ISSN 1753-2396 (Print)
ISSN 2753-328X (Online)

Journal of
Irish and Scottish Studies

Articles

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Volume 1, Issue 1
Pp: 45-69
2007
Published on: 1st Jan 2007

1 4 9 5

ABERDEEN
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Irish Political Verse and the American Revolutionary War

Vincent Morley

The political sentiments of the Catholic population in eighteenth-century Ireland have attracted comparatively little attention from historians. This neglect can be partly explained by the exclusion of Catholics from the political nation in the aftermath of the Williamite revolution. The state papers for the eighteenth century provide little first-hand information about Catholic attitudes and Catholics rarely engaged in political controversy in print during the period. Furthermore, what little they published tended to be of an apologetic nature: authors such as Charles O'Connor, John Curry and Arthur O'Leary addressed their arguments to an English-speaking and Protestant readership and sought to portray the Catholic community as an innocuous and traduced body that could be safely entrusted with greater rights without endangering either the religious or political establishments. But Catholic authors were not restricted to either print or the English language, and a large corpus of unpublished political verse in Irish was composed by and – what is no less important – *for* Catholics during the eighteenth century.

Historians have been notably reluctant to employ the evidence of this vernacular literature. Indeed, some members of the profession contend that the political verse of the period cannot be accepted as an expression of popular opinion. In a recent discussion of my *Irish Opinion and the American Revolution*, Professor S. J. Connolly invoked arguments that were advanced by Professor Louis Cullen in an influential but mistaken article originally published in 1969.[1] He summarised Cullen's key points as follows:

> The first was that the resentment of the political and social order expressed in so much of the vernacular poetry should be read as representing the grievances, not of an oppressed peasantry, but rather of a relatively 'well-to-do' group whose complaint was the loss of a former privileged status. The second was a reminder of the importance

[1] Louis Cullen, 'The hidden Ireland: reassessment of a concept' in *Studia Hibernca*, 9 (1969). The article was issued as a pamphlet in 1988.

> of genre. 'The *aisling*', he pointed out, 'was a literary form; not a message for the people.'[2]

The second of these propositions was contested by Professor Breandán Ó Buachalla in a ground-breaking article on the *aisling* which appeared as long ago as 1983:

> Nuair a deir an tOllamh Louis Cullen mar shampla, *'The* aisling *was a literary form, not a message for the people'*, ní amháin go dtugann sé le tuiscint nach bhféadfadh teachtaireacht a bheith ag aiste litríochta ach go gceileann sé príomhfheidhm na haislinge: foirm liteartha a chur ar an teachtaireacht, réaladh liteartha a chur ar ráiteachas na tairngreachta. Mar is chuige an aisling go bunúsach, ní chun go raghadh an file ag válcaereacht dó féin cois abhann, cois coille, nó cois leasa dó go huaigneach; ná ní chun go bhfeicfeadh sé an spéirbhean agus go dtabharfadh tuarascáil chalcaithe phréamhaithe uirthi; is chuige an aisling chun go dtiocfadh an file ar an spéirbhean agus go bhfaigheadh uaithi an teachtaireacht, an tairngreacht i dtaobh na ríochta.[3]
>
> (When Professor Louis Cullen says, for example, 'The *aisling* was a literary form, not a message for the people', not only does he imply that a literary composition cannot have a message but he conceals the principal function of the *aisling*: to give literary form to the message, to give literary expression to the prophetic statement. For the essential purpose of the *aisling* is not for the poet to go wandering alone by river, wood or fairy fort; nor for him to see the *spéirbhean* and to give an ossified, conventional account of her; the purpose of the *aisling* is for the poet to encounter the *spéirbhean* and to receive from her the message, the prophecy concerning the kingdom.)

I am not aware that this argument has been controverted in the twenty years since it appeared in print and it seems to me to be incontrovertible. Not only

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[2] S. J. Connolly, 'Jacobites, Whiteboys and republicans: varieties of disaffection in eighteenth-century Ireland' in *Eighteenth-Century Ireland: Iris an Dá Chultúr*, 18 (2003), 75.

[3] Breandán Ó Buachalla, 'An mheisiasacht agus an aisling' in P. de Brún, S. Ó Coileáin and P. Ó Riain (eds), *Folia Gadelica* (Cork, 1983), 82. All translations in this article are mine.

can messages be conveyed as effectively by the *aisling* as by most other literary *genres*, but there is no essential linkage between the *aisling* and any particular viewpoint. While it is true that the bulk of the *aislingí* composed during the first half of the eighteenth century were Jacobite in sentiment, the same can be said of Irish political literature in general. The *aisling* evolved in tandem with popular opinion, however, and by the time of the American revolution it expressed a wider range of attitudes. Of the eight *aislingí* in an anthology of Irish verse from the years 1775–83 that I edited, five are Jacobite works, two make no reference to the Stuart pretender, and one might be described as a post-Jacobite composition.[4] The literary form of the *aisling* was not an ideological or a conceptual straightjacket; rather, it was a familiar and convenient vessel that could be infused with whatever message suited the circumstances of the day.

The first leg of the historians' thesis remains to be considered. If the ostensibly political verse of the eighteenth century really was political, it is certainly valid to ask whose views it expressed. This question, like all historical questions, cannot be answered by theoretical speculation but only by empirical study of the primary sources. My anthology contains twenty-one works by thirteen named and one anonymous author. Two of these, Eoghan Rua Ó Súilleabháin and Aindrias Mac Craith, are well-known poets with around sixty compositions each to their credit. Ó Súilleabháin was born near Killarney in obscure circumstances but received a hedge-school education and established a school of his own in the locality; having been condemned by the local clergy for sexual misconduct he became an itinerant teacher while working at times as an agricultural labourer. On his own testimony, he was impressed into the marines during the American war–a circumstance indicative of low social status–and he died as a result of injuries received in a drunken brawl in 1784.[5] Aindrias Mac Craith was one of the 'Maigue poets', a literary coterie centred on the village of Croom, Co. Limerick, where he taught school.[6] Tomás Ó Míocháin, the author of more than twenty extant compositions, was also a school teacher but was more successful in his profession than either Ó Súilleabháin or Mac Craith: the son of a tailor, he established a 'mathematical school' in Ennis, the county town of Clare, and his death in 1804 was noted in

[4] Vincent Morley (ed.), *Washington i gCeannas a Ríochta; Cogadh Mheiriceá i Litríocht na Gaeilge* (Dublin, 2005). See numbers 2, 3, 8, 12 and 13; numbers 7 and 14; and number 19 respectively.

[5] Máire Ní Mhurchú and Diarmuid Breathnach, *1782–1882 Beathaisnéis* (Dublin, 1999), 134–5.

[6] Ibid., 63–4.

the local newspaper.[7] Seán 'Máistir' Ó Coileáin is the only other figure among the thirteen identified authors in my anthology to enjoy a significant literary reputation; although he was not as prolific as the three mentioned above, a few of his dozen or so compositions became exceptionally popular. Ó Coileáin was the son of a tenant farmer and spent some time as a clerical student at Coimbra in Portugal before returning in 1775 to establish a school near Skibbereen in west Cork.[8] Another four of the authors can be described as minor literary figures who have left small bodies of work. Séamas Ó Dálaigh was a tailor from Mungret on the outskirts of Limerick city. Éamonn Ó Flaitheartaigh lived at Ballynoe in east Cork, a rural area close to the Waterford border, but I have failed to discover any information about his occupation. Uilliam Ó Lionnáin, a scribe as well as an author, was a Kerry-born tailor but lived at Sixmilebridge in Co. Clare. Seán Ó Muláin, a very prolific scribe, was a native of Passage West in Cork harbour and spent much of his life in Cork city; the available evidence suggests that he was quite poor and one of his works was composed *'iar bhfáil* ejectment *nó foláireamh a chaitheamh amach as a thig ag Sasanaigh*' ('after receiving an "ejectment" or a notice of his eviction from his house by *Sasanaigh*').[9] Of the five remaining named authors in the anthology, Philip Fitzgibbon and Ceallachán Mac Cárthaigh each left a solitary manuscript in which the only known copies of their songs occur.[10] While Fitzgibbon was a teacher who established a 'mathematical school' in Kilkenny city and whose death was noted in the national press, I have failed to discover any biographical information about Mac Cárthaigh.[11] The three others, Uilliam Ó Dábhoireann, Seán Mac Cathail and Maoilsheachlainn Ó Dúill, are entirely unknown apart from a single composition attributed to each of them – an obscurity suggestive of low social status.

This brief survey of the authors' diverse backgrounds provides little support for the thesis that the verse of the period represents 'the grievances ... of a relatively "well-to-do" group'. As for the argument that they were inspired by 'the loss of a former privileged status', it may be noted that only two of the authors in my anthology, Ó Dálaigh and Mac Craith, have surnames sug-

[7] Ibid., 122–3.

[8] Ibid., 87–8.

[9] Breandán Ó Conchúir, *Scríobhaithe Chorcaí 1700–1850* (Dublin, 1982), 166. *'Sasanaigh'* might be translated as either 'English' or 'Protestants'.

[10] Ms. 23 D 8 in the Royal Irish Academy and Ms. G 6 in the Burns Library, Boston College, respectively.

[11] For notes on Fitzgibbon by Séamus Ó Casaide see *Irish Book Lover*, IX (1918), 74–5 and XXII (1934), 65.

gesting descent from professional bardic families. Crucially, the fallen status of individual families does not feature as a theme in political verse from the period of the American revolution. References to the defeat and oppression of the Milesians and Catholics are common, but they are general and collective rather than specific and particular in nature.[12] They embrace the native community as a whole and complement equally generalised abuse directed against the English and Protestants.[13] The political literature of this period invokes communities rather than individuals, *ethnies* rather than noble lineages, and kingdoms rather than localities. It can still be argued that these compositions are not the voice of the 'peasantry', that their authors, although they belonged to neither a hereditary caste nor a social élite, were at least a few steps removed from the mud cabin and the potato patch. One might therefore contend that the literature should be seen as the voice of the Catholic middling sort: of tenant farmers and priests, of retailers and craftsmen, and especially of school teachers. This representation is true enough as far as *production* of the verse is concerned, but its *consumption* is another matter. No cultural 'fire-break' existed between the landless labourers and those rural Catholics who were a couple of rungs above them on the social ladder: they worshipped at the same mass-houses ("tithe pobail" or 'parish houses' in Irish), attended the same fairs and *pátrúin* (celebrations to mark the feast-days of local saints), spoke the same language, and shared a literary culture that was primarily oral.[14] It is reasonable to assume that they would also have sung the same songs and recited the same poems. In the case of one of the 'American' songs – Seán Ó Coileáin's composition – this hypothesis can be proved because the work survived in the repertoire of traditional singers in west Cork until the early years of the twentieth century.[15] If the political songs were not composed by the illiterate, they were sung by them.

One final objection by supporters of the historians' thesis can be anticipated. It may be allowed that the authors were men of the middling sort, that they

[12] Morley, *Washington*, number 1, line 10; number 2, line 30; number 7, line 19; number 9, line 9; number 11, line 13; number 15, line 9; and number 18, line 14.

[13] Ibid., number 2, line 31; number 2, line 40; number 3, lines 53–4; number 6, line 41; number 13, line 61; and number 15, line 20.

[14] One observer reported that public readings from Irish literary manuscripts were 'considered by the peasantry a treat of the highest order, and large numbers will assemble on a winter's evening around the turf fire of a farmer's cabin for the purpose'. According to the same writer, the manuscripts were 'usually the products of the leisure hours of the schoolmaster'. See T. Crofton Croker, *Researches in the South of Ireland* (London, 1824), 331–2.

[15] Peadar Ó hAnnracháin, 'Filidhe ó Chairbre' in *Irisleabhar na Gaedhilge* 18 (1908), 265.

are as likely to have been rising as falling in social status, and that their compositions circulated among the illiterate. None the less, it may still be argued that the sentiments they articulated were neither original nor genuine but were copied uncritically from the literature of the 1690s and the early decades of the eighteenth century, a time when members of the dispossessed Catholic gentry still entertained realistic hopes of a Stuart restoration and the recovery of their attainted estates. In this way, compositions from the era of the American revolution which articulate a partisan viewpoint can be discounted as 'part of a society's folklore rather than its politics'.[16] But the argument strains credulity to breaking point. It presumes to relegate talented and (by the standards of the time) educated men to the role of inanimate echo chambers, mindlessly intoning the mantras of a lost war, a vanished class and a bygone age. Furthermore, if one could believe that such a mechanistic model was possible, one would expect the attitudes expressed in the literature to be static and uniform; in reality, they are dynamic and varied. We hear in the vernacular verse, not the monotone voice of a fossilised tradition, but personal reactions to topical events: the siege of Boston, Spanish invasion preparations, the British evacuation of Boston, France's entry to the war, an anticipated French invasion of Ireland, the campaign for 'free trade', Yorktown, the 'renunciation' campaign, opposition to the Fencible regiments, etc.

It is almost certainly the case that a great many of the political songs and poems composed during the American war have been lost, but the extant corpus is sufficiently large to allow the evolution of opinion to be traced over the course of the conflict.[17] The remainder of this article will attempt to give a brief summary of that evolution.

II

A work composed by Uilliam Ó Dábhoireann during the first months of the war when General Gage's army was trapped in Boston displays an intense hostility to Britain but contains no overt indication of sympathy for the colo-

[16] S. J. Connolly, *Religion, Law and Power: the Making of Protestant Ireland 1660–1760* (Oxford, 1992), 248.

[17] It is striking that of the twenty-one compositions edited in Morley, *Washington*, as many as seven (numbers 1, 5, 11, 16, 17, 18 and 20) appear to be found in only one manuscript. The line between survival in a single copy and non-survival is a perilously thin one.

nists whom it describes as 'Presbyterians'. The piece begins with an ironical expression of concern for the besieged British forces:

> Is trua liom na scéalta do chuala go déanach,
> im' chluasa do chéas mé le sealad,
> ar scuaine seo an Bhéarla do ghluais uaim le tréimhse
> as cuanta na hÉireann go Boston;
> le fuadar, le faobhar, dá bhfuadach le chéile
> is dá scuabadh ins na spéarthaibh ina gceathaibh
> le fuaim torann piléaraibh ag slua *Presbytérian*
> – cé gur mhuar ar féasta iad is ar bainnis.[18]
>
> (Grieved am I by the stories I've lately heard, that have pained my ears for some time, about this English-speaking herd which set out some time ago from the harbours of Ireland for Boston; with energy and arms being driven together and being blown to the sky in showers, to the sound of roaring bullets by a *Presbyterian* army – though they'd be great at a feast or a banquet!)

Ó Dábhoireann made no distinction between the English and the Anglo-Irish, and identified the members of the besieged army with the oppressors of the Gaels: *'ba bhuartha agaibh Gaelaibh'* ('the Gaels were tormented by you'). Amid much non-specific rhetoric about the oppression to which the native Irish were subjected (*'dá suaitheadh le claonadh is le cleasaibh'* – 'being shaken by deceit and trickery'; *'i gcrua-shnaidhm an daorbhroid'* – 'in the harsh fetter of bondage') the Penal prohibition on Catholics leasing land for long terms was selected for particular mention (*'gan buaineacht 'na saolaibh / a lua do na Gaelaibh ar thalamh'* – 'with no permanence in their lives assigned to the Gaels for land').[19] Ó Dábhoireann showed no interest in the matters at issue between Britain and its colonies and his work gives no indication of any sympathy for the Americans *per se*, but the mere fact that the oppressors of the Irish had suffered heavy casualties at the battles of Concord and Bunker Hill and were now hemmed into the town of Boston was itself a cause for celebration – irrespective of either the merits of the dispute or the identity of Britain's enemy.

Early in the war, Seán Mac Cathail reworked the well-known Jacobite song 'Síle Ní Ghadhra' (one of many personifications of Ireland in the literature of

[18] Morley, *Washington*, number 1, lines 1–8.

[19] Ibid., lines 9, 10, 21 and 19–20 respectively.

the period) by incorporating contemporary references, not only to American events but, more importantly from his perspective, to well-publicised Spanish preparations for an overseas expedition. This song was as forthright as Ó Dábhoireann's composition in its hostility to Britain:

> Tá an fhoireann so Luther dá dturnamh i ngach bóthar
> *Prussia* 's a chomplacht ag tnúth le *Hannover*,
> Gage bocht i gcúngach dá bhrú ag *Bostonians*
> Putnam á rúscadh is gan súil le teacht beo aige.
> Ar bóchna atá an gasra in arm agus i bhfaobhar
> a seol-bhrata ar leathadh 's is maiseach a scéimh
> chun fóirthin ar Bhanba ó anbhroid dhaor,
> *commander* ceart Gaoidheal orthu, *sweet Captain Reilly*,
> agus beidh an lá leis an mbuíon seo ag Síle Ní Ghadhra.[20]
>
> (This crew of Luther's is being vanquished on all sides, Prussia and its forces are longing for Hanover, poor Gage is in battle and being crushed by Bostonians, Putnam is pelting him and he doesn't expect to escape alive. At sea the soldiers are armed and keen, their sails are spread and beautiful is their appearance, to rescue Ireland from cruel oppression, a true commander of the Gaels at their head, sweet Captain Reilly, and victory will belong to this band of Síle Ní Ghadhra's.)

This Spanish expedition was described by the *Annual Register* as 'the most formidable in its preparations, of any in the present age' and was commanded by General Alejandro O'Reilly, a County Meath-born veteran of the Hibernia regiment in the Spanish service. Mac Cathail's hope that the force might be intended for Ireland was not entirely unreasonable – Britain and Spain had come to the brink of war over the Falkland Islands only five years before – but the expedition was in fact directed against Algiers.[21] None the less, Mac Cathail's updated version of 'Síle Ní Ghadhra' testifies to the prevalence of the idea that 'England's difficulty is Ireland's opportunity'.

It is clear that the possibility of war in Europe, rather than the existing rebellion in North America, formed the principal theme of the political literature even during the first phase of the conflict – predictably enough as the Bourbon powers alone seemed capable of upsetting the *status quo* in Ireland.

[20] Ibid., number 2, lines 46 – 54.

[21] *Annual Register*, 1775, 144.

While Eoghan Rua Ó Súilleabháin lauded Benedict Arnold's advance into Canada at the head of an American army his reference to the war in North America was little more than a rhetorical device to increase the credibility of the imminent overthrow of the existing régime, as predicted to him by a *spéir-bhean* personifying of Ireland:

'Le sámh-thoil Dé fuair páis is péin
tá an báire ag téacht 'na gcoinne ar buile,
fágfaid, séanfid, rithfid sin
as caomh-chríoch Eoghain,
atá Arnold, laoch nár stán i mbaol,
ag fáil an lae ar an bhfoirinn uile,
an mál so ag maodhmadh, ag milleadh-bhriseadh
an chlaon-dlí nó;
tá ag téacht i mbarcaibh sár-dhíon go magh mhín Chuailgne
ag traochadh an tsleachta chráigh sinn, na táinte rí-ghas óg,
's go crích mo shaoil ní shínfead féin
le smírle caoitheach cuil in iomaí
ar tigheacht mo Chaesar dhil, is guibhidh
é 'shuí i gcoróin.'[22]

('By the calm will of God who suffered passion and torment, the contest is turning against them [the British] rapidly, they'll leave, they'll quit, they'll flee the beautiful land of Eoghan [Ireland]; Arnold, a hero who never shirked danger, is vanquishing the entire crew, this hero is bursting and shattering the perverse new law; they are coming in stout ships to the smooth plain of Cuailnge [Ireland], wearing down the race which tormented us, hosts of majestic young warriors; and until the end of my life I'll never lie abed with a horrible foreign villain when my darling Caesar [Charles Edward Stuart] arrives – and pray you for his coronation.')

But however warmly they applauded American victories, Catholic authors gave no indication of support for the Whig ideology of colonial patriots. Military commanders like Arnold and Washington were praised but political leaders such as Hancock or Adams attracted no attention. The sympathy

[22] Morley, *Washington*, number 3, lines 57 – 70.

of the Catholic populace for the Americans was superficial and rested on the pragmatic calculation that 'my enemy's enemy is my friend'.

An *aisling* by Éamonn Ó Flaitheartaigh, which appears to have been composed sometime between Spain's entry into the war in June 1779 and Admiral Rodney's relief of Gibraltar in the following January, reveals that an element of ambivalence persisted in popular attitudes towards the Americans for some time after their conclusion of a French alliance. On the one hand, Ó Flaitheartaigh numbered them among those who were fighting against Britain and extolled Washington's prowess as a military leader; on the other hand, he recognised the colonists' British ethnicity and portrayed the war in North America as a civil war among the traditional enemies of the Gaels. The usual personification of Ireland addressed the poet:

> Ba chiúin tais cneasta a bréithre líofa, gasta, léirghlic,
> ag maíomh na startha léifid san saothar so romham,
> ar sí 'tá an aicme chraosach d'fhúig Gaoidhil le seal fá dhaorbhroid
> ag cloí 's ag creachadh *a chéile* is ní réidhfid go fóill;
> atá an taoiseach fear go fraochta idir naimhde ba thaca déanach
> i gcoimheascar catha is éirligh mar aon lena shlóigh –
> Washington 'sa laochra, is nach tím i dtaisteal taobh leo,
> is cúinse ar bith ní méin leis go ngéillfid dá ndeoin'.[23]
>
> (Quiet, tender and kindly were her fluent, quick and perceptive words, relating the accounts that will be read in this composition below, she said 'the voracious class which kept the Gaels in bondage for a time are destroying and plundering *each other* and won't settle yet; the leader of men is ferocious among enemies who were recent allies, in a violent and deadly struggle along with his army [are] Washington and his heroes, and he's not slow to march at their side, and he's unwilling that they should concede any terms voluntarily'.)

The Americans were still seen as *Gaill*–as anglophones and Protestants, the progeny of Calvin and Luther. Strangely, however, they were now also *'laochra'* (heroes). This is an entirely new perception in Irish political literature, a perception that I have not encountered in any work dating from before the period of the American revolutionary war. For the first time, the view was expressed in

[23] Ibid., number 7, lines 17–24. The emphasis is mine.

the vernacular literature that English-speaking Protestants were not necessarily the invariable allies of Great Britain. Before long, this new perception would be applied closer to home.

The American war precipitated an economic depression in Ireland which worsened when fighting spread to European waters. The resulting economic crisis provided the stimulus for a campaign against British mercantilist restrictions on Irish trade, a campaign which won the support of all sections of the population during 1779. As the demands of Anglo-Irish patriots for 'free trade' became more clamorous and their rhetoric more populist and anti-British in tone, it became increasingly easy for Catholics, familiar as they were with a vernacular political literature in which England's oppression of Ireland formed a central theme, to lend their support to the campaign for free trade. In another novel development, prominent members of the parliamentary opposition were lauded in Irish literature. Tomás Ó Míocháin composed a song in praise of the leaders of the parliamentary opposition – Henry Grattan, Walter Hussey Burgh and Barry Yelverton. The song was written, as Ó Míocháin explained, '*ar bhfuascailt na nÉireannach ó dhaorchuing na Sacsan le saorarm sáirmhianach na Banban, dá ngoirtear* Volunteers' – that is, 'on the liberation of the Irish from England's oppressive yoke by the high-minded free army of Ireland, called *Volunteers*'. The opposition leaders were extolled in extravagant terms:

> Ar Ghrattan ba náir gan trácht go taitneamhach,
> cáidhfhear ceanamhail, cáilmhear, ceannasach,
> seol scóip is trealamh gan tím;
> is ba dheacair dá bhfágfainn bláth-Bhurgh beachtaithe,
> ráib ler tagaradh cás na Banba,
> i nglór beoil ba bheannaithe binn.
> Ligeam 'na ndiaidh go dian gan dearmad
> Yelverton fial ag fiach na bhfealladh-chon,
> sciath gheal-tseasamhach, íodhan acmhainneach,
> rialach, rabairneach, triathach, teanga-chlis,
> lann óir is luiseag na nGaoidheal.[24]
>
> (Grattan it would be shameful not to mention with affection, an excellent amiable man, reputable and commanding, a spirited well-equipped guide without timidity; and harsh would it be were I to omit

[24] Ibid., number 10, lines 12–22.

> polished and precise Burgh, a champion by whom Ireland's case was asserted, in diction that was blessed and sweet. Let us admit quickly after them without fail, generous Yelverton hunting the treacherous dogs, a bright and steadfast shield, a sturdy spear, regular, unstinting, lordly, quick-tongued, the golden blade and the knife-point of the Gaels.)

This novel praise for members of a Hanoverian parliament by a Jacobite author represented a frank recognition of the equally unrestrained and unprecedented nature of the rhetoric employed by opposition leaders during the critical month of November 1779 when a short money bill and the demand for free trade were in agitation. Hussey Burgh made the most memorable contribution to the debate on the short money bill when, referring to the Volunteers, he observed that 'the English sowed their laws like serpents' teeth, and they sprung up in armed men'; a contemporary report states that the House of Commons 'broke out in a burst of applause, which was echoed by the gallery'.[25] It is not too fanciful to hear in Ó Míocháin's song a more distant echo of that burst of applause.

With the surrender of Lord Cornwallis at Yorktown in October 1781 it quickly became apparent that American independence was a *fait accompli* and that formal British recognition of the new reality was only a matter of time. In the interim, the Franco-American victory was celebrated in Irish verse, both as a welcome event in itself and also as an indication that the long-predicted end of British rule was finally at hand. In an *aisling* composed by Seán Ó Muláin the *spéirbhean* personifying Ireland rejoiced at the downfall of her oppressors and lauded the hero of the hour, George Washington:

> Tá Hannover séidte le tréimhse ag Washington
> is na méirligh mhallaithe dá dtraochadh ar feo,
> tá Holónt gan ghéill go fraochmhar feargach
> 's is taomach treascartha atá [tréad] Liospóin;
> geallaim daoibh gan chúinsí go bhfúigfidhear cathracha
> ina múrthaíbh lasrach gan géilleadh don chóip,
> beidh scriosadh ceart ar champaí an chamdhlí chealgaigh
> 'na gcamluí ar machaire ag téacht don fhómhar.[26]

[25] *Hibernian Magazine*, August 1780, 452.

[26] Morley, *Washington*, number 13, lines 49–56. The metre indicates that a word is missing before *'Liospóin'* and *'tréad'* (gang) is my guess. The Portuguese yielded to a Franco-

(Hanover has been finished off by Washington for some time, and the accursed plunderers are subdued and decaying, Holland hasn't yielded and is furious and angry, and the Lisbon [gang?] is moody and prostrate; certain is the grim prospect that England will be left in a sea of flame unless it surrenders to the band, the camps of the crooked treacherous régime will be completely destroyed and lie twisted on the battlefield with the coming of autumn.)

For Ó Muláin, the importance of Washington's victory lay in the fact that the power which vanquished Catholic Ireland in 1691 and triumphed over the Catholic powers of Europe in 1763 had finally been humbled. He recognised that one of the British empire's most important possessions had thrown off its dependency and anticipated a repetition of the process closer to home.

Britain's defeat in North America and the weakened position of Lord North's ministry encouraged Anglo-Irish patriots to press their demand for 'legislative independence', a development which was applauded and associated with Britain's military reverses in the vernacular literature. Ceallachán Mac Cárthaigh praised the Volunteer delegates of Ulster and Connacht who attended provincial meetings at Dungannon and Ballinasloe in the months of February and March 1782 respectively:

Ag Baile na Slógh atá na slóite fearchoin –
beoga, calma, óga, groí,
is tuilleadh dá sórt atá ag pórt Dún Geanainn –
mórdha, macánta, cróga a ngíomh;[27]

(At Ballinasloe are hostings of heroes, vigorous, valiant, youthful, spirited, and more of their kind at the fort of Dungannon, noble, upright, brave their deeds.)

But the same author's gleeful anticipation of a Bourbon descent on Ireland would have horrified the delegates whom he applauded:

Ciodh fada atá Seoirse brónach feargach
ag comhrac Washington, Jones is Lee,
is gur leagadh go leor dá chróntoirc leathana –

Spanish ultimatum and closed their ports to British warships in November 1780.

[27] Ibid., number 17, lines 17–20.

srónach, cealgach, glórach, groí;
atá Laoiseach fós ag tabhairt gleo dó is anfa,
Holónt á ghreadadh 's an Spáinneach buí,
is fé thosach an fhómhair atá Fódla dearfa,
a chomhachta leagtha go deo nó á gcloí.[28]

(While George [III] has long been dejected and furious, fighting Washington, [Commodore John Paul] Jones and [General Charles] Lee, and many of his bloated swarthy boars have been felled – big-nosed, treacherous, clamorous, stout; Louis [XVI] is still giving him tumult and terror, Holland is lashing him, and the swarthy Spaniard, and by the beginning of autumn Ireland is assured, his power will be overthrown forever or worn down.)

This recognition of the challenge which anglophone patriots on both sides of the Atlantic now posed to the constitutional *status quo* existed alongside – but did not supplant – older forms of disaffection, and Mac Cárthaigh also deployed the stock Jacobite image of '*Carolus Rex mar Caesar calma*' ('King Charles [Edward Stuart] like a valiant Caesar').[29]

We are not restricted to the literary sources for evidence that popular attitudes were changing. In 1787, four years after the end of the American war and at the height of the Rightboy disturbances in Munster, an alarmed pamphleteer reported that a group of Rightboys in west Cork had paraded behind 'a fifer playing the White Cockade', while an equally alarmed MP declared in a parliamentary debate that another body of Rightboys had paraded behind a more modern symbol of disaffection, the Stars and Stripes.[30] It would be difficult to envisage a more striking example of the way in which living political traditions can combine elements of continuity and change – of the way in which novel ideas can be absorbed without displacing older attitudes. The anglocentric student of political thought may be inclined to dismiss the Rightboys' medley of republican and Jacobite symbolism as evidence of the political ignorance of the Irish masses; if so, the error lies in the attempt to bring English perspectives to bear on a very different society and culture.

[28] Ibid., lines 1 – 8.
[29] Ibid., line 27.
[30] *The O'Leariad. Translated into English Verse, and Illustrated with Notes* (Dublin, 1787), 9 (footnote) and *Faulkner's Dublin Journal*, 24 February 1787, respectively.

III

One message, one 'prophecy concerning the kingdom', was reiterated in Irish verse throughout the American revolutionary war. The outcome foretold time and again by the authors – and therefore, it is safe to assume, the outcome desired by their audiences – was that Britain would be defeated and the Catholic nation would be restored to the rights of which it had been stripped by the Williamite Revolution.[31] This was a traditional aspiration but it was also part of an evolving world-view, for the vernacular literature leaves no doubt that popular attitudes changed fundamentally during the course of the American revolutionary war. If the conflict was seen as a British civil war when it began, by the time it ended English-speaking Protestant republicans – Generals George Washington, Nathanael Greene, Charles Lee, Commodore John Paul Jones, among others – were being extolled in Irish verse. More importantly still, Anglo-Irish patriots were praised when they were perceived to be acting in defence of Ireland's interests.

These developments, which would have been inconceivable in the period before the American revolution, were pregnant with possibilities.

[31] Morley, *Washington*, number 2, lines 86–90; number 5, lines 19–20; number 6, lines 37–40; number 13, lines 59–62; number 17, lines 25–28; number 21, lines 61–4.