

The Example of Ireland and America: Politics, Religion and Sectarian conflict During Ireland's 'Long' Eighteenth Century.

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“On the dogmas of religion, as distinguished from moral principles, all mankind, from the beginning of the world to this day, have been quarreling, fighting, burning and torturing one another, for abstractions unintelligible to themselves and to all others, and absolutely beyond the comprehension of the human mind.” Thomas Jefferson, 1777

“The Irish brogue is no sooner discovered than it makes the deliverer in the last degree ridiculous and despised; and from such a mouth an Englishman expects nothing but bulls, blunders and follies.” Jonathan Swift, 1707

In December 1798, a 27 year old American novelist from Pennsylvania named Charles Brockden Brown sent a copy of his first novel, *Wieland; Or The Transformation. An American Tale*, to a very unlikely reader, the then vice-president of The United States Thomas Jefferson. Jefferson, the architect and author of American republican secularism, was an unlikely reader of Brown's first novel because of the story it told. In *Wieland*, “a father dies by spontaneous combustion and the son, a onetime deist, goes crazy and strangles his wife and five children, seeks to murder (and perhaps to rape) his sister and commits suicide.”¹ The story was based on a real, contemporary crime², but his handling of it was far from historical. In the novel, Brown offers a dark view of life in the new country, where the forest and its attendant dangers can turn even the most pious believer into a murderer and potential rapist. Thomas Jefferson, author of The Declaration of Independence, and the *Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom* (1777) would have been interested neither in the overweening religiosity of the characters, nor in the undefined threat borne by the forest to its new inhabitants. He was not, in short, a fan of the Gothic, even the new American brand inaugurated by the young Quaker Brockden Brown from Philadelphia. For his part, Brown appears to have wanted the vice-president to recommend his “horrible work” to others as a way to “facilitate a favorable reception to future performances.”³

In Ireland, the same year—1798, in May--a much more calamitous series of events began: a violent rebellion led by remnants of a United Irishmen movement that sought to liberate both Protestants (mainly Presbyterians) and Catholics from English rule. Loyalists such as

¹ Peter Kafer, *Charles Brockden Brown's Revolution and the Birth of the American Gothic* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), xi.

² A murder in Tomhanick, New York of his wife and children in 1781 by religious fanatic James Yates.

³ Kafer, *Charles Brockden Brown's Revolution*, xv.

Brigadier-General John Knox of Ulster reasoned that the only way to blunt the popular appeal of The United Irishman was to increase sectarianism in Ireland⁴, pitting Catholics and Protestants against each other in a struggle for national identity: “[I hope to increase] the animosity between Orangemen and United Irishmen. Upon that animosity depends the safety of the centre counties of the North”.⁵ This simple (and as we now know, effective) plan would keep Protestants and Catholics from finding a common thread in their struggles with London, thereby setting sectarian fighting within the broader question of national identity: would Ireland remain a Catholic colony of England, thus providing England’s historical enemies with a “back door,” or would England’s “first colony” take its place as a proper Protestant partner in the growing empire? Surprisingly, such sectarian tension was a relatively recent trope in discussions about Irish national identities. Prior to 1641, when the first major Irish Rebellion occurred, even the most vocal critics of the Irish and their perceived differences from the culturally superior English did not frame these criticisms in religious terms. As Kathleen Noonan has persuasively argued, even writers such as Edmund Spenser, Sir John Davies and Henry Jones, probably the most widely read critics of Irish resistance to English colonialism, refused to cast the “Irish Question” in sectarian terms. For all three writers, the “Irish are characterized as victims of history from which only a few nations—England for example—have been delivered.”⁶ Before 1641, the problem with the Irish, the perennial “Irish Question,” was that the civil and judicial institutions that had brought England out of medievalism were never fully applied in Ireland, thus preventing what Sir John Davies argued was Ireland’s historical destiny: to become English.⁷ After the 1641 Rebellion and its narrative transformation in John Temple’s *The Irish Rebellion*, the problem lies in the land and the people of Ireland, specifically the “papists,” whose sole interest in dealing with English planters is to ruin and kill them. A century and a half later in this story, General Knox was merely extending the work that Temple had begun.

⁴ Until this point in the republican struggle, sectarian tension was most pronounced in County Armagh, birthplace of both the Orange Order and the Catholic Defenders; in the other centers of violence in 1798 (Dublin, Wexford, Wicklow and Kildare in the southeast, Antrim and Down in the northeast), charges “of sectarianism have been much exaggerated,” Jacqueline Hill, “Convergence and Conflict in Eighteenth Century Ireland.” *The Historical Journal* 44, no. 4 (2001): 1039-1063. Page 1059.

⁵ Kevin Whelan, *The Tree of Liberty: Radicalism, Catholicism and the Construction of Irish Identity 1760-1830* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1996), 120.

⁶ Kathleen M. Noonan, “‘The Cruell Pressure of an Enraged, Barbarous People’: Irish and English Identity in Seventeenth Century Policy and Propaganda.” *The Historical Journal* 41, no. 1 (1998): 151-177. Page 156.

⁷ Noonan, “The Cruell Pressure,” 157.

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Back in the new nation of America, meanwhile, there were no guarantees that the same sectarian tension that had riven Ireland would not also trouble the new republic, especially since many of these new Americans had come to the colonies after experiencing religious persecution and prejudice in England. In fact, America in 1776 was not the homogeneous nation that subsequent mythologies have portrayed. As populist historian Ray Raphael framed it, “The image of a perfect America in a mythic past hides our Revolutionary roots . . .”⁸ “The reality,” according to historian Jon Meacham,

“is more complex The first years of the country’s history were full of pious pilgrims . . . , anxious Jews in flight from persecution in Brazil, intense spiritual seekers guided by an ‘Inner Light,’ and stern Puritan politicians intent on building a City of God in the middle of a fallen world. It was an eclectic cast of characters, some in search of God, others on the prowl for mammon—and even those for whom freedom of religion was a driving force found themselves doing unto others what had been done to them.”⁹

The potential for sectarian extremism, most of the founders would admit, was very great, even though the subsequent myth about “the Founding” has tended to occlude all suggestions that this was so. John Adams, who claimed justifiably that he had been “present at the creation,”¹⁰ confided in 1790 to his friend Benjamin Rush that the “History of our Revolution will be one continued lye [sic] from one end to the other.”¹¹ Adams was most worried in this instance about his historical place in the story of the nation’s founding, but his worries about how the tale would be told continued to vex him late into his life. According to historian Joseph Ellis, Adams and others were aware that the story of the revolution and the subsequent creation of the new nation would be written by Jefferson and carried into successive ages by “fiction writers masquerading as historians.”¹² For Adams and other Federalists, Jefferson’s Republican founding tale, which emphasized “one man, one moment and one document distorted the true story of the American Revolution.”¹³ In short, the tenuous nature of the Republican experiment and the contentiousness that the founding fathers had to deal with were lost in Jefferson’s romanticized narrative, something that Adams was finally unable to condone. Critic Luke Gibbons’ phrase for this

⁸ Ray Raphael, *Founding Myths: Stories that Hide Our Patriotic Past* (New York: The New Press, 2004), xv.

⁹ Jon Meacham, *American Gospel: God, The Founding Fathers, and the Making of a Nation* (New York: Random House, 2006), 40-1.

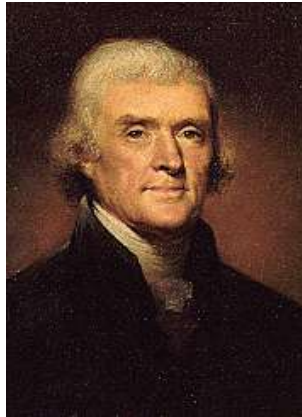
¹⁰ Joseph J. Ellis, *Founding Fathers: The Revolutionary Generation* (New York: Random House, 2000), 216.

¹¹ Ellis, *Founding Fathers*, 167.

¹² Ellis, *Founding Fathers*, 232.

¹³ Ellis, *Founding Fathers*, 242.

process in America's founding—"radical amnesia"—is an apt one, for by it, Jefferson sought to "free the living from the deadweight of previous generations."¹⁴



Thomas Jefferson



John Adams

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Public domain: http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Image:JohnAdams_2nd_US_President.jpg

We can discern this same "radical amnesia" in the work of America's first major novelist, Charles Brockden Brown. Brown was born to Quakers, a group of Christian dissenters who proclaimed themselves "children of the light" and who were persecuted both in England and in the American colonies, where Charles II eventually granted the land which became Pennsylvania to William Penn in 1681. Both in England and in America at the time of the Revolutionary War, Quakers were routinely arrested as spies, since they steadfastly refused to swear allegiance to any state or nation, abjuring swearing of any kind as impious. Brockden Brown's father, Elijah, was arrested in 1777 and exiled briefly in territory that would eventually become Maryland. Elijah Brown and sixteen other Quakers, at least seven of whom were Scotch-Irish, were arrested and exiled partly at the urging of pamphleteer Thomas Paine, whose father was a Quaker, and who nonetheless condemned Philadelphia Quakers as "real Jesuit[s]."¹⁵ For the small, privileged group of founding fathers, nearly all of whom were Episcopalians (what some still called "the established religion"), Methodists and Presbyterians, the political identity of the new nation would not be associated with either Catholics from Ireland or with Quakers from England. Even an avowed Deist like Thomas Jefferson had little affection for what he considered the

¹⁴ Luke Gibbons, "Ireland, America, and Gothic Memory: Transatlantic Terror in the Early Republic." *boundary 2* 31.1 (2004): 25-47. Page 28.

¹⁵ Kafer, *Charles Brockden Brown's Revolution*, 36.

supernaturalism of both faiths¹⁶. What added to this political unease was the increasing number of Irish political radicals who sought refuge in the new country, as well as (in the minds of some, at least) a secure base from which to continue plotting.¹⁷

The chief instrument for establishing this narrow sectarian identification was Jefferson and Madison's insistence on the separation of church and state, expressed as Jefferson's famous "wall of separation"¹⁸ between the two. By insisting that man's affairs with God were his own private business, the doctrine of separation of church and state ensured that until 1960, all U.S. Presidents would be mainstream Protestants¹⁹ save one, Herbert Hoover, who was a Quaker of liberal practice. Clearly, within the close ranks of founding personalities, there was a fair amount of religious intolerance, enough so that had the nation been founded with a particular denominational identity, sectarian violence against such groups as Catholics and Quakers might in fact have occurred²⁰. Even after hostilities with England had advanced irreversibly, men like Joseph Galloway, a close friend of Benjamin Franklin, interpreted the Revolution in sectarian terms, as a contest between Episcopalians/Anglicans and Congregationalists and Presbyterians whose "principles of religion and polity [were] equally averse to those of the established Church and Government."²¹ Fortunately, this view of the colonial rebellion did not prevail. The potential for a different, less harmonious outcome, however, was always close to hand, even after the successful prosecution of the war with England and the establishment of the nation. What happened instead of religious sectarianism dominating the struggle for national identity was that the architects of the new nation avoided the conversation altogether by eschewing any overt connection between any test of religious denomination and political service. Over time, this meant that mainstream Protestantism would be the dominant religious affiliation of American Presidents, something that came briefly into focus in the 1960 presidential race when John F.

¹⁶ Jefferson's suspicions about Catholicism were born from his experiences in France just before the French Revolution. To his private secretary William Short, Jefferson wrote in April, 1820, "'the serious enemies are the priests of the different religious sects, to whose spells on the human mind its improvement is ominous."

¹⁷ Gibbons, "Ireland, America, and Gothic Memory," 35.

¹⁸ In his January 1, 1802 reply to Messrs. Nehemiah Dodge and Others, "A Committee of the Danbury Baptist Association in the State of Connecticut." Recently, a conservative Christian group led by self-proclaimed historian David Barton (Wallbuilders), had no such intention and the nation's subsequent adherence to the separation of church and state is a mistaken reading of the intention of the founding fathers, all of whom, Barton claims, would have welcomed an openly Protestant (conservative) national identity. Most of Barton's claims have been rejected by the historians of the Library of Congress and at Monticello.

¹⁹ Episcopalian (the majority), Methodist, Presbyterian and Deist, either by affiliation or by acknowledged practice.

²⁰ See Olmstead, Clifton E. *History of Religion in the United States*. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1960, chapters 1 and 2.

²¹ Meacham, *American Gospel*, 55.

Kennedy famously answered the “Catholic Question”²² in Houston, Texas. The issue of whose God prevails in the national destiny was effectively banished by Jefferson and Madison with the tacit understanding that America is guided and protected by a Protestant God whose chief enjoinders to the new nation are to promote industry and thrift, something still enshrined on American money²³. For men like Charles Brockden Brown, the historical contest over the proper way to worship the deity is offset by the cultural pressure to begin the nation anew. In Jeffersonian terms, this pressure required the “clearing away of historical claims on the territory of the new country,”²⁴ especially by aliens. Writing about Puritan New England, where religious sectarianism flourished for the longest time before the Revolution, Brown eschewed historical narrative for romance narrative, in which the specific details of Puritan religious and political history could be thrown back into an indistinct and mysterious past, safe from any potential harm they might do to the image that Jefferson and his followers were crafting about “the Founding.” Brown made this distinction clear in his “The Difference Between History and Romance,” (1800), where he argued that,

“If history relates what is true, its relations must be limited to what is known by the testimony of our senses. Its sphere, therefore, is extremely narrow. The facts to which we are immediate witnesses, are, indeed, numerous; but time and place merely connect them. Useful narratives must comprise facts linked together by some other circumstance. They must, commonly, consist of events, for a knowledge of which the narrator is indebted to the evidence of others. This evidence, though accompanied with different degrees of probability, can never give birth to certainty. How wide, then, if romance be the narrative of mere possibilities, is the empire of romance? This empire is absolute and undivided over the motives and tendencies of human actions.”

The narrative genre for the new literature that Brown pitched to the second vice-president would be provided by romance, not the particular narrative of history. As America’s first professional novelist, Brown avoided the topical references that many of his Irish models in the Gothic mode—especially Charles R. Maturin²⁵, included in their fictions, and rested his stories,

²² In a speech to the Greater Houston Ministerial Association, on September 12, 1960, “I am not the Catholic candidate for President. I am the Democratic Party’s candidate for President who also happens to be a Catholic. I do not speak for my Church on public matters — and the Church does not speak for me.”

²³ See, for example, the words “*Annuit Coeptis*,” which translates to “He has favored our undertakings.” This inscription is also connected to the famous (some would say infamous) “eye of Providence” which sits atop the unfinished pyramid; situated prominently at the middle, top of all bills is the national motto, “In God We Trust.”

²⁴ Gibbons, “Ireland, America, and Gothic Memory,” 28.

²⁵ In *Melmoth the Wanderer*, for example, the classic romance narrative is interrupted by “Editorial footnotes that concern the Irish rebellion of Robert Emmett, mob rule and murders in the streets, all directly and inconveniently asserted as witnessed, which curve away steeply into the horrific” (24), in Victor Sage, “The Author, the Editor, and the Fissured Text: Scott, Maturin and Hogg,”

even those grounded on historical events like *Arthur Merwyn or Memoirs of the Year 1793*, on the indeterminate narrative structuring of romance. W.B. Berthoff is correct in his claim that “Brown was concerned [...] not only with history as example but with history as morphology,” leaving as a “sketch” for historical understanding “a bewildering profusion of administrative designs and historical settlements drawn from a two-thousand-year past.”²⁶ Brown thus views history as a set of apocrypha, not as a suggestive chronology of events as they impinge on the present. What becomes significant in Brown’s work is not so much what he says but what he avoids saying: by not mentioning any of the fraught history of religious sectarianism in the colonies, Brown plays a significant role in the project of “radical amnesia,” a project that astute critics like novelist Toni Morrison have claimed persisted well into the twentieth century.²⁷

In the romance that Brown sent to Jefferson (*Wieland*), so that the Vice-President might recommend the work to others, the first person narrative moves tantalizingly through landscapes and events that parallel the torments of Elijah Brown. The narrator’s father lives near Schuylkill, Pennsylvania, where the seventeen Quakers arrested in 1777 were brought for the first evening of their exile, and the pietism which the narrator’s father is afflicted by early in the text closely resembles the practice of Brown’s afflicted family members, down to the temple that the father builds which is destroyed in a “cloud impregnated with light,”²⁸ in a final, fatal fire that mysteriously destroys the narrator’s father. This is the man who dies in a case of spontaneous combustion as a strange object lesson for the overly religious. From this point on, however, any hope that Brown’s story would thread through the indignities and hardships of his family or the religious prejudice that characterized the first moments of the new Republic’s birth is disappointed. The tale rather heads for familiar territory—the Gothic romance as it was practiced by Matthew Lewis and Walter Scott, where there are few precise dates and no particulars that might lead the canny reader to assume any historical or sectarian partisanship in Brown’s story. The story of Theodore Wieland, whose piety leads to religious excess and murder, suggests that the nation was born in spite of, not because of the benevolences of human belief in God. By casting nearly all his stories as fictional biographies, Brown made any historical interest

²⁶ W.B. Berthoff, “Charles Brockden Brown’s Historical ‘Sketches.’ A Consideration.” *American Literature* 28, no. 2 (1956): 147-154. Page 151-2.

²⁷ This is essentially the argument of Morrison’s powerful rereading of blackness into American history and literature, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary imagination* New York: Random House, 1993. See especially the second lecture, “Romancing the Shadow.”

²⁸ Charles Brockden Brown, “Wieland, or, The Transformation: An American Tale,” in *Charles Brockden Brown: Three Gothic Novels* (New York: Literary Classics of The United States, 1998), 16.

idiosyncratic and not symptomatic of the time. Interestingly, the day is saved in *Wieland* by an Irish immigrant, Carwin, whose talents in ventriloquism allow him to save Theodore Wieland's sister from her brother's murderous and perhaps incestuous designs. While this point might seem inconsequential, a closer look at Brown's politics reveals that he feared "alien influences" like the Irish or the French, who "threatened to pollute the American body politic."²⁹ Thus, the innocuous Carwin is transformed into a potential threat once he is "read" from the perspective of Brown's isolationist politics.

More than any other colonial writer, Charles Brockden Brown was in a position to explore the sectarian divides that threatened the unity of the new nation, from the Puritan persecutions in Salem, Massachusetts, to the Irish Presbyterian crises that led Irish Protestant immigrants South and West from Boston and New York in search of land far from centers of English/Anglican control, to Catholic persecutions in New York, Boston and Baltimore, to Quaker deportations in Pennsylvania. And yet, these potentially divisive and destructive religious factional struggles prior to the founding of the new nation disappeared behind the founding myth of a secular state that was unbound to any religious test for office or to any dominant religion supported by public monies. The truth may in fact have been different, but the myth prevailed and allowed the new nation to set aside the suspicions and mistrust that religious sectarianism invariably breeds, at least for a time. Religious secularism prevailed in the critical moments of the nation's birth, and while that secularism has been tested over the ensuing 230 years, it has remained relatively intact. For Jefferson, Madison, Adams and the others, the successful founding of The United States after armed conflict with the world's largest and most powerful empire required the erasure of the tensions and oppositions that had led to that momentous birth. The powerful mythopoesis that changed history into national myth began working almost as soon as the ink was dry from the last signature on the Declaration of Independence in August, 1776. It's not that religion was ignored by the founding fathers; in fact, religious worship was openly embraced as necessary for the success of the new nation—even in the conflict with England, so long as this religion was, in the words of the Library of Congress historians,³⁰ "nondenominational, nonpolemical Christianity."³¹ Since this national narrative was

²⁹ Gibbons, "Ireland, America, and Gothic Memory," 35.

³⁰ The so-called "Awakening" of religious fervor in the 1730's encouraged colonists to begin using religion as a reason for resisting English military enforcement; even Anglicans, whose Book of Common Prayer called for prayers in support of the King, changed the text to reflect a more republican appeal, a call for prayers in support of

framed from what Kathleen Noonan describes as “a process in which the centre triumphs over local interests,”³² the specific tropes and themes in this national narrative would be crafted by those who had the greatest interest in the new nation’s success.³³ The same was not true of Ireland in its tragic eighteenth century, where the story of the republican struggle would be written by colonial parties who were fearful of a displaced Catholic majority and who tried to forestall Catholic empowerment by deploying sectarian violence and hatred as a political strategy.

In Ireland’s longer contested history, religious sectarianism flowered in the eighteenth century, which many historians have called the “long century.”³⁴ The boundaries of this “long century” are marked between two bloody rebellions, the 1641 Rebellion, which was crafted into a sectarian national narrative by Sir John Temple³⁵, and the 1798 Rebellion, which appeared to fulfill the dire predictions that Temple had made a hundred and fifty short years before. It was Temple’s 1646 polemical history, *The Irish Rebellion, Or an History of the Attempts of Irish Papists to Extirpate the Protestants in the Kingdom of Ireland*, which cast hitherto ethnic and cultural differences between the English and the Irish into religious and sectarian terms, framing subsequent English/Irish history into what Jarlath Killeen has provocatively called a “Gothic history.” In the minds of eighteenth century Protestant planters, John Temple cast the 1641 Rebellion in religious sectarian terms that kept the struggles and conflicts between the Irish and the English from ever receding into the distant past. In fact, the final chapter in his tale of

the Continental Congress. See Library of Congress, “Religion and The Founding of the American Republic,” <http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/religion/religion.html>, Section III, “Religion and the American Revolution,” (accessed 13 June 2007).

³¹ Library of Congress, “Religion and the American Revolution.”

³² Noonan, “The Cruell Pressure,” 152.

³³ Despite the fact that most Americans consider The Declaration of Independence a radical document, it was in fact one of over 90 such “declarations” issues by communities throughout the northeast and mid-Atlantic colonies, with some of the others reaching towards declaring towns and territories to be communal in nature, with most property owned in common. The document that was finally adopted by the Continental Congress preserved the property of the founding authors, most of whom would have been among the richest men in the colonies in 1776, at the same time as it established some authentically radical premises for republican governance. See James West Davidson, Mark H. Lytle, *After The Fact, 5th Edition*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 2004, chapter 3.

³⁴ This phrase has a varied provenance, meaning on the one hand vis a vis Ireland, 1641 to 1801, when the Act of Union took effect, and 1688-1815 in British historiography, from the accession of William of Orange to the defeat of Napoleon at Waterloo. See Paul Langford, for example. In the context of this paper, the former usage is intended.

³⁵ In *History of the Irish Rebellion (1644)*, subtitled *together with the barbarous cruelties and bloody massacres which ensued thereupon*. This particular text, Jarlath Killeen has argued persuasively, created a Gothic historiography in Ireland which in turn prepared the ground for the great Gothic writers of the nineteenth century. See Jarlath Killeen, *Gothic Ireland: Horror and the Irish Anglican Imagination in the Long Eighteenth Century* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2005).

Catholic atrocities towards unsuspecting and undeserving Protestant settlers really remains unfinished because it speaks about dangers in the future should Catholics ever regain enough power to make claims on their former lands. In the preface to the 1812 reprint of Temple's book, Francis Maseres claimed ominously that the threats of Protestant annihilation during the 1641 Rebellion were repeated in the 1798 Rebellion. By 1812, facing Catholic agitation for repeal of the Penal Laws (for so called "Catholic Emancipation"), Maseres argued that Temple's description of Catholic atrocities in 1641 should "prevent [the present English government] from weakly giving their consent to so injudicious and dangerous a measure."³⁶ Temple had not merely described an historical event from Ireland's past, he had taken the measure of Ireland's future in the ravenous and reprehensible behavior of Catholics against their innocent Protestant neighbors.

Temple's formula was simple and ingenious. For years before 1641, at least as far back as the travels of Fynes Moryson, whose *Itinerary* (1617) provided English readers with images of the "savage Irish" who regularly drank cow's blood as a supplement to their sometimes meager diets, the prevailing view of the native Irish was that they were in fact cannibals, both in their habits and in their worship. This particular trope has been a staple in most colonial narratives, but in Ireland, its particular resonance is derived from its connection to Catholicism: people who would worship their God by eating his flesh and drinking his blood would most certainly be willing to do the same to their enemies. As Robert Mahony explains, "for all Temple's restraint from mentioning instances of actual cannibalism claimed in some of the depositions [of eyewitnesses from the 1641 rebellion], his images and the contemporary rhetoric of remembrance promoted Irish cannibalism as a metaphor for the massacres."³⁷ In Temple's narrative, which historian Roy Foster has described as a "pornography of violence,"³⁸ it was the Protestant planters themselves "who are being consumed, which justifies defensive measures on their part,"³⁹ both in 1641 and in the future. After several printings of Temple's *Irish Rebellion*,

³⁶ Sir John Temple, *Irish Rebellion, Or an History of the Attempts of Irish Papists to Extirpate the Protestants in the Kingdom of Ireland* (London: R. Wilks, 1812), ix.

³⁷ Robert Mahony, "The Irish Colonial Experience and Swift's Rhetorics of Perception in the 1720's." *Eighteenth Century Life* 22 no. 1 (1998): 63-75. Page 67.

³⁸ Roy F. Foster, *Modern Ireland, 1600-1972* (London: Penguin, 1988), 86.

³⁹ Mahony, "The Irish Colonial Experience," 66.

eighteenth-century Irish Protestants were convinced that “widespread massacres of the sort remembered from 1641 would recur.”⁴⁰

After a second outbreak of rebellion in 1798, Protestant anxiety about Catholic perfidy seemed justified, especially as it was fanned into sectarian flames by Loyalists like General Knox. One of the most important observers of the 1798 Rebellion, Sir Jonah Barrington, composed his entertaining *Personal Sketches of His Own Times* (1827-32) about the period, including some strange recollections of the fighting around Wexford. After recounting a humorous example of cannibalism involving a Mr. Waddy, who in order to stave off starvation during the worst of the fighting had actually carved a few steaks from the rump of a neighboring priest who had died accidentally in the fighting, Barrington describes the ground around Vinegar Hill, scene of the hottest combat: “The numerous pits crammed with dead bodies, on Vinegar Hill, seemed on some spots actually elastic as we stood upon them; whilst the walls of an old windmill on its summit appeared stained and splashed with the blood and brains of many victims who had been piked or shot against it by the rebels.”⁴¹ The key word here is “elastic,” a relatively new addition to the eighteenth century lexicon, which in reference to the burial pits of the rebels seems to suggest that they are in fact not completely dead. Their Protestant victims certainly are dead, evidenced by the stains, blood and brains on the walls of the old windmill, but the rebels still threaten from under the ground. As the late Siobhán Kilfeather remarked in 2004, Barrington’s *Personal Sketches* is “preoccupied with incidents from the past that cannot find closure, specifically with people who will not stay dead and buried.”⁴² The Gothic history that became a unique feature of eighteenth century Irish historiography reaches its apotheosis here, with cannibalistic Catholic rebels constantly threatening an innocent Protestant planter population with annihilation, and even in defeat, refusing to remain dead and buried. In this formulation, and others following, the very ground in Ireland is implicated in the sectarian violence of the country.

The most important Irish writer who worked this constellation of Gothic tropes in the eighteenth century was the Dean of St. Patrick’s Cathedral (Church of Ireland), Dublin born Jonathan Swift, who with the publication of “A Modest Proposal” in 1729, managed to expose

⁴⁰ Mahony, “The Irish Colonial Experience,” 68.

⁴¹ Sir Jonah Barrington, *Personal Sketches of His Own Times*, 3rd ed. 2 vols. (London: Lynch Conway, 1871), 151.

⁴² Siobhán Kilfeather, “Terrific Register: The Gothicization of Atrocity in Irish Romanticism.” *Boundary 2* no. 2:1 (2004): 49-71. Page 68.

the conceit of Temple's sectarian history of the 1641 Rebellion. As with Temple's work, the specific strategy of "A Modest Proposal" is deceptively simple, and is explained by the narrative persona in explicit terms: "I have been assured by a very knowing American of my acquaintance in London, that a young healthy child well nursed, is, at a year old, a most delicious nourishing and wholesome food, whether stewed, roasted, baked, or boiled; and I make no doubt that it will equally serve in a fricasie, or a ragoust."⁴³ From that simple commercial and gustatory observation, the proposer offers the following solution to the "Irish Question:"

I do therefore humbly offer it to publick consideration, that of the hundred and twenty thousand children, already computed, twenty thousand may be reserved for breed, whereof only one fourth part to be males; which is more than we allow to sheep, black cattle, or swine, and my reason is, that these children are seldom the fruits of marriage, a circumstance not much regarded by our savages, therefore, one male will be sufficient to serve four females. That the remaining hundred thousand may, at a year old, be offered in sale to the persons of quality and fortune, through the kingdom, always advising the mother to let them suck plentifully in the last month, so as to render them plump, and fat for a good table. A child will make two dishes at an entertainment for friends, and when the family dines alone, the fore or hind quarter will make a reasonable dish, and seasoned with a little pepper or salt, will be very good boiled on the fourth day, especially in winter.⁴⁴

Thus, Protestant anxiety about Catholic shenanigans—past and future--will be allayed by the consumption of Catholic children⁴⁵, which will not only keep their numbers within safe margins, but will also alleviate the burden of supporting Catholic poor from public coffers. Lest the reader wonder whether the proposer has a pecuniary interest in the proposal, he explains, "I profess, in the sincerity of my heart, that I have not the least personal interest in endeavouring to promote this necessary work, having no other motive than the publick good of my country, by advancing our trade, providing for infants, relieving the poor, and giving some pleasure to the rich. I have no children, by which I can propose to get a single penny; the youngest being nine years old, and

⁴³ Jonathan Swift, "A Modest Proposal For Preventing the Children of Ireland From Being a Burden to Their Parents or Country," in *Satires and Personal Writings by Jonathan Swift*, ed. William Alfred Eddy (London: Oxford University Press, 1932), 19-32. Page 23.

⁴⁴ Swift, "A Modest Proposal," 23-4.

⁴⁵ "For first, as I have already observed, it would greatly lessen the number of Papists, with whom we are yearly over-run, being the principal breeders of the nation, as well as our most dangerous enemies, and who stay at home on purpose with a design to deliver the kingdom to the Pretender, hoping to take their advantage by the absence of so many good Protestants, who have chosen rather to leave their country, than stay at home and pay tithes against their conscience to an episcopal curate"

my wife past child-bearing.”⁴⁶ Read in the context of growing sectarianism following John Temple’s *Irish Rebellion*, we can surmise that a Protestant God would have little trouble accepting the consumption of Catholic children as a solution to a myriad of troubles their parents have caused over the centuries to a benevolent colonizer, Protestant England. After all, the colonial trope of eating human flesh was always within easy reach in England’s discourse about Ireland, even if in Swift’s proposal, it was the English consuming the Irish. Unlike Brown’s Gothic romances, Swift’s grim proposal was specifically and strategically framed by historical events in eighteenth century Ireland.

Swift, of course, is being profoundly ironic in “A Modest Proposal,” which is neither modest nor earnest in its recommendations. Rather, he strikes at both the absurdity of Protestant fears of being cannibalized by dispossessed Catholics and the paucity of Dublin’s policy towards the Irish poor⁴⁷. No particular friend of Catholicism, Swift found little to his liking in a national policy that promoted sectarianism as a solution to a variety of social, cultural and economic problems. If anyone in 1729 hoped that Swift’s interference in the growing sectarian debate in Ireland would do any real good, both the 1798 Rebellion and the disasters of the Great Famine (1845-1851) would dispel them⁴⁸. By 1729, the sectarian violence engendered by Protestant fear and a powerful national narrative driven by eminent Catholic threat had become inseparable from the nation’s story and would persist beyond the twentieth century and Irish independence from Great Britain.

There is another key difference between eighteenth century America and Ireland: Ireland was a conquered colony, at least twice—brutally and cruelly, while the Americans succeeded in their national endeavor with the aid of England’s enemy, Catholic France, which had also attempted to help the United Irishmen in 1798, but with far less fortunate results. While there is still healthy debate over the question of whether Ireland was indeed a colony (something that historians have also asked about the American colonies), there could be no doubt that Ireland’s

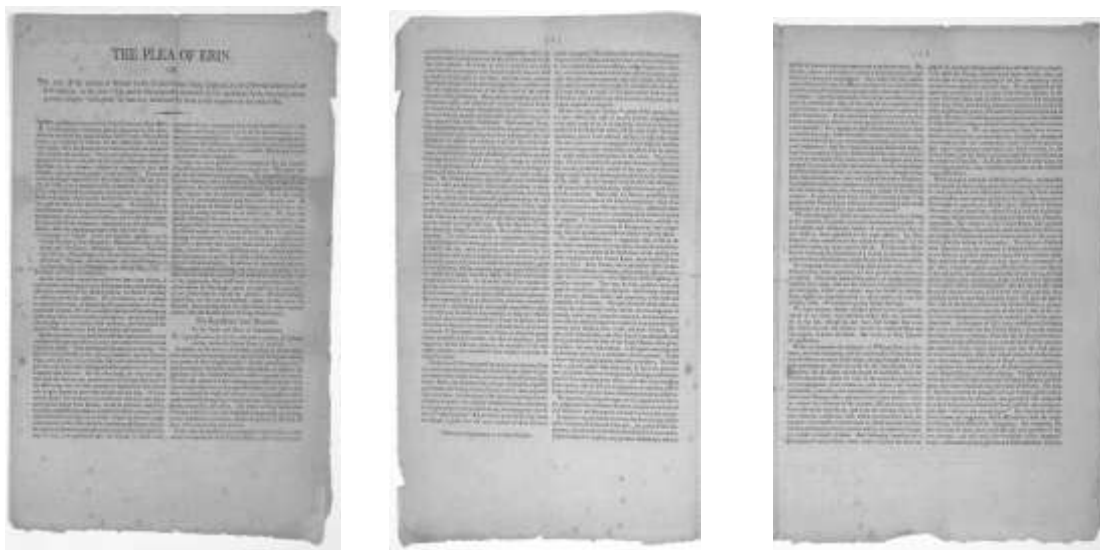
⁴⁶ Swift, “A Modest Proposal,” 31.

⁴⁷ Declan Kiberd’s description of Swift’s intentions in *A Modest Proposal* adds a clear postcolonial edge to the Dean’s suggestion: “Pouring scorn on racist theories that the Irish were inherently lazy, unproductive, even cannibalistic, he [Swift] suggested that the real man-eaters came from outside” (80).

⁴⁸ In 1724, Swift successfully agitated against a corrupt coining scheme in Ireland, using phrases like “all government without the consent of the governed is the very definition of slavery” (Kiberd 85). His work in this and other like causes made him a reluctant republican patriot for both the Irish and for American agitators for independence from English rule (like Benjamin Franklin) (Kiberd 83).

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status as conquered territory played large in its sectarian struggles well into the twentieth century. Because of the Catholic threat from historical enemies like France, England was much less likely to settle its difference with its first colony on negotiated terms. Similarly, the memory of cruelties inflicted in the several repressions of Irish republicanism made Irish accommodation of English fears equally unlikely to happen. The role of the French in Irish and American affairs after the surrender of English forces in America crosses significantly with the life and career of Charles Brockden Brown and the Irish/American story. As America's former allies in the Revolutionary struggle became increasingly radicalized and began to intrude in American naval commerce, suspicion about the French and their intentions towards America increased, alongside increasing suspicion about France's closest European allies, the republican Irish. One of the most ardent pamphleteers against such "alien influences" was Charles Brockden Brown. As Luke Gibbons explains, for "Brown, the difficulty for American identity in this vulnerable phase of nation building was that the machinations of foreign powers—and their fellow travelers—threatened to unleash unstable, destructive elements within American society."⁴⁹ These "unstable, destructive elements," of course, were the very forces that were occluded by the "radical amnesia" exercised by both Thomas Jefferson and Charles Brockden Brown.



The Plea of Erin, 1798

Courtesy of the Library of Congress, Rare Book and Special Collections Division. Printed Ephemera Collection; Portfolio 149, Folder 12. LOC <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.rbc/rbpe.14901200>

⁴⁹ Gibbons, "Ireland, America, and Gothic Memory," 36.

History provides an interesting epilogue to this discussion, one that links the Irish sectarian dilemma even more closely to the American experiment. In 1775, “a Congressional address condemned in the name of the yet undeclared American nation the ‘undeserved injuries’ inflicted on its sibling ‘people of Ireland’”. Because John Adams was principally involved in drawing up the address, parallels were drawn between the “fettered state” of the American colonies in 1775 and what was presumed to be the ongoing ‘subjection’ of contemporary Ireland by Britain.”⁵⁰ In response to this outpouring of American sympathy for the plight of the Irish, a number of Irish Americans issued “The Plea of Erin” in 1798, in response to the passage of the Alien and Sedition Acts of 1798⁵¹. These laws were aimed at precisely the “alien influences” that Brown and others had propagandized against in a variety of pamphlets that circulated widely in the northern and mid-Atlantic colonies⁵². The “Plea” is illuminating in the context of this discussion because it was a response to an earlier offer of religious refuge to the Irish by English colonials who had rebellion in mind, and because in the response from Irish Americans twenty three years later, specific mention is made of “Irish Ecclesiastical Ills” and the religious sanctuary America has historically offered, naming the Quakers and William Penn as an example of a people that prospered from American religious tolerance. The document is notable also because it specifically compares Irish religious persecution to the situation in the colonies before the American Revolution: “If America was alarmed by a violation of important principles, and a little oppressed in fact, all principle has been outraged towards Ireland, and oppression there exceeds the conceptions of the Americans” (4). In a nearly prescient commerce of civilities and affinities, American colonists and Irish republicans exchanged sympathetic advances in 1775, before both the American Revolution and the 1798 Rebellion, and then in an eloquent and powerful complaint about American xenophobia against Catholic and “Jacobin” Irishmen and Frenchmen, Irish Americans argued that “Irish blood” had been shed for American independence. This fact, argued the authors of “The Plea of Erin,” made suspicion and intolerance of Irish expatriates an unnecessary and unhappy consequence of European history. There is a powerful poignancy here, not least because those who gained religious refuge from the

⁵⁰ Maurice J. Bric, “The United Irishmen, International Republicanism, and the Definition of the Polity in The United States of America, 1791-1800.” *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy* 4 (2004): 81-106. Page 23.

⁵¹ Ironically enough, during the administration of John Adams, who had earlier issued the 1775 address to the people of Ireland.

⁵² It was against this very charged and “alarmist milieu” that Charles Brockden Brown was completing his work on *Wieland* (Gibbons 42).

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awful situation in Ireland before 1798 argued that America, which had so recently avoided institutionalizing the sectarian divisions that racked England's first colony, should continue to offer refuge to those looking to avoid being destroyed by sectarian violence. If God was indeed Protestant, as people like Sir John Davies and Sir John Temple claimed, the establishment of The United States of America offered a different means to establish national identity, not so much to change the sectarian potential of the national debate as to mitigate it and move towards a less divisive resolution to these contentions.

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