The Priest and the Agent: Social Drama and Class Consciousness in the West of Ireland

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INTRODUCTION

On the morning of 4 April 1877, estate agent Arthur Brooke drove his carriage up to the gate of Cashel Farm, the residence of John Magroarty in Carrick, a small market town in the mountainous hinterland of southwest Donegal. Brooke had brought sheriff McCrory along with him, but his bailiffs emerged from their nearby homes a bit more reluctantly than usual. It was clear to Brooke that tenant Magroarty would not submit mildly to the impending eviction, for, although warned of the sheriff's intention several days earlier, he had not budged a parcel and a large crowd was gathering to witness the proceedings. Agent Brooke had never been so loath to perform his duty, for Magroarty was not the average evictee. He was the owner of several cows and was a reliable and even "improving tenant." Most of all, however, he was the parish priest. It was *Father* Magroarty Brooke and his henchmen had come to toss into the streets of Carrick.

The story of the eviction is contained in the letter press-books of estate agent Arthur Brooke covering the years between 1875 and 1880 (Musgrave 1866–1902), during which time he was in the employ of landlord James Musgrave of Belfast. There is, however, another version: the tale of the priest and the agent found its way into the local oral tradition. The version I heard was recited in Gaelic by a ninety-one-year-old woman living in a house close by the scene of the confrontation. Her account differed, not only on the matter of the motivations attributed to the actors but, most significantly, as to the ultimate character of the confrontation and hence its place and meaning in local ideology. From Brooke's perspective, the confrontation was of a legal

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and political nature; for the "folk," it was moral and religious. Brooke understood the battle to be between himself and one clever but utterly devious and troublesome priest; for the *seanchaidhe*, or storyteller, it was one of a series of clashes between priests and the perfidious *Gaill* (foreigners)—contests between the secular power of landlords and their henchmen and the supernatural power of priests. In these tales, the tenant may be evicted, but the final, supernatural victory typically belongs to the priest.

I propose to take advantage of the coincidental survival of these two accounts to address two distinct but related questions, each of which has ramifications beyond the immediate case. First, why was the priest evicted—or to put the question more broadly—to what extent was the conflict between the priest and the agent a function of their respective positions in a changing regional social structure? And, second, why is the eviction remembered the way it is; how was it made to fit into a set of historical categories which continues to shape the contemporary view of the social world?

The conflict is historical, but the questions to be addressed here concern social structure and ideology in a local arena, and are thus anthropological. So, too, are the theoretical and methodological approaches taken. The analysis replaces the 1877 eviction in its historical and social contexts, and treats the conflict as an "extended case study" (see Van Velsen 1967). This analysis of the events leads us to view the agent and the priest as "brokers" (Wolf 1956, 1966) or "mediators" (Silverman 1965) whose power as local political actors was based on their connections to external authorities. The recent purchasers of the estate, Belfast businessmen John and James Musgrave, had hired Brooke to straighten out affairs. This involved Brooke in social as well as economic management, and brought him, as we shall see below, into direct competition with the priest. In the context of this conflict, the eviction can be interpreted as a strategic move by the priest: political theatre aimed at defining the nature of the conflict in such a way as to ensure the support of the locals, and undermine Brooke's growing influence in the parish.

The folktale version of the eviction is another matter. That, too, needs to be contextualized anew, both in the social setting of the telling and in the corpus of local "priest tales." From the former we can divine something of the contemporary significance of the tale, but from the latter we can tell much about the shaping of an entire social structure, mentioned above as the social context of the eviction. Thus an anthropological view of the conflict, and of the tale told about it, may lead us to an understanding of the transformation of a local, but complex, social and cultural system.

The relevance of this case study, however, goes beyond southwest Donegal and indeed Ireland, for the event and the mode of analysis have, respectively, comparative ethnographic and methodological significance. The changes in local social structure which form the important context for the conflict were in fact part of a general trend throughout the west of Ireland, where adjustments

to a postfamine economy were altering the economic and social structure of many great estates. For Marx (1886:I, ch. 25) these changes were an important aspect of his model of the development of capitalism.[1] Ireland, from the point of view of Marx and Engels, was at once a colony and a provincial periphery of England. But unlike the case in England, depopulation in Ireland began only with the famine in 1845, when massive evictions and starvation eliminated much of the poorest agricultural classes. Those who survived to leave went not to Irish cities, however, but to England and, most often, to America, thus dispersing the most potentially revolutionary class.

Cattle and sheep did not, however, replace the marginal peasantry everywhere in Ireland. In the extreme west, in areas like southwest Donegal, the rural proletariat continued to grow in number even as the size of their meagre leaseholds shrank. Survival depended on cottage industries such as herring fishing, with marketing through local merchants. What was the class consciousness of this proletariat? Did the national political movements of Fenianism in the 1860s and the Land League in the late 1870s and 1880s succeed in fostering within these people a thoroughly class-oriented view of themselves and those around them? The evidence suggests that it did not. The question for Marxist theory is, Why not? What were the competing social ideologies, and why were they more successsful? The answer may have relevance for many developing capitalist peripheries.

There is another, complementary, way of viewing the transitions in Irish social structure that figure in this case study: from a Weberian perspective. From that angle, two processes need to be considered: (1) the rationalization of the estates by new, "improving" landlords and agents, and (2) the increasing bureaucratization of the Catholic Church in Ireland and subsequent institutionalization of charisma in local religious practice, as represented in the increasing power of the priest—priestly domination, in Max Weber's language (Weber 1963: 20–31). In the context of these theoretical concerns the question is, Why does the local Irish clergy continue to enjoy not only great secular power, but a personally controlled charisma of office whose daunting nature is striking to those familiar with other Catholic regions? Much of the recent Irish historical scholarship bears on these questions, in particular the works of Emmet Larkin (1966, 1972, 1975a, 1975b, 1980) and Sean Connolly (1982), but these authors have so far made little reference to the possible relevance of general social theory. Among the works of anthropologists writing on contemporary Ireland, the priest is conspicuous by his absence.[2]

This case study is offered as a link between these problems of general social

[1] Marx and Engels were extremely interested in the case of Ireland both as a peasant society and as a model of colonial exploitation. See Marx and Engels (1971). For a recent view of the role of Ireland in British development, see Hechter (1975).

[2] John Messenger's (1969) treatment of the role and influence of the priest is an exception, though its perspective is very different from that used here. Dorothy Finnegan's (1982) un-

theory and of Irish history and ethnography. By focusing on one small social world, a community, though a complex and stratified one,[3] it is possible to perceive individuals both contributing and responding creatively to the historical forces described by Marx and Weber. Father Magroarty's actions did not simply reproduce the local social structure, but rather manipulated and adapted pre-existing categories and relationships; in a situation of shifting social structure it is not always in the interest of such brokers to maintain the status quo. The case study also suggests a new approach to the use of folktales, both by the "folk" and by those of us who analyze their actions.[4] The priest tales can be viewed from this perspective not merely as passively assembled folk knowledge or folk delusion, but as the product of a collective ordering—an assertion of meaning which is, as it were, self-fulfilling. But it is equally apparent that such orderings are never static, but can be reforged to meet new exigencies, seizing on events not just as problems to be explained but as opportunities for expression.

THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In the southwest peninsula of Donegal of the 1870s the community was the estate/parish: sixty-odd square miles of mountain, bog, and occasional glen comprising several distinct settlements. Its inhabitants included a vast majority of poor Catholic tenants, a small minority of Protestant tenants holding more and better acreage, and a few Catholic merchants. The confrontation of 1877 catches not only southwest Donegal, but much of rural Ireland, at a critical point in several continuing processes of social change. We may usefully distinguish two sorts of change: the first being in the nature of a long-term process, and the second, a much more rapid rearrangement of local social relations. The long-term process in question was the emergence, over the preceding century, of "new" classes: a small but influential petit-bourgeois merchantry and a large and powerless marginal peasantry. The more rapid alterations were those that followed the transfer of much western Irish estate land through the Incumbered Estates Courts in the years following 1849. The buyers were, by and large, of a background and orientation different from those of the sellers, less likely to be absentee landlords, and more likely to bring a rational-economic world view of the enterprise of running an estate, or else were land speculators, with shorter-term profits in mind (see

published analysis of the role of the local priest in class relations is an important addition to the literature concerning the problems that this article addresses.

[3] There is a danger that anthropologists, and particularly those working in Europe, will, in reaction to simplistic functionalist community studies, abandon the community focus. See Taylor (1983: 7–9) for a fuller discussion.

[4] This concern animates the work of Henry Glassie (1982) and Gearoíd ó'Crualaoich (1982) but very few other students of Irish folklore.

Vaughan 1983:23). In pursuit of their goals, such landlords often hired the services of an agent with legal experience, who actively intruded into local affairs. These two aspects of what may be called modernization—the emerging class structure and the rationalization of estate social structure—together comprised the significant structural context to which the local clergy had to adapt.

CHANGING CLASS STRUCTURE

By 1877, southwest Donegal exemplified one version of the local outcome of the historical currents I have mentioned. A marginal peasantry renting very small parcels of land, and hence dependent on a variety of cottage industries for rent and subsistence, had already taken form in the mid-eighteenth century (see Taylor 1980a). Famine and eviction had cleared a large portion of this class from the land elsewhere in Ireland, but in southwest Donegal, as in other areas where the land was too marginal for market cattle production, there were fewer clearances; population continued to grow while the size of holdings decreased through the 1870s at least.

The condition of this marginal peasantry worsened with repeated bad harvests in the 1870s, and many tenants experienced difficulty in paying rent (as Brooke's correspondence attests). The class consciousness of these marginal peasants may have been pricked by the activities of the Fenians, whose platform and followers seemed to indicate a new turn in Irish resistance politics (see Clark 1979: 212). According to Emmet Larkin, Fenianism "politicized what was left of a class that before the famine had tended to degenerate into the terrorism of agrarian secret societies" (Larkin 1975a: 1261). Linking peasant proprietorship with independence from England, the Fenian Brotherhood declared "war against the aristocratic locusts whether English or Irish, who have eaten the verdure of our fields."

If such views threatened the landholding class, as is reflected in a number of Brooke's letters to his employer, they were unsettling to the Church as well. The Fenians "favoured absolute liberty of conscience, and the complete separation of Church and State" (Lee 1973: 54)—an ideology not likely to have been comforting to an increasingly powerful national Church which had been able (at least since Daniel O'Connell, who led the successful campaign for Catholic emancipation in 1829) to identify nationalism with Catholicism.

More subtly, however, a thoroughgoing class consciousness, involving class as a primary definition of self, might have made much of the population aware of exploitation in other guises, including that of the new middle class of which the priests were typically part. That class included merchants who had profited from assuming middleman possitions in local-level trade and who were typically resident in the new street-towns of the countryside—places like Carrick, which had received its post-office and first street only in 1840

(see Taylor 1980b).[5] By the 1870s, the time of the eviction, this group constituted a small but important new element in the region and occupied a position in many ways intermediate between the very poor marginal peasantry and the representatives of the landed gentry. This latter group was entirely Protestant, and the merchants of Carrick were largely Catholic, yet there is some indication, both in oral history and in contemporary records, that they recognized each other as having shared interests. Of significance to our consideration of the drama at hand, the agent's letters indicate that several of this class of Catholic merchants acted as bailiffs and foremen for projects under the direction of a landlord's agent or of the local government, which in this case amounted to the same thing.[6] Certainly the agent perceived a great difference between this sort of individual and the mass of impoverished country people.

Thus the long-standing, two-part local class division—between a poor, Irish Catholic, Gaelic-speaking tenantry on the one hand, and a small number of wealthier, Protestant, English-speaking tenants (and their compatriots of the landlord class) on the other—had lately become complicated by the emergence of a third group: a new Irish Catholic, Gaelic-speaking middle class. Under the former conditions, there had prevailed a convenient coincidence of ethnic and class categories, and some difficulty may have attended the accommodation of a new element which confuted that symmetry, even when members of the new group were seen individually as exploiters: *gombeens* who extorted interest payments at usurious rates.[7]

RATIONALIZATION OF ESTATE STRUCTURE

From the time of Cromwell's conquest through the middle of the nineteenth century, much of the marginal lands of western Ireland were held—often in large estates—by absentee landlords, whose sole interest was in the exaction of rents. The portion of southwest Donegal that concerns us here was held by

[5] Merchant-farmer relations are treated by Conrad Arensberg (1968), whose analysis seems to have informed Samuel Clark's (1979) view of the role of "townsmen" in radical politics, who, he says, constituted an important part of the "challenging collectivity." "They did so because they were socially integrated into the rural society and enjoyed strong social bonds and cooperative economic relationships with farmers [and thus] rural-urban relations were less divisive in Ireland than in most other societies" (Clark 1979: 275–76). Against this view of such relations, see Gibbon (1973) and Taylor (1980b). Doubtless the ties of at least the rural merchantry (of the type living in Carrick in the 1870s) to the surrounding tenantry were in many respects more complex than the typical urban-rural relations elsewhere in contemporary Europe. Yet the leadership role exercised by such townsmen (including clergy) should not be read as indicating the lack of incipient class divisions between them and the very marginal peasants in such areas as southwest Donegal.

[6] The county governing body was the "Board of Guardians," whose control over the expenditure of funds for road improvements and the like made its members important to local landlords and agents, who, in fact, typically sought and were elected to such offices.

[7] See Taylor (1980b) for a discussion of the local perception of the *gombeen*.

a Thomas Connolly, whose main residence was some fifty miles away, and who seems to have interfered only sporadically with the practice of agriculture among the local peasantry.

Like many of his fellows, Connolly in 1860 found himself in the Incumbered Estates Court, a special body set up in 1849 to facilitate the sale of estates made bankrupt by the decline of rents during the famine. The hope was that well-endowed capitalists would purchase the lands for investment, rationalizing both agricultural practices and management in order to profit from such an undertaking. Low prices attracted enough purchasers to effect the transfer of about one seventh of the country over a period of a decade. The purchasers, as Joseph Lee notes, were "mainly younger sons of gentry, solicitors, and shopkeepers who did well out of the famine" (Lee 1973: 36–37). If not the major capitalists the courts had hoped for, such men may at least have been more apt to take a calculating economic view of their holdings than had their predecessors.

The purchasers—brothers John and James Musgrave—were members of a Belfast family of business and professional men. That James (who ran the estate) was determined to "improve" and rationalize the 50,000-odd acres and 1,350 tenancies that comprised his Donegal holdings is clear from his letters to his estate agent, Arthur Brooke. Hired in 1875 to oversee all estate problems, Brooke, judging from his accounts and those of the oral history of the peasantry, was diligent in pursuit of his employer's goals. Resident in nearby Killybegs, and weekly present in Carrick conducting estate business, Brooke was a new type of broker. Armed with the authority of both the landlord and the local government (to which he was also well connected), he could effectively mediate a range of local disputes, and in that way challenge the secular power of the priest. Indeed, Brooke's letters show that many of the locals were quick enough to realize that a case well presented in the appropriate idiom to agent Brooke might find quicker and more favorable resolution than with priest Magroarty.

In sum, the emerging class conflict and rationalization of estate social structure each in their own way represented dangerous challenges not only to the national Church, but to the mediatory power of such local clergy as Father Magroarty. An appreciation of the priest's response to these challenges requires a look at the important changes in the position of the clergy that transpired concomitantly with these other alterations in the rural social structure.

THE CHANGING STATUS OF PRIESTS

Sean Connolly's (1982) recent and penetrating study of Irish clergy before the famine draws attention to the gap between official Catholicism and the folk version. While the efforts of the clergy in the early decades of the nineteenth century were often aimed against the syncretic magical religion of the people,

it must be remembered that the priests themselves enjoyed an important place in that same cosmology. If officially the power of the priest came to him from the institutional Church, that external institution was not so importantly manifest in local religious life. Mass attendance was not yet the definitive religious activity, and when held the services were often out of doors or in people's homes. Holy wells and pilgrimage sites were probably more important foci of group religious activity than churches, and in such cases religious power was associated with natural rather than cultural settings. Insofar as the priest was seen from the perspective of that cosmology—so also was he.

In Weberian terms, the priest's was still the more personal charisma of the magician. Furthermore, the priest's potential, though not inevitable, opposition to the source of secular cultural authority—that of an illegitimate and oppressive foreign rule—lent a charisma to his office of the sort that Weber associates with the prophet. Just as the prophesies of Saint Columcille enjoyed great popularity in the early nineteenth century, the *tairngreacht,* or damning prophecy, with which priests would overcome powerful secular opponents is fondly remembered in local folk history. While it is clear from the work of Connolly, Larkin, and others that the place of the Church in local society changed through the middle decades of the nineteenth century, and that natural, folk-Catholicism suffered as a result, the magical attributes of priesthood may not have vanished.

According to Larkin (1972), two things brought about a new relation between clergy and people: (1) the famine and the ensuing elimination of the landless and marginally landed classes through death and emigration, and (2) the reforms promulgated by Archbishop (later Cardinal) Paul Cullen, who from 1850 till his death in 1877 succeeded in "modernizing" and strengthening the Irish Catholic Church. On the local level, the impact of Cullen's reforms accomplished what Larkin has called the "devotional revolution," whereby new ranks of better educated and indoctrinated priests, backed by the power and money of the bishops could now afford to insist that their parishioners come to church. By 1870, it is estimated that regular attendance at mass had risen from a pre-famine level of 33 percent of the population to over 90 percent, the level at which it continues today.

In Weberian terms, all this amounts to a routinization of charisma: the institutionalization of religious power in a manner such as to favor the rise of the ideal type of priest, for whom

> pastoral care in all its forms is . . . the real instrument of power, particularly over the workaday world, and it influences the conduct of life most powerfully when religion has achieved an ethical character [and where it has,] the pastor will be consulted in all the situations of life by both private individuals and functionaries of groups (Weber 1963: 75–76).

These new Irish priests are locally remembered as having opposed such magicoreligious practices as all-night (purportedly riotous) vigils. Sacred

stones gave way to Sacred Hearts and a thousand other "mass cultural" religious items, all of which came to the people through the priest and Church from "outside"—ultramontane, at least in terms of the local geography. The clergy, in Larkin's words, "centered their attention on the sacraments, and especially on the sacraments of penance and the Holy Eucharist . . . confession and communion, once only Easter duty, now became much more frequent" (Larkin 1972: 644).

Thus the mediator between his parishioners and all Sacred Power, the priest, particularly in the far west of Ireland, may have been an important secular mediator as well. Where absentee landlords were the rule, local life was interrupted only by the occasional appearance of rent-collecting agents. This left a power vacuum for which the priest was a natural candidate. Not only were locals likely to use his special position to adjudicate disputes, but the landlord—Protestant as he typically was—often remained content in the knowledge that the priest could be relied upon to keep a general order on his estate. For the priest's part, of course, he, and indeed his whole national Church, had grown comfortable under the protection of the Protestant ascendancy.

This convergence of interests between landlords and clergy on the local level, and the rulers of the state and the Catholic Church on the national level, is familar enough from elsewhere in Catholic Europe. What is significantly different in the Irish case, however, is the inherently ambiguous position of the Catholic Church and its clergy. From Catholic emancipation in 1829 on, the Church began to represent an established authority, and one which was yearly growing richer and more visibly powerful; but it was authority that was, at least in principle, opposed to the authority of the Protestant rulers of Ireland. For both the national Church and the local clergy, Fenianism and anything like a full-blown class consciousness threatened their authority as local leaders and, more personally, as members of the rural middle class—a class which John O'Leary, a Fenian leader, characterized as "in Ireland and elsewhere, . . . the lowest class morally—that is, the class influenced by the lowest motives" (quoted in Brown 1972: 157).

There is abundant evidence that the hierarchy, at least, were well aware of the danger, both of alternative views of Irish society and of the new political charismatics of the Land League who espoused those views. "Whether the priest will it or no," wrote Bishop John MacEvilly of impending Land League meetings in the late 1870s, "the meetings will be held. Their people will assemble under the pressure of threatened famine to expound their wrongs to landlords and government; if the priests keep aloof, these meetings will be scenes of disorder; if the priests attend they will keep the people attached to them" (quoted in Larkin 1975b: 29).

If Father Magroarty's authority was being threatened by the growing class distance and class perception of affairs in his own small corner of Ireland, his position as secular mediator, as we have already seen, was also being chal-

lenged by the bureaucratization of estate management. Whereas the priest under the *ancien régime* enjoyed the status of secular adjudicator and dispute settler, the new agent's records, as noted, indicate that an increasing number of tenants were discovering that Brooke was now in a better position to influence the course of earthy events. But though the priest's secular power was being sapped by the change in estate structure, his sacred power rested on a set of symbolic elements which remained in his sole possession. Yet these symbols may well have needed restrengthening at this juncture. Because his earlier secular power and association with the local middle class and more distant ruling class may have undermined the sacred power of the priest, the power of his specifically religious associations needed regeneration and, in order to handle a new configuration of local challenges, restructuring as well. That restructuring could be accomplished by a ritual confrontation which dramatically opposed the priest, as symbol, to the Protestant enemy. If successful, the priest's revolt could overcome two enemies at once: the competing power broker, Brooke, and a burgeoning class consciousness.

THE EVICTION ACCORDING TO BROOKE

By Brooke's account, the trouble with the priest started on 24 January 1876, when Magroarty walked into the agent's Carrick office to offer his rent on Cashel Farm. Having received the correct amount, Brooke proceeded to write out a receipt in the name of "representatives of P. Gallagher," for Gallagher was the name the punctilious Brooke found listed in his lease records. Magroarty protested that he could not accept a receipt but in his own name, adding by way of proof of his own rightful tenantry that he had paid a substantial sum to Gallagher, before he had emigrated, in the presence of the Reverend Logue, parish priest of Kilcar. That argument was not one that could possibly find favor with Brooke, for whom the presumed lofty status of priests was an affront and challenge to his own contractual world view. Magroarty refused to pay the rent without a proper receipt, and Brooke could not "recognize" a claim unsanctioned by the authority (of landlord and contract) upon which all his own power depended.

This, however, was not the only transgression of which Magroarty was guilty. Brooke discovered that the priest had put up fences on a portion of the commonage adjoining his farm. Brooke's account, addressed to landlord Musgrave, of his confrontation with Magroarty on this issue is interesting:

> He says he acted "bona fide" in putting [the fences] up, thinking he had a right to do so in order to protect his grazing, and not until some of the other tenants had first done so and asked him to do so also. . . . He is willing to acknowledge in "black and white" [that he is in the wrong] but he cannot recede from his position by taking down the fences as he would lower himself in the eyes of his parishioners . . . . he maintained that you had promised four years ago to take steps to protect his grazing from trespass by making some regulation about the quantity of stock to be kept (Musgrave 1866–1902: 4278 n.784).

A recently increasing population in the parish must have put growing pressure on accessible pasturage. Although former landlord Connolly had presided over the consolidation of rundale strip holdings into separate "stripes" and "squares," mountain land had remained commonage. In this case, the press for enclosure seems to have been coming from the better-off tenantry, and if Brooke and Musgrave favored the general principle of enclosure (as did all "improving" landlords) as being necessary to rational agriculture, they were not happy about tenants taking the initiative by carving up commonage without first securing the contractual right to do so. It is worth noting, as well, that, as this passage shows, this priest was a farmer and as such in competition with some of his parishoners for scarce resources.[8]

"He was arguing," continues Brooke's letter to Musgrave, "as if priests were to be treated differently from other tenants, and that if you gave in to him it could not form a precedent to your harm." Indeed, both the priest's hope for special treatment and Brooke's fear of giving it are testament to the priest's symbolic importance in that social world. Beyond their specifically sacred role, such rural priests were almost alone among local Catholics in such regions in their ability to communicate and even mobilize for political ends. According to Samuel Clark (1979: 197), the Catholic clergy, particularly after 1873, took an active part in parliamentary politics, and were, in fact, "time and again accused of having improperly interfered in politics." Brooke was concerned, however, with more local matters, such as the election of the Board of Guardians, whose jurisdiction over county affairs most affected the running of the estate.

> Nathaniel Walker has been returned as Guardian for Glen and Malinmore though John Blaine pushed him very hard, to within 8 votes. . . . I have not heard the particulars of the election yet but I think the Priest must have interfered for Blaine as Walker told me more than two thirds of the voters had pledged themselves to him. I purposely avoided anything like interference for fear of raising his back (Musgrave 1866–1902: 4278–79 n. 774).

The "fear of raising his back" shows Brooke's sensitivity to the power of the priest, and the possibly adverse effects of a direct confrontation—particularly over a public issue and in a public arena. Brooke's hope was for a legal contest where the issues were contractual, but his letters show quite clearly that he was not insensible to the fact that such a battle would, in the final analysis, be difficult to keep within judicial limits. He and Musgrave began to write letters to the bishop, hoping that he would convince Magroarty of the errors of his ways, all to no avail. Brooke then offered the priest £200 compensation, much more than he had allegedly paid Gallagher for the privilege of renting the farm, and even the continued possession of the house and

[8] The symbolic function of the commons, as elegantly discussed by James Fernandez (1981), may have been filled, in coastal settlements at least, by a watery commons. See Taylor (1981).

gardens. But all offers were refused. Brooke had it from his network of spies that the local opinion of the priest was not altogether favorable, for he was often described as being avaricious: Brooke may have entertained faint hopes that the people would not support Magroarty. The reports from reliable sources, however, ultimately made him nervous.

> Magroarty is determined to be put out I am told, as it is his avowed object to make the place impossible for you. That it is which makes him refuse your offers. . . . . [H]e will not give up until put out, as he thinks the people will side with him against you, so that his real object is to make a show if he can (Musgrave 1866–1902: 875–76).

As the event drew near, Brooke became increasingly anxious, and his hesitation to inform the priest about the day on which to expect the sheriff well illustrates the perceived precariousness of his position. If he notified Magroarty as to the day, Brooke reasoned, the priest could really set the stage; if he did not, then Magroarty could later claim unfair treatment. Either way, Brooke now clearly saw that nothing less than a "show" was in the offing.

The confrontation was indeed dramatic. A crowd met the agent at the gate and although Magroarty was in fact evicted, within a few days of the fabled event, as Brooke ruefully notes, local guerillas were fighting for the priest's fallen honor. The landlord's walls and fences were "tumbled" at night, and the priest's cows were led daily by youths onto the very pastures from which they had been driven. Meanwhile, a committee had organized itself to meet in the church and raise money for the building of a new, equally illegal, residence for Magroarty. A frustrated Brooke found Magroarty sympathizers even within the constabulary barracks[9] and begged Musgrave to send a band of Protestant laborers who could be trusted to act properly. Their arrival, of course, only served to reinforce the religious and ethnic definition of the antagonism. In the end, Brooke must have either wearied or shied from the battle, for the priest's new house stood. Magroarty died soon after, but his replacement, a man named Peter Kelly from whom Brooke expected a pleasant change, was soon reported to be passing petitions in church demanding fair rents. When Land League agitation began soon after, the national leaders found natural allies among priests who, like Father Magroarty, had proved fit adapters to the contingencies of changing circumstance.

THE FOLK MEMORY

The success of Magroarty's strategy is evident not only in the ensuing events, which testify to Brooke's greatly weakened political influence in the area, but in the folk memory of the eviction. The story was not told in the mode assigned to mere historical anecdote, but in the formal tones of the *sean-*

[9] W. E. Vaughan (1985) points out that landlord power was sapped by the growth of an independent constabulary after the 1830s.

chaidhe, as an heroic confrontation. An audience of half a dozen old men listened as ninety-one-year-old Mary Cunningham launched into the narrative. Her story began (my translation),

> Magroarty, that's the priest that Brooke put out of his house, well that's the story that I heard about it. The priest was a big, strong, confidant man, and he had a hound, or maybe a couple of them, and he liked to be out hunting, do you see? But at that time there were bailiffs over in that place to watch it, do you know, and I think you had to have permission to hunt there. But it's likely that the priest hadn't permission to go hunting there, and whatever happened that evening, the bailiff met him up on the hill and he took him in, in Brooke's name. . . . Well it was all the Musgraves', do you see, and when the priest went to pay the rent, Brooke wouldn't accept it, and told him that he had broken the law, that he was out in the hills hunting and that he would lose the place, the house he was in.
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> Well he wasn't satisfied, but what could he do? Well then the people of the parish heard about it all. He had been the priest for a long time, and they weren't at bit satisfied at what had happened. But they let the time slip by, to when he had to be out of the house, and the time grew short and in the end the last day arrived. In those days there was only one carriage around here, and that was Brooke's, and the priest saw it arrive. He was upstairs, guarding that way out. He saw them coming from the corner—there were soldiers there and Brooke outside in his carriage. And the curate that was there, he came as well, and with him were the people of the parish. . . . And the curate came, when the priest was at the top of the stairs, Father Magroarty, and the curate pulled the stole from his pocket and put it around his own shoulders, and he pulled out his book and began to recite. 'Put that back in your pocket,' said the priest, 'let it be.' He did so. The priest went out the door and he wasn't seen and no one saw where he went. No one saw him leave. Well, that was fine—the intruders came in and there was no priest for them to find. He had left. They searched and threw whatever belongings they found out into the street. And when they had all that done, they put a lock on the door for fear that someone else would try to go into it . . . they left then and the people were in a rage.
>
> Well, in those days they were all fine and strong, women as well as men, but the men wouldn't start anything until the woman would first. There was no law on them, it didn't matter what they did . . . but there was one woman down here then and she was as strong as any in the parish. They say she had two great broad shoulders on her; she was so strong each hand on her and the fist on her . . . *aru,* she was so strong that it didn't matter what she took hold of, she could pull it down. She went up to the hotel the Musgraves had up there, and a very nice one it was, and she took hold of the iron fence around it and began to pull it down. When the men saw what was up they began to help her and it wasn't long till they had wrecked it all. . . .
>
> Well all that was good, but the priest was still out and with no house at all. Everyone went off then, the people of the parish, and met together, and though they hadn't any money, they each had two hands. . . . They joined together and started to bring stones until they built the house the priest is in now—in three weeks and thats the way the story went—in a couple of weeks later the priest was living in it. I heard my mother talk of it, and she heard the old folks talk of it. . . .

The listeners to this tale showed their familiarity and agreement with the narrative by their frequent and apparently heart-felt repetition of the Gaelic verbs that began several episodes of the story.

Two points in which this tale diverges from Brooke's account are worth

noting. Whatever the historical veracity of the hunting incident, Brooke makes no mention of it and, given that he never hesitated to decry Magroarty's infractions, it's hard to think he would have passed up the chance in his letters. It is impossible to say whether the hunting incident was offered by Magroarty as a justification, or supplied by one generation or other of storytellers in search of an appropriate cause of eviction. In either case, it has the virtue of attributing poaching, the favorite local criminal sport, to the priest, and thus aligning his interests with those of his parishioners. Conspicuous by its absence in mention of any possible violation by Magroarty of communal grazing rights, or of any element of competition between him and his flock. In the confrontation at the house, the curate arms himself with stole and book—an important theme, we shall see, in the genre. It is not clear to me whether or not the reason that the priest walks out of the house without being seen is that he has rendered himself invisible, though this interpretation would put the story very much in line with others of its type. It is significant that Magroarty, who in other contexts is remembered as greedy vis-à-vis the local people, is cast in this saga as *An Sagart,* the priest—a dramatic role he seems carefully to have created for himself. The forces of Good are thus dressed in priestly garb and here pitted against the ascendent forces of Evil arriving in the class emblem of carriage, Protestant by implication of the narrative structure and the logic of binary opposition.

The local meaning of this story is better appreciated when it is placed in its proper context, for in many respects it is typical of a subgenre of local priest stories. In this class of tales, the priest's power is pitted against various elements of the local Protestant ascendancy: landlord, agent, bailiff. The setting is historical—not a dream time—and the priest is often named. There were several stories recorded by a local folklorist in the 1940s (O'hEochaidh 1945)[10] detailing the exploits of Father Charles McNeely, Magroarty's immediate predecessor (1859–70), and another whose hero is one Father Peter McDevitt, parish priest from 1886 to 1905. In all these stories, the priest is depicted as the defender and avenger of the unfortunate, and his weapons are supernatural. Sometimes he simply freezes his opponents with his breath, but most often he delivers a damning prophecy of great ill fortune that is to befall his enemies (a technique no doubt having deep pre-Christian roots), or "*tharraingt se an ribin agus chuir sé thar a mhuineal é, agus tharraing sé amach a leabhar agus thosaigh sé a leitheoireacht,*" that is, he pulls out the stole and puts it around his shoulders and pulls out his book and begins to recite (a phrase that recurs in several of O'hEochaidh's stories). Those actions may be the prelude of anything from leading salmon into the bay to bringing a dead Protestant up from hell. It is interesting that the Gaelic word *Protastunach* is

[10] There are twenty-three tales about priests included in the notebook. I am currently working on a study of priestly power as revealed in these stories.

never used in any of these stories; they are all *na gaill* (the foreigners), usually in contrast with either *na bunadh paroiste* (people of the parish) or *na Caitlicigh* (Catholics), though in more casual conversation the opposing pair might be *gael* versus *gall*. In all these cases, however, the effect is to identify the central conflict as one between the indigenous Irish, unified behind and led by the priest, and the foreign Protestant intruders. They are also potent reminders to contemporary listeners of the depth and basis of priestly power, a power which in my own field work in southwest Donegal I saw to be certainly changed, but in some respects not abated.

CONCLUSIONS

This historic incident, and the folk memory of it, may suggest some of the reasons why the local clergy of Ireland have so successfully maintained their dominance through sometimes radically changing social circumstances. According to sociologist Samuel Clark (1979: 356), Irish political movements of the second half of the nineteenth century must be seen in the context of a general social transformation from communalism to associationalism. The evidence presented here suggests that such a shift did not mean the dissolution of local communities, but rather their redefinition at the hands of, and in response to, increasingly intrusive external social forces. The rural parish or great estate became an increasingly complex social field within whose bounds relations of class played as important a role as those of kin and territory. This local world was also a stage on which various dramas were enacted by players representing at least three nationally based institutions: the landlord and his class, the Catholic Church, and the Land League. Such dramas, and their narrative interpretations, made substantial contributions to the local understanding of social relations and, through time, to the continuing social construction of "history." All the players, moreover, were interested in defining the nature of social relations as well as in political domination. The landlord and his agent sought to teach as well as enforce a contractual view of estate relations, while the Land Leaguer or Fenian framed them in the idiom of nationalism and class exploitation. The clergy, however, were in some ways as threatened by the one as by the other; the Church had its own version of social reality to construct.

Father Magroarty was a political power broker astute enough to recognize and act in his own and his institution's interests. So, too, was the agent Brooke, and both he and the priest were in positions to mediate not only between locals and external sources of power and authority, but among the various elements that comprised the local social system. In this competition it seems the agent should have had the upper hand, being possessed of more influence over the worldly affairs of his tenants than was his competitor. But in the drama, the priest had the theatrical advantage, being able to demonstrate a symbolic power more definitive and, indeed, more memorable.

That power is embodied in the tales, all of which, from internal evidence, date from the 1860s through the 1880s, a period during which there were, in fact, very few evictions. It is interesting that the generation of a strong Protestant versus Catholic ideology in this period also characterized the Protestant northeast of Ireland (Walker 1984), and that in neither case did the newly virulent ideology seem simply to give folk expression to actual strife. Rather, several isolated confrontations became the source of great volumes of folk ideology. Thus the stories should be taken as evidence not of behaviors so much as of ideology and, in the case at hand, as evidence of how successful the priest was in defining the symbolic nature of the conflict.

If this analysis seems to overrate the political impact of theatre, it is worth remembering that modern Irish history is punctuated by just such carefully constructed dramas, not the least of which was the 1916 Easter uprising. The Irish have never undervalued the symbolic and dramatic sides of politics, and the structurally ambiguous position of the local clergy and of the Catholic Church allowed for a special latitude in the symbolic manipulation of consciousness. The incident of the eviction here examined suggests some of the reasons why anticlericalism in Ireland has had far less class consciousness about it than elsewhere. The Catholic success in surmounting a prototypical local class consciousness may owe as much to such local clerics as Magroarty as to the machinations of Cardinal Cullen and his bishops.

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