

The Poet as Partial Historian: Richard Murphy's 'The Battle of Aughrim'

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Abstract:

'The Battle of Aughrim' is a major achievement of modern Irish poetry but remains misrepresented in critical discourse. Written by Richard Murphy, the last poet of Ireland's Protestant aristocracy, it has been respected as an ideologically balanced, historically objective treatment of the decisive battle of the Williamite War in Ireland that secured Protestant political dominance on the island for more than two centuries. In the manner of a historian, the poet took pains to carefully research the event, and the finished work has long been considered a model of accuracy and impartiality. This article argues that common critical perceptions of the poem are mistaken, that in fact, 'The Battle of Aughrim' does not equitably deal with the Anglo and Irish traditions of Murphy's cultural identity but instead makes gestures of conciliation and sympathy towards the latter. This article conducts a parallel re-examination of the poem and historical record and calls for a greater consideration of the cultural climate in Ireland at the time of the poem's composition. Doing so will validate the further contention that 'The Battle of Aughrim' actually caters to nationalist conceptions of Irishness and serves to palliate the poet's insecurities regarding the notion of authentic Irish identity.

Keywords: Irish History, Irish Poetry, Anglo-Irish, Identity, Territory, Nationalism, Jacobite-Williamite War

I. Introduction

'The Battle of Aughrim' dramatises the decisive battle of the Williamite-Jacobite War that led to the establishment of Protestant hegemony over Ireland. At the time of the poem's composition, Richard Murphy's (1927-2018) sense of a divided identity was acute. He would come to be unreservedly labelled a "Poet of Two Traditions", those being the Anglo and Irish ones of his cultural background, and as Maurice Harmon asserts, "The key to much of Murphy's work comes from this need to bridge the gap between the two cultures and the two traditions, to achieve a balance between planted demesne and peasant holding" (Harmon 1978, 8). Yet Murphy wrote from an even further remove from the Irish mainstream in that he not only came from a Protestant family in an overwhelmingly Catholic country, but was a member of the

former aristocracy that had reigned pre-eminently over the Irish masses in the centuries prior to independence. Frequently termed the 'Ascendancy', Murphy's class of Protestants was in fact even more elevated, being that of the 'Big House' landowners whose large holdings served as a centre of wealth, power, and influence from the eighteenth century onwards (Mortimer 1991, 209) and who had traditionally thought of themselves as 'The English in Ireland' (Beckett 1976, 28-34). He had made overt statements of discomfort and dissociation from his privileged caste, describing himself as "a renegade from a family of Protestant imperialists" (Murphy 2002, 220) and his poetry as "my forlorn attempt to shed my colonial past" (Murphy and O'Malley 2013), and these sentiments are manifested in 'The Battle of Aughrim' in ways that have long been overlooked or unnoticed in critical assessments of the poem.

In contrast to the large critical consensus that the poet remains balanced, neutral and objective with regards to his treatment of the English and Irish traditions that the two armies of the battle represent, a re-examination of the poem will show that Murphy actually adopts the nationalist historical narrative and perspective. Dillon Johnston and Guinn Batten comment that the poems of the sequence "focus from a controlled distance" on the participants of Ireland's colonial history (Johnston and Batten 2006, 373). Julian Moynahan insists that "for Murphy Irish traditions are something of a balancing act" (Moynahan 1983, 108). J.G. Simms asserts that Murphy's "presentation is subjective, but subjectivity is balanced [...] with no obvious leaning to one side or the other" (Simms 1977, 50). Similarly, Gregory Schirmer states that 'The Battle of Aughrim' "resists the tendency to heroicize either side of the conflict" (Schirmer 1998, 344). Joseph Swann reads the poem as one of "non-identity" (Swann 1990, 41). And in a recent essay, Siobhán Campbell posits that the poem "shows Murphy attempting to upend the exceptionalism that permeates both nationalism and loyalism", emphasising the poet's "irony-seeking" and "cool detachment" (Campbell 2019, 118-120). This article's analysis will show that such readings have missed important details that significantly alter our understanding of the poem; through close analysis of the sequence's literary elements, set against the realities of the historical record, it will be evident that Murphy, influenced by the prevailing cultural nationalist principles of the time, writes with a discernible sense of affinity towards the side of the defeated and dispossessed.

The matter is not one of mere sympathy for the downtrodden. It is an illustration of a nationalist pressure to conform to its historical narrative and conditions for true "Irishness". While the poet's dissonance with the martial values of British imperialism, to which his ancestors had been exemplary adherents, are no secret, the nationalist dictates of Irish authenticity at the time of the poem's composition are a neglected aspect of previous critical evaluations. The defeated Catholics have been internalised as representatives of the truly Irish, and as a way of more closely affiliating with the Irish tradition, 'The Battle of Aughrim' makes gestures of conciliation, solidarity and sympathy towards them. It is crucial to contextualise not just the cultural climate in which the poem was composed, but the decades prior during the poet's

formative experiences in what would become the Irish Republic. Upon the establishment of the Free State, the national philosophy in government “laid heavy emphasis on the ‘Gaelic’ nature of the new state [...] Gaelicizing the new state was a preoccupation” (Foster 1988, 518-519), and the Catholic church “shaped the vision, goals, and policies of the state [...] a Catholic *habitus* pervaded all aspects of social life” (Inglis 2005, 60-69). Gaelicism and Catholicism, the two pillars of Irish Ireland, were born out of Daniel Corkery’s conception of a ‘Hidden Ireland’, “hidden not only from the Ascendancy historians but from the heirs of those who inhabited it” (Maume 1996, 7). Corkery felt that the “first article in an Ascendancy’s creed is, and has always been, that the natives are a lesser breed, and that anything that is theirs (except their land and their gold!) is therefore of little value” (Corkery 1925, x-xi), so Irish Ireland’s hostility towards people of Murphy’s ilk cannot be understated. A nationalist agenda of establishing the parameters of Irish authenticity dominated the field of Irish cultural debate well into the 1940s and 1950s, its ultimate goal being the realisation of a “pure and final essence [...] when the true nature of Irishness, so long ‘hidden’ and ‘disguised’, would be fully revealed in contradistinction to the colonial other” (Smyth 1998, 164-165). An insecurity of oneself as “colonial other” underlies much of Murphy’s work, and yet, as Jacob Golomb explains, “To be authentic is to own one’s self. But one cannot do so completely without also owning one’s past and one’s heritage” (Golomb 1995, 116). As Murphy has spoken of attempting to shed his colonial past, it might be argued that he is disqualified from both the Anglo and Irish conceptions of authenticity which he can so often be seen attempting to negotiate in his poetry.

Murphy stated his motivation for writing the sequence: “I wanted to look inward at the divisions and devastations in myself as well as in the country: the conflicts, legends, rituals, myths and histories arising from possession of the land – why we still had borders and bigotries” (Murphy 2002, 221). Yet as “the divisions and devastations in myself” have their origins in the Protestant victory, the poem, however subtly, spiritually aligns with the defeated Catholics. The poet’s divided loyalties to Britain and Ireland echo the fact that his ancestors fought on both sides of the war. As Justin Quinn observes, “For all its historical accuracy and colour, the poem is, as Murphy makes clear at the outset, a kind of autobiography writ large” (Quinn 2008, 116). Thus, the stance taken in the poem is one which repudiates the British side of his sense of division whilst affirming loyalty to the Irish side. The poet’s own stated “anti-triumphalist, anti-militarist” stance (Murphy 2013, 294) translates to an anti-imperialist, anti-Protestant viewpoint within the sequence. This is occasioned by an internalised understanding drawn from nationalism that to be pro-Catholic is to be pro-Irish, as he is at pains to reconcile an inauthentic self with an authenticity prescribed by the Southern state. However, as authenticity quite often cannot be imagined beyond the conditions set by nationalist ideology (Graham 2001, 136), the poet cannot shed his colonial past, so the poem makes great efforts towards making amends for it.

II. Now and Before

'The Battle of Aughrim' comprises four parts: Now, Before, During and After. It was originally commissioned for radio by the BBC and composed between 1962-1967. The acuity of Murphy's historical consciousness is evidenced in the following recollection:

I remembered driving through the village of Aughrim, right in the centre of Ireland, and feeling a sense of desolation in the place. The battle fought there on Sunday 12 July 1691 was the last and bloodiest in a war that established the Protestant ownership of land in Ireland for almost the next two centuries. The famine of 1845-7, the partitioning of Ireland in 1922, and the long ebb tide of emigration that was, we hoped, about to turn, were remote consequences of the battle. And I recalled that one of my mother's ancestors, Robert Miller, had acquired from a dispossessed Catholic the land and house he called Milford. (Murphy 2002, 217)

The "remote consequences of the battle" underlie the sentiments of the poem; Murphy is self-conscious about the history of violence, oppression and tragedy that followed the Protestant Williamite victory at Aughrim. The poet was born in a house which was a prize of war given to his family. In an early elegy for his grandmother 'The Woman of the House', Murphy had written, "Through our inheritance all things have come". However, he is unforgiving towards the political and military corollaries of his inheritance as Aughrim's outcome "turned the screw of oppression even tighter [and] eventually became the focus of all that Murphy repudiates" (Longley 2000, 129). The central question of 'The Battle of Aughrim' which opens the poem – "who owns the land" – was answered over two centuries ago in an early episode of British imperialism, but the land has since, for the most part, changed hands. A necessity to answer this question again becomes more urgent following independence, Ascendancy decay and sectarian violence in Northern Ireland in the latter half of the twentieth century. As the poem delves into family history, and the national histories of Britain and Ireland intertwine, we detect regret about how these histories played out in the victors' favour at Aughrim, echoing the sentiments of Irish nationalist narratives.

As evidence, the poem frames the conflict as "Ireland's defence \ From the colonists' advance" ('Legend'), even as it recognises that it is a war "Of godly bigotry and pride of race". Murphy has been lauded for the careful research he undertook for the composition of the poem, yet in making the battle strictly reflect the poet's own sense of division between British and Irish traditions, an important political context is overlooked. As S.J. Connolly comments:

But the fact remains that Jacobitism, concerned to set a Scottish dynasty on the united thrones of Great Britain and Ireland, was by definition a British political ideology. Like the earlier service of Irish Catholics in the armies of James II, it derived its whole rationale from an assumption that the three kingdoms of the British Isles would remain under one sovereign. (Connolly 1997, 52)

This is why the Williamite-Jacobite conflict in Ireland is often termed, “the war of the two kings”. Murphy is well aware of this; ‘Legend’ also acknowledges the struggle as “a feud of absent kings \ Who used war like a basset table”. However, the poem’s sympathies lie with Ireland’s Catholic “defenders” from the outset.

An early indication of nationalist sentiment appears in the opening poem, ‘On Battle Hill’. ‘Battle Hill’ refers to Kilcommodan Hill, where the Jacobite forces were positioned. The speaker, in the first instance, literally assumes their viewpoint. The contemporary landscape inspires memories from the past:

Who owns the land where musket-balls are buried
In blackthorn roots on the esker, the drained bogs
Where sheep browse, and credal war miscarried?
Names in the rival churches are written on plaques.
Behind the dog-rose ditch, defended with pikes,
A tractor sprays a rood of flowering potatoes:
Morning fog is lifting, and summer hikers
Bathe in a stream passed by cavalry traitors.

The speaker is the only person for whom history is vital: sheep lazily browse, the place where the Jacobite infantry was positioned is now a potato farm through which a tractor passes, hikers have no idea they are retracing the path of Henry Luttrell’s “cavalry traitors” who forsook the battle. Life in contemporary Aughrim appears unconcerned about “who owns the land”. Elsewhere in the poem the speaker observes, “A Celtic cross by the road commemorates no battle \ But someone killed in a car... a farmer with a tinker woman... thinning turnips by hand... giant earth-movers \ Shovel and claw a highway over a rector’s glebe”. Schirmer notes:

Murphy, like Yeats, laments a present so ready to ignore or dispense with the past, usually for self-interested, materialistic purposes, but he is even more concerned about the construction of present-day attitudes and prejudices on highly subjective readings, or misreadings, of history. (Schirmer 1998, 144)

Another poem from the first part of the sequence, ‘Inheritance’, criticises a “kinsman” who is eager to “dispense with the past” for “self-interested, materialistic purposes”:

Left a Cromwellian demesne.
My kinsman has bulldozed three bronze age raths.

No tree can survive his chainsaw:
Hewing is part of the land reclamation scheme.

He has auctioned grandfather's Gallipoli sword
And bought a milking machine.

Slate he stripped from a Church of Ireland steeple
Has broadened his pigsty roof.

Murphy's poetry usually endorses the "shaping spirit". Numerous poems in his oeuvre witness the building and restoration of boats, homes, gardens and other structures. However, the actions of the speaker's "kinsman" in 'Inheritance' are seen to dislocate the present from the past. Heaney comments:

The poet is affronted by a 'kinsman' – and how tactfully his use of that proud noun places him at a distance from the man himself and from the less dynastic consciousness of the 'truly Irish' – who violates both the indigenous and the colonial heritages. (Heaney 1978, 26)

The speaker's "kinsman" embodies a modernising, industrious Protestant ethic. As he is a descendant of the Protestant victors at Aughrim, his negative actions are one of the 'remote consequences' of the battle reverberating in the present-day. That the speaker distances himself from the "kinsman" is important; though he is not of the "truly Irish", he is of the Anglo-Irish, a heritage which the "kinsman" also disrespects by stripping an Anglican steeple and auctioning away ancestral memorabilia. Whereas the "kinsman" is neglectful of the past, the narrator of 'On Battle Hill' is mindful of the last words of Jacobite commanders, Patrick Sarsfield, 1st Earl of Lucan, 'Would to God...' ['... this were shed for Ireland'], and Charles Chalmont, Marquis de St. Ruth, '*Le jour est à nous, mes enfants*' ['The day is ours, my children']. As Murphy is the poem's implied speaker, the poet is seen to be more closely connected to the defeated Jacobites than to his own Protestant kin. 'On Battle Hill' ends with the speaker dismounting from his horse at the cairn of St. Ruth. St. Ruth's death is the catalyst of the legend that 'The Battle of Aughrim' is prepared to explore, "A cannonball beheaded him, and sowed a myth". Yet as the poem's sympathies lie with the "truly Irish", 'The Battle of Aughrim' cannot keep itself from advancing nationalist mythologies of the event.

Take for instance the strikingly different ways modern nationalist and unionist factions are depicted in 'Green Martyrs' and 'Orange March'. The former begins with an allusion to St. Ruth on horseback, "I dream of a headless man \ sitting on a charger, chiselled stone", then lists the lamentations of a woman "reading from an old lesson":

'... who died in the famine.

'Royal bulls on my land,
I starved to feed the absentee with rent.

'Aughrim's great disaster
Made him two hundred years my penal master.

'Rapparees, whiteboys, volunteers, ribbonmen,
Where have they gone?

'Coerced into exile, scattered
Leaving a burnt gable and a field of ragwort.'

While the "old lesson" is recognised as a received historical narrative of nationalism, the narrative itself is not disputed. If, as John Wilson Foster asserts, the "historic landscape of *The Battle of Aughrim*" is "a venue of defeat" (Foster 1991, 162-163) for Murphy, this suggests an affinity felt by the narrator for the defeated. The grievances listed by the woman are a near echo of what the poet deemed in his memoir to be "remote consequences of the battle", consequences from which he had hoped the country was "about to turn". The end of 'Green Martyrs' transforms the identity of the headless man, "She brings me from Knock shrine \ John Kennedy's head on a china dish". Swann notes:

For St. Ruth, the French general who led the Irish into the battle they lost, is, in the poem, transmuted into, or rather completed by, the Kennedy whose deeds and status might have redeemed that loss. The temptation to interpret the poem in this way is, however, rudely reversed when one observes that both figures have become items in a collection of souvenirs, and indeed of imaginary souvenirs, for there is no record anywhere of a statue of St. Ruth. (Swann 1990, 40)

However, the poem memorialises St. Ruth by casting him as a martyr. The change from the forgotten French general to the revered American president (at the time, the first and only one from a Catholic Irish background), whose assassination occurred early on in Murphy's composition of the sequence, makes a nationalist sense of loss and victimisation more immediate, powerful and affecting. A notion of martyrdom is reinforced in the religious imagery of the poem's final line which recalls the presentation of John the Baptist's head to Salome on a platter.

In stark contrast is the characterisation of Northern Protestants in 'Orange March'. The poem observes the triumphalist celebration of Protestant history that regularly takes place in Northern Ireland:

In bowler hats and Sunday suits,
Orange sashes, polished boots,
Atavistic trainbands come
to blow the fife and beat the drum.

Apprentices uplift their banner

True blue dyed with 'No Surrender!'
Claiming Aughrim as if they'd won
Last year, not 1691.

There is a noticeable, if not overt, tone of criticism and ridicule. The unionist tradition is marked by militarism and belligerence. Where republican historical memory is one of tribute, unionist historical memory is one of atavism. The Orange marchers are identified as a subset within the wider history of British imperialism in the third stanza:

On Belfast silk, Victoria gives
bibles to kneeling Zulu chiefs.
Read the moral, note the date:
'The secret that made Britain great.'

The poem satirises the patronising tradition that the Orangemen celebrate. The grotesque aspects of unionism are magnified by ties to "the Ulster cloth trade, missionary imperialism, and that unpleasant bust of Queen Victoria hard by Belfast City Hall, glowering westward" (Moynahan 1983, 105). Ironically, the poet of imperial heritage is unable to identify with "the unionist grand narrative" that "celebrates Irish unionists' role in British imperialism and colonialism, and as agents, beneficiaries, advocates and privileged clients of the British monarch and state in Ireland" (O'Dowd 2005, 82). The last stanza transfers the poem's setting from Belfast to another one of the country's focal points of sectarianism:

Derry, oakwood of bright angels,
Londonderry, dingy walls
Chalked at night with 'Fuck the Queen!'
Bygone canon, bygone spleen.

The traditional name of the city, Derry, from the Irish word for oakwood, *doire*, is associated with "bright angels", a reminder of the city's ancient ties with Colum Cille, the sixth-century saint and evangelist. The prefix, 'London', was granted by royal charter during the reign of James I, in which the controversial Plantation of Ulster was launched; Londonderry is associated with sectarian "spleen" that is anything but "bygone". If "for Murphy, history is the ground upon which Ireland's two traditions meet", 'Orange March' suggests that the tradition that glorifies British imperialism is more "vulnerable to dangerous interpretations that justify and motivate prejudice" (Schirmer 1998, 343). The contrasting way in which the poetry treats contemporary republican and unionist sides reflects the way it perceives the historic Catholic and Protestant sides of the Aughrim battlefield.

Where the sequence is most even-handed is in its treatment of the religious context of the war. Simms notes, "For both Catholics and Protestants the war had something of the character of a

crusade” (Simms 1977, 41). The clash of religious sects is symbolised in ‘Dragoon’, wherein its Catholic narrator describes how a “Soft west wind carries our friary bells \ Against the tide of psalms flooding the plain” from the Protestants. With regards to religiosity, both Williamite and Jacobite are shown to be brutal and fanatical. The comrade of the narrator of ‘Dragoon’ “boasts he’ll hack \ From a shorn heretic a pair of testicles \ To hang above St Brigid’s well for luck”. The narrator of ‘Planter’ prays, “May the God of battle \ Give us this day our land \ and the papists be trampled”. St. Ruth, in his address to the Jacobite army, revels in the “Glory I have acquired, and how Successful and Fortunate I have been in Suppressing Heresie in France, and propagating the Holy Catholick Faith... great numbers of those incurigable Hereticks have perished both Soul and Body by their obstinacy”. Swann notes that the poem, ‘God’s Dilemma’, “by not obviously interpreting, but simply stating, both (or all three) sides of the religious divide, makes a powerful plea for its absurdity” (Swann 1990, 40). A balanced perspective is registered by the structure of the poem, composed of three, three-lined stanzas. In the first, the Catholic “God was eaten in secret places among rocks... And the priests were whipped or hunted like stags”. In the second, the Protestant “God was spoken to at a table with wine and bread... And heretics were burnt at stakes for what they said”. The third stanza asserts that senseless religious violence has left “God... fallen into ruins on the shores of lakes” as figures from both sides of the divide continue with mundane tasks of their everyday lives, “Peasants went on milking cows or delving dikes \ And landlords corresponded with landlords across bogs”. A close association of religion with warfare was instilled in Murphy at a young age, and this had much to do with the imperial tradition of his background. As Harmon notes, “To die for religion and country was one of the strongest sentiments in his upbringing”, but it is a sentiment against which the poet had fiercely revolted while attending Wellington College, a school in Berkshire with a strong military tradition (Harmon 1978 *Biographical*, 12).

When the poet turns to describing the battle, the perspective once more becomes less balanced. It is important to note the side on which the sequence is primarily focused. Swann asserts that “the writing of history has to do with a duality, or plurality, of contexts” (Swann 1990, 42). Parts of ‘The Battle of Aughrim’ do make an effort to maintain a balanced structure equally representative of both sides: a poem narrated by Williamite mercenaries is followed by one narrated by a Jacobite dragoon, the monologue of a landlord in ‘Planter’ is followed by a poem about the Irish guerrillas who resist him (‘Rapparees’), and ‘God’s Dilemma’ was witnessed to have been critical of both Catholic and Protestant zealotry. Although Moynahan argues that “the poet views the ancient struggle at Aughrim in an essentially non-partisan spirit” (Moynahan 1983, 103), the poem’s primary focus on the story of one side of “the ancient struggle” makes ‘The Battle of Aughrim’ partisan in terms of perspective. The sequence emphasises a theme of betrayal, specifically the betrayal of “the Irish cause”. In ‘The Sheepfold’, a farmer named Kelly and a shepherd named Mullen offer to point St. Ruth out to the Williamite gunners on the day of the battle after the French general seized their flock, “armed with spite, two traitors limp”:

So fetch them to a grey house, where the Dutch
Commander who serves England's Orange king
Shakes hands, and gives them each a purse to clutch.

In 'Planter', an Ulster clan leader, Red-mouthed O'Donnell, is induced by "Quiet music and claret cups" to "keep far from battle" his contingent of "a thousand troops". The narrator, an ancestor of the poet, gloats, "I bought him: the traitor sleeps". Later in the sequence, Murphy will write contemptuously of Luttrell, the cavalry commander who withdrew his forces from the battlefield during a critical point in the fighting. The poetry laments that if only these misfortunes had not befallen the Jacobites, Ireland would have surely triumphed over the scheming Protestant colonisers that day at Aughrim. Yet, as J.W. Foster notes, "the traitor looms so large in *The Battle of Aughrim* that one senses an over-compensation" (Foster 1991, 163).

III. During and After

A great many narrative elements of the sequence hold to nationalist accounts of the battle. The first two poems of the third section '3. During', 'St. Ruth' and 'The Winning Shot', are, respectively, a portrait of the French general and a dramatisation of his death. After 'His head is shot off' at the close of 'St. Ruth', 'The Winning Shot' recounts:

The victory charge was halted. Life Guards stooped down
And wrapped the dripping head in a blue cloak,
Then wheeled and galloped towards the setting sun.
Chance, skill and treachery all hit the mark
Just when the sun's rod tipped the altar hill:
The soldiers panicked, thinking God has struck.

Simms asserts that "a modern historian, versed in the weakness of seventeenth-century artillery, has discounted all but chance" (Simms 1977, 48). Yet Murphy adds "skill and treachery" to confirm that the prior betrayal of 'The Sheepfold' has led to a disastrous blow for the unfortunate Irish army. Reality proved less dramatic. As Richard Doherty explains, although the "Life Guards were demoralized to see their general killed before their eyes", the Irish army continued fighting until the Williamite cavalry overtook them from their flank (Doherty 1998, 179). Murphy's poem seems to insist that the battle was a "forsaken" cause for an ill-fated Irishry. Furthermore, a number of poems emphasise Protestant cruelty. The most explicit act of violence performed by Catholics occurs in "Rapparees"; a "noble family" is "gutted... charred in its sleep". Violent acts by Protestants are disproportionately represented. In 'Martial Law', Williamite soldiers "decide to deal \ Justly" with a country couple that they suspect will poison a spring, "So they hang them on a tree by the well". In 'Prisoner', English troopers taunt a captured wounded boy with threats of sexual violence, "Castrate the fucker... Let the papist kiss

my flute... Shove a sword up his hole”; this continues until their “tipsy officer” casually orders, “I want no prisoners, d’you hear me? Shoot \ \ The crowd we took”. In ‘Wolfhound’, a dog, notably of a breed native to Ireland, grieves over its owner’s body, “She lifts her head to cry \ As a woman keens in a famine for her son”, until “A redcoat, stalking, cocks \ His flintlock... he fires his gun”.

In terms of the battle itself, the extent of Protestant brutality reached its pinnacle during the retreat of the Jacobite infantry. As Piers Wauchope notes, “It was this final stage of the battle that made Aughrim the bloodiest in Irish history” (Wauchope 1992, 232). An eyewitness account of a Danish mercenary recalled, “the infantry [...] threw down their arms, left their colours and ran. Terrible scenes followed as the English fell on the rear of the fugitives [...] The blood from the dead so covered the ground that one could hardly take a step without slipping” (Ellis 2004, 126-127). Yet this was not atypical of how war was conducted at the time. Within the poem, only ‘Prisoner’ is set during the retreat and it is a scene crafted by the poet; Murphy narrows the focus of the poem creating a more intense sense of brutalisation. The scene in ‘Martial Law’ appears to also be of the poet’s imagination. ‘Wolfhound’ is a dramatisation of an eyewitness anecdote by Reverend George Story (Williams 1977, 90). The sequence’s emphasis on Protestant acts of violence may be said to foreshadow the oppressiveness with which Ireland will be subdued and administered as a colony. However, it also accentuates a sense of Catholic victimisation, another indication of where the poet’s affinities lie.

To further prove the sequence’s nationalist bias we can compare the way Murphy writes about the two key figures of the Jacobite leadership in ‘The Battle of Aughrim’, Luttrell and Sarsfield. The poem is unequivocal about characterising Luttrell as a traitor. From ‘Luttrell’:

When he hears the word spread
Along the line, ‘St Ruth is dead.’
He retreats at a trot:
Leading his priding cavalry
To betray the humble foot:
Ten miles to a dinner, laid
In a mansion then to dead.

Luttrell’s forces saw limited action at Aughrim. When he faced the English cavalry and saw that enemy numbers were increasing, his dragoons were being outnumbered and there was no prospect of support, he ordered his men to disengage and is said to have simply rode away from the battlefield (Doherty 1998, 179). Moynahan notes, “Perhaps the worst thing known about Luttrell is that he prospered through his treachery, enjoying a fine property at Lucan and a Dublin town house during the early years of the ensuing Penal Era” (Moynahan 1983, 108). ‘Luttrell’s Death’ reveals that he was later assassinated, “a shadow cocked a gun”. His killing is prefaced by a series of unflattering depictions, “A poor smell of ordure \ Seeped

through his embroidered chair... 'Let the traitor pass'... his pocket full of pebbles \ Which he used... To lob at little girls." Following Luttrell's death:

No one betrayed his assassin
Although the Duke of Bolton
Offered three hundred pounds' reward.
The crowd spat on Henry Luttrell's coffin.
Eighty years after his murder
Masked men, inspired by Wolfe Tone,
Burst open his tomb's locks,
Lit a stub of wax
And smashed the skull with a pickaxe.

The popular perception of Luttrell as a traitor and the cause of the Jacobite loss at Aughrim persisted for at least a century after his assassination (Wauchope 1992, 302). An 1809 article published in *The Irish Magazine and Monthly Asylum for Neglected Biography* asserts:

Neither time nor artifice has been ever able to remove the infamous stigma from the name of Luttrell [...] we have no doubt that every rational and religious mind will admit this interposition of divine providence, in allowing the chastisement of an infamous man who betrayed his sovereign [...] who betrayed his religion and his country, and by laying both at the feet of an enemy to one, and a stranger to the other, perpetuated those miseries which Ireland feels to the present day. (Cox ed. 1809, 289-291)

While animus against Luttrell existed during and after the man's lifetime, Murphy's poem gives the wrong impression that his murder was a heroic act of patriotic retribution. In fact, he was shot for a more mundane reason; "his assassin was thought to be either a jealous husband, a debtor or a poor and distant relation who hoped to inherit his estate" (Wauchope 1992, 302). Peter McDonald has commented on how 'The Battle of Aughrim' "treats its historical record with real respect" (McDonald 1989, 95), and others like Schirmer and Simms have commended Murphy for an equitable handling of history. Yet the poem's treatment of Luttrell parrots a politicised historical narrative; Luttrell is nationalist Ireland's treacherous scapegoat and the poem is certain in its condemnation that "He'd sold his country to preserve his class." This is despite there being no contemporary accounts that speak of the man's treachery (Doherty 182) and his acquittal by a tribunal of Jacobite officers (by a vote of 19-4) at a trial regarding suspicion of collusion (Wauchope 1992, 244-245). We cannot say that Murphy is merely retelling the nationalist "myth" of Aughrim; his poem perpetuates it. As a way of appeasing a sense of guilt about the historical foundation on which the poet's caste was established, 'The Battle of Aughrim' makes an overture beyond sympathy to affiliation, catering to a nationalist notion of having been undercut and betrayed.

Unlike Luttrell's, Sarsfield's legacy is revered in nationalist memory. During the war he commanded respect even from his adversaries and was a galvanising figure for the Irish:

The English held him in awe. To them he was the most dangerous and gallant of the Irish; he was the one gentleman amongst a race of savages, the one heroic figure amongst a nation of cowards. To the Irish he was the 'Father of the Nation' [...] Sarsfield's followers were to be found in all classes of Irishmen [...] not generally confined to either the English or the Gaelic speaker. He was neither Anglo-Norman nor Gaelic. He was both, and as such he was the seventeenth century representative of the new Ireland. (Wauchope 1992, 1)

Famous for conducting daring raids, Sarsfield distinguished himself at Ballyneety, where his cavalry ambushed and destroyed a Williamite siege train on its way to Limerick, "He smashed the Dutch usurper's \ Waggon-train of cannon." The poem 'Sarsfield' depicts him astride "a chestnut horse \ At the head of his regiment, \ His mountainous green shoulders \ Tufted with gold braid." Simms notes:

A historian, if indeed he mentioned the shoulders, would have made them red. Sarsfield was in a British army and held his commission from King James. But in another sense the shoulders were green; they belonged to an Irish hero, the darling of an army that took little account of Seamus a' Chaca, James the Shit. (Simms 1997, 48)

Murphy makes a point to portray Sarsfield as one of Ireland's "green martyrs". Sarsfield stands alone as "the one heroic figure" in Murphy's poem. St. Ruth was a capable military tactician, but his portrayal, with 'Green Martyrs' being an exception, mostly focuses on him as a vain, arrogant "wife-tormentor" and religious fanatic. Some accounts insist that St. Ruth had deliberately marginalized Sarsfield's role at Aughrim, and there is debate among historians as to where the earl was actually positioned in the battle. The poem that bears his name adopts a version that places Sarsfield in charge of the reserve:

Patrick Sarsfield, Earl of Lucan
Commands the reserve today.

The saviour of Limerick knows
Nothing of St Ruth's plan,
Not even that the battle
Of Aughrim has begun.
He has obeyed since dawn
The order to wait for further
Orders behind the hill.

Nationalist historian Edward Alfred D'Alton criticises Sarsfield's relegation:

Instead of being second in command, he was thus relegated to a subordinate position; and on that eventful day the greatest soldier of the Irish race was thus condemned to inactivity. His services to Ireland ought to have saved him from such a humiliation; but St. Ruth was jealous of him, and would give him no share in the victory he expected to gain. (D'Alton 1920, 448)

However, St. Ruth failed to inform any of his senior officers about his battle plan, not just Sarsfield. In addition, different historians place Sarsfield in command of the Jacobite right flank (Hayes-McCoy 1969, 268), an area that Doherty posits was "probably the army's most vulnerable." (Doherty 1998, 172) The poem follows a nationalist narrative that witnesses Sarsfield "condemned to inactivity", despite "Sarsfield and his men [being] the first to begin the fighting at Aughrim, and the last to stop" (Wauchope 1992, 232).

Sarsfield is then given a lengthy tribute in 'Patrick Sarsfield's Portrait'. Murphy claims descent from Sarsfield through his mother's side. Murphy has said of this poem, "I address Patrick Sarsfield, who fought on the losing Catholic Irish side, as my 'great uncle,' [...] precisely talking to the portrait of a man who was an uncle of mine ten generations removed" (Murphy 1975). With this in mind, we may read the poem as a sincere and direct dedication from the speaker. The "great-uncle in the portrait's grime" is a "Landlord who never racked, you gave your rent \ To travel with your mounted regiment". Following the opening stanza, there are six more that catalogue and praise the earl's military exploits, "Hotly you duelled for our name abroad...to prove \ Your Celtic passion and our Lady's love...Gallant at Sedgemoor, cutting down for James...To breathe our Irish winter into spring...Your ashwood lance covered the Boyne retreat... You kindled Ireland... At Limerick besieged, you led the dance... You saved the city, lost your own estate". Murphy states that as he was writing 'The Battle of Aughrim' he was "trying to come to terms with my own army heritage, and with not having served in the war that was brought to an end by the bomb on Hiroshima", adding, "That heritage accounts for the coolness of tone and the demythologizing ironies of the poem" (Murphy 2002, 220). Yet the tone in 'Patrick Sarsfield's Portrait' is clearly admiring, "through plague and shelling you held out", and affectionate, "You were their hazel nut and speckled fish". It is difficult to locate any "demythologising ironies" regarding Sarsfield. As Heaney remarks, "[The] darling of the defeated Irish side, is plangently celebrated [...] and the buoyancy and melody of this section of the poem touch racial stops" (Heaney 1978, 25).

Murphy is self-conscious of Irish racial identity; "my father was Irish by race, as our name declares" (Murphy 1975). Yet in modern Ireland "there is plenty of evidence that Catholics who became Protestants [...] are still remembered today and despised as 'turncoats'" (Inglis 2005, 70). It is from this questionable notion of Irish "race consciousness" that the poet may claim kinship with what Heaney had earlier termed in his analysis of 'Inheritance', "the truly Irish". The conversation between poets F.R. Higgins and Louis MacNeice that was reprinted as the prologue in *The Faber*

Book of Contemporary Irish Poetry comes to mind. Higgins' asserted that MacNeice, "as an Irishman, cannot escape from your blood, nor from our blood-music that brings the racial character to mind" (Higgins and MacNeice 1986, 18). In "touching racial stops" in his dedication to Sarsfield, Murphy communes with the Irish tradition in the best way that he, as an Anglo-Irish Protestant with Gaelic blood, feels himself capable. The narrator's voice joins with that of the Irish people in heroicising Sarsfield:

Only to come home stronger had you sailed;
Successes held you, and the French prevailed.
Coolly you triumphed where you wanted least,
On Flemish cornfield or at Versailles feast.

We loved you, horseman of the white cockade,
Above all, for your last words, 'Would to God
This wound had been for Ireland.' Cavalier,
You feathered with the wild geese our despair.

The patriotic tenor of Sarsfield's dying words on a foreign battlefield deepens a sense of affection for the earl. Doherty comments, "In his passing [...] can be seen something of that perverse misfortune that seemed to strike the Irish at every turn throughout that war" (Doherty 1998, 201). Throughout 'The Battle of Aughrim', Murphy nimbly writes with an underlying sense of sorrow about the Jacobites' "perverse misfortunes" that cost them the conflict. By the end of the sequence, we witness a sense of solidarity with the 'Wild Geese', the fleeing Jacobite army under Sarsfield's command. The poet's victorious forbears, from whom "The good of being alive was given through them" ('The Woman of the House'), are offered no such type of extended tribute. Thus, far from the common mischaracterisation of the poem as a balanced, distanced, and impartial meditation, 'The Battle of Aughrim' largely complies with the nationalist narrative of the battle and likewise casts the consequences of its outcome as little other than regrettable.

IV. Conclusion

What is to account for the poem's uneven tendencies, and how did they go unnoticed for so long in critical discourse? Through a close reading of the text alongside various historical resources, we have dissected the poem to discover that the long-held belief that the sequence is an accurate, balanced and non-partisan dramatisation of history is false. It is not just a meditation on the sense of division felt by Murphy, it is a narrative which places the poet on one side of that divide. 'The Battle of Aughrim' is emblematic of how deeply ingrained the cultural and political principles of Irish nationalism came to be within even an aristocratic Protestant's poetic psyche. As "memory, nationalism and violence mesh together" in a spatial framework that serves "to exacerbate identity politics and reify competing territorial ideologies" (McDowell and Braniff

2014, 12), Murphy's attempt to be inclusive of all sides of the conflict in his retelling is indeed admirable. However, in the period of the poem's composition, notions of identity and territory in Ireland were firmly under the auspices of the Republic's nationalist arbiters.

Since "the restoration of an independent Ireland was inextricably linked with restoring the land to native ownership" and "conquest and colonization were associated with the confiscation of Irish land and the resettlement of intruders" (Daly 2006, 24), Murphy must carefully negotiate his status as a member of the landed Protestant gentry. 'The Battle of Aughrim' witnesses the Ascendancy poet writing out of guilt, insecurity and sympathy from within a nationalist framework of history. This is done in order to appease the sense of a coloniser's illegitimacy and appeal to the colonised in solidarity. The Jacobites are portrayed as Ireland's "defenders" against Protestant "usurpers" from whom the poet's privileged status was inherited. Rather than bridging a gap between two traditions, the Anglo and the Irish, 'The Battle of Aughrim' sacrifices the former for the sake of the latter as would be expected from the nationalist perspective. While this does nothing to detract from the artistic quality and literary importance of the poem, it does much in the way of enhancing our understanding of its execution and refining future analyses of this great work.

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