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Ireland and the Jacobite Cause, 1685-1766: A Fatal Attachment

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Author: Éamonn Ó Ciardha
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As the volume of books and articles on eighteenth-century Ireland continues to expand, so Irish Jacobitism increasingly stands out as a glaring omission. In 1998 Professor Breandán Ó Buachalla produced a major study, in Irish, of the place of the Stuarts in Gaelic Irish literature in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.⁽¹⁾ This apart, however, there remains no study of Irish Jacobite politics or culture to compare with the work of Evelyn Cruickshanks, Paul Monod or Murray Pittock. Éamonn Ó Ciardha now offers to fill the gap. His study draws on extensive research in the full range of available sources – state papers, the Stuart and French archives, private correspondence, newspapers, and Gaelic poetry. On this basis Ó Ciardha documents the scale of popular support for the Jacobite cause in the war of 1689-91, the continued contacts after 1691 between Catholic Ireland and the exiled Stuart court, and the impact on both Catholic and Protestant society of the subsequent ups and downs of the Jacobite cause, from the continued Irish investment in Louis XIV's campaigns of the 1690s to the last great surge of expectation inspired by the Seven Years War. He traces the various manifestations of Jacobite sentiment at home, from the activities of outlaw rapparees to the reported 'insolence' of the Catholic mob in Dublin and the highly developed corpus of writing on the themes of dispossession and deliverance developed by the Gaelic poets. He also offers a full account of the Irish element within the network of military and civilian exiles and hangers on that surrounded the Stuart court, and gave Irish disaffection a distinctly international flavour. By the end of his 378 pages of text there can be no question that Jacobitism was indeed the primary political loyalty of the great majority of Irish Catholics up to at least the 1740s, and that the threat it posed had a profound effect on the outlook and behaviour of the ruling Protestant minority.

All this is of undoubted interest, and the story is told with an engaging enthusiasm. The problem is that very little of it is new. Dr Ó Ciardha legitimately criticises Irish historians for not having paid more attention to Jacobitism. But he can hardly claim that they have failed to acknowledge its existence. As long ago as 1967 Maureen Wall noted that 'the cult of the Stuarts was widespread among the Gaelic-speaking intelligentsia'.⁽²⁾ The eighteenth century volume of the *New History of Ireland*, published in 1986, included extended discussion of two important aspects of the subject. Brian Ó Cuív offered an overview of the political themes found in the Gaelic literature of the period, while J.G. Simms's chapter on the Irish in continental Europe included sections on 'the Jacobite court as a focus for migration', and on the role of the Irish brigades in Jacobite military planning.⁽³⁾ Roy Foster, so often denounced as the archetypal 'revisionist', included in his analysis of the 'hidden Irelands' of the eighteenth century 'a continuity of underground culture' in which poets 'expressed conventionally Jacobite politics in terms that by mid-century were necessarily visionary'.⁽⁴⁾ Thomas Bartlett, discussing the background to the penal laws, insists that 'there was a Jacobite threat at least until the 1740s'.⁽⁵⁾ David Dickson's well-regarded text book concedes that Ireland played no part in the risings of 1715 or 1745, but nevertheless suggests that the ups and downs of the Jacobite cause were watched with a 'mixture of despair and providential expectation', and that 'the prospect of a Jacobite restoration ... remained the most powerful theme resonating in Irish-language political poetry for the next fifty years'.⁽⁶⁾ So what is required is not a strenuous assertion, however copiously documented, that Irish Jacobitism existed, or even that it existed on a large scale. Instead what we need is an analysis of its extent, meaning and significance.

Let us look at some of the issues such an analysis would explore. The first concerns the precise extent of Jacobite sympathy. Dr Ó Ciardha has clearly been stimulated by the work of Evelyn Cruickshanks and others who over the past two decades have promoted the study of English Jacobitism. However the unwary reader would not necessarily gather from his text that these citations refer to only one side of a hotly contested debate, in which an alternative body of literature emphasises the solidity of the Hanoverian regime and the strictly limited support for serious Jacobite conspiracy.⁽⁷⁾ The reason why English historians have been able to offer such widely conflicting estimates is, of course, the nature of the evidence: the transactions concerned were by definition secret or disguised, and genuine intelligence as to Jacobite proceedings has to be distinguished from false accusations generated by malice, paranoia or the hope of reward.

Dr Ó Ciardha is clearly aware of these pitfalls. Yet his critical filter seems at times to be slightly askew. His account of the Wood's Halfpence crisis, for example, begins with the startling sentence: 'Jacobitism also reared its head in other unlikely circles during this period' (p. 211). The five pages that follow (pp. 211-16) are devoted mainly to a detailed summary of a wildly unrealistic report on Jacobite prospects from a Catholic bishop, followed by some ambiguous verses ascribed to Swift. Beyond these, we are offered only Hugh Boulter's claim, which Dr Ó Ciardha himself characterises as 'a political ploy to quell rising opposition', that the campaign against Wood's patent had united Whigs, Jacobites and papists. A second contemporary comment, that 'nothing but the Pretender could create more unease in this kingdom', adds precisely nothing to the analysis, though the resulting hint of guilt by association would have been appreciated by Walpole's propagandists. In the same way, Dr Ó Ciardha takes largely at face value the assurances of support given to Jacobite agents like the Dominican Ambrose O'Connor, who toured Ireland in 1708 (pp. 122-3), apparently ignoring the widespread evidence that at this time men of all shades of opinion, in both Great Britain and Ireland, saw some level of contact with the Stuart court as a sensible insurance policy. Dr Ó Ciardha also accepts contemporary allegations of a 'witch hunt' against the Jacobite Sir James Cotter (p. 332), although recent research indicates that Cotter was in fact probably guilty of the rape for which he was hanged in 1720.⁽⁸⁾

This selective handling of questionable evidence is only part of the problem. Dr Ó Ciardha's hunt for

Jacobites also ignores some of the finer distinctions which people drew, at a time of agonising political dilemmas, between different levels of acceptance or non-acceptance of the Revolution. Thus his discussion of Protestant Jacobitism brings in not just active supporters of the Stuarts, but non-jurors (pp. 108, 123), a conflation that makes it impossible to do anything like justice to the political position of large numbers of Protestants, in both England and Ireland, in the years following the Revolution. Secondly, there is a persistent tendency to slip back and forth between a discussion of the actual extent of Jacobite conspiracy and a discussion of establishment fears regarding the possible existence of such conspiracies. Thus Dr Ó Ciardha accepts that the outbreak of cattle maiming that disturbed western counties in 1711-12 was primarily economic in motive, but goes on to add, accurately but with doubtful relevance, that 'this would not have been so obvious to an uneasy Protestant populace' (p. 131). Later in the text, with no attempt to present further evidence, this observation expands into the claim that 'the Jacobite dimension with which the Houghers have been credited may not be altogether unfounded' (p. 293, n. 71). In the same way, discussing the revelations of what he himself describes as the 'notorious discoverer' Redmond Joy regarding a Franco-Jacobite conspiracy in 1702, Dr Ó Ciardha observes that the truthfulness of such allegations 'is of less importance than the effects they had on the political nation'. If the aim is to investigate Protestant mentalities this is to some extent true (though the historian might still wish to know whether the fears that shaped political behaviour were soundly based or imaginary). However Dr Ó Ciardha goes on to say that the willingness of leading office holders to take Joy's charges seriously 'should serve to caution historians against dismissing such depositions as being purely alarmist or mercenary' (p. 119). It is by no means clear why it should do anything of the kind. Once again we seem to have slipped, imperceptibly but crucially, onto a different level of argument, away from what was actually happening to what contemporaries believed was happening.

The same curious difficulty in distinguishing between related but separate issues is evident in the treatment of another important question. Given that Jacobite conspiracy did exist, both at home and abroad, how serious a threat did it pose to the Hanoverian state? Dr Ó Ciardha's opening position seems both clear and realistic. The great majority of Irish Catholics in the early and mid-eighteenth century were potential supporters of a Stuart restoration. However the exile and dispossession of the Catholic landed class, and the cowing into submission of the clergy, had left them unarmed, leaderless and disorganised, so that they did not in themselves constitute a serious threat. Given these circumstances, Dr Ó Ciardha can legitimately criticise those historians who have taken Catholic inactivity in 1715 and 1745 as necessarily indicating indifference to the Stuart cause (pp. 271-3). What is less clear is how he can also accuse contemporary Protestants who took much the same view of Catholic military impotence of being 'smug', 'complacent' and consistently wrong (pp. 301, 127). He also maintains that the state papers and other records in which such perceptions are recorded are 'no less subjective as historical source-material' than the poetry of the Gaelic intellectual elite (p. 194). This is of course true, and it is hard to believe that any reputable historian of eighteenth-century Ireland has ever thought otherwise. But on this particular issue the state papers are, by Dr Ó Ciardha's own account, a reasonably accurate depiction of the military situation. On the other hand he himself is driven to point out that his Gaelic literary sources can be taken seriously only if we recognise that Jacobitism was 'an ideology founded on unquenchable optimism' (p. 194), sustaining itself on 'extravagant hopes' (p. 214).

Despite its length, and the wealth of documentation on which it draws, Dr Ó Ciardha's study shows curiously little interest in the internal dynamics of Irish Jacobitism. Earlier accounts of the period 1689-91 have emphasised the divisions between competing ethnic groups and vested interests. Dr Ó Ciardha, by contrast, is concerned only with unity. Where others have noted the conflicts of interest that emerged between the English-centred king and his Irish Catholic supporters, he is content to cite an isolated expression of James's sympathy for the dispossessed Irish Catholics (p. 64). He also ascribes clear political motives to the bands of rapparees who served as irregular allies of the

Jacobite army, despite contemporary evidence that these preyed on Catholic and Protestant alike, and in some cases included renegade English and Scottish soldiers (p. 73). At one point – rather oddly for a historian elsewhere insistent on the superior value of the Gaelic literary sources – he goes so far as to condemn the poet Daithí Ó Bruadair, who wrote against freebooting rapparees, for having failed to understand their importance to the Jacobite cause (p. 93). Elsewhere too Dr Ó Ciardha shows little interest in those who do not follow the party line. The only systematic statement of Catholic political principles in the first half of the eighteenth century is Cornelius Nary's *The Case of the Roman Catholics of Ireland* (1724). Yet Dr Ó Ciardha has almost nothing to say about Nary – presumably because his pamphlet made the case for an acceptance of George I as *de facto* king. Other dissident voices, like Charles O'Connor, are likewise minimised or accused of vested interests.

Turning back to those who did give active support to the Jacobite cause, we must consider the question of motive. The formal core of Jacobite ideology was indefeasible hereditary right. It would be unwise to assume that this principle meant nothing to Irish Catholics. It rested on a formidable body of both theological and political doctrine, while the Gaelic Irish could also cite the elaborate genealogies that had been fabricated to give the Stuarts a pedigree linking them to Gaelic Irish royalty. But Jacobitism was also a mobilisation of Catholics behind a Catholic claimant to the throne. What was the relative importance of these two influences, dynastic allegiance and religious solidarity? How much weight, for example, do we give to those occasions when Jacobite planners considered abandoning the Stuarts and offering to place a liberated Ireland under direct French control? The problem becomes more urgent still when we turn from the Jacobite elite to its rank and file. The dubious motives of the rapparees during and after the war of 1689-91 have already been mentioned. What of the thousand or so men who went each year to serve in the Irish regiments in the service of France and other Catholic European powers? Once again the importance of an ideological commitment to the Stuarts should not be discounted out of hand: Dr Ó Ciardha points to evidence showing the importance recruits attached to warrants directly from the exiled court. At the same time, it seems legitimate to ask what proportion of this surplus manpower being exported from a poor rural society would have been equally willing, if permitted, to serve in the forces of the British crown – as indeed large numbers were to do from the late eighteenth century onwards. Where political motives did exist, equally, they were not all of a kind. If some recruits talked of returning in triumph with the rightful king, others seemed more concerned with settling accounts with the Protestant enemy, and others again with casting off economic servitude.⁽⁹⁾ Further investigation may help to clarify what was clearly a complex picture. What is not acceptable is to posit a self-explanatory and unitary motive, 'Jacobitism', running through every aspect of anti-Hanoverian activity.

Finally, an analysis of Jacobite motivation must also consider the Irish dimension. Jacobitism was after all a British ideology. Dr Ó Ciardha follows Dr Vincent Morley in finding this characterisation 'startling' (p. 347, n. 84). Their shared bewilderment suggests a regrettable blind spot at the very heart of the emerging genre of Irish Jacobite studies. Irish Jacobitism, like Scottish, may well have drawn much of its emotional charge from resentment at national subordination to England. But the fact remains that the whole point of Jacobitism was to place a Scottish dynasty back on the united thrones of England and Scotland and on the dependent throne of Ireland. This makes it difficult, at first sight at least, to understand how Irish poets like Aogán Ó Rathaille and Liam Inglis could celebrate the prospect of such a restoration in terms of the return of the Irish language to its former dominance and the eclipse of 'Beurla na m-búr' (the English of the boors) (pp. 276, 159). This is not to say that there is necessarily a contradiction. Dr Ó Ciardha summarises a fascinating memorandum from 1737 in which Ulick Burke, son of the earl of Clanricard, sketched out a restructured Stuart patrimony, with Scotland and Ireland, liberated from their inferior status, keeping a potentially rebellious England in check (pp. 267-8). But we need to know whether others recognised and addressed the problem in similar terms. If they did, then their proposed solutions are surely an

important part of the history of Irish Jacobitism. If not, then the naive equation of a Stuart restoration with a triumph of Gael over English must cast doubt on Dr Ó Ciardha's claims for the high level of political sophistication underlying the political poems of men like Ó Rathaille and Inglis.

Dr Ó Ciardha's book should mark a turning point in the history of eighteenth-century Ireland. Given the wealth of detail he has assembled, historians have no longer any excuse for failing to build into their assessment the attachment of such a large section of the population to the cause of the exiled Stuarts. Now that this point has been so comprehensively demonstrated, it is time to move on to other tasks: to separate, as best we can, real glimpses of conspiracy from bogus or fanciful accusation, to distinguish clearly between Protestant fears, Catholic aspirations and military and political realities, and to uncover the varied and changing meanings of Jacobitism to different groups within the population to whom it so clearly appealed.

Notes

1. Breandán Ó Buachalla, *Aisling Ghéar: Na Stíobhartaigh agus an t-Aos Léinn 1601-1788* (An Clochomhar; Baile Atha Cliath [Dublin], 1996). [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Maureen Wall, *The Penal Laws 1691-1760* (W. Tempest; Dundalk, 1967), p. 19. [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. T. W. Moody and W. E. Vaughan (eds), *A New History of Ireland*, vol. 4: *Eighteenth-Century Ireland 1691-1800* (Oxford University Press; Oxford, 1986), chapters 13, 19. [Back to \(3\)](#)
4. R. F. Foster, *Modern Ireland 1600-1972* (Penguin; Harmondsworth, 1989), p. 196. [Back to \(4\)](#)
5. Thomas Bartlett, *The Fall and Rise of the Irish Nation* (Gill and Macmillan; Dublin, 1992), p. 18. [Back to \(5\)](#)
6. David Dickson, *New Foundations: Ireland 1660-1800* (2nd ed.; Irish Academic Press; Dublin, 2000), p. 68. [Back to \(6\)](#)
7. See for example the judicious summary in Julian Hoppit, *A Land of Liberty? England 1689-1727* (Clarendon Press; Oxford, 2000), pp. 392-7. [Back to \(7\)](#)
8. Dr Ó Ciardha himself (pp. 192-4) cites James Kelly's rejection of the charge against Cotter. For a full account see Neal Garnham, 'The trials of James Cotter and Henry, Baron Barry of Santry: two case studies in the administration of criminal justice in early eighteenth-century Ireland', *Irish Historical Studies*, 31 (1999), 328-52. [Back to \(8\)](#)
9. These generalisations draw on my own review of some limited evidence relating to recruits: S. J. Connolly, *Religion, Law and Power: The Making of Protestant Ireland 1660-1760* (Clarendon Press; Oxford, 1992), pp. 238-9, 243-4. [Back to \(9\)](#)

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