

Irish Partisans: Rapparees of the Williamite Wars, 1689-1691

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Introduction

To better understand this article, one should read the previous piece I wrote in the *Irish Marxist Review* 9 (IMR 9) on Irish Tory social-bandits during the Cromwellian and Restoration periods of seventeenth century Ireland.

Still relevant as ever, Irish Socialist Republican and Marxist, James Connolly, first wrote about the Jacobite period in his famous *Labour in Irish History*. Connolly with his élan and his renowned style of writing regarded it as one of the greatest tragedies of Irish history that Irish men and women, who fought in opposing armies, would die in order to seat a foreign King on the throne:

It is equally beyond all question that the whole struggle was no earthly concern of theirs; that King James was one of the most worthless representatives of a race that ever sat upon the throne...The war between William and James offered a splendid opportunity to the subject people of Ireland to make a bid for freedom while the forces of their oppressors were rent in civil war. The opportunity was cast aside, and the subject people took sides on behalf of the

opposing factions of their enemies.¹

This article will, nevertheless, analyse the Irish partisans that were active throughout the Williamite Wars in Ireland: the Rapparees. They differed somewhat from their Tory social-bandit predecessors, insofar as Rappareeism was more politicised and was recognised as a political force under the articles of the Treaty of Limerick signed in 1691. What the Rapparees and the Tories had in common, however, is that they both provided Ireland with fighting-men and fighting-leaders throughout the upheavals of the seventeenth century. Despite this, the Rapparees, like the Tories, lacked a revolutionary political ideology that could have elevated the insurgency above the out-dated politics of feudalism. Perhaps if Socialism or Irish Republicanism had been discovered a century earlier, the subject Irish people could have then rejected feudalism in its entirety and liberated itself from the dead-weight of colonialism and foreign rule? Of course it's counter-factual history, but it's a question well worth asking.

Origins and political significance of the Rapparees

Ah, way out on the moors where the wind shrieks
and howls,
Sure, he'll find his lone home there amongst the
wild fowl.
No one there to welcome, no comrade has he.
Ah, God help the poor outlaw, the wild rapparee.

He has robbed many rich of their gold and their
crown.

He has outrode the soldiers who haunted him down.
Alas, he has boasted, they'll never take me,
Not a swordsman will capture the wild rapparee.²

- Popular folk song devoted to the Rapparee

¹James Connolly, *Labour in Irish History*, (Dublin, 1973), pp. 6-7.

²Henry Glassie, *Passing the Time in Ballymenone: Folklore and History of an Ulster Community*, (Dublin, 1982), p. 110.

Rapparees (derived from the Irish word *rapaire*, meaning half-pike or pike wielding person), were Irish partisans that fought alongside the Jacobites armies against the Williamite forces during the Irish Williamite Wars (1689-1691). Rappareeism in Ireland originated, in 1687, during a period which would lead to the remodelling and ‘Catholization’ of the Irish army by Richard Talbot, Earl of Tyrconnell; and provided the opportunity for former vagrants or Tories to join the Jacobite armies under King James II as irregulars or commissioned officers.³ Since the landing of the Williamite Duke of Schomberg in Ireland, on 13 August 1689, the Jacobites were gradually losing the conflict. Guerrilla war soon ensued and King James II encouraged Rapparee incursions into enemy territories: the crown’s support helped to institutionalise Rappareeism. However, English contemporaries of the Williamite Wars tried in earnest to depoliticise the Rapparees, dismissing them as outlaws that were hand-in-glove with the enemy in order to indirectly suppress Protestant settlers. Pro-Williamite historian, George Story, also depoliticised the Rapparees, linking them with Italian type banditry then prevalent throughout the continent. This was not, in fact, a valid comparison as the banditry that engulfed Italy was regarded as non-political (Italy was not a unitary state until the nineteenth century); whereas Ireland was, and the Williamite Wars strengthened the ethnic and religious elements of Rappareeism.⁴ Despite this, Williamite authorities continued to harangue and depoliticise the Rapparees.

John Stevens, an English Jacobite, also downplayed the political significance of the Rapparees and regarded them as mere out-

laws that solely robbed and plundered the country ‘under pretence of suppressing the rebellious Protestants’.⁵ This disparagement is further illustrated by King William of Orange, who dismissed the Rapparees as ‘Irish Papists, and other lewd and vagrant persons disaffected to the government, [which] are observed to wander up and down, to the terror of his Majesty’s subjects’.⁶ In contrast, Irish historian Eámonn O’Ciardha has argued that contemporary leaders of the political divide in Ireland, such as the French Jacobite, General D’Avaux, did view the Rapparees as politicised ‘Jacobite partisans’.⁷

The Rapparees: a fighting partisan force and the Bog of Allen

In view of this, the Rapparees successfully conducted a war of attrition against Williamite forces, notably making it difficult for Williamites, under the command of the Duke of Schomberg, to leave camp for fear of being ambushed or killed. As the Williamite historian, George Story further explained;

For they straggled abroad and plundered those few people who were left, and some of them were murdered by the Rapparees, a word which we were strangers to ‘till this time ... such of the Irish as are not in the army but the country people, armed in a hostile manner with half-pikes and skeans, and some with sythes, or musquets’.⁸

Operating in small cells and being concealable from the rest of the Irish population would be an important factor for the military effectiveness of the Rapparees; and

³ James Anthony Froude, *The English in Ireland in the Eighteenth Century*, (3 vols, New York, 1888), p. 178.

⁴Eámonn O’Ciardha, ‘Woodkerne, tories and rapparees in Ulster and north Connacht in the seventeenth century’ (M.A thesis, University College, Dublin, 1991) , p. 185.

⁵ Robert H. Murray (ed), *The Journal of John Stevens*, (Oxford, 1912), pp. 61-62.

⁶Warrant Book, 6th May Whitehall (*Cal. S.P. Dom.*, 1689-1690, p. 92).

⁷Eámonn O’Ciardha, *Ireland and the Jacobite Cause, 1685-1766: A fatal attachment*, (Dublin, 2004), p. 71.

⁸George Warter Story, *A true and impartial history*, 9th September, 1689, p. 16.

⁹Harman Murtagh. ‘The War in Ireland 1689-91’, in W.A. Maguire (ed), *Kings in Conflict: The Revolutionary War in Ireland and its Aftermath 1689-1750*, (Belfast, 1990), p. 82.

this can be attributed to the Williamite failure to quickly suppress them.⁹ Historian, G. Simms, attributed the effectiveness of the Rapparees to their extensive knowledge of the local terrain and the compliance of the local Catholic population.¹⁰ This was evident during the Duke of Schomberg's march to the Boyne: Rapparees had constantly harassed Williamite armies before the Battle of the Boyne in July 1690. As with all successful partisan movements, the element of surprise provided the Rapparees with effective camouflage, as they could subsequently melt into the Irish populace without being detected by the Williamite authorities. George Story summed up the Rapparees *modus operandi*;

When the Rapparees have no mind to show themselves upon the bogs they commonly sink down between two or three little hills, grown over with long grass, so that you may as soon find a hare as one of them: they conceal their arms ... you may search till you are weary before you find one gun: but when they have a mind to do mischief, they can all be ready in an hour's warning, for everyone knows where to go to and fetch his own arms, though you do not.¹¹

Detachments of Rapparees disrupted Williamite communications by successfully raiding small garrisons, stealing horses, intercepting mail and couriers, together with destroying bridges; yet these operations did not affect the outcome of the Battle of the Boyne.¹² Following the ignominious Jacobite defeat at the Boyne - which precipitated the cowardly flight of James II from Ireland - Rapparee forces retreated to the Bog of Allen (in the centre of Ireland); and many of the de-mobbed soldiers from the defeated

Jacobite armies also swelled the ranks of the Rapparees. Famous Rapparees, such as 'White Sergeant', M'Cabe, Cavanagh, and 'Galloping Hogan', all at one point or another operated near the Bog of Allen.¹³ During September 1690, George Story explained the strategic importance of the Bog of Allen for the Rapparees;

The Rapparees by this time were got to the end of the Bog of Allen, about twelve miles from Dublin (this Bog is the largest in Ireland; for it reaches through a great part of the country, from hence as far as Athlone, and is at least forty miles in length having several islands full of woods in the midst of it): These robbed and plundered the country all about; for they had an island on this end of the Bog which they fortified.¹⁴

Reference to fortifications provides evidence that the Bog of Allen had been a key strategic zone for the Rapparees which further proves that they cannot simply be regarded as bandits; but instead should be viewed as well organised partisans. The south Ulster border was another area that continued to be troublesome to the Williamite forces, and, during May 1690, a detachment of Rapparees 'came over the bog near Newry and carried away horses, cows, and men' - causing Williamite armies a great deal of trouble.¹⁵ George Story, again, commented on the remoteness of the south Ulster area and the menace it had been to the English authorities throughout the golden-age of Toryism during the Restoration period;

The country between Newry and Dundalk, is one of the wildest places of all Ireland, being the hunt some years ago, of the famous Tory, Redmond O'Hanlon,

¹⁰J.G. Simms, *Jacobite Ireland, 1685-91*, (new ed., Dublin, 2000), p. 198.

¹¹George Warter Story, *A true and impartial history*, December, 1690, pp. 152-153.

¹²Wurtemberg to Christian V, Waterford, 2nd May 1691, in K. Danaher and J.G. Simms (eds). *The Danish Force in Ireland 1690-1691*, (Dublin, 1962), p. 110

¹³John J. Marshall, *Irish Tories, Rapparees and Robbers*, (Dungannon, 1927), pp. 50-51.

¹⁴George Warter Story, *A true and impartial history*, December, 1690, p. 156.

¹⁵News Letter. 20th May 1690 (*Cal. S.P. Dom.*, 1690-1691, p. 14).

whose Ancestors were wont to brag that they were Standard-Bearers in times of old, to the Kings of Ulster.¹⁶

Formation of militias and sectarian conflict

Despite early successes, contemporaries such as French General, D’Avaux, commented on the ever-increasing destitution of Jacobite soldiers as the war prolonged: they were forced to continuously plunder and pillage in order to survive. Such actions enabled the Williamites to further disparage the Rapparees as common bandits. Williamite suppression, however, contributed to the popular support given by the general public to the Rapparees: Williamite forces unmercifully pillaged the countryside and attacked Catholics at every given opportunity. Coupled with this, Williamite soldiers maltreatment of the natives, in which they ‘begun to strip and rob most of the Irish ... made it natural for them [Catholics], after this, to turn Rapparee, and do us all the mischief they could’.¹⁷ Williamite repression is further highlighted by the policy of setting-up local Protestant militias, during the winter of 1690-1691, in an attempt to combat the Rapparees, which further polarised sectarian feeling among Irish Catholics and Protestants.¹⁸ Not surprisingly, this greatly added to the Catholic populace’s sense of injustice as these Protestant militias were noted as extremely undisciplined and bitterly sectarian. It has been previously argued that the militia-men proved unreliable when deployed with regular forces, but they were effective in providing county defence and security when the Williamite forces were in the field of battle.¹⁹

Each indiscriminate or coercive measure perpetuated by the militias or the

Williamite forces hardened attitudes among the wider Catholic community; and the Williamite forces soon realized that it was extremely difficult to distinguish between Rapparees or ordinary Catholic civilians. On a number of occasions the Williamite army and Protestant militias did not make any distinction between Rapparee, civilians or Jacobite soldiers. Williamite contemporaries admitted that large numbers of innocent civilians had been killed as suspected Rapparees. This would suggest, as John Childs has explained, that one can compare the conflict in Ireland to similar ‘total wars’ that had been fought in contemporary Europe.

European partisans and the Irish Rapparees

These total wars, which Childs refers to, included the Balkans during the Austrian offensives after 1683; the French invasions of Catalonia in 1689 and 1697; and the French invasion of Savoy-Piedmont from 1690 until 1696. Similar religiously inspired conflicts, like the Williamite Wars, were being fought in Poland, from 1656 onwards, against invading Protestant Swedes.²⁰ Undoubtedly, the Irish Rapparees also greatly resembled the Danish Snapphane partisans who fought alongside the Danish regular armies against the Swedes during the Scanian Wars.²¹ These resilient Scanian peasants, who joined the ranks of Snapphane, carried out a guerrilla war from between 1657-1658 and from 1674-1679 against the Swedish occupation of the province of Scania.

One can also perhaps compare the Rapparees to the Haiduks, the resistance fighters from Eastern-Europe. Haiduks, as in Russia or Hungary, could become attached to the nobility (similar to the Rapparees being

¹⁶George Warter Story, *A true and impartial history*, 15th September, p. 15.

¹⁷*Ibid*, p. 138.

¹⁸Richard Doherty, *The Williamite War in Ireland 1688-1691*, (Dublin, 1998), p. 156.

¹⁹ John Childs, *The Williamite Wars 1688-1691*, (London, 2007), p. 282.

²⁰ John Childs. ‘The laws of war in seventeenth-century Europe and their application during the Jacobite War in Ireland, 1688-91’, in David Edwards, Padraig Lenihan & Clodagh Tait (eds), *Age of Atrocity: Violence and political conflict in early modern Ireland*, (Dublin, 2007), pp. 298-299.

²¹Robert I. Frost, *The Northern Wars: War, State and Society in Northeastern Europe, 1558-1721*, (London, 2000), p. 36.

subsidiary to King James II or the House of Stuart); and were also described as bandits or highwaymen who robbed not only the Ottoman Turkish occupation, but the native population or merchants on the high-ways.²² Comparisons, too, can be made with the Cossacks. Cossack detachments had consisted of irregular or freebooting soldiers from Eastern-Europe and notably signed the Treaty of Pereyaslav which would precipitate the outbreak of the Russo-Polish War or Thirteen Years War (1654-1667).²³ In Ireland, similar measures of suppression as those enforced against the partisans in Europe had been implemented: the Danish Duke of Württemberg compared the Protestant militia in Ireland to a similar Swedish militia which had suppressed the Danish populace and Snapphane partisans.²⁴ As with most wars, fully distinguishing between regular troops, irregular forces, or civilians had been an unavoidable problem for both sides in the conflict.

Hugh Baldearg O'Donnell and his infamous volte-face

One such irregular to emerge in Ireland during the Williamite conflict was the former Spanish soldier and freebooter Hugh Baldearg ('red spot') O'Donnell. Hugh O'Donnell was of Spanish-Irish descent and earned distinction by serving in the Spanish armies on the continent. O'Donnell had been recognised by the Spanish as the true Earl of Tyrconnell; much to the displeasure of Richard Talbot, then current Earl of Tyrconnell. Both O'Donnell and Richard Talbot had a personal vendetta with each other; and claimed to be the rightful heir to the title of Tyrconnell. Following the fall of the Jacobite garrison at Galway, the Jacobite armies were greatly weakened and thereafter operated in north Connaught and Munster, with a substantial presence in Sligo. It was in north Connaught that O'Donnell op-

erated with units composed of 'Creaghts', which had been accompanied by women, children and herds of cattle. This type of military formation was first pioneered by Owen Roe O'Neill's usage of Creaghts earlier in the seventeenth century during the Irish Cromwellian Wars.

French Jacobite General, D'Avaux, remained impressed with the Creaghts in Ulster; but in reality, O'Donnell offered token resistance to the Williamite armies, and subsequently played no part at the Battle of Aughrim, despite considering ambushing General Ginckel and his Williamite army on its move towards the Jacobite garrison at Sligo. However, instead of taking to the field, O'Donnell surrendered and accepted favourable terms from the Williamite leadership; and this enabled the Williamites to successfully continue their advance into Sligo. O'Donnell's volte-face, after which he would eventually join ranks with the Williamites, has later been attributed to his personal hatred for Richard Talbot, Earl of Tyrconnell.²⁵

Suppression of Jacobite supporters and Williamite victory

With the Jacobite armies greatly weakened and almost defeated, Williamite armies under the command of General Ginckel continued to encourage the widespread persecution of the Catholic population, regarding them as being in daily contact with Rapparees by providing intelligence and logistical support. Repression of Catholic priests was also government policy in order to bring priests that were sympathetic to the Jacobite cause into line. Without doubt, ruthless suppression by the Williamite authorities greatly minimised the influence of the Catholic Church. Also, in areas where the Rapparees were deemed to be numerous, proclamations were issued by the Lord Justices 'requiring all Papists to remain in their respective Parishes,

²²Eric Hobsbawm, *Bandits*, (new ed., Great Britain, 2000), pp. 78-79.

²³Robert I. Frost, *The Northern Wars: War, State and Society in Northeastern Europe, 1558-1721*, (London, 2000), p. 164.

²⁴Württemberg to Christian V, Dublin, 26th Dec. 1691, in K. Danaher and J.G. Simms (eds), *The Danish Force in Ireland 1690-1691*, (Dublin, 1962), p. 139.

²⁵Richard Doherty, *The Williamite War in Ireland 1688-1691*, (Dublin, 1998), p. 186.

²⁶George Warter Story, *An impartial history of the war in Ireland*, September, 1689, p. 138.

at least not to go three miles farther, and only then to a market'.²⁶ Robert H. Murray, however, has stressed that ambitious Protestants that envisaged climbing the social ladder encouraged the seizing or arresting of Catholic priests in order to take 'revenge for past injuries, or to gain money or lands'.²⁷ Jacobite officials, too, were not exempt; Williamites regarded them as no different from the Rapparees. Colonel William Wolseley, noted that his men had tracked down and killed between 80 or 100 Tories and had taken prisoner former sheriffs of King James: Andrew Tuite, James Ledgwich and Redmond Mullady. Wolseley regarded them as Tories and Highwaymen;

They are no soldiers, nor have any commission for what they do, and therefore I conceive are not to be treated other ways than Toryes and highwaymen; and therefore I have a great mind to hang them, if his majesty will either give orders for it, or say nothing but leave me to myself, for I am well assured that an Irishman is to be taught his duty only by the rod.²⁸

Wolseley, in fact, had been forced to admit that Andrew Tuite's father and about 1000 Rapparees under the command of Gerald Nugent - one-time Sheriff for King James - had not yet been apprehended and were successfully holding out at a garrison in Mullingar.²⁹ Despite this, waves of suppression, during the Williamite Wars, had unimaginable socio-economic consequences. A contemporary account from Robert Huntingdon commented on the terrible socio-economic devastation of war:

And 'tis much alike to the impoverished whether they are rapped & undone by the Danish

& French, the Dutch & English, or by the Irish Tories: only the wounds of a friend are more unkind, cutting & deadly. From this intolerable and almost licensed waste and destruction the country must rationally expect a famine and mortality.³⁰

The Treaty of Limerick

Despite the overall persecution of the Catholic populace and suppression of many Rapparees, coupled with major defeats at the Boyne, Aughrim, Galway and Sligo, the Jacobite cause continued to hold out against the jaws of defeat until the end of 1691. Gradually, the war in Ireland was moving toward on an outright military victory for the Williamite armies: the presence of an English fleet in the Shannon estuary greatly reduced the opportunity of fleeing Jacobites reaching France to regroup, and effectively decided the conflict. In view of this, Patrick Sarsfield and other Jacobite generals surrendered and accepted the terms of the Treaty of Limerick.³¹ Under the military articles of this treaty, the Jacobite army were to be provided with ships to be transported from Ireland and ordered not to return; thereafter, the exiles joined various armies in Europe (famously known as the Wild Geese). More importantly, the military articles of the Treaty of Limerick applied to the Rapparees³²; and provided further proof that the Rapparees had indeed remained in synonymy with the official Jacobite armies throughout the conflict; hence they had been a de facto, politicised partisan movement. This was finally acknowledged by the victorious Williamite authorities when the Rapparees were recognised as a politicised army by the declaration of an amnesty under the military articles of the Treaty of Limerick.

²⁷Robert H. Murray, *Revolutionary Ireland and its Settlement*, (London, 1911), pp. 265-266.

²⁸ Letters from Colonel William Wolseley, 1690. 'Pursuit of Irish Tories', in John T. Gilbert (ed), *A Jacobite Narrative of the War in Ireland 1688-1691*, (Dublin, 1971), pp. 258-259.

²⁹*Ibid*, p. 259.

³⁰Robt. Huntingdon to Abp. Of Canterbury, 1690, Nov. 13, in Charles McNeill (ed), *The Tanner Letters: Original Documents and Notices of Irish Affairs in the Sixteenth & Seventeenth Centuries*, (Dublin, 1943), p. 506.

³¹J.C. Beckett, *The Making of Modern Ireland 1603-1923*, (new ed., London, 1981), p. 148.

³²J.G. Simms, *Jacobite Ireland, 1685-91*, (new ed., Dublin, 2000), p. 258.

Conclusion

The Williamite Wars ended perhaps one of the most violent periods of Irish history, and established a Protestant ascendancy in Ireland. The English crown thereafter stripped all economic and religious freedoms from the Catholic majority. Feudalism had triumphed in Ireland, and along with it a native embryonic bourgeoisie was beginning to emerge. It was indeed a tragedy that the Rapparees had aligned themselves to the Jacobite cause rather than along class lines. The Rapparees, however, proved more effective than their Tory predecessors because the English crown had retrospectively granted belligerent status to Rapparee actions even when it was clear that the Jacobites were losing the conflict. Rapparees should, then, be viewed as a well organised partisan force and its operations at the Bog of Allen proved how effective guerrilla war in Ireland could be. Partisan armies in Europe at this period also mirrored the Irish Rapparees; in particular the Danish Snapphane partisans whom fought against the Swedes in the Scanian Wars, or later, the Eastern-European Haiduks and Cossacks. Sectarianism and the formation of militias further added to the European dimensions of the Williamite Wars, as the Swedish employed similar sectarian militias to pacify Danish resistance during the Scanian Wars. Sectarian militias, in fact, terrorised the Catholic populace, weakened the Rapparees support

base, and effectively clipped Jacobite resistance in Ireland.

Like all conflicts, it was not without its opportunists and Jacobite General Hugh Baldearg O'Donnell's defection to the Williamite cause proved that in some cases personal prejudices outweighed ideological adherence. With decisive defeats of the Jacobite armies at the Battles of the Boyne, Aughrim, Galway, and Sligo, and with the Williamite forces in control of the ports, the conflict was settled in 1691. An offering of an amnesty to the defeated Jacobites and, more importantly, to the Rapparees, within the articles of the Treaty of Limerick, vindicated the Rapparees as a politicised force, rather than as a previously derided group of apolitical bandits. However, the subsequent Flight of the Wild Geese and the last of the Gaelic aristocracy were to be a watershed in Irish history: the country was subsequently re-colonised from Derry to Cork and administered on behalf of the English crown by a native embryonic Irish Protestant bourgeoisie from their parliament in Dublin. The Rapparees, then, should be viewed as the last resistance from an old-Ireland that was rapidly changing. They, like the Tories, were trailblazers that provided Ireland with fighting-men and fighting-leaders, but failed to avert the rapid constitutional and political changes that Ireland was undergoing during the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries.