I am very grateful to Jason Peacey for his comprehensive and thought-provoking review of *God’s Executioner: Oliver Cromwell and the Conquest of Ireland*. His generous appraisal of the book needs no further comment from me but I welcome the opportunity to respond to his criticisms of my treatment of English attitudes and behaviour towards the Catholic Irish during the 1640s and 1650s. Peacey writes that the book ‘is both challenging for academic specialists and capable of reaching out to a wider audience’ but claims that tensions arise in the attempt to traverse the scholarly and popular markets. In fact, he suggests that there are two different books here – ‘one a judicious revaluation of a crucial and contested period of history, and the other a controversial and contentious reading of some of the most bloody episodes in English and Irish history’.

I fully accept that my interpretation of certain events will be deemed controversial by many readers but this is hardly surprising given the contentious nature of the subject matter. Peacey further argues, however, that the picture of English attitudes towards the Catholic Irish is at times ‘rather caricatured and very much at odds with the subtlety of Ó Siochrú’s analysis of Irish politics’. I find myself somewhat perplexed by these comments as the book is based on a careful examination of the available evidence from both sides. In addition to criticisms of English actions my work also exposes some uncomfortable truths about the Catholic Irish, such as the extent of their recruitment into the ranks of the New Model Army. Contrary to Peacey’s assertion, I also discuss at some length the indiscriminate and murderous attacks on the Protestant settlers by the Catholic rebels during the early months of the rebellion. The lack of stress on religion when discussing 1641, highlighted by Peacey, is very deliberate, as I believe this aspect has been over emphasised in previous accounts. The bulk of the contemporary evidence from both sides, as distinct from subsequent self-serving accounts by many key participants, supports the contention that economic and political grievances were the primary motives for the initial violence.

Regarding English public reaction to events in Ireland, Peacey expresses legitimate concerns about how to gauge public opinion in the 17th century. We do know, however, from the work of Keith Lindley and others that news of the Irish uprising created widespread panic in England and Wales, especially in those counties adjacent to the Irish Sea, where people feared an invasion by the Catholic rebels. Moreover, as Ethan Shagan and Kathleen Noonan have shown, the enormous outpouring of newsheets in late 1641 and early 1642, triggered by the rebellion in Ireland, testifies to a large public appetite for news from that kingdom. Although various factions in England exploited this propaganda in different ways for domestic purposes, they all agreed on the barbarous nature of the Irish rebels. The absence of any dissenting voices in print supports the idea that this is what the public wanted to read (or hear).

For the late 1640s, I examined in detail claims by Norah Carlin and others that a degree of reticence existed in radical thought concerning the Cromwellian conquest of Ireland. As I explain in the book, however, the Leveller leadership proved extremely reluctant to take any stance on Ireland, and apart from a handful of anonymous publications (all seemingly written by the same hand) there is no evidence of any unease with the plans to crush confederate Catholic resistance. Discontent in army ranks stemmed primarily, and understandably, from a reluctance to engage in a risky overseas venture, widely perceived as hazardous, with the climate and disease likely to claim more victims than warfare. Parliament was worried about displays of royalist rather than Irish sympathies, but guarantees about the prompt payment of wages finally helped silence the few opposing voices, allowing Cromwell to continue his preparations for an invasion without further interruption. Thereafter, parliament made every effort to publicise news of Cromwell’s victories in
Ireland, including the bloody massacres at Drogheda and Wexford, all of which suggests large-scale support for the policy of conquest.

As for Peacey’s argument for a conflicted Cromwell, the evidence he cites for this (as he freely acknowledges) is taken from my book. Cromwell often wrestled with his conscience but he invariably won, and the outcome was absolutely clear cut in an Irish context at least. The Catholic Irish were treated differently to other combatants and the accepted military conventions simply did not apply in their case. The parliamentarians targeted the civilian population both directly and indirectly, through military action and the destruction of property, crops and livestock. Their actions created widespread famine and facilitated the spread of disease, all of which resulted in the death of almost 25% of the population in just a few years. In the light of these facts, the conflict fully deserves to be characterised as ‘a war of extermination’. The debate between Vincent Gookin and Richard Lawrence on the transplantation of the Irish after the war (covered in some detail in the book) clearly highlights differences of opinion within English government circles but my principal focus throughout is on those policies actually implemented by the colonial regime.

Peacey concludes his review by stating that ‘what would have made this excellent book a really great work, therefore, would have been a truly consistent application of the standards of scrupulous, judicious, open-minded and balanced scholarship that Ó Siochrú sets for himself, and demonstrates in the vast bulk of his analysis’. I reject unreservedly any suggestion that these standards have not been scrupulously adhered to throughout this work. I am not interested in ‘victim’ history and there is no hierarchy of suffering in war. The horrors experienced by Protestant settlers in 1641-2 were every bit as real and terrifying as anything inflicted on the Catholic population between 1641 and 1653. However, Peacey makes the claim ‘that visceral intolerance and hatred – like military atrocities – existed on both sides, and already had a long heritage by 1641’. This may be true to an extent but the statement appears to be a reworking of the argument that the conflict in Ireland merely reflected the general breakdown of traditional restraints across Europe and elsewhere during the early modern period.

This is simply not the case and in fact obscures the overwhelming reality of life in Ireland during the 1640s and 1650s. No one, I believe, would attempt to equate the genocide inflicted on the Native Americans by European colonists with the periodic massacres of settler communities in the New World. Similarly, the historical relationship between England and Ireland was not one of equality. In Ireland there was a fundamental difference between the random, uncoordinated actions of the Catholic rebels in the early months of the uprising, and the deliberate, officially sanctioned, slaughter of non-combatants by the colonial authorities. As soon as the Catholic elite established some degree of central control over their forces, the attacks on Protestant planters ceased and no further massacres of Protestants took place for the remainder of the war. Contrast this with the continued targeting of Catholic civilians throughout the conflict, which reaches a crescendo of bloodshed in 1651–2. Colonial warfare was a nasty, brutal business and this undoubtedly makes for some uncomfortable reading, but any attempt to mitigate the horrors of the conquest, in order to create some false sense of balance, would in my opinion be a crude distortion of the historical reality.

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