

“A Warr So Desperate”

“A Warr So Desperate”:
John Milton and Some Contemporaries
on the Irish Rebellion

By

Jim Daems

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P U B L I S H I N G

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This book first published 2012

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

12 Back Chapman Street, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2XX, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

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ISBN (10): 1-4438-3510-2, ISBN (13): 978-1-4438-3510-7

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This book began over a decade ago as my PhD dissertation entitled “*A barbarous nook of Ireland:*” *Representations of the Irish Rebellion in Milton and Some Contemporaries* at the University of Wales, Bangor under the supervision of Thomas N. Corns—whom I would like to thank for his continuing support on this project. Over the years, parts of this book have been presented at conferences organized by the Canadian Society for Renaissance Studies, the Pacific Northwest Renaissance Society, as well as at the British Milton Seminar, and a History Roundtable at the University of the Fraser Valley. I would also like to thank the librarians at the University of the Fraser Valley—particularly the interlibrary loans librarians who I have greatly relied on while working on this book. Soon after beginning work on this project, the UFV library also got a very timely subscription to the Early English Books Online database, which made research much more convenient. Holly Faith Nelson suggested some useful sources. In addition, she and Willy Maley graciously read the manuscript. Kelly Henry helped with formatting issues during the last weeks of preparing the manuscript. This book is dedicated to my father, who passed away several months before its completion.

INTRODUCTION

READING AND WRITING THE IRISH REBELLION

[The Irish Rebellion] reached deeper then hell it selfe, at which the very Prince of the Divels could not but be astonished.

—Adam Meredith, *Ormonds Cvrtain Drawn*

References to the Irish Rebellion are scattered throughout the prose works of John Milton: from the early antiprelatical tracts through to *The Readie and Easie Way* on the eve of the Restoration. The Irish Rebellion must also contribute to Milton's representation of rebellion in *Paradise Lost*.¹ The Irish Rebellion, which erupted late in October 1641, affected Milton enough for him to donate money for the relief of English Protestant refugees in June 1642.² Yet, Milton's *Observations Upon the Articles of Peace* remains a marginalized tract within the Miltonic canon. *Observations*, if mentioned at all, is often done so only in passing, or relegated to a footnote. Even scholars who have written specifically on *Observations* frequently note that the tract is not the most engaging of Milton's prose writings, and there is certainly some truth to that assertion. Thomas N. Corns, for example, cites stylistic reasons and the fact that much of the tract "is the reproduction—as a prelude to refutation or comment—of dry and drossy stuff by Milton's enemies."³ The material that Milton was commissioned by the Council of State to respond to consists of the *Articles of Peace* concluded between the Earl of Ormond, Charles I's Lord Lieutenant in Ireland, and the Confederate Catholics; an exchange of letters between Ormond and Colonel Michael Jones, Parliamentary governor of Dublin, attempting to persuade him to break his allegiance with the English Parliament; Ormond's declaration of Charles II; and the Belfast Presbytery's *Necessary Representation*, attacking the "sectaries" for Pride's Purge, the trial and execution of the king, and a wider religious toleration. *Observations* is, perhaps as a result of this, a prose work in which Milton expresses a minimum of personal engagement—only the Belfast Presbytery's *Representation* seems truly to fire Milton's imagination. Willy Maley similarly states that Milton's *Observations* "is a text which few Milton scholars would want to dwell unduly."⁴ In part it

may well be that Milton himself was not particularly interested in dwelling on the commission because of the nature of the documents he was asked specifically to respond to, prompting Joad Raymond to suggest that he took a “dilatatory” approach to such “hack work.”⁵

While all three critics put forward valid points as to why *Observations* may be so neglected—and certainly I will not argue in what follows that it deserves an elevated position in the canon of Milton’s works—there is another reason to consider. The argument put forward by Milton in *Observations* is not one that would elicit a sympathetic response today. Merritt Y. Hughes, writes,

Probably most Englishmen, including very many royalists and even some Catholics, went along with Milton in most of his strictures on the Peace and rejoiced in his sarcasms that make modern readers wince.⁶

On one level, we do generally enjoy Milton’s sarcasms, particularly his ad hominem attacks. These usually signal his engagement with his topic. However, in terms of Hughes’ insight, Milton’s sarcasms in *Observations* are generally motivated by both his anti-Catholicism (clearly evident throughout his other work) and his ethnic stereotypes, and these are problematic beyond just what might be termed our current “political correctness.” The problem is more significant in the contexts of how we view Milton and his ideals—particularly in relation to liberty and religious toleration. *Observations* is not the work of the autonomous citizen-author that takes centre stage in *Areopagitica* and argues passionately that debate is essential to individual, religious, and political liberties. *Observations* is published anonymously by “Authority,” and argues for the justness of an English reconquest of Ireland. The Irish are, quite simply, barbaric, preferring “their own absurd and savage Customes before the most convincing evidence of reason and demonstration.”⁷ In relation to our contemporary perception of the text, Mary C. Fenton states,

Milton’s views of Ireland expose a significant moral contradiction for the modern reader: Milton, the rational, liberal advocate for individual, civil, and domestic liberty and religious tolerance seems to be, concurrently, Milton the apologist for Cromwell’s devastating hegemonic policies against the Irish.⁸

Milton’s aim in *Observations*, as its commissioned status makes clear, is to present to readers the Commonwealth’s official line regarding Ireland and to persuade them of the necessity of such a policy. Hence, as Maley argues, while Edmund Spenser’s Irish writings have often led critics to

portray him as “a mere mouthpiece for the presumed policies of the presiding regime. That charge would be levelled with more justice at Milton.”⁹ The tract is a call to avenge “the Murders, Massacres, Treasons, [and] Pyracies” that have occurred “from the very fatal day wherein that Rebellion first broke out” (*Observations*, CPW 3: 308). That vengeance is, however, directed at more than just the Irish rebels, though the Irish would suffer the most violent consequences of what Milton is justifying in *Observations*.

As Milton confidently asserts of the *Articles of Peace*, “no true borne *English-man*, can so much as barely read them without indignation and disdaine” (*Observations*, CPW 3: 301). This is a key point early in *Observations*—Milton is defining the Parliamentary interest throughout the tract in a very specific way by conjoining the interests of both Ormond’s royalist alliance and the Belfast Presbytery with the Irish rebels. The point he is making is straightforward in a very George W. Bush way—you are either with the purged Parliament or with the Irish rebels. As Hughes and Corns note, Milton is drawing upon a clear alignment of anti-Catholic and ethnic prejudices that, within the context of the Irish Rebellion, he would not have the benefit of in most of his other work.¹⁰ He employs these stereotypes to impugn both Ormond’s royalist coalition and the Belfast Presbytery in a very specific manner by “building on a broad Protestant antipathy to Irish Catholics and feeding off the assumptions of a reading public now conditioned to look for and to find royalist and papist conspiracies.”¹¹ Milton is on reasonably solid ground in asserting the reaction of his ideal reader as a “true borne *English-man*.” His strategy in dealing with the documents included in the tract is straightforward in this regard:

Although it be a Maxim much agreeable to wisdom, that just deeds are the best answer to injurious words, and actions of what ever sort, their own plainest Interpreters; yet since our enemies can finde the leisure both wayes to offend us, it will be requisite we should be found in neither of those wayes neglectfull of our just defence. To let them know, that sincere and upright intentions can certainly with as much ease deliver themselves into words as into deeds. (*Observations*, CPW 3: 300)

The distinction is made here in the opening sentence of *Observations* by Milton’s pronouns which construct this straightforward binary—“our enemies” versus “us.” The central comparison-contrast of words and deeds is an effective way of highlighting the present urgency of the situation in Ireland and of asserting the Commonwealth’s political legitimacy as the defender of English rights in Ireland, as well as the purged Parliament’s

wider religious toleration. Milton will end the tract on the same point of comparison-contrast by explicitly calling attention to the disparity between the king's and Ormond's deeds and the concessions granted to the Irish rebels in the *Articles of Peace*, as well as the present rebellious actions of the Belfast Presbytery in relation to their protests in *A Necessary Representation*.

Of the former, Milton demonstrates that the *Articles of Peace* reveal that Charles was,

playing his own game, upon the miseries of his people: Of which wee desire no other view at present then these Articles of peace with the Rebels, and the rare game likely to ensue from such a cast of his Cards. (*Observations*, CPW 3: 332)

Similarly, he asks of the Belfast Presbytery's *Representation* whether readers can reconcile their words, which condemn the Irish rebels as "enemies of God," with their present actions against the Parliamentary interest, as the Ulster Scots "goe not out to battell, as they ought, but rather by these thir doings assist and become associats" with the Irish rebels (*Observations*, CPW 3: 334). This statement is clearly a rallying cry both justifying the Parliament's intentions of militarily reasserting English rights in Ireland and asserting that it has the best interests of the Commonwealth at heart—that it will not allow anyone to alienate Ireland from England, as Charles and Ormond have done with the *Articles of Peace* and the Ulster Scots have done by not joining their military forces with those of the English Parliament to suppress the rebellion. Milton's claim here echoes Stephen Marshall's *Meroz Cursed* (1642) in its condemnation of those who will not avenge the atrocities committed by the Irish rebels:

Because they [Meroz] joyned not their strength with Gods people, they are judged not to help the *Lord*. For [...] the *Lord* and his *People* are so *conjoynd*, that their friends are his friends, and their enemies are his enemies, and whosoever helps not *them*, are interpreted to *refuse to assist the Lord himselfe*.¹²

Conjoining royalists and the Belfast Presbytery with the anti-christian Irish rebels reinforces Milton's providential assertion of Parliament, most evident in *Observations* in his defense of the trial and execution of Charles I:

A matter which to men whose serious consideration thereof hath left no certain precept, or example undebated, is so farr from giving offence, that

wee implore and beseech the Divine Majesty so to uphold and support thir spirits with like fortitude and Magnanimity, that all thir ensuing actions may correspond and prove worthy that impartiall and noble peece of Justice, wherein the hand of God appear'd so evidently on our side. (CPW 3: 311)

That the actions of Parliament continue to correspond in both words and deeds—evident in Jones' steadfast rejection of Ormond's appeal to break his parliamentary trust and Milton's own act of writing—conjoins the cause that Milton represents in *Observations* with the "*Lord himselfe*." The actions of the royalists and the Belfast Presbytery alert readers to the duplicity and hypocrisy of those that oppose the purged Parliament in terms of both political issues that touch on the relationships between England, Ireland, and Scotland, as well as how these impinge upon England's rights of dominion in Ireland. The importance of this is evident in the fact that Milton explicitly ends the tract by reiterating this interpretive model.¹³

Milton's stress on comparing and contrasting words and deeds highlights the significance of the multitude of publications that poured from the press dealing with events in Ireland, many of which did make explicit contextual links to the wider political significance of the rebellion in a three kingdoms context. It is important to note, however, that although these tracts greatly influenced English perceptions of what was happening in Ireland many are fictional. M. Perceval-Maxwell states that,

Apart from those [publications] reproducing speeches or official statements, few appear to be authentic in the sense of being in fact what they purport to be. A great many describe events in Ireland that never happened. Some undoubtedly were published for propaganda purposes, but the motive is sometimes concealed.¹⁴

Such material, along with sermons (which were often printed), most likely inspired Milton's donation for Irish relief in 1642, and he is drawing on his readers' similar knowledge. We have a very significant example of how some people were affected by their reading of the Irish Rebellion from the commonplace book of Nehemiah Wallington, "in which he digested a number of pamphlets published in late 1641 and early 1642."¹⁵ Wallington dwelled considerably on the atrocity literature of the Irish Rebellion and his reading both set this into an English providential narrative—which linked the rebellion to a long list of events, such as the Spanish Armada, the Gunpowder Plot, the crypto-Catholicism of the Stuart court, and the bishops—and read it pragmatically, as an event that

demanded a response, specifically citing, like Marshall, the curse of Meroz. As Joseph Cope states,

Wallington's reflections give some insight into the thought process that gave meaning to the rising. Although Wallington's sensibilities may not have necessarily reflected the views of the majority of the people living in England in the 1640s [...] his worldview was firmly rooted in typical puritan beliefs. Wallington's reflections on Ireland thus represent one particularly accessible, but not necessarily unique glimpse of how other English readers may have tried to make sense of the horrific news arriving from Ireland in the early 1640s.¹⁶

In fact, Wallington was affected so greatly by the Irish Rebellion that he "described the relevant sections [of his commonplace book] as a 'black cover book called A Bundle of Mercies in the beginning of parliament, which book I was constrained to leave about the middle and write of the miseries that broke forth in Ireland.'"¹⁷ He also very diligently prepared himself for prescribed fast-days devoted to events in Ireland.¹⁸

While we have no explicit references to popular publications of the sort Wallington read and copied in his commonplace book for Milton's reading of such contemporary material, it is quite likely that he must have read some from the figures of dead Protestants he uses in *Observations and Eikonoklastes*. He also makes use of Edward Bowles' *The Myserie of Iniquity Yet Working in the Kingdomes of England, Scotland, & Ireland, for the Destruction of Religion Truly Protestant* (1643) in *Eikonoklastes*. We do know that he had a hand in the publication of Thomas Waring's *A Brief Narration of the Plotting, Beginning, & Carrying on of that Execrable Rebellion and Butcherie in Ireland* (1650). We also know from his Commonplace Book that Milton read Edmund Spenser's *A View of the Present State of Ireland*, which was first published by James Ware in 1633 in *Two Histories of Ireland*. As Maley notes, Milton read Spenser's "treatise, not as an antiquarian exercise, but as a practical guide—clearly against the grain of Ware's prefatorial promptings."¹⁹ The way Milton read Spenser, Bowles, and the documents he engages with in *Observations* suggests a pragmatic attention similar to Wallington's reading of more popular, ephemeral publications.

It is worth taking a moment to consider Ware's Dedication and Preface to *A View* in order to provide some important context leading up to the events that this book focuses on and which play a role in how Milton perceived the Irish Rebellion. In his dedication to the Lord Deputy of Ireland, Thomas Wentworth, Ware writes,

The sence of that happy peace, which by divine providence this Kingdome hath enjoyed, since the beginning of the raigne of his late Majestie of ever sacred memory, doth then take the deeper impression, when these our halcyon dayes are compared with the former turbulent and tempestuous times, and with the miseries (of severall kindes) incident unto them.

Ware's claim in 1633 of "*these our halcyon dayes*" in Ireland is, in large part, true. Ireland had experienced peace since the flight of the earls, and this would essentially continue through to the outbreak of rebellion in 1641. During that period, colonists and native Irish had reached accommodations. The increase in social intercourse between these groups meant that the fear of rebellion "had almost evaporated by the 1630s."²⁰ The shift in the social climate goes some way in explaining Ware's suggestion, in his Preface, that "we may wish that in some passages [... Spenser's *View*] had bin tempered with more moderation." Ware's editorial practice is more that of the antiquarian looking back upon a turbulent period in the history between colonised and coloniser in Ireland. In 1633, for example, Ware believes that Spenser would have no cause "to lay either any particular aspersion upon some families, or generall upon the Nation." One especially noteworthy family on Ware's mind would be the Butlers, and Charles I's future Lord Lieutenant, James Butler, who succeeded to the title in 1632, as the 12th Earl of Ormond.

But while Ware reflects the developing peaceful coexistence in Ireland, events in England and Scotland were beginning to conspire against this peace which would contribute to the fury of the 1641 rebellion: only a few short years following the publication of *Two Histories of Ireland*, Charles I's attempt to impose religious uniformity on his Scots Presbyterian subjects led to the Bishops' Wars. This prompted Wentworth to muster an Irish Catholic army for Charles' use against the Scots. In addition, Wentworth's attempt to curtail any possible assistance that the Scottish population of Ulster might provide their brethren in their efforts to resist Charles' heavy-handed ecclesiastical innovations in Scotland saw the institution of the hated Black Oath of Loyalty which provoked rioting in Ulster. The events between the king and the Scots also had an unforeseen effect on Ireland which further destabilized the country: the harvests of 1640 and 1641

had been bad and the poor harvest had been compounded by a shortage of labour to gather what had grown since many Scottish settlers in Ulster had fled to Scotland to escape the penal legislation being imposed on them by the Dublin administration.²¹

The resulting situation—both in terms of poor harvests and the Ulster Scots' displeasure with the Dublin administration—was further exacerbated by the quartering of an Irish catholic army in Ulster for use against the Scots Covenanters. Raymond Gillespie sums up the situation in Ireland in the years immediately preceding the rebellion by stating that,

Despite the political improbability of a rebellion given the good social and political relations between native and newcomer, nevertheless the greater likelihood of disruption from other sources was sufficient to create an atmosphere of uncertainty and instability among the settler community.²²

It is important to note, here, that despite the poor harvests, Wentworth's policies, and the situation on the English-Scottish border, that right up to the actual outbreak of the rebellion in 1641, the colonists essentially shared in Ware's opinion of "*halcyon days*." This is evident in the astonishment with which many responded to the rebellion.

Yet, neither the historical situation between coloniser and colonised nor Ware's Preface precludes the possibility of reading Spenser's tract as something other than a quaint antiquarian exercise. Ware's dedication to Wentworth, itself, suggests such a possibility—*A View* can be read "*for matter of history and policy*" in order to glean its antiquarian suggestions directed at the Preface's "fit reader." In effect, Ware's dedication and Preface both affirm a significant change from the 1590s to 1633 while subtly implying a continuity. Milton clearly read Spenser's *View* "*for matter of history and policy*," as the practical political reader of the dedication, not as Ware's antiquarian "fit reader" of the preface. In relation to Wentworth's doings in Ireland, Ware's dedication must have appeared rather naive by the late 1630s as the Lord Deputy increasingly came to be seen as a tyrannical instrument of the king and as a hindrance to the reformation in Ireland.

Indeed, for Maley, "Milton's reading of Spenser suggests a continuity of English colonial theory in a period of conflict and change."²³ We must stress this continuity and Milton's position within this tradition. Milton is, like Wallington, reliant upon textual representations of Ireland from which he garnered the interpretive binary of English civility / Irish barbarism, of an Irish nation unamenable to any prior "civilizing Conquest" (*Observations*, CPW 3: 304)—precisely what may have drawn him to Spenser's text in order to seek "a solution to the Irish problem."²⁴ Certainly, throughout the 1640s Milton shifts the blame for the failure to accomplish the benefits of such a conquest: from the bishops in the antiprelatical tracts to the king in *Eikonoklastes*, and finally to the king, Ormond, and the Ulster Scots in *Observations*. Similarly, Norah Carlin argues that it was the continuity of

the civility / barbarism binary, rather than a new religious extremism during the civil war period, that motivated the ferocity of Cromwell's Irish campaign—a campaign which Milton justified before the fact, almost immediately upon being sworn into his secretariat for the Council of State on the same day as Cromwell was appointed by the same body to command the Irish reconquest—and he would continue to justify in his later writings, particularly in *Eikonoklastes* and the first Latin defence. Like Maley, then, Carlin's examination of mid-seventeenth century English tracts on Ireland highlights the ideological continuity of English colonial attitudes towards Ireland. Such tracts, she finds,

are redolent of a mainstream colonising tradition in English representations of Ireland in the early modern period, and I believe that the policies of the Independents, in 1649-51 at least, can be understood only within that tradition.²⁵

Responsibility for the events of 1649-51, Carlin argues, cannot simply be shrugged off onto the shoulders of religious extremists.²⁶ These two issues—barbaric stereotypes and religious extremism in the 1640s and 1650s—are not, however, entirely separable. They combine for specific polemical purposes in both the popular material that many people such as Wallington and Milton read, and the more apparently politically motivated works such as *Observations* or Sir John Temple's *The Irish Rebellion* (1646). On the broadest level, ethnic stereotypes and religious extremism combined:

The conclusion that the Irish were beyond redemption gave ecclesiastical sanction to the identification of the elect of God with the new élite of colonialism and generated a sense of spiritual superiority which reinforced the conviction of cultural and social superiority which the settlers already felt.²⁷

Milton will make use of a similar sense of spiritual and cultural superiority in *Observations* as he prompts his readers to compare and contrast the words and deeds of those he represents as enemies of the Commonwealth, and it is apparent in his other discussions of the Irish Rebellion that will be explored in this book.

Chapter one looks at the wider three kingdoms context of Milton's *Observations*, examining how he represents the relationship between England, Ireland, and Scotland as he defines the Commonwealth's vision of an English Independent interest in Ireland. This entails a critique of the Scots' role not only in Ireland but also in the wider reconfigured polity

being established in the wake of Charles I's execution. Milton strives in *Observations* to implicate both royalists and Presbyterians with the interests of the Catholic Irish rebels—either directly, as in the case of the *Articles of Peace*, or indirectly by not aiding the Parliament's army in the case of the Scots. Milton rhetorically employs anti-monarchical, anti-Catholic, and anti-Irish sentiment in order to accomplish this. While the latter two play on common prejudices of the period, the contentious nature of the Covenant in the Belfast Presbytery's *Representation* and the *Articles of Peace* themselves pose significant political problems for Milton's justification of both the Commonwealth and its Irish policy, particularly in his reliance on older bonds that held England, Scotland, and Ireland together under the Stuarts. This in turn raises some important issues regarding Milton's republicanism.

The second chapter examines why, in defining a specific English Protestant interest in Ireland, Milton does not draw on the most common means of representing the Irish Rebellion—atrocity accounts. On the one hand, as the focus of the previous chapter suggests, Milton treats the documents he responds to as a strictly political problem faced in the present, nascent moment of the Commonwealth. He needs only to make use of exaggerated figures of Protestants massacred in 1641 and descriptive adjectives for the Irish rebels to condemn the royalists, particularly the late king, and Presbyterians for their actions. But, by setting *Observations* within the context of the atrocity literature—particularly Henry Jones' *A Remonstrance of Divers Remarkable Passages concerning the Church and Kingdome of Ireland* (1642), Sir John Temple's *The Irish Rebellion* (1646), and Thomas Waring's *A Brief Narration of the Plotting, Beginning, & Carrying on of that Execrable Rebellion and Butcherie in Ireland* (1650)—other probable reasons for Milton's reticence to make extensive use of such material arise, including his own critical attitude towards martyrdom, which Temple notably asserts for the Protestant victims of 1641; his awareness, evident in varying degrees even in the three works mentioned above, of the complications of both national and religious identity; and quite likely his own concerns about being complicit in actual as opposed to rhetorical violence. This, even though his anti-Catholic and anti-Irish sentiment, as well as the exaggerated figures of the 1641 atrocities, in fact contribute to and legitimize the violence of Cromwell's reconquest within a few short months of the publication of *Observations*.

Yet, Milton does find a way around the concerns discussed in the second chapter, and chapter three examines his use of a biblical atrocity story in the context of the Irish Rebellion—an allusion he twice uses, first

in *Eikonoklastes* and again in *Defensio Prima*. The story of the concubine in Judges 19-21 politically, and religiously, encapsulates Milton's view of the justness of Cromwell's reconquest while carrying none of the concerns he had about martyrdom and identity that may have contributed to the absence of atrocity imagery in *Observations*—significantly, it also allows him a figurative distance from the violence of the Irish campaign. If Milton's republican voice is only rather tentatively emerging in *Observations*, it is much more evident in his use of the Judges narrative in the two later works. In effect, I argue that the concubine's story operates similarly in the Irish context of Milton's allusions to the story of Lucretia's rape in republican writings. The rhetorical game here, however, is as disturbing as the atrocities endlessly recounted in popular representations of the Irish Rebellion. Milton's and some of his readers' complicity in appropriating rape narratives leads to the wider contexts of the Afterword's discussion of state-sanctioned violence in Ireland. As with Milton's Irish reading of Judges 19-21, providential justifications work to figuratively distance the Parliament's policies and, particularly, the actions of its army from the literal enactment of retribution for 1641.

CHAPTER ONE

THE “ENGLISH PROTESTANT INTEREST” IN IRELAND

[Charles II has] a footing in Ireland, we fear they [the Scots] perswade him to go thither, *And he that England would regain, must first with Ireland begin*; this is an old proverb.

—James Moxon, *Modest Narrative* July 1649

In recent years, critics have alerted us to some of the wider contexts of Milton’s *Observations*.¹ These readings have added important dimensions to our understanding of the tract which had, in some cases, been overlooked in previous appraisals, including my own,² which tended to focus more on the issue of the strictly Irish concerns of *Observations*, most notably stereotypical notions of Irish barbarism against which England and Milton fashion themselves. Maley’s and Raymond’s attention to the Scottish dimension, however, best highlights the “complication of interests” that Milton was requested to address by the Council of State in March, 1649 in response to the *Articles of Peace* concluded between Charles I’s Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, the Earl of Ormond, and the Catholic Confederacy; letters exchanged between Ormond and Parliament’s governor in Dublin, Colonel Michael Jones; Ormond’s declaration of Charles II; and the *Representation* of the Belfast Presbytery.³ As Maley states,

Milton’s *Observations* is not an anti-Irish treatise in any simple sense [...]. Caught up in a rhetoric of accusation and apology that serves to veil its wider context, criticism of this tract has obscured its real significance, specifically as a document that deals explicitly with a struggle over sovereignty within a troubled British milieu. Indeed, as we shall see, Milton’s greatest concern in the *Observations* is not with Ireland at all, but with Scotland.⁴

The “troubled British milieu” does pose problems for Milton’s response to the documents handed him by the Council of State, and clearly, from the amount of space that he devotes in *Observations* to the Belfast

Presbytery's *Representation*, he struggles most with incorporating the Scots within this milieu which had so recently been stripped of the king that symbolically held together the three kingdoms. What is significant, however, is the fact that Milton only uses the words "Brittish" and "Brittaine" once each in *Observations*, and they occur in the same sentence where he engages with the Article removing the Oath of Supremacy in Ireland:

These [the Irish] therefore by their own foregoing demerits and provocations justly made our vassals, are by the first Article of this peace advanc'd to a Condition of freedom superior to what any *English* Protestant durst have demanded. For what else can be the meaning to discharge them the Common Oath of Supremacy, especially being Papists (for whom principally that oath was intended) but either to resigne them the more into their own power, or to set a mark of dishonor upon the Brittish Loyalty; by trusting *Irish* Rebels for one single Oath of Allegiance, as much as all his Subjects of *Brittaine* for the double swearing both of Allegiance and Supremacy. (CPW 3: 302)

Any notion of "Brittish" very quickly collapses through the passage. There is clearly some neighbourly room here for the Scots, as British loyalty and Britain is dependent upon the exclusion of Papists "for whom principally that oath was intended." As Hughes notes, the Oath of Supremacy "was a powerful political weapon in English hands" (CPW 3: 302). What Milton has to say about the *Articles* and the letters exchanged between Ormond and Jones subtly lays the ground for his critique of the Belfast Presbytery's position within the reconfigured polity. The new regime will not embrace Catholicism as the king and Ormond are willing to do, even against the established laws. But the referent for "our" is specifically English, reiterated in the freedoms enjoyed by "*English* Protestants." While the Irish are clearly subjugated by these terms, being "justly made our vassals," the presence of the Scots in notions of either British or Britain is problematized by Milton's "*English* Protestant" qualifier that guides both his political critique and his points on toleration in response to both Ormond and the Belfast Presbytery.

This singular occurrence is, then, important in relation to the wider context of *Observations* that Maley and Raymond discuss. Raymond argues that "Two linked assumptions govern the prevailing interpretation of Milton's *Observations*. The first is that it is a nationalistic or colonialist text; the second is that it is fanatically anti-Irish, and that this is symptomatic or representative of English attitudes."⁵ Raymond's reading, then, defends Milton from the challenges posed by the tract in relation to

what are generally seen as Milton’s true notions of liberty and toleration. For Raymond, *Observations* is ultimately “hack work” that Milton engaged in only half-heartedly as a task assigned by “Authority.”⁶ These points contribute to the conclusion that *Observations* reveals Milton’s “uncomfortable reticence about the politics of the English colonial situation in Ireland” because it does not fulfill the “two linked assumptions” that the Council of State may have expected in Milton’s tract.⁷ While Raymond is correct in stating that “Milton does not elaborate [on Irish barbarism...] because *Observations* chiefly uses the Irish to censure the parties with whom they share a professed interest,”⁸ Milton is taking the point of Irish barbarism for granted. He does use it, alongside their Catholicism, as a rhetorical stick with which to beat Ormond’s royalist-Catholic coalition and the Belfast Presbytery, allowing him to exploit “his readers’ familiarity with the situation in Ireland,”⁹ gleaned from numerous contemporary pamphlets and earlier writers on Ireland. But it is here that we can further an understanding of the contexts of *Observations* in its “British milieu” and whether or not it does transcend narrowly defined national and colonial aspirations.

Certainly, *Observations* is not a straightforward call for revenge and reconquest of a rebellious Ireland based solely on a barbarous stereotype that constructs the Irish through a notion of collective blood guilt for the atrocities of 1641, as so many newsbooks and tracts published from the outbreak of the rebellion through to Cromwell’s campaign, and beyond, were.¹⁰ Milton is much more concerned with establishing the political legitimacy of the fledgling regime—most notably in addressing the threat posed by the Irish, as well as his comments on key political events, such as Pride’s Purge and the trial and execution of Charles I, and a broader religious toleration. Hence, “Authority” does lead Milton in a particular direction. As Robert Armstrong argues,

The parliamentary regime was one indelibly marked as a war institution, ideologically as much as institutionally. Parliamentarianism needed to place its enemies in sharp relief, those whose malignancy threatened to subvert their own nation, England, or whose alien nature threatened to overwhelm it. It did not need Sir John Temple to convince it that the Irish insurgents were devilish barbarians. The priority of parliamentary discourse was the articulation of the claims that Parliament was the rightful and adequate body to respond to such a threat, and that the proper response was unrelenting war.¹¹

Armstrong’s book ends as the Independents gain the upper-hand in Parliament; however, the mentality he comments on here is relevant to

Cromwell's reconquest of Ireland, as the war machine presented its own very significant political problem in regards to the reconquest in 1649—Leveller agitation which was interfering with the preparations for Cromwell's Irish expedition. Curiously, Milton does not even make a passing allusion to this problem in *Observations*, nor does he ever explicitly comment on the Levellers elsewhere when he discusses Ireland. Milton's silence on Leveller agitation in *Observations*—like his never produced response to John Lilburne's *Englands New-Chaines Discovered*—does not necessarily imply, as Raymond suggests, that Milton was sympathetic to the Levellers' arguments. As Martin Dzelzainis argues, such claims,

embody a number of misconceptions. In the first place, they underestimate the extent to which even reluctance to comply with the Council's order [to respond to Lilburne's tract], let alone outright refusal, would have struck Milton's colleagues as irresponsible and quixotic. The Levellers, after all, posed a clear and present danger to the stability of the new regime.¹²

For Dzelzainis, the timeline of the Council of State's request that Milton respond to Lilburne, followed only a couple of days later by its request that he respond to the *Articles of Peace*, is the more likely explanation.¹³

Similarly, any suggestion that Milton's sympathies for the Levellers may also attenuate his representation of Ireland and the Irish is questionable when weighed against the general view that the Levellers opposed Irish service on ethical grounds that challenge the nationalist and colonialist assumptions put forward in *Observations*. However, as Dzelzainis notes,

although there would appear to be little room for doubt about their respective stances, in that Milton chose to become a servant of the new regime's executive whereas the Levellers identified themselves as its most intransigent opponents, the suggestion that Milton nevertheless allowed his Leveller sympathies to influence him in the discharge of his official duties has recently been put forward with increasing confidence.¹⁴

For example, Raymond cites the Levellers in order to demonstrate that Milton is not providing a monolithic English representation of Ireland, noting the "divided, and contested views [...] in anti-Irish polemic. The debate prompted by the Levellers' objections to the Irish expedition resulted in the expression of diverse attitudes."¹⁵ The claim here is not as straightforward as it may seem. Leveller arguments against Irish service, as Chris Durston argues, while recognizing a minority position of opposition for ethical reasons, were motivated by the "mercenary

grounds” of arrears, concerns about accomplishing a thorough revolution in England, and concerns about “breaking the army’s solemn engagement made at Triploe Heath, Newmarket, in June 1647, by which they had pledged not to divide or disband until their grievances had been redressed.”¹⁶ The three central objections to Irish service that Durston lists are precisely those raised in *The Resolutions of the Private Souldiery of Col. Scroops Regiment of Horse* (1649). Beyond these three concerns, there is no objection made against service in Ireland in this tract. Similarly, *The Souldiers Demand* (1649) asks fellow soldiers to keep an eye on the Army Grandees:

And we pray you all to observe their cunning fetch they have plotted to send us into *Ireland*, only to find themselves matter for to let us aworke, and keep us from idlenesse, lest we should pry into their designs. First, what have we to doe with *Ireland*, to fight, and murther a People and Nation (for indeed they are set upon cruelty, and murdering poore people, which is all they glory in) which have done us no harme, only deeper to put our hands in bloud with their owne?¹⁷

The ethical concern about imbuing their own “hands in bloud” is somewhat undercut both by the opinion that the army is being sent to Ireland to allow the Grandees free reign in England and by the conventional murderous Irish comments in the tract: “And if they [the Army Grandees] could but get us once over into *Ireland* (they thinke) they have us sure enough: either we shall have our throats cut, or be famished, for they are sure we cannot get backe againe over the great Pond.”¹⁸ From this perspective, Leveller influenced regiments are being sent to Ireland to remove them conveniently from the political scene in England—to a place where they are unlikely to return from due to either Irish rebels or want. The author concludes by asking, “And why must we goe thither under all these hazards and danger of our owne lives, only to kill people there, that our Tyrannicall Masters may the easier rule over a few, & poor sort of base people?”¹⁹ There is no sympathetic identification with the Irish in *The Souldiers Demand*. In her examination of the Levellers and Ireland, Norah Carlin states of this tract,

But if even a few soldiers were, like the author of *The Souldiers Demand*, suffering from troubled consciences, then the issue of individual choice could become the rallying-point for a wider dissatisfaction. The right of conscientious objection, rather than explicitly pro-Irish views, may have been at the root of the trouble in the army.²⁰

Probably the most poignant expression of conscientious objection is William Walwyn's *The Bloody Project* (1649), but Walwyn's argument does not touch explicitly upon the justness of the cause for the reconquest of Ireland.

Another Leveller tract, *The English Souldiers Standard* (1649), attributed to Walwyn, again expresses greater concern for the establishment of liberty in England than any detailed critique of the nature of the Irish expedition:

For consider, as things now stand, to what end you should hazard your lives against the Irish: have you not been fighting these seven years in *England* for Rights and Liberties, that you are yet deluded of? and that too, when as none can hinder you of them but your own Officers, under whom you have fought? and will you go on stil to kil, slay and murther men, to make them as absolute Lords and Masters over *Ireland* as you have made them over *England*? or is it your ambition to reduce the Irish to the happinesse of Tythes upon trebble damages, to Excise, Customs and Monopolies in Trades? or to fill their prisons which poor disabled prisoners, to fill their Land with swarms of beggers; to enrich their Parliament-men, and impoverish their people to take down Monarchical Tyranny, and set up an Aristocratical Tyranny; or to overspread that Nation as this yet is, with such Wasps and Hornets as our Lawyers and their Confederates? Or if you intend not this, or would be sorry to see no better effects of your undertakings, it certainly concerns you in the first place, and before you go, to see those evils reformed here.²¹

The contrast to Milton's defense of England's rights of conquest over Ireland, which he argues need to be reaffirmed by military action in 1649, are quite striking. Milton feels that the Commonwealth can export a "civilizing Conquest," even if this does involve ruling the Irish with "Edicts and Garrisons" (*Observations*, CPW 3: 304, 303), whereas the Levellers argue that the Commonwealth can only export the tyranny that the Council of State and the Army Grandees are imposing on England. Ultimately, then, neither *The Souldiers Demand*, *The English Souldiers Standard*, nor the objections of Scroop's regiment are against the reconquest on principles beyond conscience based solely on what that action will impose on Ireland—in other words, if English liberties were secured, there are no apparent objections to a reconquest of Ireland.

Carlin suggests that the Levellers' reasons for opposing Irish service have been greatly influenced by the fact that much of our evidence of their views appear in the writings of their enemies. Both *Walwins Wiles* (1649) and *A Declaration of the Commons Assembled in Parliament Against a Scandalous Book Entituled, The Second Part of Englands New Chains*

Discovered (1649), accuse Levellers of hindering Irish service, as does *A Declaration of the Proceedings of His Excellency the Lord General Fairfax in the Reducing of the Revolted Troops* (1649) in the aftermath of the Burford mutiny. *Walwins Wiles* and the Burford tract both rely on anti-Catholicism to make their point—accusing the Levellers of furthering “Popish designs” while putting forward “their fancies of Liberty, as if the Liberties of this Nation could not or would not be settled without their inspection.”²² But these attacks work within the Levellers’ grievances as outlined by Durston, simply vilifying them by designating them as furthering “popery.” This prompts Carlin to ask,

Was Leveller defence of Irish rights, therefore, mainly an invention of their enemies, designed to discredit them, and to associate them by implication with the feared and hated papacy? Such a conclusion would ignore a number of pieces of evidence, which, fragmentary though they are, suggest that principled radical opposition to English rule in Ireland did exist in 1649, and that such views did at least overlap with typically Leveller ideas such as natural rights, freedom of conscience and the tyranny of rule by conquest.²³

This leads her to pose a second question: “If opposition to the conquest of Ireland among the Levellers was a pure fiction, pinned on them by their enemies as an extremist label why did the Leveller leaders not simply deny the accusation, as they denied most of the others?”²⁴ For Carlin, the silence of the Leveller leaders, particularly in 1649 as they sat in the Tower, suggests that Ireland was “a potentially divisive issue.”²⁵ Indeed,

If the Leveller leaders had tried to avoid ‘dividing the honest party’ in the spring of 1649 by maintaining silence or an ambiguous position on the Irish question, they failed. Instead, the Independent ministers succeeded in dividing the Levellers’ supporters by insisting that Ireland was a central issue.²⁶

Milton’s justification of the reconquest of Ireland, in itself, is suggestive of little sympathy for the stance of the Leveller agitators, and he maintains “the positive commitment of the London Independents, who had been closely associated with the defence of the English protestants in Ireland since at least the outbreak of the rebellion in 1641.”²⁷ This is not to deny the fact that the mutinies in the spring of 1649 caused preparations for the Irish expedition to be “seriously hampered, and for a few weeks nearly wrecked by the unwillingness of some in the army to follow” Cromwell.²⁸ Nor that they posed a considerable danger to the new regime. Yet, certainly, in part, Milton is oversimplifying matters in *Observations*—an

internal dissention that affects the “complication of interests” in Ireland—through a close association of Parliament and the Army which effaces Leveller resistance. And Carlin’s assertion that Ireland was a divisive issue for the Levellers is also suggestive in this regard, as Milton’s justifications for the expedition could drive a wedge between the Leveller agitators and the soldiers by playing on stereotypes of Irish barbarism and anti-Catholic sentiment. Charles Carlton, in fact, argues that “a visceral hatred of Irish papists” was perhaps a stronger ideological commitment than any political ideals during the civil wars.²⁹ This is evident in the rhetorical use of anti-Catholicism in *Walwins Wiles* and the declaration concerning the Burford mutiny cited above. In effect, the situation in Ireland provides Milton with the perfect avenue whereby he can conjoin royalist and Presbyterian interests with those of the Irish Catholics in order to construct a “common enemy” and demonstrate, as Armstrong states, “that Parliament was the rightful and adequate body to respond to such a threat, and that the proper response was unrelenting war.” Making Ireland the “central issue” provides the added bonus of undercutting Leveller agitation by default because of their own ambiguous stance on that issue. Perhaps, what disappoints us on this point is that we want Milton to engage with the more significant political debates of the time, rather than play on the basest of common prejudices of Irish barbarism and anti-Catholicism. Ultimately, however, Milton is oversimplifying his context, and the “complication of interests” in *Observations* by passing over the Levellers in order to represent Parliament and the Army as unified in its determination to subdue Ireland. However, this is not the only oversimplification of the conflicting interests that he makes, as we shall shortly see.

Ireland as the “central issue” of concern for the Commonwealth consists of the political and religious issues that *Observations* turns upon, enabling a broad us / them binary as Milton establishes the grounds for critically examining the “complication of interests.” Similar to his oversimplification of the situation in England, which allows him to unify Parliament and the Army, he very quickly reduces the conflicting interests in Ireland:

Having therefore seen of late those Articles of Peace granted to the Papists Rebels of *Ireland*, as speciall graces and favours from the late King, in reward, most likely, of their work don, and in his name and authority confirm’d and ratifi’d by *James*, Earle of *Ormond*; together with his Letter to Col. *Jones*, Governour of *Dublin*, full of contumely and dishonour, both to the Parliament and Army. And on the other side, an Insolent and seditious Representation from the *Scotch* Presbytery at *Belfast* in the North

of *Ireland*; no lesse dishonourable to the State; and much about the same time brought hither; there will be needful as to the same slanderous aspersions but one and the same Vindication against them both. Nor can we sever them in our notice and resentment, though one part intitl'd a *Presbytery*, and would be thought a Protestant Assembly, since their own unexampl'd virulence hath wrapt them into the same guilt, made them accomplices and assistants to the abhorred *Irish* Rebels, and with them at present to advance the same interest. (*Observations*, CPW 3: 300)

Milton stresses the “present” in order to build progressively the conjunction of royalists, Irish rebels, and Ulster Scots as sharing “the same interest”—ultimately, that of the “abhorred *Irish* Rebels,” and this is the immediate threat to the new regime. It is an oversimplification, but it allows Milton to put forward the claim that Parliament’s and the Army’s response is in accord with that of every “true-borne *English-man*” (*Observations*, CPW 3: 301) and ignore the Leveller agitation in England. As Maley points out,

Milton’s task is to show the extent to which both Dublin and Belfast appear to be conspiring against London. That is, the Old English of the South (the descendants of the twelfth century English settlers in Ireland, chiefly Catholic), and the new Scottish settlers in the North, are at one in their resistance and opposition to Cromwell’s regime. It is a tale of two pales, the long-standing one around Dublin and the recently planted one around Belfast, and of their shared antagonism towards the metropolis.³⁰

“One and the same Vindication” serves against “both” pales. Constructing this conjunction of “our enemies” (*Observations*, CPW 3: 300), however, requires somewhat different strategies in order to establish the complicity of the two pales’ opposition to Parliament, which will ultimately rest in their “copartnering” with the Irish rebels (or at least with the interests, indirectly, of the Irish rebels in the Scots’ case) and Parliament’s intransigent opposition to the Irish rebels in the service of national interests, defined as English and Protestant by Milton.³¹ The forces that he sees the royalists and Presbyterians complicit with at the present moment in which he writes are precisely what had enclosed Old English and Ulster Scots in their respective pales in the first place and which they now choose to join with.

In dealing with “both” in “one and the same” response, Ireland becomes, for Milton, the “common enemy,” allowing for the articulation of the Commonwealth’s ideological stance. The connection, of course, is that the royalists and Ulster Scots in *Observations* deal either directly or indirectly with Irish Papists from Milton’s perspective. While Armstrong may be overstating his case in relation to Temple’s *Irish Rebellion*, an

issue I will turn to in the following chapter, the absence of Irish atrocity accounts in *Observations* does not necessarily save Milton from the charge of being vehemently anti-Irish, as Raymond suggests. Milton does make brief allusions to atrocities in the tract—the Irish are “bloody” rebels guilty of “the mercilesse and barbarous Massacre of so many thousand *English*” (*Observations*, CPW 3: 301), backed up with an inflated figure of “more than 200000” (*Observations*, CPW 3: 308). As Patricia Coughlan notes, such language demonstrate the “alarming simplicity” of English accounts of the Irish Rebellion and the fact that, “Throughout the 1640s, any mention of the Irish seems to require an epithet such as ‘bloody,’ ‘cruel,’ or ‘inhuman’ to be communicatively effective.”³² Milton’s adjectives and figures operate by playing on readers’ textual familiarity with the situation in Ireland. But it is beyond Milton’s purpose to go into the lurid details of atrocity—it would not accomplish what he needs to do to counter the texts he is engaged to respond to. He is concerned with the moment—not with what has been done (the purported atrocities of 1641) but with what may now potentially be done “at present.” What is politically threatening to the Commonwealth are the shifting alliances that can potentially make use of the Irish first in Ireland and then within the larger context of the three kingdoms: what the royalists gain by the *Articles of Peace* and how the actions of the Belfast Presbytery indirectly further the interests of the Irish rebels, while its *Representation* challenges the political and religious legitimacy of the Commonwealth.

In terms of the *Articles of Peace*, for example, Milton is not as much concerned with a full-scale critique of each individual article; rather, he is concerned more with the coalition that the treaty brings into being. Indeed, he only broadly alludes to several articles and includes brief comments on them: the repeal of Poyning’s Law, the oath of Supremacy, control of the militia, and ploughing by the tail and burning oats in the straw. The last of these is the most intriguing, as it easily plays into notions of Irish barbarism, but its significance is greater. For Milton, the desire to return to these practices reveals in the Irish,

a disposition not onely sottish but indocible and averse from all Civility and amendment, and what hopes they give for the future, who rejecting the ingenuity of all other Nations to improve and waxe more civil by a civilizing Conquest, though all these many yeares better shown and taught, preferre their own absurd and savage Customes before the most convincing evidence of reason and demonstration: a testimony of their true Barbarisme and obdurate wilfulnesse to be expected no lesse in other matters of greatest moment. (*Observations*, CPW 3: 304)