

Irish Rebellion

Also by Stuart Andrews

EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY EUROPE

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UNITARIAN RADICALISM: POLITICAL RHETORIC 1770–1814

Irish Rebellion

Protestant Polemic, 1798–1900

Stuart Andrews

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To the memory of James Morrison, Ulsterman

The ungenerous policy of England filled Ireland with disaffection, and her alarmed Ministers of torture were let loose to quell, by means that would have disgraced an Alva, the commotions of her own raising.

Annual Review 1803

The vigorous policy of England prevented the destruction of the liberty of Ireland and preserved that country from the worst of all tyrannies, that of Jacobins.

Antijacobin Review 1804

It was not until an advanced stage of the American revolt had attracted the attention of enlightened Europe to the first principles of civil liberty, that Ireland began steadily to reflect on her own deprivations.

Sir Jonah Barrington

Historic memoirs of Ireland 1833

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Preface

This study focuses on rival historical interpretations of the 1798 Rebellion, and on the factual distortions promoted by the Protestant Establishment and its partisan literary reviews. The work completes a trilogy centred on counter-revolutionary polemic in the decades following the American and French revolutions. The focus is less on events themselves than on the rhetoric that colours perceptions of those events.

Apologists for the Episcopalian Protestant Ascendancy – ‘Protestants’ in Irish parlance of the day – sought to represent 1798 as a continuation of the long-running conflict between Catholic and Protestant. Even contemporaries saw this as too simplistic, since it ignored Presbyterian leadership of the Rebellion, while improbably bracketing Catholics and Presbyterians together as part of an alleged Europe-wide Jacobin conspiracy. An introductory chapter surveying the work of modern scholars, writing at or around the bicentenary, provides a yardstick against which to measure the more extreme examples of Ascendancy myth-making.

The arch myth-maker was Sir Richard Musgrave, who died in 1818. Himself a member of the Protestant Ascendancy, his *Irish Rebellions* was published in 1801, and was recognized at the time as stridently partisan. But less noticed is the systematic way in which the *Antijacobin Review* and the *British Critic* promoted Musgrave’s views, and gave generous space to his anonymous demolition of his challengers. This continuing journalistic war of attrition helped to fix the Musgrave version on generations of the British reading public. Meanwhile a re-invigorated Papacy, the return of the Jesuits, the increasingly self-confident Irish Catholic hierarchy, and the impact of O’Connell’s Emancipation campaign, all seemed to confirm Musgrave’s thesis.

The key years are the first half-century ending in 1848, but Musgrave was re-echoed whenever current events re-ignited the debate on 1798. So this analysis is carried to 1900 – the centenary of the Act of Union – though later chapters are necessarily more impressionistic. Irish issues brought down British ministries all too frequently. Ignoring Pitt’s resignation in 1801, ostensibly over Catholic Emancipation, there remain the ten casualties of: Grenville (1807), Grey (1833), Peel (1835), Melbourne (1841), Peel (1846), Disraeli (1868), Gladstone (1874),

Salisbury (1885), Gladstone (1886) and Gladstone (1894). Even Britain's Special Branch began in 1883 as the Special Irish Branch. The first centenary of 1798 fell in the year between the Queen's Diamond Jubilee and the outbreak of the South African War. That makes it all the more surprising that in 1900, at the height of the war and nine months before her death, Queen Victoria paid a state visit to Ireland. That same year a new two-volume history took what was essentially a Musgrave line, and a century later Sir Richard still receives scholarly support.

My reliance on other historians, whatever their sympathies, is made clear in the text. Among modern scholars to whom I owe a personal debt is Kevin Whelan, who has been most generous with his time, and in whose final chapter of *The Tree of Liberty* my own study is rooted. I am grateful for his advice at a critical moment, and for his comments on the draft of my introductory chapter. Less directly, Dr Whelan's reminder about Morley's rehabilitation of Burke was supplemented by Professor Derek Beales, who drew my attention to several Burkean references. I must thank John Kirwan for guidance on Dublin libraries, Edward Lucas for access to his unpublished dissertation on William Drennan, and Sandy Bannister for proof-reading my typescript. And I gladly reiterate my gratitude to the staff of Bristol Reference Library for their patience and expertise, which (together with my wife's forbearance) have sustained me through many years of writing and research.

Stuart Andrews

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