IRISH CURSING AND THE ART OF MAGIC, 1750–2018*

Bad cess on you. Devil take you. May you never prosper. The first drop of water to quench your thirst — may it boil in your bowels. May the flesh rot off your bones, and fall away putrid before your eyes. May your limbs wither and the stench of your rotten carcass be too horrible for hungry dogs. May you fade into nothing, like snow in summer. May you be accursed in the sight of God, and hated by your fellow man. May you die without a priest. May the Almighty's curse rest on your children. This, I pray.[1]

This article is about historic Ireland's penchant for cursing. Not swearing, turning the air blue with four-letter words, but spoken maledictions for smiting evildoers. Imprecations like: 'the curse of my orphans, and my falling-sickness [epilepsy], light upon you', which a woman from Athlone pronounced in court, on the people prosecuting her for theft.[2] Or: 'the curse of God and the curse of the flock be upon any men who vote for Higgins', repeatedly bellowed by a priest from County Mayo, during a fractious election campaign.[3] Or: 'may the curse of God alight on you and your family throughout their generations . . . may the curse of God's thunder and lightning fall heavily', prayed by a farmer from Limerick, on the landlord who had evicted him.[4]

Those maledictions were uttered between the 1830s and 1850s. Yet in Ireland, a proclivity for this dark kind of cursing goes back millennia. Hibernia's ancient lords and chieftains were notorious cursers, as were the saints who converted the Emerald Isle to Christianity, medieval Irish churchmen, and the Gaelic

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[1] 'Cess' is from 'success'. The sources of the curses are: National Folklore Collection at University College Dublin (hereafter NFC), MS 1838, 296. Patricia Lysaght, 'Visible Death: Attitudes to the Dying in Ireland', *Merveilles & contes*, ix (1995), 34; *Galway Mercury*, 26 Apr. 1845; *Derry Journal*, 15 Jan. 1839; W. G. Wood-Martin, *Traces of the Elder Faiths of Ireland: A Folklore Sketch. A Handbook of Irish Pre-Christian Traditions*, 2 vols. (London, 1902), i, 310; *Dublin Weekly Register*, 11 May 1844; *Dublin Daily Express*, 20 Apr. 1886.

[2] *Roscommon and Leitrim Gazette*, 4 Apr. 1835.

[3] *Dublin Weekly Nation*, 4 July 1857; *Advocate*, 17 Feb. 1858.

[4] *Limerick Reporter*, 22 June 1858.

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bards.[5] Like in other loosely Celtic societies, in pre-modern Ireland cursing was regarded as a legitimate activity, a form of supernatural justice that only afflicted guilty parties.[6] The idea had important consequences. It may help to explain why, during the early modern period, Ireland experienced no 'witch craze', with just a handful of trials, compared with almost four thousand across the water in Scotland (mostly involving people from lowland and non-Gaelic regions).[7] Along with taking some stigma out of interpersonal supernatural conflict, cursing influenced how Irish people saw the world. Calamitous historical events were memorialized in maledictions, notably Oliver Cromwell's brutal 1649 conquest of Ireland, which spawned 'the Curse of Cromwell', a fearsome imprecation supposed to bring death and destruction.[8] In villages and towns nationwide, place names and oral stories told how ancient curses had created local lakes, rivers, mountains and hills.[9]

Cursing continued to be rife during the period of the Enlightenment, throughout the 1800s, and until about the mid-twentieth century. 'Nothing was more feared' than a really venomous malediction, commentators on Irish manners claimed, without much exaggeration.[10] Yet this intriguing form of modern magic remains almost entirely unstudied.[11]

[5] Margaret Dobbs, 'On Táin Bó Flidais', *Ériu*, viii (1916), 146; Salvador Ryan, 'Popular Religion in Gaelic Ireland: 1445–1645' (National Univ. of Ireland Maynooth Ph.D. thesis, 2002), pt 1, 25, 250, 261, 276–7; Lisa M. Bitel, 'Tools and Scripts for Cursing in Medieval Ireland', *Memoirs of the American Academy in Rome*, li/lii (2006/2007); Luke McInerey, 'A Sixteenth Century Bardic Poem Composed for Seán Mac Conmara, Lord of West "Clann Chuiléin"', *Seanchas Ardmhacha*, xxiii (2010); Katharine Simms, 'Guesting and Feasting in Gaelic Ireland', *Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland*, cviii (1978).

[6] Ronald Hutton, 'Witch-Hunting in Celtic Societies', *Past and Present*, no. 212 (Aug. 2011); Ronald Hutton, *The Witch: A History of Fear, from Ancient Times to the Present* (Yale, 2018), 246.

[7] Andrew Sneddon, *Witchcraft and Magic in Ireland* (Basingstoke, 2015), 53.

[8] Lady Wilde, *Ancient Cures, Charms, and Usages of Ireland: Contributions to Irish Lore* (London, 1890), 224.

[9] P. W. Joyce, *The Origin and History of Irish Names and Places*, 3rd edn (Dublin, 1871), 379; T. O'Rorke, *The History of Sligo: Town and County*, ii (Dublin, [1889]), 257–8; Éamonn Ó Tuathail, 'Mallachta Choluimcille/Coluimcille's Curses', *Béaloideas*, ii (1930); John Begley, *The Diocese of Limerick: Ancient and Medieval* (Dublin, 1906), 55.

[10] Sean O'Fallon, 'Irish Curses', *Northern Junket*, xi (n.d.), 28.

[11] Exceptions include: Patrick C. Power, *The Book of Irish Curses* (Aurora, Ill., 1974); Eugene Hynes, *Knock: The Virgin's Apparition in Nineteenth-Century Ireland* (Cork, 2008), 43–47; Ian Lynch, 'The Widow's Curse: Legend and Belief, Continuity and Change' (Univ. College Dublin M.Litt. dissertation, 2012).

Antiquarians and folklorists were only marginally interested in it, with the exception of a lively essay by William Carleton (1794–1869). Cursing was probably too common and Catholic, and certainly too distasteful and subversive for these amateur scholars, who focused instead on recording what they regarded as rapidly disappearing 'pagan survivals'. This changed with the late nineteenth-century Gaelic revival and particularly after Ireland's partition in 1922. Folklorists in the newly independent Irish Free State began a nationalistic project dedicated to preserving the 'spirit of Ireland, the traditions of the historic Irish nation'.[12] Under the direction of figures like Seán Ó Súilleabháin, the government-funded Irish Folklore Commission (est. 1935) documented a vast sphere of life, from cooking to clothes, and cursing too.[13] Even so, historians have largely followed the narrower agenda of the earlier generations of folklorists, by studying Ireland's fairies, banshees, witchcraft, the evil eye, supernatural healing and calendar customs, along with newer oddities like the black magic rumours circulating in 1970s Northern Ireland.[14] Ireland's curses have been ignored despite the fact that there is a vast academic literature about cursing elsewhere, from ancient lead malediction tablets to imprecations in Anglo-Saxon legal documents to curses in contemporary societies.

The time has come for redress. In an era when we often see anger as dysfunctional, as something needing to be 'managed', and when many contemporary forms of indignation are indeed horribly crude (think of road rage or abusive outbursts on the

[12] Séamus Ó Duilearga, 'Introductory Note', in Seán Ó Súilleabháin, *A Handbook of Irish Folklore* (Detroit, 1970).

[13] Mícheál Briody, *The Irish Folklore Commission 1935–1970: History, Ideology, Methodology* (Helsinki, 2016), chs. 2 and 3.

[14] Joan Hoff and Marian Yeates, *The Cooper's Wife is Missing: The Trials of Bridget Cleary* (New York, 2000); Andrew R. Holmes, *The Shaping of Ulster Presbyterian Belief and Practice, 1770–1840* (Oxford, 2006), 89–103; Richard Jenkins: *Black Magic and Bogeymen: Fear, Rumour and Popular Belief in the North of Ireland, 1972–1974* (Cork, 2014); Angela Bourke, *The Burning of Bridget Cleary: A True Story* (London, 1999); Diarmuid Ó Giolláin, 'Celebrations and the Rituals of Life', in Eugenio F. Biagini and Mary E. Daly (eds.), *The Cambridge Social History of Modern Ireland* (Cambridge, 2017); Bettina N. Kimpton, '"Blow the House Down": Coding, the Banshee, and Woman's Place', *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium*, xiii (1993); Sneddon, *Witchcraft and Magic in Ireland*; Jenny Butler, 'The Sídhe and Fairy Forts', in Simon Young and Ceri Houlbrook (eds.), *Magical Folk: British and Irish Fairies 500 AD to the Present* (London, 2018); Andrew Sneddon and John Fulton, 'Witchcraft, the Press and Crime in Ireland, 1822–1922', *Historical Journal*, lxii (2019).

Internet), surely it is worth considering the artful ways people expressed and used anger, historically.[15] Thankfully, there is no lack of evidence. Cursing featured heavily in many Irish people's speech and personal interactions, from day-to-day joshing to terrible pronouncements that were remembered locally for generations. Inevitably, it left traces on a wide range of literary material, from Gaelic dictionaries to local newspapers, government reports, travellers' writings, letters, novels, legal documents, memoirs, diaries and religious tracts. Drawing on these sources, this article begins the study of modern Irish cursing.

My aim is to evoke and analyse a mostly intangible but nonetheless vital culture, which flourished between the late eighteenth and early twentieth centuries, and which still resonates somewhat today. Taking a broad approach like this, and enhancing it through comparisons with maledictions elsewhere, is obviously not the only way to undertake a history of magic. Case studies can be revealing and exciting, as in Angela Bourke's exploration of the 1895 killing of a fairy-ridden Irishwoman, Bridget Cleary, or Ruth Harris's account of collective possession in an Alpine village — the 'Mal de Morzine'.[16] But I think a broader perspective is more suitable here, because bringing together a wide range of evidence allows us to better appreciate cursing's central quality. Irish maledictions can be usefully analysed using familiar academic categories such as belief, ritual, symbolism, mentality, tradition, meaning and discourse.[17] Cursing contained all those things: but it was also

[15] Adekunle G. Ahmed *et al.*, 'Developing a Clinical Typology of Dysfunctional Anger', *Journal of Affective Disorders*, cxxxvi (2012); Amy Hyoeun Lee and Raymond DiGiuseppe, 'Anger and Aggression Treatments: A Review of Meta-Analyses', *Current Opinion in Psychology*, xix (2018); Jerry L. Deffenbacher *et al.*, 'The Driving Anger Expression Inventory: A Measure of How People Express Their Anger on the Road', *Behaviour Research and Therapy*, xl (2002).

[16] Ruth Harris, 'Possession on the Borders: The "Mal de Morzine" in Nineteenth-Century France', *Journal of Modern History*, lxix (1997); Bourke, *Burning of Bridget Cleary*.

[17] For example: Mark C. Taylor, *Critical Terms for Religious Studies* (Chicago, 1998); Christine D. Worobec, 'Witchcraft Beliefs and Practices in Prerevolutionary Russian and Ukrainian Villages', *Russian Review*, liv (1995); Sarah Tarlow, *Ritual, Belief and the Dead in Early Modern Britain and Ireland* (Cambridge, 2011), chs. 2 and 5; Michael D. Bailey, 'The Disenchantment of Magic: Spells, Charms, and Superstition in Early European Witchcraft Literature', *American Historical Review*, cxi (2006). For interpretations of witchcraft as discourse, see: Willem de Blécourt, '"Keep that woman out!" Notions of Space in Twentieth-Century Flemish Witchcraft

(cont. on p. 117)

something fundamentally more lively, active and affecting. Inspiration for a fuller, more dynamic understanding of cursing, and perhaps other forms of magic too, can be derived from the way that magicians since classical times have imagined the *ars magica* — the art of magic.[18] Although pioneering anthropologists like Bronisław Malinowski acknowledged the 'art of magic', this understanding of the controversial topic has been forgotten by many recent studies in which, as one not unsympathetic critic puts it: 'all too often a sense of magic is lost'.[19]

Irish cursing was a potent art. Stemming from moral indignation, the virtuoso but also shocking technique required knowledge, composure, practice and wit. For victims, it was threatening, disturbing and humiliating. For the imprecators, cursing could be a means of coercion, a cathartic fantasy of their enemies' destruction, or merely a way of showing off. This psychologically powerful form of magic was deeply rooted in Irish cosmology, tradition and history. However, it thrived in the modern world of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries because it functioned not only as a potent weapon but also as a gruesome therapy and misanthropic coping strategy in fraught times. Cursing was demanding, sophisticated, formidable and imposing. A magical art like this deserves neither our condescension nor a staid and lifeless dissection, but our (perhaps begrudging) respect.

I

STYLES OF CURSING

Not everyone in Ireland thought curses were legitimate. Like rulers elsewhere, early modern Ireland's politicians and senior churchmen repeatedly tried to quash the foul habit, as part of

(n. 17 cont.)
Discourse', *History and Theory*, lii (2013), esp. 368–71; Kimberly B. Stratton, *Naming the Witch: Magic, Ideology, and Stereotype in the Ancient World* (New York, 2007), esp. 1–2, 17–18, 39.

[18] Keith Thomas, 'An Anthropology of Religion and Magic, II', *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, vi (1975), 95.

[19] Like many early twentieth-century anthropologists, Malinowski was nonetheless rather condescending about the topic. See 'The Art of Magic and the Power of Faith', in Bronislaw Malinowski, *Magic, Science and Religion and Other Essays* (Boston, 1948) and Owen Davies, *Magic: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford, 2012), 112.

a general attack upon ungodly speech, which in turn fed into a wider civilizing mission that historians have termed the 'reformation of manners'.[20] The Oaths Act of 1635 was ineffective so more strenuous efforts were made in 1695, when Ireland's parliament again outlawed both 'profane swearing and cursing' — those two 'detestable sins'. Imprecating servants, labourers, soldiers and sailors were to be fined a shilling, and everyone else two, with escalating fines for subsequent offences and non-payers pelted in the stocks or whipped.[21] Beyond the legal crackdown, seventeenth- and eighteenth-century churchmen sermonized and wrote tracts attacking not just 'common swearing' but also the 'very near akin' yet much graver habit: the 'monstrous cuftom of cursing'.[22] Mostly it was Protestants who spoke out, during moments of evangelical revival, but not exclusively. Worried its clergy were abusing the terrifying 'priest's curse', Ireland's Catholic Church periodically forbade the practice. In 1786, for example, Munster's Catholic bishops announced their determination to sanction clerics who habitually poured 'forth from the altar the most shocking curses and imprecations'.[23]

These campaigns achieved little. Their greatest impact was at places like Doughmakeon and Oughaval in County Mayo, where during the early nineteenth century galvanized clergymen cleared their parishes of ancient cursing stones, destroying or burying unusual rocks that had long been used to lay powerful maledictions.[24] A good number of these sinister monuments remained, however, including the 'bed' of St Columbkille, a hillside rock near Carrickmore village, which was still being

[20] David Nash, 'Analyzing the History of Religious Crime: Models of "Passive" and "Active" Blasphemy since the Medieval Period', *Journal of Social History*, xli (2007); Paul O'Higgins, 'Blasphemy in Irish Law', *Modern Law Review*, xxiii (1960), 155–6.

[21] Matthew Dutton, *The Law of Masters and Servants in Ireland* (Dublin, 1723), 114–17; [Anon.] *Statutes Passed in the Parliaments Held in Ireland. Vol. II: Containing from the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Years of Charles the Second, AD 1665, to the Eleventh Year of Anne, AD 1712, Inclusive* (Dublin, 1794), 257–8.

[22] [Thomas Secker], *Against Evil-Speaking, Lying, Rash Vows, Swearing, Cursing, and Perjury. Number III of Tracts Published by the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge and Practice in the Kingdom of Ireland* (Dublin, 1787); T. C. Barnard, 'Reforming Irish Manners: The Religious Societies in Dublin during the 1690s', *Historical Journal*, xxxv (1992), 820.

[23] Quoted in: Ignatius Murphy, *The Diocese of Killaloe in the Eighteenth Century* (Dublin, 1991), 129.

[24] Christiaan Corlett, 'Cursing Stones in Ireland', *Journal of the Galway Archaeological and Historical Society*, lxiv (2012).

used to lay curses during the 1880s, as well as cursing stones on the island of Inishmurray in Sligo Bay and St Brigid's stones near Blacklion in County Cavan (see Plate 1).[25] The anti-cursing laws were sporadically employed and supplemented by the Town Police Clauses Act of 1847 and the Towns Improvement Act of 1854, both of which forbade 'profane language'.[26] But cursing was too deeply embedded in everyday life for crackdowns based on vague legislation to be effective.

In multilingual Ireland, people cursed in many tongues. In Ulster, the north-eastern province, Presbyterians uttered curses in Scottish accents using the dialect of Ulster-Scots. Although they shunned Catholic-sounding imprecations that begged the saints to unleash their holy wrath, Presbyterians were not above 'letting a curse out', as it was known, using plainer maledictions like 'God's curse upon his head' and 'bad luck to her'.[27] Cursing occurred in English too, which became Ireland's dominant language during the eighteenth century. Some of the dwindling number of monoglot Gaelic speakers wondered whether English might be especially suited for firing imprecations.[28] Really though, the great cursing language was Irish Gaelic, still spoken by around 40 per cent of people in 1801, when Ireland was incorporated into the United Kingdom, though a century later the figure had fallen to under 15 per cent, with less than 1 per cent speaking Irish Gaelic only.[29] Cursing formulas were 'very common in the Irish language', as the Victorian linguist George

[25] NFC, MS a102, 58–62; O. Davies and D. Lowry-Corry, 'Killinagh Church and Crom Cruaich', *Ulster Journal of Archaeology*, 3rd ser., ii (1939), 103; Isabel R. Crozier and Lily C. Rea, 'Bullauns and Other Basin-Stones', *Ulster Journal of Archaeology*, 3rd ser., iii (1940), 106; NFC, MS a102, 58–60; Síle Ní Chinnéide, 'A Frenchman's Tour of Connacht in 1791', *Journal of the Galway Archaeological and Historical Society*, xxxvi (1977/1978); James McParlan, *Statistical Survey of the County of Sligo, with Observations on the Means of Improvement* (Dublin, 1802), 106.

[26] O'Higgins, 'Blasphemy in Irish Law', 156.

[27] John J. Marshall, 'The Dialect of Ulster (Continued)', *Ulster Journal of Archaeology*, 2nd ser., xi (1905), 124; A. Hume, 'A Dialogue in the Ulster Dialect', *Ulster Journal of Archaeology*, 1st ser., vi (1858), 41; George Francis Savage-Armstrong, *Ballads of Down* (London, 1901), 334; James Orr, *Poems, on Various Subjects* (Belfast, 1804), 17, 91, 155; W. Clarke Robinson, *Antrim Idylls and Other Poems* (Belfast, 1907), 22.

[28] Lady Wilde, *Ancient Legends, Mystic Charms, and Superstitions of Ireland*, i (Boston, 1887), 191.

[29] Gearóid Ó Tuathaigh, 'Languages and Identities', in Biagini and Daly (eds.) *Cambridge Social History of Modern Ireland*; Antain Mac Lochlainn, 'The Famine in Gaelic Tradition', *Irish Review*, xvii/xviii (1995).

Borrow noted.[30] Irish also had an abnormally large number of 'curse' words, certainly more than English, and probably more than Scottish Gaelic too.[31] Ten Irish Gaelic nouns for 'a curse' were recorded in Bishop John O'Brien's 1768 dictionary, and thirteen in Edward O'Reilly and John O'Donovan's more definitive 1864 compilation, along with numerous verbs for the act of cursing and adjectives to describe accursed people.[32] 'Mallacht' was the main Irish term for a 'curse', but Gaelic speakers had many alternatives.

The words for curses and cursing did not really overlap with the vocabulary for witchcraft and *piseogs*, as evil spells were sometimes called. Those nasty practices had an extensive Gaelic terminology of their own. The distinction was important. Witchcraft and *piseogs* were straightforward malicious magic, designed to visit harm or death on anybody, whether good or evil, innocent or guilty. In practice, they amounted to things like ill-wishing, the evil eye, and leaving rotting meat or eggs on a neighbour's land to bring bad luck.[33] Cursing, by contrast, was a *just* form of supernatural violence. It only worked on people who deserved it: evildoers, killers, cheats, betrayers and so on.[34] 'When we do not deserve the curse we would not heed it; the curse of the wicked never availed', a farmer from County Mayo explained in 1834, when asked about the eerie topic.[35] Unjust curses would not just miss their targets. They would rebound on their casters, unless they quickly cancelled their maledictions with a blessing formula such as 'agus crosaim thú' in Gaelic or

[30] George Borrow, *Wild Wales: Its People, Language, and Scenery*, 3 vols. (London, 1862), iii, 436.

[31] Alexander Macbain's *An Etymological Dictionary of the Gaelic Language* (Stirling, 1911) recorded five Scotch Gaelic words for a 'curse': 'ainchis', 'condrachd' or 'contrachd', 'mallachd' and 'trusdar'.

[32] [Anon.], *Focaloir Gaoidhilge-Sax-Bhéarla* (Paris, 1768). O'Brien's words for 'curse' were 'aingeis', 'aoir' and 'airier', 'ceasacht', 'cursachadh', 'easgaine', 'irire', 'malsachd', 'mioscaith' and 'trist. Edward O'Reilly, *An Irish-English Dictionary*, new edn (Dublin, 1864): 'acais', 'airire', 'anfhocal', 'aoir', 'aor', 'easgaine', 'inneach', 'irire', 'mallachd', 'moiscaith', 'oighrir', 'oirbhir' and 'trist'.

[33] Murphy, *Diocese of Killaloe in the Eighteenth Century*, 279–82; Conrad M. Arensberg, *The Irish Countryman: An Anthropological Study* (Gloucester, Mass., 1959), 197–8.

[34] John O'Donovan, 'Folk-Lore. No. II. On the Traditions of the County of Kilkenny', *Transactions of the Kilkenny Archaeological Society*, i (1851), 365.

[35] *First Report from His Majesty's Commissioners for Inquiring into the Condition of the Poorer Classes in Ireland, with Appendix (A) and Supplement* (hereafter *First Report from His Majesty's Commissioners*) (House of Commons, 1835), 496.

1. St Brigid's stone, Blacklion Co. Cavan. It was used for both cursing and blessing. Source: Wellcome Collection. CC BY.

its English translation: 'I cross you'.[36] Proverbs in Gaelic and English reiterated the point: 'Curses, like chickens, come home to roost'.[37]

Whether uttered in English, Irish or Ulster-Scots, not all maledictions were magical. Curses had many connotations and Irish people used them to joke, flirt, lament, insult, threaten and rage. 'The devil go with you and sixpence, an' thin you'll want neither money nor company', was a mock malediction men used to tease women.[38] 'Bad scran to you', meaning poor food, was a jokey curse suitable for needling either sex; and surely a poignant one, given that for much of the nineteenth century most people's diet was restricted to potatoes, buttermilk, an occasional

[36] Patrick S. Dinneen (ed.), *Foclóir Gaedilge agus Béarla* (Dublin, 1904), 200.

[37] Wood-Martin, *Traces of the Elder Faiths of Ireland*, ii, 58; Robert MacAdam, 'Six Hundred Gaelic Proverbs Collected in Ulster (Continued)', *Ulster Journal of Archaeology*, 1st ser., vii (1859), 282.

[38] William Carleton, 'An Essay on Irish Swearing', in *Traits and Stories of the Irish Peasantry*, 2nd ser., 3 vols. (Dublin, 1834), i, 349–50.

smattering of fish and maybe some wild greens.[39] 'Bad luck to your own soul for the head-ache you gave me yesterday, with laughing at your old stories, and drinking your new wine', was the kind of cheeky curse friends uttered, with a wink, to their drinking buddies in Dublin's alehouses.[40]

Beyond the jokes were half-serious maledictions, simple utterances for releasing quick bursts of anger. 'May your bones be broken', for example, and 'a thousand placings of a rope round your neck'.[41] Irish people said these things during arguments, after accidents, or following near misses. To badmouths, they might retort 'divil choke you'. To boatmen who sailed over their nets, fisherman spat out all sorts of imprecations, both 'profuse Gaelic maledictions' and 'simpler curses' in English, the writer J. M. Synge observed while sailing between the Aran Islands in Galway Bay.[42] Interfering clerics, who habitually visited paupers, sometimes found their souls cursed 'to the hottest and lowest regions' of hell, as happened to the Reverend Anthony McIntyre of Belfast in 1854.[43] Policemen, too, were damned in this way, like a constable who during the Great Famine of 1845–55 stopped a hungry Ulster crowd from taking shipwrecked grain. 'May his neck get stiff', they mumbled.[44]

More serious were musical curses, stinging ballads calling for uncanny retribution. After the Great Famine, survivors wrote songs excoriating the landlords and agents who had evicted starving tenants. 'May you be stretched out under the gravestone'.[45] In places like County Clare, on Ireland's west coast, they sang in Irish and performed for family and neighbours. But cursing songs were not a dying art, part of a vanishing Gaelic folk culture. In bilingual or largely English-speaking regions, and in towns and cities, tuneful maledictions

[39] Julian Adelman, 'Food in Ireland since 1740', in Biagini and Daly (eds.), *Cambridge Social History of Modern Ireland*.

[40] John Gamble, *Sketches of History, Politics, and Manners, in Dublin, and the North of Ireland, in 1810* (London, 1826), 20–1.

[41] Dinneen (ed.), *Foclóir Gaedilge agus Béarla*, 200, 687; Samuel Lover, *Legends and Stories of Ireland* (Dublin, 1832), 187.

[42] J. M. Synge, *The Aran Islands* (Dublin, 1907), 143–4.

[43] 'Diary kept by the Rev. Anthony McIntyre', (1853–1856), Public Record Office of Northern Ireland (hereafter PRONI), MS D1558/2/3, 120.

[44] Hugh Dorian, *The Outer Edge of Ulster: A Memoir of Social Life in Nineteenth-Century Donegal*, ed. Breandán Mac Suibhne and David Dickson (Dublin, 2000), 226.

[45] Gearóid Ó hAllmhuráin, *Flowing Tides: History and Memory in an Irish Soundscape* (Oxford, 2016), 67.

were composed in English and sold as printed ballads. Beyond the stock villains of Irish popular culture, their targets included bankers, merchants and police informers.[46] James Carey, whose testimony helped convict the men who murdered the government ministers Thomas Henry Burke (1829–82) and Lord Frederick Cavendish (1836–82) in Dublin's Phoenix Park, was the object of venomous songs wishing that he be afflicted with everything from bedbugs to death.[47] For wrongs past and present, the old adversary across the water was also a frequent target: 'God's curse on you England, you cruel-hearted monsters'.[48]

Jokey, angry and tuneful curses were mere horseplay, some said. They contained 'no real viciousness' and Irish folk used them only to 'give force' to their speech.[49] This was not quite so. Metaphorical maledictions were certainly amusing, impressive and intimidating. Yet though their utterers may have been unconscious of it, non-literal curses were also vital preparation for the high art of real cursing. Carefully calibrated to absolutely ruin enemies, real cursing differed in many ways. Whereas metaphorical curses were daily occurrences, real cursing was deeply serious and comparatively rare. To signify this, real cursing used scarier and more complicated wordplay. Basic maledictions like 'hell's cure to you', 'the divil's luck to you', and 'high hanging to you' were easy to remember and quick to say.[50] Sometimes, for real cursing, they were piled on top of each other, as if to multiply their effect. 'That ye may never have a day's luck! That all belonging to ye may die with the hunger!! That yeer eyes may fall out of yeer head!!!'.[51] But workaday curses were not particularly suitable for proper cursing because they invited easy retorts. It mattered because curses were believed to be most powerful when their victims remained silent, as if dumbstruck

[46] Rorke, *History of Sligo*, i, 398.

[47] Teresa O'Donnell, '"Skin the Goat's Curse" on James Carey: Narrating the Story of the Phoenix Park Murders through Contemporary Broadside Ballads', in Kyle Hughes and Donald M. MacRaild (eds.), *Crime, Violence, and the Irish in the Nineteenth Century* (Liverpool, 2017).

[48] Henry Glassie, *Passing the Time in Ballymenone: Culture and History of an Ulster Community* (Philadelphia, 1982), 83.

[49] O'Fallon, 'Irish Curses', 32; Robin Flower, *The Western Island or Great Blasket* ([1944] Oxford, 1979), 49.

[50] Carleton, 'An Essay on Irish Swearing', 348–9.

[51] Kevin Danaher, *Irish Country People* (Cork, 1976), 14.

by the lyrical ingenuity of the dreadful utterances.[52] By contrast, people who instantly countered with clever replies could turn curses back on their authors. Something obvious like 'bad luck to you' invited the reply 'good luck to you, thin; but may neither of them ever happen'. 'Your soul go to the Devil' might be nullified with 'my soul *from* the Devil'.[53]

To make a curse stick, it was best to say something dreadful, complex and difficult to rebut. 'May you never die till you see your own funeral', for example — an obscure allusion to a hanged man watching the spectators at his execution.[54] 'May she and her friends who in any way caused this marriage, be forever without the grace or favour of God — may their offspring unto their latest generation be unhealthy and attended with every misfortune that can befall mankind'. Such was the nasty curse pronounced, in 1829, by a Catholic priest from Tarbert, County Kerry, on discovering that one of his flock was marrying a Protestant.[55] Often though, it can be difficult to uncover the exact wording employed by Ireland's greatest cursers, because journalists censored horrible maledictions. When Johanna Sullivan was convicted of being drunk outside Cork's Theatre Royal, in 1863, she gave the magistrates a mouthful, but the local paper noted only that she 'uttered a fearful curse'.[56] Novelists were less inhibited, but as well as being melodramatic and stereotypical, they were unconcerned with literal accuracy. 'May the cold north blast of misery nip your body, while your heart burns like fire. May every thing that could give comfort in affliction be a day's march before you, whilst sorrow, multiplied sorrow, be your daily companion', the Irish writer John Levy made one of his characters, an old widow, pray on her landlord.[57] Neither novelists nor journalists mentioned sexual maledictions. Yet it is probably safe to assume that, in nineteenth-century Ireland as in the ancient world and elsewhere, special curses existed for attacking penises, breasts, vaginas and arses.

[52] *Visions and Beliefs in the West of Ireland Collected and Arranged by Lady Gregory: With Two Essays and Notes by W. B. Yeats*, 2nd ser. (London, 1920), 131.

[53] Douglas Hyde, *Beside the Fire: A Collection of Irish Gaelic Folk Stories* (London, 1890), 187; P. W. Joyce, *English as We Speak It in Ireland*, 2nd edn (London, 1910), 38.

[54] Carleton, 'An Essay on Irish Swearing', 349

[55] *Mayo Constitution*, 5 Mar. 1829.

[56] *Cork Examiner*, 7 Apr. 1863.

[57] Captain Prout [John Levy] (ed.), *Bob Norberry; or, Sketches from the Note Book of an Irish Reporter* (Dublin, 1884), 228.

Nineteenth-century Irish folk possessed a deep oral literacy and a high capacity for verbal sparring. English newspapers portrayed them as slow, stupid drunks; yet Ireland's workers possessed finely honed curses for 'every occasion, every fit of passion'.[58] Their lyrical formulas were designed to awaken God to injustice, alert the Devil to sin, and generally unsettle supernatural forces. Until quite recently, it was not unusual for historians to suggest that only 'early man' and pre-modern Europeans credited words with magical qualities.[59] Clearly that is wrong: language's metaphysical power is an enduring theme in the history of magic, whether ancient or modern. But this general point also needs qualifying. During the modern era, the currency and style of magic words varied considerably, and over short distances. To illustrate: in a classic essay about anonymous threatening letters, sent to English farmers and grain-dealers in the late 1700s and 1800s, E. P. Thompson noticed that these letters were often rhymed in a spell-like style, as if to imply a bit of magical menace.[60] Irish threatening letters, by contrast, were far more supernaturally explicit, teeming with the direst maledictions of the sort contained in a letter sent to a County Limerick landlord in 1886: 'may you wither up by the fire of hell soon and sudden, may the flesh rot off your bones, and fall away putrid before your eyes, and may the consolation of eternal flames come to be your consolation in your last illness, and the hearthstone of hell be your pillow for ever'.[61] That missive was pure literary cursing. Generally though, in Ireland, cursing's power was derived from more than mystic phrases alone. Rituals and a certain style were required to launch maledictions, 'to give them energy' as the antiquary William Carleton put it.[62]

A 'solemn curse' was uttered with poise and determination, with a hair-raising seriousness seldom found in everyday life. This was how Catholic priests imprecated grievous sinners, from the altar, with an open Bible or chalice in hand, and candles

[58] Carleton, 'An Essay on Irish Swearing', 348.

[59] For example: Maureen Flynn, 'Blasphemy and the Play of Anger in Sixteenth-Century Spain', *Past and Present*, no. 149 (Nov. 1995), 36–8.

[60] E. P. Thompson, 'The Crime of Anonymity', in Douglas Hay *et al.* (eds.), *Albion's Fatal Tree: Crime and Society in Eighteenth-Century England* (New York, 1975), 303.

[61] 'A "Moonlight" Curse', *Dublin Daily Express*, 20 Apr. 1886.

[62] Carleton, 'An Essay on Irish Swearing', 348.

flickering.[63] Beggars shooed away from cottages empty-handed could curse just as ostentatiously. Some unleashed maledictions whilst brushing the dust from their feet, as Christ told his disciples to do when they were shunned.[64] Irish cursers of various types fell to their knees, in conspicuously public places like the middle of a road or marketplace.[65] With locals watching — including, preferably, their victims — these cursers beat the floor and looked to the skies, put their hands together and besought God to blight their opponents. Other cursers stood up high, on rocks above island shores for instance, as policemen and bailiffs sailed away. With outstretched arms and windswept hair, they roared maledictions using 'magnificent words and gestures' that were totally uncharacteristic of their usually reticent temperament.[66] Flowing hair, incidentally, was important. In nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Ireland, women usually wore headscarves when outdoors, to keep warm and as nods to strong patriarchal conventions of modesty and respectability. But when they cursed, women literally let their hair down.[67] It marked a new if temporary status, their unwillingness to be restrained by ordinary gender norms, and their intention to unleash hidden powers.

For victims, being cursed could be nerve-shatteringly intimidating. In 1817, Mrs McCollum from Ballycastle in County Antrim reportedly became 'almost crazy' after she was cursed by her local priest, shunned by her neighbours, and denied the rites of the Catholic Church.[68] She may well have experienced something close to what physiologists call 'voodoo death', where a fearful magical attack inspires an extreme fight or flight response, an adrenaline surge so powerful that it causes real physical and mental damage.[69] Beyond such pains, it was

[63] Murphy, *Diocese of Killaloe in the Eighteenth Century*, 38–40.

[64] *First Report from His Majesty's Commissioners*, 761.

[65] *Western People*, 10 Oct. 1936; *First Report from His Majesty's Commissioners*, 543; NFC, Schools' Collection: vol. 78, 153; MS 42, 203; MS 538, 212. Lynch, 'Widow's Curse', 28–36.

[66] Synge, *Aran Islands*, 62.

[67] NFC, MS 538, 391–2.

[68] 'Letter from Alexander McNeile, Ballycastle, to the Rt Rev. the Roman Catholic Bishop of Down and Connor', (12 May 1818), PRONI, MS D1375/3/35/15.

[69] W. B. Cannon, '"Voodoo" Death', *American Anthropologist*, xliv (1942); Esther M. Sternberg, 'Walter B. Cannon and "Voodoo' Death": A Perspective from 60 Years On', *American Journal of Public Health*, xcii (2002); Martin A. Samuels, '"Voodoo" Death Revisited: The Modern Lessons of Neurocardiology', *Cleveland Clinic Journal of Medicine*, lxxiv (2007), suppl. 1, S8–16.

deeply humiliating to be publicly cursed, to have your misdeeds advertised and family openly threatened, especially by someone who was notionally your social inferior. When they knelt in the street to curse, crying out to the Almighty and all who would listen, like a poor woman from County Kerry recalled in one early twentieth-century memoir, it would have been hard to know how to react.[70] Some victims unconvincingly mocked their imprecators, saying they 'did not care' about their curse any more than their blessing.[71] Others walked off, shaking, or maintained what they imagined was a dignified silence. A few tried to send the maledictions back. Whatever the response, after scenes like these, the neighbours would talk, and not just about your crimes. Every time misfortune struck they would mention your curse, whispering how you had never had any luck since that fateful day. Troubles or deaths befalling the earls of Egmont, to take a famous example, invariably prompted retellings of the tale of the 'solemn curse' that had been laid on the family seat of Cowdray House, way back during the Dissolution of the Monasteries, in 1538.[72] Even if you tried not to believe in it, being cursed made you seem weaker — an impermanent and insecure presence, who was not long for this world.

For the imprecators themselves, cursing was a powerful form of coercion. But even if the threat of a malediction did not shape someone's behaviour in the way you had hoped, the evil prayer still had value. Cursing was stress busting and cathartic, for two reasons. First, it was an outlet for boiling anger, doubtless engaging what clinical psychologists call the neurological 'rage circuit' even more powerfully than conventional swearing did.[73] Second, and rather luridly, cursing articulated intricate revenge fantasies. Some maledictions, it is true, were fairly general, calling for unspecified punishments. 'May God's curse and my curse light down on her every day she rises', a mother from Ballybay cried in 1911, on the woman she blamed for spoiling her

[70] S. M. Hussey, *The Reminiscences of an Irish Land Agent*, ed. Home Gordon (London, 1904), 220.

[71] *Armagh Guardian*, 28 Feb. 1868.

[72] 'Historic Cowdray', *Dublin Daily Express*, 22 Aug. 1910.

[73] J. J. M. Vingerhoets, Lauren M. Bylsma and Cornelis de Vlam, 'Swearing: A Biopsychosocial Perspective', *Psychological Topics*, xxii (2013).

relationship with her adult son.[74] Many maledictions, however, were horribly detailed and gory. Like cursing African Americans in the early 1900s, Irish cursers revelled in 'luxuriant fantasies' about their enemies being destroyed in specific, irremediable ways, with bones broken, flesh rotted, heads smashed, stomachs exploded, arms withered and eyes blinded.[75] Curses expressed people's deepest anger and most elaborate fantasies, making them 'a great relief of the heart', as one prolific Irish imprecator put it.[76] If you could not stop an eviction, get a tolerable meal, recover your stolen possessions or ensure that your relatives behaved loyally, it was invigorating to imagine that, in time, an artful malediction would wreck the evildoers.

II

CURSING AND BEGGING

The Irish were formidable cursers. As Keith Thomas noted several decades ago, on the neighbouring island of Britain, cursing persisted into the early modern period; but since it sometimes led to witchcraft accusations, presumably the distinction between the righteous magic of cursing and the evil magic of witchcraft was less pronounced than it was in Ireland.[77] Throughout the nineteenth century, many British people credited witchcraft and other strange powers. However, they had little sense of cursing as a distinct type of moral magic.[78]

Why then was the righteous art of cursing so heavily cultivated in Ireland, in the commercial and increasingly sophisticated world of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries? That question has a multi-causal answer, which I will build up throughout the rest of this paper. It must begin with deep history and the cursing traditions I noted earlier. To use sociological parlance, there was a certain amount of 'path dependency', with Irish imprecators drawing on well-established conventions and precedents, just as people do in other cursing cultures, such as

[74] *Northern Whig*, 13 Feb. 1912.
[75] James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* (Yale, 1990), 42–3.
[76] Flower, *Western Island or Great Blasket*, 49.
[77] Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic: Studies in Popular Beliefs in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century England* ([1971] London, 1991), 599–611.
[78] Thomas Waters, *Cursed Britain: A History of Witchcraft and Black Magic in Modern Times* (Yale, 2019), ch. 3.

the Okiek of Kenya.[79] Yet when Irish folk uttered maledictions, they recreated and renewed certain (not all) cursing techniques. To explain this it is helpful to take an unfashionably 'functionalist' approach, which shows how cursing most persisted when it was useful.

To illustrate: Irish cursing was closely linked with certain characters, whose identity gave them heightened powers. Reflecting a remarkable continuity in the history of magic, blacksmiths were known as potent cursers. This theme has been recorded far and wide, from Western Europe to East Africa, from ancient times to the present.[80] In Ireland, stories about imprecating blacksmiths were still current during the 1930s, when the Irish Folklore Commission made the inspired decision to get schoolchildren to record their elders' yarns.[81] Threatening a curse was 'the only way some country blacksmiths could get paid', apparently.[82] In real life, smiths genuinely mentioned curses during financial confrontations, albeit rarely. In 1960, for example, in the little town of Elphin in County Roscommon, Martin O'Connor threatened a shopkeeper with the blacksmith's curse during a row about money.[83] The blacksmith's curse persisted in Ireland, but at a low level. Other cursing traditions were more current because they chimed with the needs and conditions of large numbers of people. Chief amongst these useful maledictions, during the impoverished early nineteenth century, was the 'beggar's curse'.

The beggar's curse was an old idea that resonated powerfully in early nineteenth-century Ireland.[84] This was because rapid population growth, a lack of official poverty relief and a parlous economy based on inefficiently subdivided land had unleashed a tidal wave of begging.[85] You could find begging in all major cities,

[79] Corinne A. Kratz, 'Genres of Power: A Comparative Analysis of Okiek Blessings, Curses and Oaths', *Man*, new ser., xxiv (1989).

[80] Scopas Poggo, 'The Origins and Culture of Blacksmiths in Kuku Society of the Sudan, 1797–1955', *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, xviii (2006), 170; Felix J. Oinas, 'The Balto-Finnic Epics', in Felix J. Oinas (ed.) *Heroic Epic and Saga: An Introduction to the World's Great Folk Epics* (Bloomington, Ia, 1978), 302.

[81] NFC, Schools' Collection: vol. 95, 146–7; vol. 119, 507.

[82] NFC, MS 1413, 369.

[83] *Longford Leader*, 15 July 1961.

[84] Jonathan Ben-Dov, 'The Poor's Curse: Exodus XXII 20–26 and Curse Literature in the Ancient World', *Vetus Testamentum*, lvi (2006).

[85] Cormac Ó Gráda, *Ireland Before and After the Famine: Explorations in Economic History, 1800–1925* (Manchester, 1993), 17; Mel Cousins, 'The Irish Parliament and

(cont. on p. 130)

of course, but its vast scale in Ireland staggered travellers from Britain, Europe and America. Stereotypically male though in reality mostly female, 'beggars' included people as various as migratory farm labourers, temporarily workless families asking their neighbours for assistance, 'tinkers' or 'travellers' — an increasingly distinct ethnic group, and professional itinerants known as 'boccoughs' or 'bull-beggars'.[86]

Curses were part of many people's begging strategies. We know this because of a remarkable ethnographic source: the *First Report of the Irish Poor Law Commissioners* (1835). To lay foundations for a locally funded but nationally organized system of poor relief, commissioners traversed Ireland, gathering evidence about poverty from rich and poor, Protestants and Catholics, men and (much less) women. Amongst their standard questions, the commissioners asked witnesses whether people bestowed charity because of beggars' curses. They received many different answers, but one thing was clear. Everybody knew what a beggar's curse was: it was a regular and familiar part of life, in pre-famine Ireland.

Beggars could not curse lightly, because maledictions levied without just cause were ineffective.[87] In a world of canny country folk and official discourses about the 'undeserving' poor, mendicants had to appear genuinely needy to make their curses seem potent. It began with dress. Occasionally people gave beggars clothes or even shoes but these were not much use because they made mendicants appear wealthier than they were.[88] It was better to keep to rags and swap any garments for food or a warming drink. Women and children elicited more sympathy, so husbands generally waited out of view. Beggars also needed stories about how they had fallen on hard times. If potatoes, grain or a few pennies still were not forthcoming, they could begin hinting at more mysterious powers. Some female beggars wore their hair down, as if to imply that they were

(n. 85 cont.)
Relief of the Poor: The 1772 Legislation Establishing Houses of Industry', *Eighteenth-Century Ireland*, xxviii (2013).

[86] 'The Boccough', *Londonderry Sentinel*, 12 Dec. 1835, 1; Niall Ó Ciosáin, *Ireland in Official Print Culture, 1800–1850: A New Reading of the Poor Inquiry* (Oxford, 2014), 75–6.

[87] *First Report from His Majesty's Commissioners*, 525–30, 560, 585.

[88] *Ibid.*, 556–7.

already in the cursing pose. More directly, mendicants insinuated mystic influences by asking for 'alms for the glory of God', as one Irish beggar did when she met the linguist George Borrow, in the summer of 1854.[89] Anyone who agreed, who provided a little charity, would be rewarded with profuse blessings. 'May you live a hundred years, may you pass unhurt through fire and water, may the gates of Paradise be ever open to receive you'.[90] But if there was still no luck, and they were desperate or frustrated enough, beggars might curse. Plain imprecations were uttered in English: 'the curse of the poor and helpless cripple upon you every day you put a coat over your back', a beggar on the shores of Lough Patrick was overheard saying, in 1816.[91] But beggars usually laid their worst maledictions in Irish Gaelic.[92] 'Biadh an taifrionn gan sholas duit a bhean shalach!', for example, meaning 'may the Mass never comfort you, you dirty queen!'.[93]

Did people fear beggars' curses? Publicly, 'respectable' men insisted they did not. Privately, amongst their families at home, the reality was different. In dangerous times, many people's thinking amounted to a magical version of 'Pascal's wager', where it was best to stay safe, to avoid curses if doing so was not too costly, just in case. Some men interviewed by Irish Poor Law Commissioners in the early 1830s admitted this. Most provided evasive or cynical replies, saying that only illiterates, fools, servants, children and women took beggars' curses seriously.[94] Occasionally though, witnesses gave a glimpse of an uncertain superstitious psychology beneath the hard-nosed façade of early nineteenth-century opinion. A publican and farmer from Kilmanaheen, in County Clare, told the commissioners: 'a woman with child would certainly never refuse relief', meaning that a pregnant woman would not dare risk a beggar's curse. Then another witness, a cottager, chimed in: 'I know my wife always gives when she is big with child, and she says she must do it, or she

[89] Borrow, *Wild Wales* (1862), iii, 417, 422, 434, 436. Also: *First Report from His Majesty's Commissioners*, 525, 530, 537.

[90] Gamble, *Sketches of History, Politics, and Manners, in Dublin, and the North of Ireland*, 48.

[91] 'A Day at Lough Patrick', *Christian Examiner and Church of Ireland Magazine*, xi (1831), 48.

[92] *First Report from His Majesty's Commissioners*, 687.

[93] Borrow, *Wild Wales* (1862), iii, 423.

[94] *First Report from His Majesty's Commissioners*, 449, 550, 565, 577, 628, 648.

would have a miscarriage'.[95] His remarks feel genuine. They speak to the precariousness of rural life in an age before antibiotics and vaccines, when crops, beasts and people were at great risk from dimly understood threats, when local famines and fever epidemics were almost annual occurrences. In this dangerous environment, it was best to be cautious.

The beggar's curse did not decline because it was formally disproved. Instead, the tradition faded with the massive reduction in begging that followed the Great Famine. This had various causes: emigration, population decline, the near disappearance of the precarious peasant class, the increased availability of official poverty relief, and new laws criminalizing wandering begging. By the close of the nineteenth century the masses of Irish beggars who had once stunned travellers were gone, and the beggar's curse began to be forgotten.[96] A few stories were still told about it.[97] Occasionally, people who had fallen on hard times threatened to use it, to elicit a bit of money or food. But as hordes of desperately needy people left the Irish landscape, promises of beggars' blessings and threats of beggars' curses stopped being regular occurrences.

III

CURSING PRIESTS

The most dangerous malediction, Irish commentators and ordinary people agreed, was a priest's.[98] 'I mind nothing but the priest's curse', one of Lady Anne Daly's tenants told her in 1872, when describing how he could endure any intimidation from his neighbours except that.[99]

There was an irony about priests being pre-eminent cursers. Formally, the Church forbade it. Dr James Butler's *Catechism*, Ireland's official statement of Catholic faith, explicitly prohibited cursing for being contrary to the Second

[95] *Ibid*., 639.

[96] Virginia Crossman, *Politics, Pauperism and Power in Late Nineteenth-Century Ireland* (Manchester, 2006), 9–15, 119–222; Caitríona Clear, 'Homelessness, Crime, Punishment and Poor Relief in Galway 1850–1914: An Introduction', *Journal of the Galway Archaeological and Historical Society*, l (1998).

[97] NFC, Schools' Collection: vol. 185, 131.

[98] *Saunders News-Letter*, 22 Sept. 1843, 1.

[99] *Copy of the Minutes of the Evidence Taken at the Trial of the Galway County Election Petition (1872)*, pt 1 (House of Commons, 1872), 173.

Commandment.[100] Within Roman Catholicism, however, this simple statement masked considerable ambiguity and inconsistency. Curses figured in several of the Church's ceremonies, including the most severe form of excommunication ('the anathema') and some ordination liturgies for nuns and bishops. 'He that shall curse him, let him be cursed'.[101] The Bible also abounded in imprecations — with hapless infidels and appalling sinners, smote by the inescapable curses of a wrathful God.

Catholic priests were well placed to excel at the theatrical art of cursing. They, after all, were immersed in the Judeo-Christian cursing tradition, trained in practice of solemn ritual and public prayer, and possessed of sacred objects like chalices, church bibles and vestments. On a symbolic level too, priests' status within the Church enhanced their cursing abilities. The boundary between religion and magic is always porous.[102] This distinction is especially problematic for Irish cursing, which was an unusually religious type of magic. Cursing blended lyrical and ritualistic spell casting with something like prayers to God, Mary, Jesus, the saints (and occasionally the Devil), begging these awesome entities to smite guilty parties. Priests, by definition, were close to God and the saints. Bathed in righteous power, steeped in the Holy Spirit, it was obvious that they should possess awesome imprecations.

The priest's curse was rooted in ancient precedents, yet it gained a remarkable new relevance in the fractious but slowly liberalizing world of nineteenth-century Ireland. In this contested environment, for the first time perhaps since the Middle Ages, priests' curses became political. They formed a sharp edge of the Catholic Association, a mass movement founded by the barrister Daniel O'Connell to campaign against anti-Catholic discrimination and for the repeal of Ireland's union with Britain. In this epic struggle, priests' curses were potent forms of intimidation, which helped the notionally peaceful

[100] *The Most Rev. Dr. James Butler's Catechism: Revised, Enlarged, Approved, and Recommended by the Four R.C. Archbishops of Ireland, as a General Catechism for the Kingdom* (Dublin, 1836), 42.

[101] Rev. George Lewis, *The Bible, the Missal, and the Breviary: or, Ritualism Self-Illustrated in the Liturgical Books of Rome*, i (Edinburgh, 1853), 232, 242, 260–1.

[102] Ronald Hutton, *Pagan Britain* (Yale, 2013), vii–viii.

Catholic Association exercise great pressure on voters, whilst at the same time remaining just within the pale of the law.

The relationship is revealed in the timing. Soon after the Catholic Association's foundation, in 1823, Members of Parliament in Westminster began complaining about the outrageously intimidating Irish clerics, who were frightening electors with horrid stories about priests' curses sending people blind, as if that might be their punishment if they were so unwise as to opt for the wrong candidate.[103] Protestant periodicals also started carrying scattered reports about priests using maledictions and altar denunciations to make their parishioners pay the 'Catholic rent', a regular fee to support the Catholic Association.[104] One might be tempted to dismiss these sectarian writings as fabricated propaganda. Some Protestant claims about cursing priests undoubtedly were. But evidence from other sources confirms not only that priests deployed their curses politically, but also that some Catholic bishops actively encouraged them. It would have been obvious what the Archbishop of Tuam meant when, in 1835, he wrote to his clergy, instructing them to kindle amongst voters the fear that 'the curse of the Lord will come' on those who elect 'enemies of religion', meaning opponents of the Catholic Association.[105] In the depressed and famine-struck years of the 1840s, reports mushroomed of clerics flaunting their mystic powers during elections. Some cursed from the altar, damning and excommunicating the opposition, prohibiting friendly contact, and proclaiming that 'they walked on earth as accursed beings'.[106] Others joined campaign trails. At Ballyloo in 1840, Father Tyrrell went with a hundred men to the house of Patrick Regan, where the priest gave Patrick his curse, saying he would soon see whether he would prosper.[107] Their curses would raise

[103] 'Catholic Emancipation — Petition of the Roman Catholic Bishops of Ireland', *Hansard*, xvi, col. 796 (2 Mar. 1827).

[104] 'Roman Catholic Questions: Church of Rome in Ireland', *British Critic*, v (1829), 186–7; *Wexford Conservative*, 28 Oct. 1835.

[105] *The Letters of the Most Reverend John Mac Hale, D.D.* (Dublin, 1847), 369.

[106] [Anon.], *The Reign of Terror in Carlow, Comprising an Authentic Detail of the Proceedings of Mr. O'Connell and His Followers, from the Period of His Invading that County Down to the First of September* (London, 1841), 17–18.

[107] *Ibid.*, 43.

storms, sink ships and bring 'the sickness', imprecating clergymen warned.[108]

During this conflicted moment, proselytizing also began to inspire clerical maledictions. Between the 1820s and 1860s, Protestant missionaries strove to persuade Irish Catholics to abandon Rome and embrace Reformed faiths. Occasionally, priests fought back with maledictions, wishing 'God's curse' on Catholics who worked in or enrolled their children at Protestant schools.[109] 'Any person or persons sending their children to this school henceforth, may they be struck blind and deaf . . . may they be pained both sitting and standing . . . [may] their crops and their goods be taken away by the devil'.[110] So pronounced a priest from County Clare in 1851, praying for curses to afflict patrons of the new Kiltrellig school. Curses were thrown at Protestant evangelists and their converts too, with notable victims being the Reverend Edward Nangle (1800–83) and his mission on the island of Achill.[111] Their tongues would fall out, local Catholics were warned, if they failed to bellow abuse at the heretics.[112]

It has been said that cursing priests belonged to the primitive, pre-famine era, before modernizing institutions like St Patrick's College at Maynooth improved the quality of clerical training.[113] This was not so. In fact, there is good reason to think that the power of cursing clerics actually grew, in the wake of the famine.[114] Their ratio was rapidly increasing, from roughly one priest per three thousand laity in 1840, to approximately 1 per 1,500 in 1870, and still growing.[115] Priests could now realistically monitor their parishioners and, if they misbehaved, pronounce personalized imprecations.[116] Good evidence of this powerful

[108] K. Theodore Hoppen, *Elections, Politics, and Society in Ireland, 1832–1885* (Oxford, 1984), 212–13.

[109] *Kerry Evening Post*, 19 Sept. 1835; 1 Apr. 1846; *Londonderry Sentinel*, 26 Sept. 1835; *Statesman and Dublin Christian Record*, 31 Mar. 1846; *Ballyshannon Herald*, 17 July 1863.

[110] *Newry Telegraph*, 9 Oct. 1851; *Limerick Chronicle*, 11 Oct. 1851.

[111] *Kerry Evening Post*, 19 Sept. 1835; Niall R. Branach, 'Edward Nangle & the Achill Island Mission', *History Ireland*, viii (2000), 35–8.

[112] Edward Nangle, *The Origin, Progress, and Difficulties of the Achill Mission* (Dublin, 1839), 53–4, 140.

[113] Hoppen, *Elections, Politics, and Society in Ireland*, 212.

[114] *Southern Reporter and Cork Commercial Courier*, 30 Apr. 1862.

[115] R. F. Foster, *Modern Ireland: 1600–1972* (1989), 338; K. Theodore Hoppen, *The Mid-Victorian Generation: 1846–1886* (Oxford, 1998), 582.

[116] Murphy, *Diocese of Killaloe in the Eighteenth Century*, 258.

combination was generated by the disputed Galway by-election of 1872. A Home Rule candidate John Philip Nolan trounced his unionist opponent, the Conservative William Le Poer Trench, before the result was overturned on appeal. In court, hundreds of witnesses described how the local Catholic clergy and others had used various intimidating practices, from violence to threatening letters to sermons calling for the Conservatives to be ostracized. Amongst these strategies was cursing. On Sunday 14 January, at the midday Mass at Dunmore chapel, a local priest named Father Loftus imprecated Charles O'Loughlin, the Catholic agent of the Conservative candidate, as he sat in his family pew. Following Holy Communion, Father Loftus stood at the altar, holding a chalice. Humorously, he asked: where was the 'blackguard' who canvassed for the Conservatives? The congregation laughed and even Charles himself chuckled. But the atmosphere darkened when the priest said anyone voting for Captain Trench would die bearing the mark of Cain, as would their children.[117] Next Father Loftus pronounced a Gaelic malediction that Charles could not understand, but which affected the Irish-speaking majority so much that they instinctively touched their chests, in horror. Against a Conservative supporter, Mrs Griffiths, Father Loftus pronounced a Gaelic curse translating as: the curse of the people on her — may bad luck fall on everything she touches.

Finally, towards the end of the nineteenth century, Ireland's priests stopped throwing political curses. Although the union with Britain was still in place, many of the Catholic movement's great causes had been won, from emancipation in 1829, to control over most state-funded schools, and the disestablishment of the Church of Ireland in 1869. However, the main reason priests stopped throwing political maledictions lay elsewhere. Following decades of debate, the Corrupt and Illegal Practices Act of 1883 at last outlawed the using of 'undue spiritual influence' during elections, meaning clerical curses.[118] Priests still threw imprecations, and many people still credited them. Now, though, the main targets were sinful, antisocial parishioners.

[117] *Minutes of the Evidence Taken at the Trial of the Galway County Election*, 2–11.

[118] 'Parliamentary Elections (Corrupt And Illegal Practices) Bill—Bill 7', *Hansard*, cclxxx, col. 842–93 (18 June 1883).

'May the arm that is now sick, sling dead and powerless by her side before twelve months' time'. So prayed a priest from County Mayo, in 1872, on a woman he accused of spreading tar on his church's seats.[119] He uttered that malediction while standing at the altar, pointing, and followed it up with stories about families who had wasted away and animals that had gone mad, after gaining the priest's malediction. Another clerical curse victim was Thomas Mahon, a retired policeman and possible child killer from Carna in County Galway. In 1888 Thomas secretly disposed of the dead body of his little daughter, who he had conceived out of wedlock with his cousin and housekeeper. He would have got away with it, had not the local priest heard rumours and put his malediction on anyone who did not report what they knew to the police. 'I would never have spoken of the occurrence at all only that the priest cursed those who knew about it off the altar for not exposing it', a witness admitted.[120] Well into the twentieth century, priests threw imprecations at 'land-grabbers', who rented or purchased estates from whence the previous tenants had been evicted.[121] A priest's curse was useful in a boycott because it meant that neither the 'grabber' nor his or her customers would prosper. Their 'money would melt in their pockets', apparently.[122] During the bloody years of the Irish War of Independence (1919–21), murderous republicans also felt the force of clerical imprecations, if they killed well-liked local characters.[123]

Stories about cursing priests were told in villages and towns across mid-twentieth-century Ireland, the Irish Folklore Commission discovered.[124] In Virginia, County Cavan, locals spoke about a woman who had mocked a rheumatic priest's cranky gait. He found out and she gave birth to blind and crippled children after the angry cleric muttered 'Oh God keep her . . . it's like she knows how her own children will be yet'.[125] Elsewhere, people remembered priests pronouncing 'dreadful'

[119] *Irish Times*, 18 Feb. 1873; *Cork Constitution*, 21 Feb. 1873; *Warder and Dublin Weekly Mail*, 21 Feb. 1874.
[120] *Dublin Daily Express*, 20 Mar. 1890; 24 Mar. 1890.
[121] *Irish Independent*, 5 Dec. 1919; *Freeman's Journal*, 4 Dec. 1919; *Connacht Tribune*, 17 Jan. 1920.
[122] *Connacht Tribune*, 6 Dec. 1919.
[123] *Londonderry Sentinel*, 9 Sept. 1919.
[124] NFC, Schools' Collection: vol. 498, 307; vol. 625, 258.
[125] NFC, MS a815, 398–9.

curses on smokers who lit up near chapel.[126] The tales spoke to lingering anxieties about clerical supervision and supernatural powers. Catholic priests were still extraordinarily plentiful, with as many as 1 to every 660 members of the laity in 1950.[127] People took their curses seriously; yet priests no longer used them. Partly this was because the church hierarchy was now firmly in control. Since the late 1920s it had been involved in the Irish Free State's censorship of 'immoral' books, cinema and journalism. With these responsibilities, ecclesiastical leaders could no longer permit their priests to use such terrible language. In any case, there were fewer reasons for clerics to curse. Following Southern Ireland's independence in 1922, crime in the Irish Free State and Irish Republic fell precipitously, partly because huge numbers of deviants and dissenters were shunted off to asylums and church homes. With few left to denounce and little scope for throwing political or parish curses, the concept of the priest's malediction faded.

IV

CURSING WOMEN

Ireland's cursers were beggars, priests, blacksmiths, millers, orphans, people nearing death, parents, and all sorts of wronged souls. Mostly though, Ireland's cursers were women.

In oral stories, collected by folklorists like William and Lady Wilde (Oscar's parents) during the nineteenth century, and by the Irish Folklore Commission from the 1930s, imprecators were usually female.[128] Local yarns recounted the sufferings of cursing women, bereaved mothers who cried 'that the caor [lightning] may kill him', against men who betrayed their sons.[129] One particularly gruesome tale described a mother enraged by her son's bridal choice, who willed his death by lighting candles round his bed as if a corpse lay there, going

[126] NFC, MS 407, 265.

[127] Paulo Reis Mourão, 'Determinants of the Number of Catholic Priests to Catholics in Europe: An Economic Explanation', *Review of Religious Research*, lii (2011).

[128] Lady Wilde, *Ancient Legends, Mystic Charms, and Superstitions of Ireland*, i, 132–5; NFC, Schools' Collection: vol. 78, 153.

[129] NFC, MS 548, 242; Schools' Collection: vol. 465, 83.

down on her knees, praying for his demise.[130] Across Ireland, many people knew childish legends about mothers who gave their offspring the choice of a large cake and a curse or a small cake and a blessing.[131] More seriously, the commonest malediction stories concerned the dreadful power of the widow's curse.[132]

Like the beggar's curse and the priest's curse, the widow's curse was an old idea that chimed with the conditions of Irish life during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Widows were certainly plentiful and needful of power. The emigration and land consolidation following the Great Famine meant that female farmers (most of whom were widows) made up a growing proportion of tenants, from 4 per cent in 1841, to 15 per cent by 1911.[133] Landlords were evicting unprofitable tenants but farmers fought back, particularly during the Land War of 1879–82, using non-compliance and intimidation. Women were central to the struggle, organizing ostracisms and boycotts of 'land-grabbers', shouting and spitting at bailiffs, throwing stones at policemen, snatching notices and blocking roads to stop evictions (see Plate 2). Yet Irish society's patriarchal conventions hampered women's capacity to oppose. Female tenants joined the Land League (1879–81), the organization that fought for tenants' rights, but were barred from leadership positions and from speaking at public meetings. They could take the initiative, however, by throwing curses at 'land-grabbers'. As well as publicly uttering maledictions, Irish women used modern means to advertise the dark forces they had unleashed. In 1888, a shopkeeper from Mitchelstown who had purchased a house from the Countess of Kingston's estate was warned by notices posted around the town: 'let her be aware of the widow's curse'.[134]

Curses have been left out of accounts of Irish land conflict, but there is no doubt that they played an important role. From an emotional perspective, evicted tenants consoled themselves with

[130] NFC, MS 635, 145–6.

[131] Patrick Kennedy, *Legendary Fictions of the Irish Celts* (London, 1866), 54–7; Reidar Th. Christiansen, 'A Norwegian Fairytale in Ireland?', *Béaloideas*, ii (1930), 238; Pádraig Ó Tuathail, 'Folk-Tales from Carlow and West Wicklow', *Béaloideas*, vii (1937), 67.

[132] NFC, Schools' Collection: vol. 460, 294; vol. 461, 456; vol. 507, 554; vol. 573, 383; vol. 640, 75.

[133] Janet K. TeBrake, 'Irish Peasant Women in Revolt: The Land League Years', *Irish Historical Studies*, xxviii (1992).

[134] *Cork Constitution*, 17 Oct. 1888.

the thought that dire supernatural punishments awaited the new occupants. 'The bayonet of the British soldier will protect him', admitted a speaker at a meeting of the Callan Tenant Protection Society in 1847, 'but the widow's curse will meet him on the threshold and wither him'.[135] Literary stories about Irish life contained a trope about an abandoned cottage, left unoccupied since the previous occupant uttered her widow's curse.[136] In the real world, loosely similar events took place. At Tully in County Mayo, farmland owned by Miss Pringle remained unoccupied for at least fifteen years during the 1880s and 1890s, because the old tenant had been evicted. It was finally let in 1901 but the new occupant quickly gave it up after hundreds of local people protested and their leaders warned him that he 'would go before God with the widow's curse'.[137] In that instance, it is hard to discern what part the curse played, but other cases show that maledictions genuinely did drive out some 'land-grabbers'. A Scotsman named Patrick Dowd, for example, who in 1901 bought a distressed farm in Sligo. When the evicted tenant 'prayed the "widow's and orphans' curse upon him"', Mr Dowd suddenly reneged on his purchase, frankly telling the vendor: 'I'll have nothing to do with that place I so unwisely bid for. I do not want to have the widows' and orphans' curse'.[138]

With curses, Irish women complained, agitated, denounced, denigrated and fought back. It was the scariest manifestation of a well-established but increasingly controversial tradition, of 'sharp-tongued' females using fearful words to scold, defame and assert themselves.[139] Irish popular culture had long paid special heed to women's voices, in moments of crisis, from the cry of the keening mourner to the wail of the banshee. This may explain why, despite growing anxieties amongst Irish elites about the unruly conduct of verbally abusive females, Irish women continued to curse until the era of the Second World War and beyond. To take a few examples: in 1960 Mary Feehily knelt down on the road to use her widow's curse, calling for God to smite her

[135] *Kilkenny Journal*, 17 Nov. 1849.
[136] 'The Confessions of an Apostate', *Meath People*, 23 Oct. 1858.
[137] *Belfast News-Letter*, 18 Dec. 1901.
[138] *Evening Herald*, 12 Mar. 1901; *Irish News and Belfast Morning News*, 13 Mar. 1901.
[139] Cara Delay, '"Uncharitable Tongues": Women and Abusive Language in Early Twentieth-Century Ireland', *Feminist Studies*, xxxix (2013).

2. *Eviction Scene*, Daniel MacDonald (*c.*1850). A kneeling woman, perhaps a widow, calls down a curse on the landlords evicting her family. Source: Crawford Art Gallery, Cork. Reproduced with permission.

neighbour Patrick Watters, who had berated her during an argument about trespassing animals.[140] After an inheritance dispute, Ellie Walsh of Carrick spent the five years between 1957 and 1962 solemnly and publicly cursing her neighbour Harry Walsh, going down on her knees, holding up a crucifix, and praying 'that the curse of God would come' to wipe out Harry's family. Bound over to keep the peace, Ellie remained unbowed saying: 'I cursed Walsh, and I will continue to curse him until I die'.[141] Less dramatically, in 1967 Mary McCormack of Cloonard in Castlerea 'put her widow's curse' on informants who told the police she was holding unlicensed public dances.[142] The Republic of Ireland was a patriarchal and

[140] *Sligo Champion*, 17 Sept. 1960.
[141] *Western People*, 29 Sept. 1962.
[142] *Western People*, 4 Mar. 1967; *Connaught Telegraph*, 2 Mar. 1967.

conservative place, where until the 1970s married women were largely kept at home and out of the workforce. Cursing, with its traditional resonances, was a powerful tool for conventionally demure women to loudly and forcefully object.[143]

V

CURSING DECLINING AND CHANGING

Cursing dwindled, in Ireland, as its major uses disappeared and the networks that transmitted knowledge about it atrophied. But we should not exaggerate the extent of its decline, or imagine that it disappeared. Throughout the first half of the twentieth century, many people understood the righteous art's finer details. In 1930s County Clare, an American anthropologist discovered that maledictions, if uttered 'for cause', were credited with the power to ruin prosperous families, break unbelievers' necks, and send people blind.[144] Stories about lingering curses, uttered on land-grabbers generations ago, were rehearsed when their descendants died in strange circumstances. 'Those land-grabbers never had a bit of luck. The widow's curse was on them and their children'. In 1939, questioned about 'mallachtaí' (curses) by a researcher from the Irish Folklore Commission, a farmer from County Mayo reeled off an impressive list of eleven Gaelic maledictions, evoking death and the Devil, failure and blood, as direly poetic as any curses from a hundred years earlier. 'The heaviest curse at the present', wrote a teacher from the same county in the same year, 'is Marbhadh Fáisg ort — the squeeze band of Death on you'.[145]

At the mid-twentieth century, cursing was not just the province of aged farmers in the *Gaeltacht* — western Ireland, where Gaelic was strongest. Maledictions were uttered across Ireland, North and South, Protestant and Catholic districts, even in towns and cities. Especially in the North, evictees still used 'the fire of stones' curse.[146] Before they were thrown out, tenants would build up

[143] Lindsey Earner-Byrne and Diane Urquhart, 'Gender Roles in Ireland since 1740', in Biagini and Daly (eds.), *Cambridge Social History of Modern Ireland*.

[144] Arensberg, *Irish Countryman*, 28.

[145] NFC, MS 538, 208–13; Schools' Collection: vol. 126, 126; vol. 514, 19; vol. 95, 112.

[146] Fionnuala Carson Williams, 'A Fire of Stones Curse', *Folk Life*, xxxv (1996/1997); Fionnuala Carson Williams, 'A Fire of Stones Curse Rekindled', *Folk Life*, xlii (2003).

piles of stones in every hearth in the house. 'Not until these fires burn', they prayed, 'will the newcomers do any good'. The curse was known in Scotland too, and may have been brought to Ireland centuries ago by Presbyterian settlers (though the transmission could have been the other way).[147] 'One of the most baleful curses known in Ulster', the folklorist Jeanne Cooper Foster was stunned to learn that, as late as the 1940s and 1950s, the fire of stones curse was 'still used'.[148] It was always levied in connection with evictions, she discovered, with cases occurring in Downpatrick, Bushmills, County Down, and even on Belfast's famously Protestant Shankill Road.

Cinema, radio and television all diminished popular knowledge of cursing. By the 1960s American movies and television shows were popular even in remote Gaelic-speaking places like Inis Beag, a windy isle three miles off Ireland's north-western coast. The *seanchaí*, accomplished storytellers with vast repositories of local yarns, were dying off and not being replaced.[149] Old oral tales — of imprecating priests, malediction-throwing beggars, and cursing widows — were not told like they had once been. The decline was partially compensated for by the increasing popularity of folklore books and pamphlets, where malediction stories were told and racy curses listed. Ultimately though, cursing was no longer being embedded in youngsters' minds. Folklorists' interviewees, such as Patrick Feeney of Gurrane of Ballyhea in County Cork, said that the generations growing up from the 1960s knew little of maledictions.[150]

Perhaps that was overstating it: some people still knew bloodcurdling tales. Michael Rooney of Blacklion, for instance, who was interviewed for the Irish Folklore Commission in 1974. He talked volubly about dozens of topics, but when curses were broached, Michael went quiet. Had he ever heard about them? 'I did'. After lots of stunted answers, the interviewer started pushing and reassuring Michael: 'just tell us one instance: it's all right'. It

[147] Maria Trotter and Robert De Bruce Trotter, *Galloway Gossip Sixty Years Ago: Being A Series of Articles Illustrative of the Manners, Customs, and Peculiarities of the Aboriginal Picts of Galloway*, ed. Saxon (Bedlington, 1877), 109–10.

[148] Jeanne Cooper Foster, *Ulster Folklore* (Belfast, 1951), 120–2; 'Ulster Folklore', in *Proceedings and Report of the Belfast Natural History and Philosophical Society: Session 1943–1944*, 2nd ser., ii (1945), 153; Lynch, 'Widow's Curse', 28–36.

[149] John C. Messenger, *Inis Beag: Isle of Ireland* (Long Grove, Ill., 1983), 113–17, 127.

[150] Lynch, 'Widow's Curse', 231.

all came out. Michael knew a woman who threw the widow's curse. The consequences were catastrophic: 'the curse didn't fall on the people she give it too but it fell on herself'. She 'died in torture', of kidney disease: 'it come back on herself, back on herself . . . I'm telling you she suffered for the curse she gave to other people'.[151] Michael's trembling words underscore the powerful emotions swirling around this topic. Curses sprung from bitter passions at trying times. They expressed fear, loathing, hate and yearning for pitiless vengeance, for punishments exceeding anything one could mete out physically. It was terrifyingly brutal, mustering dark feelings that marked people who had seen or maybe just heard about the events in question.

In Northern Ireland, as sectarian violence flared during the dark days of the Troubles, curses were sporadically revived. 'Love your enemy — bless them that curse you', peacemakers counselled.[152] But who could blame the bereaved families who wrote to newspapers, telling the world that they had prayed for God's curse to fall on the murderers, or the clergymen who announced that paramilitary killers bore the curse of Cain?[153] This was not the elaborate, artful cursing of generations past, using complex formulas and theatrical rituals to call down gruesome tortures. It was simpler, informed more by biblical imagery than oral tradition, yet it did have elements of public performance. Although not really an art, it seems to have nurtured determination and vengeance, amongst people experiencing terrible loss.

During the Troubles, Ulster's radical politicians invoked and even threw a few curses, with mixed results. In 1969 a member of the Trotskyist civil rights group People's Democracy put the 'curse of Cromwell' on three hundred council tenants from Armagh, because they failed to join a protest demonstration outside Armagh City Hall, preferring to organize their own march instead. 'Nobody on the estate backed a winner yesterday', an informant later told the *Belfast Telegraph*. Whether or not the residents really credited the curse, it was politically counterproductive. Locals became 'very annoyed'

[151] NFC, MS 1838, 295–7.

[152] *Belfast Telegraph*, 11 Aug. 1969, 2.

[153] 'Catholic mother's "curse" on killers', *Belfast Telegraph*, 2 Mar. 1973. Also: 'Curse of Cain', *Belfast Telegraph*, 26 Nov. 1971, 5; 11 Sept. 1972, 3.

with People's Democracy: 'they will get no support from us now', one said.[154] Ian Paisley, the hard-line leader of Northern Ireland's Democratic Unionist Party, had more success when he used the rhetoric of cursing to advertise his party's 'no surrender' politics. In 1972 the Reverend Paisley attacked what he called 'the curse that has blighted twentieth-century Protestantism, this curse of ecumenism'.[155] Infamously, in the late 1970s and 1980s he and other senior members of the DUP used similar rhetoric to attack another target: if homosexuality were legalized in Ulster, they said, it would 'bring God's curse down upon our people'.[156] The scandalous claim has haunted the DUP ever since; whether it damaged or enhanced their electoral prospects is debatable.

Cursing was largely ignored during the late 1800s and early 1900s occult revival in Ireland. Writers like W. B. Yeats communed with banshees and fairies, but did little with maledictions except for a few fleeting references and using 'The Curse of Cromwell' as a poem title. Probably cursing was too vicious, humorous and Catholic for it to be translated into the dreamy and non-denominational realm of the 'Celtic Twilight'.[157] Cursing experienced none of the post 1970s esoteric revival, either. Like the 'New Age' movement internationally, in Ireland this revival was principally concerned with holistic wellness and spiritual exploration. Its adherents revisited and reinterpreted Ireland's mystical traditions, particularly its country remedies, ancient myths, magical legends and pagan monuments.[158] Needless to say, the historic art of cursing did not chime with this agenda.

[154] *Belfast Telegraph*, 5 June 1969.

[155] Quoted in John D. Brewer with Gareth I. Higgins, *Anti-Catholicism in Northern Ireland, 1600–1998: The Mote and the Beam* (Basingstoke, 1998), 111.

[156] Marian Duggan, *Queering Conflict: Examining Lesbian and Gay Experiences of Homophobia in Northern Ireland*, 1st edn (London, 2012), 53; Fintan O'Toole, 'Fire and Brimstone', *Magill*, ix, 13 Nov. 1985, <https://magill.ie/archive/fire-and-brimstone> (accessed March 2019).

[157] Edward Hirsch, 'Coming Out into the Light: W. B. Yeats's "The Celtic Twilight" (1893, 1902)', *Journal of the Folklore Institute*, xviii (1981); Roy Foster, 'Protestant Magic: W. B. Yeats and the Spell of Irish History', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, lxxv (1989).

[158] 'Druidry in Contemporary Ireland', in Michael F. Strmiska (ed.) *Modern Paganism in World Cultures: Comparative Perspectives* (Santa Barbara Cal., 2005); Carmen Kuhling, 'The New Age Movement in the Post-Celtic Tiger Context: Secularisation, Enchantment and Crisis', *Études Irlandaises*, xxxix (2014); Richard Jenkins, 'The Transformations of Biddy Early: From Local Reports of Magical Healing to Globalised New Age Fantasies', *Folklore*, cxviii (2007); Catherine

(cont. on p. 146)

Even so, cursing was not dead. Defeats in football, hurling and even stock market losses were occasionally blamed on old curses.[159] More seriously, in the Irish Republic a few people still threw maledictions and credited them with dire powers. Ellen Collins of Ballina, for instance, who thought a curse killed her mother, made her child disabled and gave her depression. In November 1996, Ellen tried to stab the woman she held responsible for uttering it.[160] In January 2010 a Donegal Garda had a 'gypsy's curse' put on her, by the occupants of an uninsured car. In court, the officer explained how it made her feel very uncomfortable, though the defendants promised it was 'a load of nonsense'.[161] Even worse was the lurid curse an arrested driver threw at a Garda officer in Ennis in May 2018: 'I am putting a curse on you. I will light a candle that your family will die and you will suffer grief in the next 12 months', he said: 'when it happens, I will take pictures and send them to you and put them up for everyone to see. You will see within 12 months that your family or someone belonged to you will be dead'.[162]

There was another difference, between turn of the twenty-first-century curses and the maledictions of the 1800s. The emphasis on justice, on curses befalling evildoers, had waned. With the legal system generally trusted to provide fair outcomes, perhaps there was little need for a justice-based supernatural punishment. Maybe, too, cursing was weakened by the decline of Catholicism and the idea of a supervisory God, with the weekly church-going rate in the Republic collapsing from 91 per cent in 1973 to 43 per cent in 2008.[163] Whatever the case, Irish cursing had not just diminished but changed, losing its previously strong link with

(n. 158 cont.)
Maignant, 'Alternative Pilgrimages: Postmodern Celtic Christianity and the Spatialisation of Time', *Nordic Irish Studies*, vi (2007); Jenny Butler, *21st Century Irish Paganism: Worldview, Ritual, Identity* (Farnham, 2019).

[159] *Irish Independent*, 11 Nov. 2000; *Irish Independent*, 8 Feb. 2002; *Sunday Independent* (Dublin), 26 July 1987.

[160] *Western People*, 25 Feb. 1998.

[161] *Derry Journal*, 26 Jan. 2010.

[162] 'Driver Jailed After Placing "Lurid Widow's Curse" on Garda that Her Family Would Die', *Irish Examiner*, 8 Jan. 2019, <https://www.irishexaminer.com/breakingnews/ireland/driver-jailed-after-placing-lurid-widows-curse-on-garda-that-her-family-would-die-896320.html>.

[163] Kuhling, 'New Age Movement in the Post-Celtic Tiger Context', 177.

morality. People who believed they were cursed occasionally wrote to newspaper agony aunts, describing themselves as being under an 'evil power', as if curses were identical with black witchcraft.[164] Likewise, in the 1990s and early 2000s countryside, in places like County Limerick and County Tipperary and even rural Ulster, there were still farmers and veterinarians who had seen strange things and experienced weird agricultural misfortunes. Guardedly, they talked about *piseogs*, the evil eye ('blinking'), witchcraft and curses.[165] However, those words now meant much the same thing. Ian Lynch, a researcher at University College Dublin's National Folklore Collection, discovered something similar in 2011, when he sent out questionnaires asking about widows' curses. Some of his respondents made an equivalence between curses and maleficent practices like leaving eggs and dead animals on neighbours' farms.[166] People no longer distinguished between different types of occult attack. Cursing, once understood as a righteous supernatural assault, had been subsumed into the general category of 'evil magic'.

VI

CONCLUSION

Fairies, rural remedies, stone circles and holy wells have made a modest comeback, in early twenty-first-century Ireland. The art of cursing, on the other hand, is little cultivated. This is striking because, up to about the 1950s, cursing was probably the most valuable magic in a land where all sorts of mystic forces were treated with respect, from Marian apparitions to banshees. Throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, metaphorical curses peppered Irish people's conversations, jokes, songs and angry outbursts. These clever formulas were the basis for the unnerving art of real cursing, a scary but widespread occult attack that Irish folk used in their struggles over vital areas of life, from land and food to politics, religion, gender and family disputes. The history of Irish cursing

[164] 'I Think I'm Cursed', *Sunday Life*, 21 May 1995, 30.

[165] Michael L. Doherty, 'The Folklore of Cattle Diseases: A Veterinary Perspective', *Béaloideas*, lxix (2001), 55–6.

[166] Lynch, 'Widow's Curse', 240.

underlines how mystic forces and supernatural powers can resonate incredibly strongly in modern societies, if they chime with people's struggles and are indulged by complacent authorities. It also reminds us that not all types of magic share the same chronology of rise and fall, growth and decline, enchantment and disenchantment.

Irish cursing persisted partly because of its value, use and functions. It is tempting to classify it as one of the 'weapons of the weak' that have been most sensitively studied by the sociologist James C. Scott — those 'everyday forms of resistance' that subordinated individuals use to subtly check authority and limit powerful people's claims upon food, rents, taxes and labour.[167] To fit Irish cursing precisely into this schema would not, however, be entirely correct. With fearsome curses, needy Irish people did indeed demand food, land, and family and religious loyalty, with some success. Yet cursing did not always work that way. It did not always ensure people's compliance, but it did have other grimly consoling uses, in assuring frustrated people that their pains would be avenged. Cursing was not only an intimidating magical weapon, but also a dark therapy. Nor was it employed exclusively by the weak and powerless. Cursing was rife in nineteenth-century Ireland because many people valued it, not only poor peasants and beggars, but priests, parents, and others needful of influence and consolation.

To be intimidating and cathartic, cursing required knowledge, practice, wit, skill and composure. In this respect, it was an art. Recognizing this challenges us to reconsider our wider ideas about the history of magic. Concepts like belief, ritual, tradition, symbolism, mentality and discourse undoubtedly illuminate key aspects of historic Irish maledictions. Overall though, cursing is best conceived of as an art because of the cultivation it required and the strength of the reactions it elicited. The same is likely to be true, though perhaps to a lesser degree, of other magical techniques. Magic is a potent force in the world, not supernaturally but psychologically. Psychosomatically, it can heal, injure and even kill; intimidate, haunt and terrify; or invigorate, inspire and empower. If we want

[167] James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (Yale, 1985), xvi–xvii.

to appreciate how magic can move people in these ways, we need to better appreciate how accomplished, skilful and imposing it is. It is time we acknowledged the polish and power of the art of magic.

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