted down in the fifty years after the rebellion. While the lasting impression of the earlier songs and the personal testimonies still remains one of authenticity, it must be admitted that, apart from historically authenticated figures like Fr Murphy, Michael Boylan and Rody McCorley, most individuals 'remembered' proved disappointingly difficult to trace with certainty. Loyalist activists and victims prove somewhat easier to trace. The identity of the yeomen Smug Leasley and Griffin Jones, whom Cullen's Wicklow informants castigated, can be authenticated from 1799 muster rolls.⁷³ Similarly, despite some discrepancies, Revd Gordon's 1801 account confirms that William Caroline, the relative of the Wexford ordnance surveyor, 'P.K.', was killed at Scullabogue.⁷⁴ Other victims of the rebellion and its aftermath prove more elusive. There is, for instance, no way of identifying 'Long Smith' killed by the rebels at Oulart, nor of tracing those involved on the rebel side, like the female weaver from Courtlough who met her death in the same battle, or the farmer named Synott who survived at Oulart though armed only with stones on the day, still less

69 Madden, *Literary Remains*, p. x. 70 Ordnance Survey Letters, Wicklow, letters 144-7.

71 Ordnance Survey Letters, Wexford, Vol. I, letter 57; Vol. II, letters 50, 233-4. 72 Guy Beiner, 'Deciphering Oral Tradition: The Mysterious Case of the Stealing of Humbert's Canon Chains at Cloone', lecture delivered at the Irish Economic and Social History Conference, Dublin, 20 November 1999. 73 Cullen, '98 in Wicklow, pp. 18-19; Ruán O'Donnell, *The Rebellion in Wicklow, 1798* (Dublin 1998), pp. 188-9. 74 Ordnance Survey Letters, Wexford, Vol. 1, letter 57; Vol. II, letters 233-4; Gordon, *History of the Rebellion*, pp. 60-2. Musgrave, *Memoirs of the Irish Rebellion*, pp. 734-55;

the pathetic mother and children found by Gordon's son in the grove near Ballycannoo.⁷⁵ These disappeared forever from the historical record into the recesses of popular memory. Did they ever exist? Surely they did. But such conviction is less that of the source-backed historian than the listener swept along by the power of story or song. Perhaps this, after all, is where the real importance of the song and personal testimonies lay. Their credibility and power to both shape and reflect popular memory lay in their vividness and their intimacy (real or imagined) with the events they recounted. Besides – and this is especially true in the case of the songs – words were not always the most important medium for the transmission of memory. Sometimes less tangible elements like melody and echo proved more powerful.

Yet, for all these reservations regarding the manipulation of material by collectors and the uncertainty of popular memory, there does seem to be a direct line of continuity between the events of 1798 and the sung and spoken memories of the *cos mhuintir*. This is strongly suggested by a closer look at the street ballads with their brief and oblique references to the rebellion. Politically naive and frequently peppered with linguistic malapropisms due to incompetence in the English language, these ballads, which Charles Gavan Duffy dismissed as 'nonsense daubed on tea-paper', nonetheless form an important causeway over the first half of the nineteenth century between the remnants of a Gaelic world and an increasingly Anglicised and politicised one.⁷⁶ They suggest how memory of the rebellion could be preserved not only by detailed narrative but also by the *shape* of a song – its title, rhythm, refrain and the air to which it may have been sung. Take, for instance, the street ballad 'Slievenamon' (otherwise known as the 'Downfall of Tithes'), sung throughout Munster and beyond in 1832.⁷⁷ The title was laden with meaning for although the text of the song dealt with the recent tithe-related incident at Carrickshock, the mere mention of Sliabh na mBan called forth phantoms of the haunting Irish lament for the failed rebellion in north-east Munster.⁷⁸ Was the new 'Slievenamon' sung to the air of the old? We have no idea, for contemporaries frequently noted that street ballads were 'bawled' rather than sung, perhaps as much a reflection of the need to be heard above the noise of crowded fair or market as of the musical inadequacies of the singer.⁷⁹ 'Slievenamon' could be sung very successfully to a rousing number like 'Preab san Ól', but it lent itself equally well to the poignant air of the earlier composition. Was this ballad of the 1830s composed by someone who knew the old air and its associations? And for an audience who, however rough-hewn, also knew that this air was, above all else, a lament (and call

⁷⁵ Madden, *Literary Remains*, p. 14; Cullen, *Personal Recollections*, p. 19. ⁷⁶ Charles Gavan Duffy, *Four Years of Irish History* (Dublin 1855), p. 56. ⁷⁷ CSORP.OR. 1832, 1063; C/1431; 1310; 1500; L1572; 1844, 27/13449; *Cork Constitution*, 3 July 1836. ⁷⁸ Michael O'Hanrahan, 'The Tithe War in Co. Kilkenny 1830–1834' in William Nolan and Kevin Whelan (eds), *Kilkenny: History and Society* (Dublin, 1990), pp. 481–505. ⁷⁹ CSORP.OR. 1834, 165/6; 1836, 6/240. The words 'crying' and 'bawling' were used to describe the rendition of the ballads in each of these cases.

for revenge) for 1798? This is not an unrealistic scenario. Much later in the century the whistling of the tune 'Harvey Duff' or 'The Peeler and the Goat' was used to goad the police, while the mere playing of 'Croppies Lie Down' was considered by the Wexford rebels to be sufficiently provocative to merit the player's murder at Scullabogue.⁸⁰ The associations awakened by melody could be further reinforced by an evocative refrain. Thus the closing lines of each rousing if inelegant stanza of the 1832 ballad echoed uncannily the more masterfully crafted refrain of the Irish song:

Mar do sheolfáí tréada de buaibh gan aoire
 Ar thaobh na gréine de Shliabh na mBan.
 [As cattle without a herd might be driven
 On the sunny side of Sliabh na mBan]

or

Go mbeidh claóí ar mhéirligh is an adharc dá shéideadh
 Ar thaobh na gréine de Shliabh na mBan.
 [That traitors will be defeated and the horn blown
 On the sunny side of Sliabh na mBan]⁸¹

as against

We'll free old Ireland from every traitor
 Or die like heroes on Slievenamon.

or

All that's past is but a token
 Of what we'll show them on Slievenamon.⁸²

So here is a case where, it could be suggested, the *shape* of the song was as important as the narrative. The new ballad was plugging into an already existing communal memory sustained by, among other factors, a poignant musical lament. The subject matter of the two songs may have been quite different but a link between past and present was forged by a familiar title, air and refrain. Most powerfully of all, past and present 'heroic' events were firmly grounded in a local setting which in this particular case had an additional symbolism as an almost magic mountain, Sliabh na mBan bhFionn of the *scéalta Fiannaíochta*.⁸³ Micheál Ó Longáin's shadow,

⁸⁰ Gordon, *History of the Rebellion*, p. 130. ⁸¹ Ó Brádaigh, *Bliain na bhFrancach*, pp. 33-4.

⁸² CSORP. OR. 1832, 1063; C/1431. ⁸³ For details of the living importance of *scéalta fiannaíochta* regarding Sliabh na mBan in the early 1850s, see Ó hÓgáin, *Duanaire Thiobraid*

too, hung over other less obvious compositions. His reproach to Munster for its non-participation in the rebellion – ‘Is cá bhfuil cúnamh Muimhneach nó an fíor go mairid beo?’ [Where is Munster aid, or are they alive at all?]⁸⁴ – was echoed in the street ballad ‘Poor Erin’ sung in Limerick city in early 1835:

Rouse up you lazy Munster dogs, no longer stand spectators,
But exert your skill, as on Vinegar Hill, to martial deeds of arms.⁸⁵

and, more gently:

You Munster Irish heroes awaken from your liturgy [sic]⁸⁶

Another obvious echoing of an original rebellion composition was heard in the previously mentioned ‘Were you at Ballinamuck’ based on the original ‘A’ raibh tú i gCill Ala’ and, more significantly, in the number of street ballads which were set to the rhythm (and presumably the air) of the Sean Bhean Bhocht.⁸⁷ Sent for scrutiny to the Castle by concerned individuals in centres as far apart as Castlebar, Oldcastle and Borrisokane between 1835 and 1843, it built up a veritable litany of key historical events which called for popular vengeance:

You sporting boys draw near, says the shanvanvuct,
Unto those few lines I’ve an ear, says the shanvanvuct,
The priest hunters you put down, and you’re praised by Ireland round,
For you boldly stood your ground, says the shanvanvuct.

It is not the year of ’98, says the shanvanvuct,
When they did us all defeat, says the shanvanvuct,
The triangles were in bloom, when they flogged the Priests of Rome,
And banished them from home, says the shanvanvuct.

Remember Father Sheehy, says the shanvanvuct,
For him our veins are bleeding, says the shanvanvuct,
For we’re ready at a call and are willing for to fall,
So we’ll trash the villains all, says the shanvanvuct.

You have heard of Columbkil, says the shanvanvuct,
A Christian war would soon begin says the shanvanvuct,
We have ships upon the main from France, Portugal and Spain,
Our rights for to maintain, says the shanvanvuct.⁸⁸

Arann, p. 13. **84** ÓFoghludha, *Mil na hÉigse*, p. 233. **85** CSORP.O.R. 1835, 139/2. **86** CSORP.O.R. 1835/139. **87** Nicholas Carolan, ‘Irish Political Balladry’ in John A. Murphy (ed.), *The French are in the Bay* (Cork, 1997), p. 142. **88** CSORP.O.R. 1835, 14718; 1839, 22/4278; 1843, 27/13337.

Such a fusion of past and present in a ballad like this poses another sticky question about popular memory. If a song shaped by nebulous memories of 1798 was composed about a recent event in, say, the tithe war, did this mean that the past was only a lens through which to view the present? Did it mean that the past was really a secondary consideration? This comes across when we look again at the Irish and English versions of 'Sliabh na mBan', the first composed in the immediate aftermath of the 1798 rebellion, the second responding to the recent Carrickshock tithe affray of 1831. There is no doubt, of course, of the structural and melodic links between the two songs. Yet the reality is that while the earlier song was a lament for a failed rebellion – 'Mo léan léir an dream gan éifeacht' [Alas for that ineffective band] – the 1831 composition is a gruesome celebration of the killing of a tithe proctor and his police escort:

Who could desire for better sporting
 Than to see then groping among the rocks,
 Their skulls all shattered and their eyeballs broken,
 Their fine long noses and their ears cut off.
 But . . . that Orange rogue
 May thank his heels that he so nimbly ran,
 Yet all that's past is but a token
 Of what we'll show them on Slievenamon.⁸⁹

Did this violent language and echoing of the Irish refrain imply a quest for retrospective revenge for the defeat of the rebels thirty years previously? Or did it reflect the rising popular expectations of the 1830s and '40s? This is where the issue of sectarian animosity proves particularly relevant, suggesting a fundamental difference between the early songs and personal testimonies on the one hand, and the later street ballads on the other. The personal testimonies collected by Cullen gave no hint of any sectarian hatred, blame being allotted on the grounds of deed rather than creed. The early songs, too, written in the immediate aftermath of the rebellion, were much more concerned with a narrative of events and the identification of individual heroes and villains than in sweeping sectarian diatribe. Though there were occasional slips in the shape of passing swipes at 'heretics and persecutors', this was nothing to the unabashed and vitriolic sectarianism of the pre-Famine street ballads which, echoing the sentiments of the Gaelic poetry upon which they were ultimately based, denounced 'heresy', 'Orange dogs', 'Harry's breed', 'an cumanasc claon nár ghéill do Chríost' [the deceitful band which did not acknowledge Christ] and 'lucht bíoblaí bréige'.⁹⁰ There is absolutely no doubt that the *cos mhuintir* saw 1798 as a sectarian conflict. Was this an accurate view, at least as far as

⁸⁹ CSORP.OR. 1832, 1063; C/1431. ⁹⁰ 'A Song of '98', Madden *Literary Remains*, p.6; CSORP.OR. 1843, 5/13187; 6/14675; *Cork Constitution*, 19 October 1843; Ó Coighligh, *Raiftearaí*, p. 97.

their own forebears' participation was concerned? Musgrave, with his own axe to grind, said yes. Much modern research says an adamant no, insisting that incidents like Scullabogue and Wexford Bridge (balanced on the other side, of course, by Carnew) were 'secondary to the trust of the rebellion'.⁹¹ However, the popular memories sung in the immediate pre-Famine decades saw only the sectarian dimension. Carnew was bad. Scullabogue was good. Were those who took this line really remembering? Or was their 'memory' shaped less by the awful events of the late 1790s than by more recent events through which they were themselves living – Catholic Emancipation, parliamentary reform, the establishment of the poor law, changes in tithe legislation and the campaign for repeal of the Union – all against the backdrop of Pastorini's prophecies and the 'new reformation'? Though formally uneducated people were unlikely to grasp the complexities of such developments, it was as clear to them as it is to modern historians that there was a serious undermining of that Protestant ascendancy upon which society had theoretically rested over the previous century. Unlettered people might not understand that this development was as much expedited as retarded by the Act of Union of 1800, something that made them equate repeal of the Union with the further amelioration of their condition. But they could see, as could frightened upholders of the *status quo*, that the O'Connellite mass politics in which they were even peripherally involved were part of an unstoppable wave of change. Where they differed from their hero, O'Connell, of course, was that they saw this change as a violent one. This explains their equation of Repeal in the present with revenge for the past, as illustrated in 'A Speedy Repeal' sung through all four provinces between June and October 1843:

We'll have an Irish parliament, fresh laws we'll dictate,
And we'll have satisfaction for the year of Ninety-Eight.⁹²

Other wrongs had also to be avenged, particularly those of the Reformation and the Plantations and, more recently, the humiliation of Catholic factions (particularly in Ulster) by their Orange equivalents. Ninety-eight was simply one in a range of scores to be settled, but its emotive power lay in its capacity to combine long distant with more recent events. It was far enough in the past to have attained an aura of romantic tragedy, but also recent enough to be within living memory. Hence, when Madden declared that songs of 1798 were quite harmless and that 'the sense of wrong which breathed [them] died with the oppressors and the oppressed', he could not have been farther from the truth.⁹³ Loyalist observers were much nearer the mark in identifying the 'restless and vague anticipation of some great change' which accompanied the mere mention of 1798 among the masses.⁹⁴

⁹¹ Carnew was the scene of a massacre of 28 prisoners by the yeomanry. Keogh, 'Sectarianism in the Rebellion of 1798', p. 45. ⁹² CSOR.POR. 1843, 3/12391; 11/13217; 20/21769; 27/12177. ⁹³ Madden, *Literary Remains*, p. ix. ⁹⁴ CSOR.POR. 1831, B/101.

Perhaps the last word, therefore, should be left to two representatives of those masses among whom these memories circulated. One remained nameless. He was the Dubliner who, watching the coffin of the notorious Lord Norbury being lowered in 1831, shouted out, 'Give him rope *galore*, boys. He was never sparing of it to others.'⁹⁵ The other was a Cork city ballad singer named Edward Fitzgerald, who in 1834 propelled himself briefly into the limelight when he was arrested in Buttevant for singing anti-tithe ballads. With all the cockiness of his kind, he deliberately riled the magistrate who had arrested him and by virtue of his name inserted himself into the great historical mosaic which, at least for those at the bottom of the social scale, linked past to present: 'He called himself Fitzgerald and would not deny it – a fine Croppy name' – one man, surely, who did not 'fear to speak of '98'!⁹⁶

⁹⁵ Fitzpatrick, *Sham Squire*, p. 209. This story was told to Fitzpatrick by Mr Brophy, the state dentist, who had attended Norbury's funeral. ⁹⁶ CSORP.OR. 1834, 165/7.