Chapter Eight

‘The Odious Demon from Across the Sea’. Oliver Cromwell, Memory and the Dislocations of Ireland

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As with any country subject to colonisation, partition, and dispossession, Ireland harbours a long social memory containing many villains, though none so overwhelmingly enduring—indeed, so historically overriding—as Oliver Cromwell. Invading the country in 1649 with his New Model Army in order to reassert control over an ongoing Catholic rebellion-turned royalty threat, Cromwell was in charge when thousands were killed during the storming of the towns of Drogheda and Wexford, before he proceeded on to a sometimes-brutal campaign in which the rest of the country was eventually subdued, despite considerable resistance in the next few years. Though Cromwell would himself depart Ireland after forty weeks, turning command over to his lieutenant Henry Ireton in the spring of 1650, the fruits of his efforts in Ireland resulted in famine, plague, the violence of continued guerrilla war, ethnic cleansing, and deportation; hundreds of thousands died from the war and its aftermath, and all would be affected by a settlement that would, in the words of one recent historian, bring about ‘the most epic and monumental transformation of Irish life, property, and landscape that the island had ever known’.¹

Though Cromwell’s invasion generated a significant amount of international press and attention at the time,² scholars have argued that Cromwell as an embodiment of English violence and perfidy is a relatively recent phenomenon in Irish historical memory, having emerged only as the result of nineteenth-century nationalist (or unionist) movements which


constructed traditions or shaped memories around him in order to justify their respective causes. As Toby Barnard has written, Irish histories of the later seventeenth century tended in their royalist concerns to overlook the Cromwellian interregnum, while the heroic symbol of the Protestant ascendancy rested not in Cromwell but William III, ‘a man not without [his own] embarrassing blemishes, but altogether less dangerous than Cromwell’. If anyone was to be the great enemy, it was the Protestant James Butler, the duke of Ormonde, or on a lesser level Murrough O’Brien, Lord Inchiquin, who recovered their estates during the restoration of Charles II and, in the former’s case, oversaw new or existing land transfers into the hands of a Protestant minority. Meanwhile, the eighteenth century, while rich in Irish historical and literary activity, witnessed Catholic and Protestant histories that focused not on 1649 or the 1650s, but on the rising of 1641, the Restoration, and the Williamite settlements, with Cromwell—according to Barnard—presented as an honourable enemy rather than a ‘duplicitous fiend’. It was not until the works of J.P. Pendergast and W.E.H. Lecky, both Victorians, that a darker Cromwell came forth, with Lecky writing that Drogheda and Wexford and the subsequent resettlements ‘made the name of Cromwell eternally hated in Ireland’, leading to the deep and sustaining antipathy ‘both of England and of Protestantism’.

Lecky’s remark that Cromwell had been ‘eternally hated’ reveals, however, that the calamitous legacy of the conqueror was very much remembered, and demonised, long before nineteenth-century partisan historians or folklorists discovered his use as an effective villain. For the previous two centuries Cromwell had already appeared in a variety of forms across oral

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