The secret history of bride abduction in 18th century Ireland

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For most, marriage is a happy occasion, marking the mutual coming together of two persons and their families. But in cases where one of the soon-to-be spouses is forced to participate in the conjugal ceremony this mutuality is absent. Marriage by abduction is practised in most parts of the world. Although husband-capture does occur, as in parts of Northern India where poor families, unable to provide daughters with dowries, resort to kidnapping grooms, in the majority of cases it is women who are kidnapped and compelled to marry their captors.[1]

Spousal capture used to be a method of marriage in Ireland. This fact is not one of historical novelty or irrelevance, as it was the kidnapping of Derbforgaill, the daughter of the King of Meath by Diarmaid Mac Murchadha the King of Leinster in the twelfth century which set into motion a chain of events culminating with the arrival of the King of England and the commencement of English colonisation on the island in 1172.[2]

Bride-capture in Ireland was not confined to the Middle Ages, reaching its apogee in the eighteenth century. The targets of abduction were heiresses, girls and women expected to inherit property, and the perpetrators were squireens, petty landowners, usually the younger sons of genteel families. Unwilling to work for a living, marrying an heiress was the only way these men, who passed their time hunting, racing horses and hurling, could maintain their status and lifestyle.

Squireens would form abduction clubs whose purpose was to seize heiresses from their homes. Their targets were not necessarily women; they often went after girls. For instance, in April 1770 one such club attacked Catherine and Anne Kennedy of Rathmeadan, county Waterford, then aged 15 and 14, at a theatre in Graignenamanagh, county Kilkenny. The teenage sisters each had £2,000 under the terms of the will of their father, which was a considerable sum at the time.

During the performance word went round that an armed group of men was on its way and Catherine and Anne, along with their mother and aunt, barricaded themselves into an adjoining room. After a siege of several hours the gang forced their way in and carried off the two girls threatening to kill anyone who tried to intervene.

Catherine and Anne were placed on the horses of the two men who were to be their husbands, Garrett Byrne of Ballyaun, county Carlow, and James Strange of Ullard, county

[1] See Barnes 1999.
[2] See Preston-Matto 2010.

Kilkenny. The two grooms rode their kidnapped brides through the night to a waiting priest, where by threats and violence, they forced the sisters to become their wives.

The two couples went on the run and for five weeks evaded the pursuing authorities, travelling through the counties of Waterford, Kilkenny, Carlow and Kildare. They were finally apprehended at Rush in county Dublin while trying to board a boat. Catherine and Anne were rescued, but their husbands escaped to Wales, where in July they were again caught and sent back to Ireland: both were duly hanged.[3]

For many, including Byrne and Strange, the execution came as a shock. It was unusual for the act of bride-capture to be punished insofar as it was regarded in much the same way as duelling at the time, which is to say an illegal but socially tolerated, even genteel, activity. As a result, the sisters, Catherine and Anne, were ostracised wherever they went and booed and hissed at in the street. This tolerance was not without its limits, however. After a particularly shocking case of bride-capture in 1707 involving a catholic gentleman kidnapping and raping a protestant heiress, the Ascendancy government made bride-capture a capital crime.[4]

Bride kidnapping in Ireland waned throughout the nineteenth century and by the start of the twentieth it was unusual. The last known cases tend to be collusive. For example, in 1911 Patrick Columb accused Michael Kelly of abducting his daughter, Bridget. The evidence that came to trial showed that Bridget had arranged the 'kidnap' with her captor to escape her abusive stepmother. Of course, not every instance involved collusion between captor and captive and there continued to be cases of women being wounded and sometimes even dying trying to resist capture by abductors.[5]

In many parts of the world, like Kyrgyzstan, bride-capture continues. In such places it is presented as an ancient custom and stated that abductions are staged - that is to say that the kidnaps are said to be performative rather than actual. But this language of tradition and ritual can hide real violence done to women.[6] In some instances, the violence is plain. In 2014, Boko Haram, an Islamist group, kidnapped 276 schoolgirls. Most of the schoolgirls have since escaped, but still 82 remain with their captors-cum-husbands.

[3] This episode is recounted in Walsh 1847 and Kelly 1994.
[4] Kelly 1994: 10.
[5] Luddy 2013: 21-2.
[6] See Kleinbach and Salimjanova 2007.

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