

# Sectarianism in 1798 and in Catholic nationalist memory

JAMES S. DONNELLY, JR

In the historiography of the 1798 rebellion the accent in recent years has been on politicisation and in particular on exploring the political framework in which the great revolutionary movement of the 1790s took place. On the whole this kind of historical revisionism has been very valuable and has significantly deepened our understanding of what by any measure is one of the most important episodes in modern Irish history. Some of those scholars most closely associated with this revisionist insistence on the political context of 1798 – Louis Cullen, Dáire Keogh, Jim Smyth, and Kevin Whelan, among others – have decried what they regard as an overemphasis on sectarianism, millenarianism, and agrarianism as motivating factors and ideological spurs to action.

Cullen and Whelan have been especially adamant about the primacy of the political framework in relation to the outbreak and conduct of the Wexford rebellion. They have drawn attention to the split among the Wexford gentry between liberal and reactionary Protestants, and they have shown how this split, which greatly intensified during the 1790s, gave openings to the United Irishmen and drove many landed Wexford Protestants to adopt even more extreme views as a result of this serious division within their own ranks. Cullen and Whelan have both been at pains to trace the inroads of the United Irishmen into Wexford. They have stressed the degree to which the United Irishmen were able, even if belatedly, to extend their military organisation and revolutionary ideas into the northern part of that county.<sup>1</sup> In arguing specifically against a sectarian interpretation of the outbreak of the Wexford rebellion, Cullen seeks to eliminate prior violent repression by the North Cork militia and local yeomanry units as the major precipitant. In Co. Wexford, he claims, 'the North Cork militia did not arrive until late April [1798], and oppressive methods began only in the week before 26 May, and the atrocities, though serious, were small in number'.<sup>2</sup> He maintains that earlier historians, misled by their reliance on the compilations of Brother Luke Cullen, have exaggerated the impact on the people of Wexford of the massacres at Carnew,

1 Kevin Whelan, 'Reinterpreting the 1798 Rebellion in County Wexford' in Dáire Keogh and Nicholas Furlong (eds), *The Mighty Wave: The 1798 Rebellion in Wexford* (Dublin, 1996), pp. 9–36; Kevin Whelan, 'Politicisation in County Wexford and the Origins of the 1798 Rebellion' in Hugh Gough and David Dickson (eds), *Ireland and the French Revolution* (Dublin, 1990), pp. 156–78; L.M. Cullen, 'The United Irishmen in Wexford' in Keogh and Furlong, *Mighty Wave*, pp. 48–64. 2 Cullen, 'United Irishmen', p. 62.

Dunlavin, and Hacketstown.<sup>3</sup> Whelan also minimises the role of sectarianism in the outbreak of the Wexford rebellion and during its course. He argues that the notorious sectarian atrocities of Scullabogue and Wexford Bridge, which in the minds and memories of Irish Protestants and Presbyterians gave to the Wexford rebellion the appearance of a religious war, were uncharacteristic events, episodes of aberrant behaviour, involving the temporary collapse of rebel discipline, and were deeply regretted and strongly condemned by rebel leaders.<sup>4</sup>

While recognising the many contributions that Kevin Whelan and Louis Cullen have made to the historiography of 1798 in general and the Wexford rebellion in particular, I wish to present a case in this chapter for keeping sectarianism at the centre of the story of 1798 and of what came before and immediately after it. My presentation focuses on Wexford. I am primarily concerned with the role of sectarian attitudes and behaviour among the rebels and their civilian supporters, though I also pay considerable attention to the beliefs and activities of their Protestant and Orange adversaries, especially in the prelude to the Wexford rebellion and during its immediate aftermath. Lastly, I look briefly at the way in which Irish nationalists came to absolve the rebels of 1798 of violent sectarian passions while at the same time attributing such motives to their British rulers and the Orangemen of Ireland.

Ethno-religious tension and conflict had long been present in Co. Wexford prior to 1798. The Protestant population of the county was by far the largest of any in Leinster. Protestant settlement was heaviest in the northern half of the county, reaching as much as one-third of the total in a few parishes there.<sup>5</sup> While the Protestant gentry monopolised the county magistracy, Protestants of subgentry status occupied a somewhat lower rung on the social ladder as middlemen, or townland tenants, and, along with the Protestant gentry, played an important role in preserving Protestant privilege and upholding law and order. In fact, the pronounced decline after 1760 in the position of Protestant middlemen, and their steady replacement by well-to-do or at least rising Catholic tenant farmers, led to a distinct sharpening of ethno-religious divisions in Wexford. Ironically, it was Louis Cullen who first drew attention to this crucial development.<sup>6</sup> More recently, Daniel Gahan has extended the analysis by looking at estate papers. Buttressed by his own findings, Gahan summarised in his doctoral dissertation in 1985 what he then understood to be Cullen's position:

Cullen's argument that the 1798 rebellion in south Wicklow and north Wexford was a local sectarian civil war between Catholic and Protestant gentry and large tenant farmers is borne out by the fact that the former

3 Ibid., pp. 51-2, 54. 4 Whelan, 'Reinterpreting the 1798 Rebellion', pp. 27-9. 5 Daniel Gahan, *The People's Rising: Wexford, 1798* (Dublin, 1995), p. 2. 6 L.M. Cullen, 'The '98 Rebellion in Wexford and Wicklow' in his *The Emergence of Modern Ireland, 1600-1900* (Dublin, 1983), pp. 210-33. See also Whelan, 'Politicisation', pp. 160-2.

group was experiencing a rise in socioeconomic status in the late eighteenth century while the latter was experiencing a decline. The collapse of the middleman system and the disappearance of most middleman families . . . would have left the Protestant inhabitants of an area such as north Wexford in a far more vulnerable position and made them far more likely to adopt repressive tactics in the face of a threat such as that of the revolutionary United Irishmen.<sup>7</sup>

Conflict in electoral politics also heightened sectarian tensions in Co. Wexford in the years before the rebellion. At the heart of Wexford politics ever since the 1760s there was, according to Kevin Whelan, a fundamental cleavage between what he calls 'a pro-establishment, ultra-Protestant faction and a liberal interest revolving around the Harvey, Grogan, and Colclough families'. The existence of two highly organised electoral blocks 'ensured that all national debates and issues were imported and diffused widely in Wexford, creating a politicised and polarised constituency'. No issue produced more polarisation than that of Catholic Emancipation, especially under the impact of the French Revolution and aggressive internal radicalism in the 1790s. In Wexford the two general parliamentary elections of 1790 and 1797 produced what Whelan terms 'an almost life-and-death struggle' between the ultra-Protestant interest led by George Ogle and the earl of Ely on the one hand and the liberal Protestant group on the other. Understandably, Whelan is primarily interested in the way in which these patterns of fissure and alliance were carried over into the Wexford rebellion, with the ultra-Protestants providing the hard core of loyalism and 'the liberal Protestants and the Catholic activists' furnishing 'a highly conscious political leadership' for the rebel forces.<sup>8</sup>

Unfortunately, both Whelan and Cullen have shown much less interest in the rank-and-file of the Wexford insurgents than they have in the leadership. At times the assumption seems to be that if the United Irishmen extended their military organisation to some district of north Wexford, they must have implanted their radical and non-sectarian political ideas as well. At other times there are rather unconvincing assertions that the influence of the French-educated rebel priests, together with the openness to French ideas of the Catholic gentry and Protestant liberals of the county, can reveal to us, in Whelan's words, 'how a powerful transmission of radical sentiment could permeate Wexford Catholic society'.<sup>9</sup> In the absence of real research on popular Catholic mentalities in Wexford in and around 1798, however, it is much too early to conclude that Catholic society was permeated by radical political sentiments. It could be argued with equal plausibility that at the popular level one major result of the passionate political wrangling of the

7 Daniel Gahan, 'The Middleman Tenant in Southeastern Ireland, 1700-1820' (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Kansas, 1985), p. 365. 8 Whelan, 'Politicisation', pp. 156-60.

9 *Ibid.*, p. 167.

Wexford elites prior to 1798 was an intensification of traditional sectarianism. It is now time to consider the salience of this issue.

Even before Protestant yeomanry units unleashed a campaign of terror against Catholics in late April and May 1798, the idea of imminent Orange-inspired massacre of Catholics had already taken deep hold in Wexford and neighbouring counties. At the Wicklow spring assizes of 1798 a man named Collins was convicted of circulating a report that the French had again arrived off Bantry, 'that the yeomen or Orangemen (indifferently supposed by the people to be the same) were to march to resist the invasion, and that it was designed by them previously to commit a massacre upon the Catholics of the country'. This report had produced a terrified reaction over a wide area: 'Such implicit belief did the report gain that every person from Bray to Arklow, between four and five and twenty miles [in] extent, abandoned their habitations and slept in the open field . . .'<sup>10</sup> Rumours of impending Orange onslaughts had been circulating in Wicklow and Kildare since the summer of 1797, and they appeared in Wexford and Carlow by the end of that year. In one such episode involving a rash of similar reports early in January 1798, a Carlow Protestant declared, 'it is truly astonishing to perceive how eagerly they are received and tenaciously credited'.<sup>11</sup>

If signs of mass trauma were already evident among Catholics in Wexford and elsewhere in Leinster before April 1798, their nightmares about murderous Orangemen were soon clothed in terrifying reality.<sup>12</sup> Although three Orange lodges were founded in north Wexford earlier in 1798, Catholics generally associated the arrival of the North Cork militia under Lord Kingsborough in April with the introduction of organised Orangeism into their county. Officers and men in this regiment were reportedly 'zealous in making proselytes and displaying their devices, having medals and orange ribbons triumphantly pendant from their bosoms'. Soon after the North Cork militia arrived in force, many Wexford Protestants 'whose principles inclined that way, finding themselves supported by the military, joined the association and publicly avowed themselves by assuming the devices of the fraternity'. The North Corks earned their public infamy among Wexford Catholics by introducing into the county that exquisite torture known as pitchcapping, and one of their sergeants became notorious as 'Tom the Devil' for his diabolical ingenuity 'in devising new modes of torture'. Pitchcapping was intended to be intimidatory public spectacle. In the towns, victims were turned loose 'amidst the horrid acclamations of the merciless torturers, and to the view of vast numbers of people, who generally crowded about the guard-house door attracted by the afflicted cries of the tormented'. 'These atrocities', declared the Wexford Catholic

<sup>10</sup> Edward Hay, *History of the Irish Insurrection of 1798, Giving an Authentic Account of the Various Battles Fought between the Insurgents and the King's Army and a Genuine History of Transactions Preceding That Event, with a Valuable Appendix* (Dublin, 1842, originally published 1803), pp. 79-80. <sup>11</sup> Forster Archer to [Dublin Castle], 3 Jan. 1798, National Archives of Ireland, Rebellion Papers, 620/35/11. See also National Archives of Ireland, State of the Country Papers, 1797/99; *Faulkner's Dublin Journal*, 13 Jan. 1798. <sup>12</sup> Gahan, *People's Rising*, p. 7.

historian Edward Hay, 'were publicly practised without the least reserve in open day, and no magistrate or officer ever interfered, but shamefully connived at this extraordinary mode of quieting the people!'<sup>13</sup>

Easily keeping pace with the North Corks in pursuing a 'white terror' in these weeks (late April and May) were certain of the local yeomanry units organised by the Protestant gentry of Wexford. Those units led by the landlord James Boyd of Rosslare (south of Wexford town), the middleman Hunter Gowan of Mount Nebo (west of Gorey), Archibald Hamilton Jacob of Enniscorthy, and Hawtrey White of Peppard's Castle (on the east coast) were singled out in a rebel proclamation of early June for having 'committed the most horrid acts of cruelty, violence, and oppression against our peaceable and well-affected countrymen'.<sup>14</sup> In the Enniscorthy district a corps of yeomen cavalry headed by Jacob was especially adept at unmasking supposed United Irishmen by means of strangulation and whipping: 'They scoured the country, having in their train a regular executioner, completely appointed with his implements – a hanging rope and a cat-o'-nine tails'. With heavy sarcasm Edward Hay remarked, 'Many detections and consequent prosecutions of United Irishmen soon followed'.<sup>15</sup> The site of one flogging by Jacob and his yeomen at Ballaghkeen on the night of 24 May was said to have looked the next morning "'as if a pig had been killed there"'.<sup>16</sup> In the Gorey district the jumped-up squire and Protestant zealot Hunter Gowan presided over similar spectacles of terror. On a 'public day' in the week prior to the outbreak of the Wexford rebellion Gowan made a 'triumphal entry' into the town of Gorey. Riding 'at the head of his corps, with his sword drawn and a human finger stuck on the point of it', he paraded 'up and down the streets several times, so that there was not a person in Gorey who did not witness this exhibition, while in the meantime the triumphant corps displayed all the devices of Orangemen'.<sup>17</sup>

Besides inflicting whippings, half-hangings, and shootings, the yeomen and militia also began a practice of burning houses and cabins where pikes or guns had been found or where suspects or others had absented themselves from their dwellings at night in violation of the curfew imposed under martial law. If fear of Orange atrocities had earlier prompted thousands to sleep out in the fields at night in the hope of safety, the actual experience of Orange-inspired torture or its near presence made this phenomenon even more frequent and widespread, thus casting unfounded suspicions and bringing unjust punishment on many innocent people.<sup>18</sup> Around Gorey, Enniscorthy, and New Ross especially, zealous yeomanry units remained punishingly active even where arms had been surrendered, and even after an official fourteen-day grace period had been declared by the Wexford magistrates on 23 May.<sup>19</sup> As some had appreciated from the beginning, the surrender of weapons by the people of a given district in return for so-called 'protections' only

<sup>13</sup> Hay, *History*, pp. 82–3. <sup>14</sup> Charles Dickson, *The Wexford Rising in 1798: Its Causes and Its Course* (Tralee, 1955), p. 150; Gahan, *People's Rising*, p. 10. <sup>15</sup> Hay, *History*, pp. 93–4. <sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 99–100. <sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 92–3. <sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 87–8. <sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 95–7.

marked them out as disloyal or would-be rebels and at the same time robbed them of the means of protecting themselves.<sup>20</sup>

As if all these elements of Orange terror had not been enough to provoke rebellion, two other events now occurred only a day apart that added to the heavy catalogue of Orange atrocities. First, on 24 May, more than thirty Catholic yeomen belonging to the Narraghmore and Saundersgrove corps in west Wicklow were summarily executed on the fair green of Dunlavin by a platoon of the Ancient Britons (a regiment of British regulars notorious for atrocities) after their captain came to believe that these yeomen had given their allegiance to the United Irishmen.<sup>21</sup> On the very next day, after rebels had suffered heavy casualties in a failed attack on Carlow town, another execution by yeomen took place when twenty-eight prisoners – suspected rebels – were shot to death in the ball alley at Carnew, located very near to the borders of Wexford and Wicklow. Tainting this second atrocity with a special sectarian hue was the report that a clerical magistrate named Cope, the Protestant rector of Carnew, ‘had presided over the executions’.<sup>22</sup> In his fine book on Fr John Murphy of Boolavogue, Nicholas Furlong has demonstrated what a big impulse the news of the Dunlavin and Carnew atrocities gave to the mobilisation of the Boolavogue men and many other Wexford rebels.<sup>23</sup> And once the rebellion finally broke out in County Wexford on 26 May, the yeomanry in northern parts of the county dramatically confirmed their reputation as murderers of Catholics. Temporarily ignoring those who had taken up arms, these yeomen, according to Edward Hay, ‘proceeded on the 27th [of May] against a quiet and defenceless populace, sallied forth in their neighbourhoods, burned numbers of houses, and put to death hundreds of persons who were unarmed, unoffending, and unresisting . . .’<sup>24</sup>

At least some of the priests who became active rebels were driven reluctantly to take up arms by the ferocity of the preceding reign of terror. Fr John Murphy had actually been advising his parishioners to surrender their weapons until a very late stage, but when consulted by some of them on the eve of the rebellion, he reportedly declared, ‘I know that they have me marked out; look to the inhuman slaughter in Carnew, about nine miles from you, and if the report of the butchery in Dunlavin be true, it is worse’.<sup>25</sup> When, during the rebellion, the Richards brothers, sent to the Three Rocks camp to negotiate on behalf of the loyalists and royal troops in Wexford town, sought out Fr Murphy, he told them immediately that ‘he did not know what terms they could expect from the treatment he had received: for that, by burning his house and property and obliging him to take shelter in the

20 Nicholas Furlong, *Fr John Murphy of Boolavogue, 1753-1798* (Dublin, 1991), p. 40. 21 For a revisionist account of this atrocity based on a careful re-examination of the often conflicting evidence that survives, see Ruán O’Donnell, *The Rebellion in Wicklow, 1798* (Dublin and Portland, Oregon, 1998), pp. 176-8. 22 Gahan, *People’s Rising*, p. 11; Furlong, *Murphy*, p. 48. 23 Furlong, *Murphy*, p. 49. 24 Hay, *History*, p. 108. 25 Dickson, *Wexford Rising*, p. 53.

ditches, he was under the necessity of raising the whole country'.<sup>26</sup> The events that brought Fr Michael Murphy irrevocably into open rebellion involved a set of brutal military atrocities, beginning with an attack by the Carnew yeomen cavalry, two or three hundred strong, on a largely unarmed multitude gathered in misplaced hope of safety on Kiltomas Hill.<sup>27</sup>

It was the contention of the modern historian Charles Dickson that the two Murphys were typical of the rebel priests. 'Of the curates who joined the ranks of the Wexford insurgents', he maintained, 'a majority, if not all of them, were compelled to do so by the force of local circumstances . . .'.<sup>28</sup> But Kevin Whelan has effectively challenged or at least modified Dickson's view of this matter. First of all, Whelan stresses that as many as seventy-four of the eighty-five priests in County Wexford in 1798 'were either active loyalists or kept a very low profile in the rebellion'.<sup>29</sup> Among the eleven Wexford priests who did become active rebels, Whelan finds much less reluctance than Dickson did. Partly, this is because in several cases (Frs Thomas Clinch, Michael Murphy, and Nicholas Stafford) he has identified serious prior associations with the United Irishmen.<sup>30</sup> In fact, Fr Michael Murphy, viewed by Dickson as typically reluctant, has been described quite recently by Nicholas Furlong as 'a man who, despite bishop and censure, had worked at an intense rate in the cause of the United Irishmen'.<sup>31</sup>

But a second reason why Whelan gives short shrift to the notion of reluctance has to do with the political and cultural profile of the rebel priests which he painstakingly builds up from scattered materials. Picking out 'some of the central elements' in this profile, Whelan characterises these clerical rebels as 'men of the people, with a history of conflict with their ecclesiastical superiors, possibly with a drink problem, who had close family links to the United Irishmen'.<sup>32</sup> And in another place, describing six of the rebel priests in particular, he remarks, 'These men were typical of a section of the eighteenth-century Catholic clergy which had emerged under a lax ecclesiastical discipline – badly trained, easy-going, heavily secularised, leading a relaxed, open lifestyle'.<sup>33</sup> Lastly, Whelan stresses their marginality in the existing ecclesiastical structure. Significantly, none of the clerical rebels was a parish priest, and only three of the eleven 'were officially accredited priests of the mission'. As many as six of the rebel priests had been suspended by the bishop or were unemployed, and of a seventh (the Carmelite John Byrne), his bishop remarked sourly: 'He was a drinking, giddy man. I advised him to quit the diocese and threatened suspension.'<sup>34</sup> Whelan suggests that the United Irishmen

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 232. <sup>27</sup> The vast crowd tried to flee when the yeomen opened fire, but 150 of them were killed in the pursuit, and immediately afterwards in this same area the yeomen put to the torch 'two Romish chapels and about a hundred cabins and farmhouses of Romanists' (*ibid.*, p. 67). See also Furlong, *Murphy*, pp. 64–5. <sup>28</sup> Dickson, *Wexford Rising*, p. 18. <sup>29</sup> Kevin Whelan, 'The Role of the Catholic Priest in the 1798 Rebellion in County Wexford' in Kevin Whelan and William Nolan (eds), *Wexford: History and Society* (Dublin, 1987), p. 296. <sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 303–4, 308. <sup>31</sup> Furlong, *Murphy*, p. 64. <sup>32</sup> Whelan, 'Role of Catholic Priest', p. 306. <sup>33</sup> *Ibid.* <sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 304–5, 315.

may have 'made concerted efforts to recruit or appeal' to the many such marginalised priests of that era.<sup>35</sup>

Although authoritative and impressive in many respects, Whelan's analysis is unpersuasive on a number of critical points. First, he wishes to claim the rebel priests as a group for the United Irish cause in Wexford, even though he has firm evidence to justify a claim of prior activism in only a few cases. Thus he suggests that as 'men of the people' who were 'deeply immersed in the quotidian stream of community life', the rebel priests 'may have found it exceedingly difficult to swim against the United Irish current'.<sup>36</sup> Certainly, this phrasing begs what is still, and may forever remain, an unsettled question: How strong exactly was the United Irish current in north Wexford at the start of the rebellion? And how was that current, by which (I suppose) something politically modern is meant, different from the much older and at that moment arguably much stronger current of sectarianism. Whelan observes, reasonably enough, that the half-dozen suspended or unemployed priests who became rebels, because of their accentuated economic dependence on their host communities, 'may have felt the need to swim with the tide' in an especially powerful way.<sup>37</sup> But he does not contemplate the possibility that it was an in-rushing sectarian tide at the popular level with which a high proportion of the rebel priests needed to swim.

Second, because Whelan views the clerical rebels as representative of an 'easy-going' priestly group 'leading a relaxed, open lifestyle' featuring a fondness for drink, sport, and general sociability, he also sees them (quite mistakenly, I believe) as 'heavily secularised'.<sup>38</sup> This description seems at serious odds with other evidence provided by Whelan himself. In considering the popular pressures that pushed or pulled unemployed or suspended priests towards involvement in the rebellion, he remarks astutely that 'the suspended priest in Irish folk tradition was credited with supernatural potency, especially as a thaumaturgist, and the "power" was particularly associated with those who had been silenced for a drink problem'.<sup>39</sup> As an example, Whelan cites the case of Fr John Keane of Bannow, called by his bishop 'a weak, poor fool', who had been 'under censures the greater part of his life for drunkenness and other irregularities'.<sup>40</sup> Whelan is also somewhat dismissive of Fr Keane, saying of him that 'his main contribution to the rebel cause was the liberal dispensing of holy water, scapulars, and blessings as he made his way through the rebel camps, mounted on a pony "led by two men who cried out in a loud voice, 'make way for the blessed priest of Bannow'".<sup>41</sup> But it was not only a hanger-on like Fr Keane who sought to exercise thaumaturgical powers. So too did the clerical military leaders. Whelan observes that the circulation of stories about the invulnerability of the rebel priests to bullets was 'perhaps helped by the two Fr Murphys' willingness to show spent bullets in their hands to credulous followers'.<sup>42</sup> It could of course be argued that in seeking credit for thaumaturgical

35 *Ibid.*, p. 304. 36 *Ibid.*, p. 305. 37 *Ibid.* 38 *Ibid.*, p. 306. 39 *Ibid.*, p. 305. 40 *Ibid.*, p. 315. 41 *Ibid.*, pp. 308-9. 42 *Ibid.*, p. 309.

powers, these clerical military leaders were consciously exploiting widespread popular religious beliefs merely to instil courage in their troops. But there is no evidence that these priests were simply poseurs, and no reason to treat them as such. Given the penchant for thaumaturgy among the rebel priests, it must be questioned whether they can really be described as 'heavily secularised'. Moreover, in at least one critical respect Whelan's new interpretation and the older view of Charles Dickson are in substantial agreement, namely, in seeing the participation of the rebel priests as a function of their need to swim with the tide in their own parishes and districts. Though United Irish ideas and organisation may have been part of that tide, sectarianism was another, and of greater significance.

In view of the intensity of extreme Protestant sectarianism that immediately preceded and largely provoked the Wexford rebellion, it would have been very surprising if anti-Orange and anti-Protestant sectarianism had not manifested itself strongly among the overwhelmingly Catholic rebels. Against the view that sectarian animus from the Catholic and nationalist side heavily punctuated the Wexford rebellion, however, are some weighty considerations that deserve to be addressed. Edward Hay pointed out long ago that 'in all the proclamations and other [rebel] documents published during the insurrection, there does not appear the smallest symptom of religious bigotry: the very contrary is even manifest . . .'<sup>43</sup> It was also the case, of course, that a significant number of well-to-do Protestants were elevated to positions of leadership among the Wexford rebels. Even among the major Catholic leaders there is for the most part no credible evidence of sectarian behaviour. In fact, the Catholic leaders often intervened at critical moments and more generally to protect loyalist Protestants and sometimes even Orangemen. Even Protestant churches experienced little damage at rebel hands. Rebels did burn the Protestant church of Old Ross, but this occurrence was reportedly 'the only one of the kind that took place during the insurrection' in Wexford.<sup>44</sup> What makes this immunity of Protestant churches all the more remarkable is that loyalist forces were much readier to destroy Catholic chapels, burning at least five in late May and June and damaging some others.<sup>45</sup>

Against the view portraying widespread Catholic sectarianism, it has also often been urged that, as Charles Dickson put it, 'the fanaticism of the insurgents was not directed against Protestants as such, but against Orangemen'.<sup>46</sup> In other words, the rebels did violence to their political enemies, not to those who merely differed from them in religion. Kevin Whelan has made this point forcefully in his contribution to the 1996 collection entitled *The Mighty Wave*. 'A very clear distinction', he insists, 'was observed between loyalists (politically-active Protestants, who had joined the yeomanry or Orange Order) and neutrals (like the Quakers, or liberal Protestants like the Richards brothers, Ebenezer Jacob, etc.)'.<sup>47</sup> Edward Hay made

43 Hay, *History*, p. 173. 44 *Ibid.*, p. 150. 45 *Ibid.*, p. 275. 46 Dickson, *Wexford Rising*, p. 19. Dickson himself did not endorse this view. 47 Whelan, 'Reinterpreting the 1798 Rebellion', pp. 28-9.

a similar point long ago, but with a different qualification. 'All Protestants', he declared, 'who had not adventured in the hanging, burning, flogging, shooting, and exterminating system that immediately preceded the insurrection were in general as safe as any other description of men in the country *on joining the people, for as to this there was no alternative* [italics mine] . . .'<sup>48</sup> Or to put the matter differently, neutrality, depending on the circumstances, might not be tolerated and could be interpreted as hostility. In addition, Hay also admitted that 'many gentlemen [Protestant or mostly so], who had formerly been much liked, were considered as unpardonable if concerned in any exertion against the people of the description just cited, particular instances of which *alleged against them* [italics mine] occasioned the imprisonment and death of individuals'.<sup>49</sup>

There is also evidence from contemporary ballads and poems that the rebels conceived of their military and political opponents in sectarian terms. One ballad entitled 'The Battle of Ross' contains the following words lamenting and explaining the rebel defeat: 'The Lutherans were sick, sad, in the beginning of the day / But the brave men were worsted thro' fondness for the drop'.<sup>50</sup> And Tom Dunne has pointed out that 'the only contemporary poem about the battle is in Irish', and that it 'combines reference to the revolutionary wars raging in Europe with the traditional categorisation of the enemy of the rebels as "clanna Luther" [Luther's breed]'.<sup>51</sup> Dunne has also scrutinised the six versions of the 'basic' ballad entitled 'On Father Murphy' preserved in R.R. Madden's *Literary Remains of the United Irishmen of 1798*. As Dunne observes, 'The most striking feature of five of these versions . . . is the identification of the enemy in sectarian terms . . . The conflict is seen as a religious war against "that damned heretical clan", fought by "St Peter's flock" or [the] "brave Romans"'. One of these sectarian versions has the following triumphant stanza:

Since Father Murphy of the Co. Wexford  
Has lately arose from a sleeping dream  
To shake off heretics and persecutors  
And wash them away in a crimson stream.<sup>52</sup>

As Breandán Ó Buachalla has shown on a much broader front, Irish speakers of the mid and late eighteenth century did have a political and even nationalist lexicon, but it regularly depicted the enemy in sectarian terms. Although 'Sassenach' originally meant 'Saxon', around 1760 it came much more usually to mean Protestant. And versifiers in Irish often encouraged the notion of driving out 'the invaders' in language about 'routing Luther [or Calvin] and his band'.<sup>53</sup> Whatever

<sup>48</sup> Hay, *History*, p. 173. <sup>49</sup> *Ibid.* <sup>50</sup> 'The Battle of Ross', Prim MSS, Box 4, Department of Irish Folklore, University College, Dublin. <sup>51</sup> Tom Dunne, 'Wexford's *Comoradh* '98: Politics, Heritage, and History' in *History Ireland* 6/2 (Summer 1998), p. 53. <sup>52</sup> Tom Dunne, 'Popular Ballads, Revolutionary Rhetoric, and Politicisation' in Gough and Dickson, *Ireland*, p. 149. <sup>53</sup> See Breandán Ó Buachalla, *Aisling Ghear* (Dublin, 1996).

the United Irishmen had to say about religious brotherhood had to contend with long-established mental categories and politico-linguistic usages at the popular level.

Many of the sworn statements submitted by loyalists in the aftermath of the rebellion provide arresting examples of the alleged sectarian language and behaviour of numerous rebels. Some of these statements suggest that the rebels were very quick to brand their known opponents or suspected enemies as Orangemen, and that almost anyone judged to be an Orangeman was seen in rebel eyes as worthy of death. In hopes of saving himself from a severe whipping at what 'the rebels called the tree of liberty' in Enniscorthy, Robert Whitney of the local yeomen cavalry declared that 'the face of God he might never see if he knew anything of an Orangeman', but, claimed Whitney, 'the rebels immediately cried out that he was very safe in saying that, as he knew that no heretic could ever see the face of God ...'.<sup>54</sup> Whitney also recalled that he and thirty-seven other prisoners in Enniscorthy had been 'obliged in preservation of their lives to cross themselves (or to bless themselves), as the papists term that ceremony'.<sup>55</sup>

Many other Protestants whom the rebels believed to be linked in some way with Orangemen or Orangeism were reportedly subjected to sectarian abuse – verbal, physical, or both. The Protestant farmer Edward Stacey of Tomgarrow, whose son and nephew had been killed as Orangemen at Vinegar Hill, was made to state his religion by a small group of rebels and then asked 'whether he did not know that while his body was creeping on earth, that the souls of him and all his sort were burning in hell'. Stacey and one of these insurgents then got into a heated discussion about the Blessed Virgin Mary, with the rebel asking Stacey 'whether he believed that the Virgin Mary was blessed above all women', and Stacey replying safely in the affirmative because, as he said, 'it was left on record that all generations should call her blessed'. But this response only maddened the inquisitive rebel, who shouted at Stacey, 'You vagabond, how should you know what was left on record?' His assailants then shot him in the rump and the musket ball 'passed through his private parts'.<sup>56</sup> Other rebels also questioned Protestant prisoners about the Virgin Mary, hoping perhaps to entrap them into some offensive remark, for it is evident that many Wexford Catholics believed that Protestants, or at least some of them, held Christ's mother in low esteem.<sup>57</sup>

Even apart from the rebel massacres of Protestants at Scullabogue and Wexford

<sup>54</sup> Sir Richard Musgrave, *Memoirs of the Different Rebellions in Ireland from the Arrival of the English; also a Particular Detail of That Which Broke Out the 23d of May 1798, with the History of the Conspiracy Which Preceded It* (4th ed., Fort Wayne, Indiana, 1995), pp. 757–8. <sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 759. <sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 729–30. <sup>57</sup> In neighbouring Co. Wicklow the story of the burning of Greenan chapel in 1760 (it was set afire again in 1798) by an ultra-Protestant named Whaley was still circulating widely in the mid-nineteenth century. According to this story, 'Burn-Chapel-Whaley', as Catholics derisively called him, shot 'a [picture or statue of the] Sacred Heart of Mary through the heart and exclaimed, "I shot the wh[or]e through the heart and she did not bleed"'. See Myles V. Ronan (ed.), *Insurgent Wicklow, 1798: The Story as*

Bridge, to be considered below, there is the problem of how to evaluate the fate of the 300 to 400 Protestant 'loyalists' whom the rebels tried (after a fashion) and executed in their camp on Vinegar Hill.<sup>58</sup> The executions began almost immediately after the camp was established. According to Sir Richard Musgrave, as many as thirty-two people were killed on 29 May, and this number included two Protestant ministers – the Revd John Pentland of Killann and the Revd Thomas Troke of Templeshannon (Enniscorthy).<sup>59</sup> The trials and executions persisted throughout the next three weeks as raiding parties went almost daily into the surrounding countryside and brought back fresh batches of prisoner-victims to Vinegar Hill. Vengeful feelings were much in evidence in the camp, as Thomas Cloney found on his arrival there and later recorded: some people 'showed wounds that proved them not destitute of courage; others mourned their children, brothers, relations, and friends who fell in the late engagements or who had suffered death previously by torture. More exclaimed that they were left without a house or home, their houses and property having been consumed by the Orange yeomanry.'<sup>60</sup> As reports of further military atrocities against civilians by loyalist forces mounted in the month of June, it seems highly likely that the desire for vengeance among the rebels camped on Vinegar Hill remained as strong as Cloney had found it earlier.<sup>61</sup>

Protestants who were yeomen or supplementaries or Orangemen, if taken as prisoners to Vinegar Hill, had little prospect of escaping death, and such loyalists probably formed a high proportion of those executed there. But even in those cases where a 'political' crime had been committed, these executions were often laden with sectarian significance, as when Protestant prisoners were asked whether they wished to change their religion before being dispatched. One such prisoner, who was fortunate to avoid execution at Vinegar Hill, was the Protestant yeoman Benjamin Warren of Kilcormick parish. When he told his captors that 'he would die a Protestant as he had been bred [as] such', one of the rebels allegedly declared, 'You bloody Orange thief, you are damned and will go to hell the instant we put the breath out of you'.<sup>62</sup> In addition, the evident strength of blood-for-blood psychology in the camp made it much more likely that some Protestants would be falsely charged or mistakenly identified as enemies of the risen people. John Gill, who narrowly escaped death as an alleged Orangeman while held as a prisoner at Vinegar Hill, testified in May 1800 that he had implored the rebel leader Andrew Farrell 'to save his life'. Not knowing the prisoner, Farrell asked him his name and was told that it was Gill. At this news Farrell reportedly 'replied [that] that is a bad name, prepare for death, you have not an hour to live. Gill was a Protestant name in the county of Wexford.'<sup>63</sup> On at least one occasion, according to the loyalist

*Written by Rev. Bro. Luke Cullen, O.D.C. (1793-1859), with Additional Material from Other Mss. (Dublin, 1948), pp. 77-8. 58 Dickson, Wexford Rising, p. 77. 59 Musgrave, Memoirs, p. 346. 60 Thomas Cloney, A Personal Narrative of Those Transactions in the County of Wexford in Which the Author Was Engaged during the Awful Period of 1798 (Dublin, 1832), p. 17. 61 Dickson, Wexford Rising, pp. 76-8. 62 Musgrave, Memoirs, pp. 721-2. 63 Ibid., p. 763.*

historian George Taylor, the Enniscorthy brewer Luke Byrne, who supervised the trials and punishment of numerous prisoners, asked how many people had been condemned, and when told twenty-seven, he reportedly replied: 'If anyone can vouch for any of the prisoners not being Orangemen, I have no objection [that] they should be discharged.'<sup>64</sup> This statement makes it appear as if Protestants might have been presumed guilty until proven innocent.

To judge from the repeated statements by rebel leaders and other observers about the difficulty of protecting Protestant prisoners from popular retribution, sectarian desires for revenge ran strong among the rebel rank-and-file and their civilian supporters. In his history of the Wexford rebellion Edward Hay cited several instances of rebel retaliation that appear to have had a sectarian character.<sup>65</sup> Hay also gave a graphic account of his ultimately unavailing efforts to save from death at the hands of an impassioned crowd two Protestant prisoners, including his 'beloved friend' Edward Turner, at Wexford in the closing days of the rebellion. For his efforts 'many pikes were raised against me, and several guns and pistols cocked and pointed at me, and vengeance vowed against me as an *Orangeman*, for they vociferated that I had distinguished myself by no other feat but activity in protecting their enemies the *Orangemen*'. In this extremity Hay besought at least a trial for Turner but 'was answered by this universal cry: "What trial did we or our friends and relations obtain when some were hanged or shot, and others whipped or otherwise tortured, our houses and properties burnt and destroyed, and ourselves hunted like mad dogs?"'<sup>66</sup>

In this context, one in which sectarian passions were operating at full throttle among many of the rebel rank-and-file, and the demarcation between Orangemen and other Protestants was obscured or confused, the massacres at Scullabogue and Wexford Bridge become much more understandable. Behind these two massacres lay the actuality or prospect of major rebel defeats, accompanied by loyalist military atrocities. The Scullabogue slaughter, which occurred on 5 June, followed immediately the huge rebel losses in the battle of New Ross.<sup>67</sup> Though the Scullabogue massacre was over by the time that the retreating insurgents returned to nearby Carrickbyrne Hill, the connection with the rebel disaster at New Ross is beyond doubt. Some 'runaways' from that battle, arriving at intervals, brought the awful news and raised a clamour for retaliation against the 'loyalist' prisoners. 'The runaways', observed the Revd Gordon, 'declared that the royal army in Ross were shooting all the prisoners and butchering the Catholics who had fallen into their hands, [and] feigned an order from [Beauchamp Bagenal] Harvey [the rebel general] for the execution of those at Scullabogue.'<sup>68</sup> One survivor of Scullabogue

64 Quoted in Dickson, *Wexford Rising*, p. 77. 65 Hay, *History*, pp. 170, 186-7. 66 *Ibid.*, pp. 208-9. 67 Dickson, *Wexford Rising*, pp. 116, 118. 68 James Gordon, *History of the Rebellion in Ireland in the Year 1798, &c., Containing an Impartial Account of the Proceedings of the Irish Revolutionists from the Year 1782 till the Suppression of the Rebellion, with an Appendix to Illustrate Some Facts* (London, 1803), p. 145.

declared later that according to 'opinions current among the insurgents, the cause of the massacre was the report that the military were murdering their prisoners in Ross as they had done in Dunlavin, Carnew, and Carlow'.<sup>69</sup> Though attempts were made to implicate several priests in the massacre, they all lack credibility.<sup>70</sup> But those who were bent on destroying the prisoners did invoke the name of an allegedly approving priest in their persistent and ultimately successful efforts to defeat the initial resistance of the guards. There were altogether about one hundred victims, some fatally piked or shot in the front garden of Scullabogue House, but the great majority burned, suffocated, piked, or shot to death in the notorious adjoining barn.<sup>71</sup> The dead included women and children as well as men, and, according to Hay, fifteen or sixteen Catholics.<sup>72</sup> Not surprisingly, the Protestant memory soon excluded these Catholic victims.

During the furious four weeks of the Wexford rebellion one of the most prominent markers of greatly heightened sectarian consciousness on both sides consisted of the numerous reports of Protestant conversions, pseudo-conversions, and refusals to convert to the Catholic faith. Protestants were forcefully reminded that many Catholics regarded them as heretics and their apostasy as an affront to the 'one true faith'. A Protestant woman named Elizabeth Richards (a daughter of Thomas Richards of Rathaspick) kept a diary while staying in Wexford town between 26 May and 22 June. Her diary contains repeated references to the attempts made by Catholic rebels to force conversions, including her own. As she contemplated the dismal prospect that the rebels might ultimately be victorious, she acidly remarked, 'They will not long suffer hereticks to infect the air'.<sup>73</sup> And the Revd James Gordon, though a moderate loyalist, insisted in his history of 1801 that 'no fact is more certain than that the common people of the Catholic persuasion in all parts at least of the County Wexford, whenever they had hopes of success in the rebellion, declared that no other form of worship than their own must ever be permitted, and that God had never intended that any other should have place'.<sup>74</sup> Confirming Gordon's assessment is the case of Catharine Heydon. A few days after

69 Dickson, *Wexford Rising*, p. 123. 70 Musgrave, *Memoirs*, pp. 402, 786; Gordon, *History*, p. 146; Dickson, *Wexford Rising*, pp. 121-2. 71 Gordon put the total number of victims at 221 (*History*, p. 146), but Edward Hay insisted that fewer than 80 persons perished in the flames of Scullabogue barn, not 184, as Gordon had claimed. Thus, if Hay's account is credited, the death toll at Scullabogue did not exceed 120 – about 80 inside the barn and almost 40 outside (Hay, *History*, pp. 163-4). See also the recent re-examination of this atrocity by Daniel Gahan: 'The Scullabogue Massacre, 1798' in *History Ireland*, 4/3 (Autumn 1996), pp. 27-31. In his otherwise excellent account Gahan downplays the sectarian features of the atrocity. 72 Hay, *History*, p. 165. 73 'Copy [of the] Diary of Elizabeth Richards, Daughter of Thomas Richards of Rathaspick, Co. Wexford, from 26th May to 22nd June 1798', p. 29 (N.L.I. Microfilm 36486). For an analysis of this fascinating diary, see John D. Beatty, 'Protestant Women of County Wexford and Their Narratives of the Rebellion of 1798' in Dáire Keogh and Nicholas Furlong (eds), *The Women of 1798* (Dublin and Portland, Oregon, 1998), pp. 116-18. I wish to express my deep appreciation to Mr Beatty for providing me with a copy of this diary. 74 Gordon, *History*, p. xiii.

rebels killed her husband, the Protestant vicar of Ferns, she was visited in Enniscorthy by her Catholic butler, Lewis Bulger, who 'told her that she might live happily again in her own house, provided she would become a Roman Catholic and be surrounded by none but by persons of that religion'. Confident that the rebels would be completely triumphant, Bulger declared to Mrs Heydon that 'there will be but one religion on the face of the earth; this is all the handiwork of God; and as a proof of the divine interposition in favour of the rebellion, he said, "Father John Murphy catches red-hot bullets in his hand"'.<sup>75</sup>

Some Protestants had the hardihood to resist the notion of conversion even under extreme pressure. A Protestant farmer named Bleakney Ormsby of Garraun in Meelnagh parish, who had previously told a visiting band of 'United Irishmen' that 'he would remain at home and not take any part with either side', was visited a second time on 31 May by a numerous body of rebels, who 'compelled [him] to go to the house of [Father] David Cullen of Blackwater, a parish priest, to be baptised'. Although Cullen refused to do so, Ormsby was, by his own account, later forced 'to join the rebels as a soldier' and was wounded in the Battle of Arklow. While recovering from his wound, Ormsby was 'often pressed' by his labourer John Brennan 'to send for a priest and to change his religion, as no person could be saved out of the Roman Catholic Church, and it was not known that a Protestant ever was saved'. Yet a Protestant Ormsby remained – in spite of the killing of his father and brother in the earliest days of the rebellion and the murder of a second brother on 22 June.<sup>76</sup>

Another illuminating case of a very similar kind was that of the extreme loyalist George Taylor, who fell into rebel hands on 6 June, the day after the Scullabogue massacre. Taylor attributed his first escape from death as a Protestant prisoner to the rebel general Bagenal Harvey's strict order against such executions in reaction against that slaughter. While imprisoned at Gorey, Taylor was visited by 'some of his Roman Catholic neighbours', who 'wished him a speedy liberation and at the same time informed him that the only mode of procuring it was to be baptised by the priest, to embrace the holy Roman Catholic faith, and to take up arms and to fight for the cause of liberty'. Obdurate Protestant that he was (his visiting neighbours found him 'in the act of reading Protestant prayer books'), Taylor flatly refused to renounce his faith and for his steadfastness had a second narrow escape from death at Wexford Bridge.<sup>77</sup>

But many other Protestants who came under pressure were not nearly so courageous. Frances Miller of Tintern, widowed when her husband Robert was killed in the Scullabogue massacre on 5 June, later declared to a magistrate that 'through fear of being murdered' herself, 'she went to the priest to be christened'. Similar was the experience of another Protestant woman of Tintern, Catherine Poer, whose husband Patrick had been burned to death at Scullabogue. Reduced almost to starvation, she pleaded for a little meat from a Tintern mason named John

<sup>75</sup> Musgrave, *Memoirs*, p. 728. <sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 773–5. <sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 770–3.

Houghran, 'who acted as commissary to the rebels for distributing provisions'. Houghran refused, 'saying she did not come under the rules of his church' and 'was not a Christian', and that 'it would be giving meat to his enemies and breaking his oath'. When Houghran insisted that she 'go to the priest to be made a Christian', she did so 'to save her life and get victuals'.<sup>78</sup> Philip Clarke, the son of a Protestant brewer in the Wexford town of Fethard, testified against the captured rebel Joshua Colfer in December 1798 that Colfer had 'desired him and his brother to be christened by a priest and sent for a popish manual to have him [and] his brothers and sisters taught their catechism'. Since Colfer and other rebels had already killed several Fethard Protestants and threatened others with death, those who did not simply flee were naturally terrified and sought to save themselves by attending mass and seeking Catholic baptism. According to Musgrave, the local priest, Fr Doyle, assembled the remaining Fethard Protestants 'in a house under a pretence of baptising them, though in fact he did not perform that ceremony; and he very humanely announced in order to save their lives that they were sincere converts to his religion'. Philip Clarke firmly believed that he, his brother and sisters, and other Fethard Protestants had preserved their lives 'merely because they were considered as converted'.<sup>79</sup> Indeed, in most cases the priests sought out by fearful Protestants, while usually compliant, did not evince enthusiasm for conversions.<sup>80</sup> What such examples strongly suggest is that anti-Protestant sectarianism was rife among ordinary Catholics at the popular level and could scarcely have been excluded from rebel ranks. Perceiving only too well that many Catholics and insurgents considered their heresy a political danger and a religious affront, Wexford Protestants in substantial numbers sought the security afforded by conversions or pseudo-conversions.

These phenomena and others of the same kind appear to have been especially rife in Wexford town during the period of its occupation by rebel forces. Armed rebels and their civilian supporters often displayed ferocious hostility against Orangemen in particular and Protestants more generally, as revealed in the diary of Mrs Brownrigg of Greenmound. While detained in Wexford, she was visited by the Catholic bishop of Ferns, James Caulfield, who 'was very kind and gave me an ample protection, but like [Beauchamp Bagenal] Harvey, declared he had no influence and added that he was cautioned, in the street coming, to beware how he protected Protestants'. Appalled at the popular tumult and what he viewed as the rebels' sectarianism, he declared to Mrs Brownrigg that 'the people could not be described, that in reality the Devil was roaming at large amongst them', and that 'they w[oul]d make it a religious war, which w[oul]d ruin them'.<sup>81</sup>

Protestants in Wexford town were naturally terrified and many of them sought

78 *Ibid.*, pp. 775-6. 79 *Ibid.*, pp. 779-80. 80 Gordon, *History*, pp. 169, 264; Dickson, *Wexford Rising*, p. 149. 81 H.F.B. Wheeler and A.M. Broadley (eds), *The War in Wexford: An Account of the Rebellion in the South of Ireland in 1798, Told from Original Documents . . .* (London and New York, 1910), p. 175.

to change their religious identity. As early as 2 June, Mrs Le Hunte, the wife of a yeomanry colonel, and many other Protestants 'went to the [Catholic] chapel, renounced their religion, were *christened* (for it seems *we* are not Christians), and were marched in procession thro' the town'.<sup>82</sup> The Catholic historian Edward Hay remarked with some misplaced amusement that despite the 'earnest exertions' of leading Catholics and republicans in Wexford town, 'all endeavours to have service performed in the Protestant church proved ineffectual'. Abandoning completely 'their usual place of worship', 'great numbers [of Protestants] flocked in the most public and conspicuous manner to the Catholic chapel, where they affected the greatest piety and devotion'. These Protestant 'converts'; Hay declared, suddenly became even greater 'crawl-thumpers' than the Catholics themselves: 'Catholics strike their breasts gently on certain occasions, and with the right hand alone, but Protestants who attended at mass in these times generally continued to strike themselves vehemently with both hands almost during the whole service'.<sup>83</sup>

The 'heresy-hunting' (Charles Dickson's phrase) in Wexford town that prompted such cowed behaviour among many Protestants helped to set the stage for the gruesome massacre of 20 June by rebel pikemen on Wexford Bridge. The Catholic historian Hay and the extreme Protestant chronicler Musgrave both agree on the central role of the rebel captain Thomas Dixon in the making of this massacre. An innkeeper in Wexford with a seafaring background, the sanguinary Dixon had a vehement hatred for yeomen and those he denominated as Orangemen. He repeatedly demonstrated his capacity for leading and working up the sectarian enthusiasm of crowds. In one such episode in mid-June, reported in strikingly similar accounts by Hay and Musgrave, Captain Dixon threw the town 'into the most violent confusion and alarm'. At the head of 'a great cavalcade' that paraded through the streets of Wexford, he and his wife orchestrated a dramatic piece of sectarian theatre. The marchers exhibited to the watching crowds a firescreen said to have been discovered at Artramont, the country seat of Colonel Le Hunte, leader of the Shelmalier corps of yeomen cavalry. The firescreen was decorated 'with orange bordering, fringe, and tassels', and 'ornamented with various emblematical figures representing some heathen gods'. The orange-coloured items Dixon 'represented as the insignia of an Orange lodge', and the figures on the firescreen he proclaimed to be 'representations of the tortures which the Catholics were to suffer from Orangemen'. Mrs Brownrigg of Greenmound heard Dixon declare to the crowd, "'You see, we were all to be massacred'". Hay was both astounded and appalled by the effectiveness of this street theatre. Through it, he declared, Dixon had succeeded in assembling 'almost all the inhabitants of the town, whose phrenzy on seeing the orange ornaments, and hearing his assertions most desperately vociferated, it is impossible to describe'. This fanatical reaction reminded Hay of the popular tumult excited some days earlier by the alleged discovery of an 'Orange warrant or commission and a pitched cap' in the military barracks at Wexford. For

82 *Ibid.* 83 Hay, *History*, pp. 153-4.

Hay these incidents underlined what 'the people' had come to believe: 'their supposition or rather persuasion of their intended extermination, which the sight of anything orange awakened in the most sensitive manner'.<sup>84</sup> Dixon and others repeatedly directed these popular Catholic fears and hostilities against the 'loyalist' prisoners, of whom at least 260 were confined in the town.<sup>85</sup>

Yet, in spite of the threats against the prisoners' lives made by Dixon and others, and supported by popular sectarian passions, the republican leaders and their associates had been almost completely successful in staving off atrocities until the virtual collapse of their authority on 19 and 20 June. By that time the military forces of the crown were rapidly moving to encircle Wexford town, which, barring a rebel surrender on advantageous terms, seemed destined to become the scene of catastrophic rebel defeat, great slaughter, and pillage. This drastic shift in the military outlook and the psychological climate considerably raised the odds against the prisoners' continuing safety, but several new factors as well as one standing element opened the way to the historic massacre at Wexford Bridge. First of all, it was decided to concentrate rebel military forces at the camp on the Three Rocks, located about three miles from the town, and its armed inhabitants, who were severely criticised for their 'backwardness' in the struggle, were peremptorily ordered to appear at the Three Rocks camp, or the rebels themselves vowed to destroy the town.<sup>86</sup> Second, while many armed Wexford residents headed off to the camp, hordes of refugees flooded into the town from the west and especially the north, seeking asylum from the approaching and encircling troops. Edward Hay, himself an eyewitness to these chaotic events, later recalled that the number of refugees 'was increased every instant by the arrival of new fugitives, who described in melancholy strain of lamentation how their houses were plundered and destroyed, and how they themselves had narrowly escaped with life from the fury of the soldiery' who were ravaging the countryside.<sup>87</sup> One is reminded of Thomas Cloney's account of the recitation and nurturing of bitter grievances by the rebels collected earlier at Vinegar Hill, which certainly provided a major stimulus to the execution of so many prisoners there. Even the language of the refugees' complaints, as recorded by Hay, closely paralleled the language of the Vinegar Hill rebels recalled by Cloney.<sup>88</sup>

All these circumstances placed Dixon in an extremely strong position to break through the remaining restraints on his long-standing ambition to put numerous imprisoned 'Orangemen' to death. On the previous night Dixon had collected a band of about seventy men 'from the northern side of the Slaney', who, given courage and ferocity by liberal doses of whiskey, became the core of the group of hard men with whose essential aid the massacre was eventually carried out.<sup>89</sup> For some four hours Edward Hay and others resorted to various stratagems aimed at

84 *Ibid.*, pp. 196-7. See also Musgrave, *Memoirs*, pp. 438-9; Gordon, *History*, pp. 178-9.

85 Gordon, *History*, p. 176. 86 Hay, *History*, pp. 202-3; Dickson, *Wexford Rising*, p. 151.

87 Hay, *History*, p. 202. 88 *Ibid.*, p. 208. 89 *Ibid.*, pp. 204-5.

frustrating the murderous designs of Dixon and his supporters on the prisoners, such as a jury to try them before the infliction of any punishment. And when a bare majority of this jury rejected the death penalty for any of the first batch of prisoners, it appeared briefly that Dixon might be balked of his prey. But his project was suddenly saved when two of the remaining prisoners – a carver and gilder named Charles Jackson and an organist named O'Connor – went on their knees to Dixon, 'acknowledged that they were Orangemen', and promised 'to give every information' if their lives were spared. Dixon immediately realised that his frustrations were over:

He instantly addressed the people assembled before the gaol, stating that two Orangemen had become informers, and that proceeding to trial was therefore unnecessary, as the evidence of these men must be conclusive. It may easily be conceived that on this communication, horribly vociferated by Dixon and re-echoed by his wife, the populace became ungovernable. The people instantly approved of his plan and demanded that all Orangemen should be sent out to them . . .<sup>90</sup>

From about three or four o'clock in the afternoon until seven or eight o'clock in the evening Protestant prisoners were brought in batches to Wexford Bridge by heavily armed guards and there dispatched by pikemen acting on the commands of Dixon and his wife.<sup>91</sup> Besides having the information extracted from the two 'Orange' informers, those presiding at the bridge conducted a mockery of a trial: 'It was asked, did any one know any good action of the intended victim sufficient to save his life; and if no answer was made, the assertion of an individual of some deed against the people was conclusive evidence of guilt, and immediately death was the consequence, on his primary denunciation by Captain Dixon'.<sup>92</sup> Although a few of the prisoners were shot, the great majority of those executed were piked to death, one at a time, by two pikemen thrusting from the front and two others from the rear, with some prisoners dying 'under aggravated circumstances of barbarity'.<sup>93</sup> The executioners threw all the bodies over the bridge and into the river below. Hostile witnesses long remembered how both the killers and the attendant crowd behaved. As one witness recalled, 'I saw the horrid wretches kneel down on the quay, lift up their hands, seeming to pray with the greatest devotion, then rise and join (or take the place of) other murderers. Their yells of delight at the sufferings of their victims will ever, I believe, sound in my ears'.<sup>94</sup> Before the killing stopped through the intervention of Fr John Corrin, the parish priest of

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 211–12. <sup>91</sup> Musgrave, *Memoirs*, p. 458; Gordon, *History*, pp. 180–1. <sup>92</sup> Hay, *History*, p. 214. <sup>93</sup> *Ibid.* <sup>94</sup> The witness was Mrs Brownrigg of Greenmount, County Wexford, whose diary was first used by Musgrave. See his *Memoirs*, pp. 455–6. The quotation in the text here is taken from the edition of the Brownrigg diary published by Wheeler and Broadley, *War in Wexford*, p. 186.

Wexford, and the rebel leaders Esmond Kyan and Edward Roche, at least thirty-six prisoners had been put to death. Protestant sources, including Musgrave, put the death toll much higher, at ninety-seven persons.<sup>95</sup> But Edward Hay adamantly insisted on the accuracy of the lower number, mainly because 'among the various occupations assumed by different persons in the course of this melancholy catastrophe, one man in a most audible voice counted the victims one by one as they were put to death'.<sup>96</sup> According to Lieutenant-General Gerard Lake, however, 'above seventy prisoners' were murdered.<sup>97</sup> As the slaughter finally ended, a hostile witness distinctly heard 'the leader of *the* murderers' calling to his men, "'Come, my lads! We will go now and blessed be God, we have sent some of their souls to hell.'" They went off really as if they had been performing a praiseworthy and religious action.<sup>98</sup>

If Irish Protestants and Presbyterians long remembered and were often reminded of the massacres at Wexford Bridge and Scullabogue by Orange propagandists, Catholics, especially those of Wexford and Wicklow, were not likely to forget the sectarian violence and intimidation directed at them by ultra-Protestants and by British troops before, during, and after the 1798 rebellion. The 'white terror' that was carried on in the second half of 1798 and throughout 1799 in Wexford and Wicklow by rank-and-file Orange yeomen, with the connivance of the Protestant magistracy, was remarkably ferocious and even victimised many Catholic priests whose loyalty during the rebellion had been beyond question by any objective measure.<sup>99</sup> But during the nineteenth century Catholics sought to forget and were even ready to distort or deny the sectarian excesses of their own forbears in 1798. This tendency was evident as early as the original publication in 1803 of Edward Hay's *History of the Irish Insurrection of 1798*, in which Hay repeatedly challenged the claims of those extreme Protestants – whether writers or politicians – who wanted for crude political reasons to paint the Catholic rebels as religious fanatics pursuing a religiously inspired war against Protestants.<sup>100</sup> Hay's purpose was in part to restore the alliance that had existed in Wexford prior to 1798 between the Catholic gentry and middle class on the one hand and liberal Protestants on the other. This kind of an alliance, raised to a national scale, was a prime desideratum of Catholic nationalist politicians for most of the nineteenth century, and it significantly affected thinking and writing about 1798 from the Catholic and nationalist side.

Thus in recent years scholarly attention has been focused on the distortions perpetrated by the Franciscan priest Fr Patrick Kavanagh in his *Popular History of*

<sup>95</sup> Musgrave, *Memoirs*, p. 455; Gordon, *History*, p. 182. <sup>96</sup> Hay, *History*, pp. 215–16.

<sup>97</sup> Lieut-General Gerard Lake to Viscount Castlereagh, 23 June 1798, printed in Musgrave, *Memoirs*, pp. 814–15. <sup>98</sup> For this recollection by Mrs Brownrigg of Greenmount, see Wheeler and Broadley, *War in Wexford*, pp. 187–8. <sup>99</sup> Hay, *History*, pp. 252–81; Whelan, 'Role of Catholic Priest', pp. 311–13; O'Donnell, *Rebellion in Wicklow*, pp. 267–346.

<sup>100</sup> Hay, *History*, pp. 152–4, 172–5, 203–4.

the *Insurrection of 1798*, the earliest version of which appeared in 1870, with a second edition in 1874 and several centenary editions in 1898. Recent scholars have rightly faulted this highly influential popular work for its 'faith and fatherland' approach to 1798 and especially the Wexford rebellion. Acutely conscious of the Catholic Church's condemnation of Fenianism, which was the contemporary expression of the revolutionary republicanism and non-sectarianism that had inspired the United Irish leaders, Fr Kavanagh made it appear that Wexford was a stranger to the United Irish movement in 1798, and that its status as a secret society was a large part of the reason for the ultimate failure of Ireland's revolutionary efforts in the late 1790s. In Kavanagh's version of 1798 in Wexford, the leadership role of liberal Protestants is slighted and that of Fr John Murphy and certain other rebel priests is magnified – indeed, inflated to the point that his readers might begin to think that most of the Catholic clergy of Wexford had taken the side of their oppressed people.<sup>101</sup>

While these recent criticisms of Kavanagh are generally well directed, little or no attention has been paid to his highly sanitised treatment of Catholic sectarianism. At certain points in his narrative Kavanagh flatly denies the existence of significant sectarian motivation among the Wexford rebels. For example, after reciting the details of the rebel victory at Enniscorthy, he throws down a thunderous challenge: 'I defy the base defamers of a race, who are generous and forgiving almost to a fault, to substantiate the charges of cruelty and ferocity they have so unscrupulously made against the insurgents in the brief and disastrous but heroic struggle of the Irish of one county against all the military resources of England'.<sup>102</sup> Kavanagh also seizes on the elevation of liberal Protestants to positions of leadership in the revolutionary movement as 'a proof that the Catholics . . . are far too generous and enlightened to entertain rancour against those who differ from them in their views of religious truth'.<sup>103</sup> Like others before and after him, Kavanagh makes use of the argument that the violence of the rebels was aimed not against Protestants as such but against Orangemen. He claims, for example, that 'while the Catholic party in Wexford enjoyed undisputed sway, not the slightest disposition was manifested by them to injure or outrage in any way their Protestant fellow-townsmen. The resentment of the people was directed exclusively against Orangemen.'<sup>104</sup> In his only reference to the pressures felt by so many Protestants to change their religion, Kavanagh admits that the Protestants of Wexford town were constantly importuning 'the priests for admittance into the Catholic Church'. But he emphasises that 'the principal Catholic inhabitants of the town used their utmost endeavours to

**101** Anna Kinsella, '1798 Claimed for Catholics: Fr Kavanagh, Fenians, and the Centenary Celebrations' in Keogh and Furlong, *Mighty Wave*, pp. 139–55; Kevin Whelan, '98 after '98: The Politics of Memory' in his *The Tree of Liberty: Radicalism and the Construction of the Irish Identity, 1760–1830* (Cork, 1996), pp. 133–75 and esp. pp. 169–73. **102** Patrick F. Kavanagh, *A Popular History of the Insurrection of 1798, Derived from Every Available Record and Reliable Tradition* (2nd Centenary ed., Cork, 1898), p. 114. **103** *Ibid.*, p. 171. **104** *Ibid.*, p. 173.

banish all apprehension from the minds of their heterodox brethren', and he concludes his treatment of this subject with the sweeping and grossly indulgent declaration, 'No truth, indeed, has been more clearly shown forth than that the Catholics of Wexford [town] were possessed by no persecuting spirit.'<sup>105</sup>

Holding these views, Kavanagh was bound to have some difficulty in accommodating the rebel atrocities of Scullabogue and Wexford Bridge. In part he does so by treating them as highly exceptional, in contrast to the systematic and innumerable atrocities of the loyalist forces. Thus, in addressing Scullabogue, he declares, 'For one black deed such as the one now referred to, we can cite hundreds perpetrated by the partizans [*sic*] of English rule, not in the madness of passion but with cold-blooded deliberation'.<sup>106</sup> Gross distortion is permitted by Kavanagh in the insertion of a special notice in the appendix of his book from an unnamed correspondent. Here the belief is attributed to Thomas Canning, 'who was in charge of the prisoners' at Scullabogue, that the massacre there 'was done by an agent of the government, either personally or by inciting others to the deed, in order to terrify Protestants and put hatred in their hearts against their Catholic countrymen'.<sup>107</sup> (This piece of black propaganda is reminiscent of another on the opposite side from the ultra-Protestant Sir Richard Musgrave, who had the effrontery to declare that the Catholics themselves had burned scores of their own chapels in Wexford and elsewhere in the aftermath of the rebellion.)<sup>108</sup> In his account of the Wexford Bridge massacre Kavanagh gives the impression that the victims were exclusively Orangemen who received a rough-and-ready but not grossly unfair form of trial before their execution. This act of vengeance, he insists, 'was executed upon men who were all known to the people as the perpetrators of crimes deserving of death before any just tribunal'.<sup>109</sup> He treats the religious fanatic Captain Thomas Dixon, chief author of the massacre, much less critically than Edward Hay had done, and in fact severely censures Hay, calling him 'the good angel of the Orangemen' and saying that he cared far more about saving the life of one of them than he did about the fate of a hundred ordinary rebels. Kavanagh also stresses the role of Fr John Corrin in finally bringing the slaughter to an end. And, like Edward Hay, Kavanagh finishes his treatment of this gruesome deed with a flattering quotation from a Protestant in relation to the intervention of Fr Corrin and Esmond Ryan: 'I have heard of hundreds of Catholics who risked their lives to save those of Protestants, but not of one Protestant who encountered any danger to save the lives of Catholics'.<sup>110</sup> From this necessarily brief evaluation it should be apparent that Fr Kavanagh's perspective on Catholic sectarianism in Wexford in 1798 is at least as distorted and misleading as are his views on the role of the United Irishmen there and elsewhere.

Kavanagh's views on sectarianism were probably quite common among his nationalist contemporaries. They were undoubtedly shaped by the political

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 173-4. <sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 155. <sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, Appendix, pp. 28-9. <sup>108</sup> Musgrave, *Memoirs*, p. 895. <sup>109</sup> Kavanagh, *Popular History*, Appendix, p. 30. <sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 214-18.

exigencies of the late nineteenth century, when 'Protestant' Ulster exhibited increasing hostility to the political ambitions of Home Rule and republican nationalism. Those who, like Fr Kavanagh, yearned to make Ireland (all thirty-two counties of it) autonomous or independent, with its own legislature in which Catholic representatives would necessarily predominate, could not easily afford to dwell on the sectarian aggression of Catholics against Protestants in 1798. I am not at all sure that it is present-day politics in relation to Northern Ireland that have prompted some prominent scholars of 1798 to suggest that sectarianism does not merit a central place in the story of the Wexford rebellion, but in my view their insistence on the primacy of 'the political framework' has been carried to excessive lengths and should be scaled back considerably. By all means let us continue to seek to know the full extent of the United Irishmen's ideological and organisational presence in Wexford and everywhere else. But at the same time let us gauge accurately the central sectarian component of popular politics and culture in the 1790s – in all its harshness, crudeness, and repulsiveness.

Mrs Brownrigg of Greenmound, though hardly an impartial witness, may not have been far from the truth when towards the end of her diary, after royal troops had reoccupied Wexford town, she recorded the following remarks:

The rebel *leaders* said they fought for liberty, emancipation, and reform, their soldiers that they fought for religion, to *punish* the Protestants, and to save their own lives, as *we* [the Protestants or Orangemen] were certainly to have massacred all of them on Whitsun Tuesday . . . One night on our steps a man lamented much the hard life he led, and said he was much happier in his own cabin. 'So we were,' said another, 'but consider your religion.' 'I will never be *backward* for my religion' was his answer.<sup>111</sup>