The Politics of *A Modest Proposal:* Swift and the Irish Crisis of the late 1720s

10,664 words

In the summer of 1729 Swift complained to Alexander Pope that the kingdom of Ireland was 'absolutely undone, as I have been telling it often in print these ten years past'.[1] The 1720s had brought an economic downturn, culminating in three successive harvest failures. As prices rose steeply, food riots erupted in southern ports, large-scale emigration from the north began, and thousands died from hunger, malnutrition and disease.[2] The sense that a decade of futile protest against Ireland's constitutional and economic subordination was coming to a grisly climax emanates from Swift's published and unpublished tracts from this period. One of these is entitled *An Answer to a Paper, called A Memorial of the Poor Inhabitants, Tradesmen and Labourers of the Kingdom of Ireland* (1728): here Swift recalled his vain attempts to rouse Irish public opinion 'at my own peril for several years past'. Added to this characteristic note of self-pity was a new intimation of Old-Testament wrath: Swift admitted to experiencing some 'Malicious

[1] Swift to Pope, 11 Aug. 1729, in David Woolley (ed.), *The Correspondence of Jonathan Swift, D. D., Volume III: Letters 1726-1734* (New York, 2003), 245; this despairing pronouncement is repeated in almost exactly the same words in his next letter to Pope dated 31 October (*ibid*., 263).

[2] For the economic crisis see James Kelly, 'Harvests and Hardship: Famine and Scarcity in Ireland in the Late 1720s', *Studia Hibernica*, xxvi (1992), 65–85.

pleasure' as he contemplated the calamity now engulfing his obdurate countrymen.[3] Even the spectacular success of Swift's *Drapier's Letters* in mobilising opposition to the Wood's halfpence scheme now seemed a fluke. The withdrawal of the controversial new coinage, one of the greatest humiliations suffered by Robert Walpole, was just 'a lucky juncture, when the fuel was ready for the first hand that would be at the pains of kindling it'.[4] Patriots nevertheless continued to look to the famous dean of St Patrick's for their salvation. An address published by the distressed inhabitants of County Armagh, where experience of dearth was particularly severe, urged the public to buy Irish goods only, as recommended by 'our celebrated Drapier'. The woollen weavers of Dublin appealed to their dean to write once more on the subject of boycotting English imports.[5]

Swift's ferocious response is widely regarded as the most magnificent satire in the English language. Its full title is *A Modest Proposal for Preventing the Children of Poor People from being a Burthen to their Parents, or the Country, and for Making Them Beneficial to the Publick*, and the carefully considered scheme it advances for the organised breeding and eating of Irish infants still horrifies. Once regarded as a

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[3] [Jonathan Swift], *An Answer to a Paper, called A Memorial of the Poor Inhabitants, Tradesmen and Labourers of the Kingdom of Ireland* (Dublin, 1728), 12–14.

[4] 'Answer to Several Letters sent me from Unknown Hands' (1729), in David Hayton and Adam Rounce (eds.), *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Jonathan Swift: A Modest Proposal and other Works* (Cambridge University Press, forthcoming), 233.

[5] For the background, see James Kelly, 'Jonathan Swift and the Irish Economy in the 1720s', *Eighteenth-Century Ireland*, vi (1991), esp. 29.

denunciation of the market economy, it is now celebrated as a bitter anti-colonial polemic. Since Swift liked to compare the Irish to native Americans and 'hottentots', it is not surprising that his bleak pamphlets of the 1720s are now read as a generalised critique of European imperialism, or that literary scholars have sometimes assimilated eighteenth-century Ireland to post-colonial frameworks that obscure its social and cultural characteristics.[6] The following article addresses a stubborn problem that post-colonial critics have never properly addressed. Those who have read the *Modest Proposal* with care agree that the target of Swift's fury is not English oppression so much as Irish complicity in English oppression.[7] Ireland's predatory ruling class is attacked in the climactic passage in which the bitter voice of Swift himself emerges to dismiss talk of the 'other Expedients' urged by Irish patriotic writers:

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[6] In addition to works cited elsewhere in this article, see the quite different colonial interpretations offered by Carole Fabricant, 'Swift as Irish Historian', in Christopher Fox and Brenda Tooley (eds.), *Walking Naboth's Vineyard: New Studies of Swift* (Notre Dame, Indiana, 1995), 40-71; Charlotte Sussman, 'The Colonial Afterlife of Political Arithmetic: Swift, Demography, and Mobile Populations', *Cultural Critique*, vol. 56 no. 1 (2004), 96-126; John Richardson, 'Swift, A Modest Proposal and Slavery', *Essays in Criticism*, 51 (2001), 404-423 and *Slavery and Augustan Literature: Swift, Pope, Gay* (London, 2004).

[7] Two influential books in this respect were Oliver W. Ferguson, *Jonathan Swift and Ireland* (Urbana, Ill., 1962), ch. 6; and Edward W. Rosenheim, *Swift and the Satirist's Art* (Chicago, 1963), 46–51. See also Claude Rawson's outstanding *God, Gulliver and Genocide: Barbarism and the European Imagination 1492–1945* (Oxford, 2001).

Of taxing our Absentees at five shillings a pound: Of using neither Cloaths, nor household Furniture, except what is of our own Growth and Manufacture: Of utterly rejecting the Materials and Instruments that promote Foreign Luxury: Of curing the Expensiveness of Pride, Vanity, Idleness, and Gaming in our Women: Of introducing a Vein of Parcimony, Prudence and Temperance: Of learning to Love our Country, wherein we differ even from LAPLANDERS, and the Inhabitants of TOPINAMBOO: Of quitting our Animosities, and Factions, nor Act any longer like the Jews, who were Murdering one another at the very moment their City was taken: Of being a little Cautious not to Sell our Country and Consciences for nothing: Of teaching our Landlords to have at least one degree of Mercy towards their Tenants.[8]

Elsewhere the *Modest Proposal* contains ironic references to the anti-Catholic penal laws (cannibalism is among other things presented as a radical method of 'preventing the further growth of popery'); gibes about disloyal Catholics (first condemned for emigrating and then for not emigrating); a sideswipe at the Dissenters of the north (who would rather leave for North America than pay tithes to the Anglican clergy); a passing crack at the English (who would 'swallow up' the entire Irish nation without seasoning); and a series of slurs on the Irish poor themselves (upbraided on account of their promiscuity and fecklessness). But the most direct focus of Swift's

[8] [Jonathan Swift], *A Modest Proposal for Preventing the Children of Poor People from being a Burthen to their Parents, or the Country, and for Making Them Beneficial to the Public* (Dublin, 1729), 14.

aggression is certainly Ireland's landed elite, on whose tables the children of the poor are to be served up, '*Stewed*, *Roasted*, *Baked*, or *Boyled*'. It is the landowners who 'have already devoured most of the Parents' and consequently have the 'best Title' to their offspring.[9] They reappear in the pamphlet's closing remarks, when Swift explains that landlord brutality, in conjunction with monetary problems and commercial weakness, has so immiserated the common people that they would be better off dead.[10] The startling disclosure that '*the Carcass of a good fat Child* … will make four Dishes of excellent Nutritive Meat' is a vicious joke at the expense of the broad public which had remained deaf to previous pleas for amendment, most notably Swift's own.[11] But the pamphet's animating grievance is a distinctive variety of anti-landlordism, a topic that has never been seriously investigated.

Of course it is unlikely that there is a single polemical purpose in *A Modest Proposal* to be extracted simply by applying the usual techniques of historical contextualization. And yet Swift's reflections on 'these ten years past' invite us to locate 'the finest of all ironic satires' in the specific political and social circumstances that produced it.[12] A re-examination of the 'straight' tracts of the 1720s, to which the modest proposer's 'other Expedients' passage directs our attention, reveals Swift's engagement in contemporary debates about estate management, leasing policy and, above all, the

[9] *Ibid*., 6, 7.

[10] *Ibid*., 16.

[11] *Ibid*., 8.

[12] The verdict of Wayne C. Booth, *A Rhetoric of Irony* (Chicago and London, 1974), 105.

relative merits of arable and pastoral agriculture. The conversion of landed estates from tillage to pasture, and the resultant expulsion of communities of villagers, posed the urgent problem for which the modest proposer announced his sickening solution: the common Irish must learn to fatten up their children like their '*Sheep*, *black Cattle* or *Swine*', if they are to appease their rapacious landlords and retain their farms.[13] Critics have naturally concentrated on the suggestion that Irish infants would make 'delicious, nourishing and wholesome' food.[14] But the science of breeding entertains Swift just as much as the refinement of Irish cuisine. The subject of the pamphlet is not simply culinary innovation, nor even the encroachments of the market economy, but a gruesome experiment in livestock farming designed to expose the barbarism of the enclosure movement.

By 1729 the encouragement of tillage had become a patriotic shibboleth in Ireland. No fewer than nine tillage bills had passed through the Dublin parliament since 1710; a tenth was being discussed when *A Modest Proposal* was published. The conversion of open arable fields to pasture provoked intense controversy, as it had done in Tudor England. Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516) presented the enclosure of plough land as the undoing of English civilization: land under tillage is taken away, houses and towns are pulled down to satisfy 'the unscrupulous greed of a few'. In a famous image, which Swift must surely have recalled, More warns that sheep have been transformed into

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[13] *Modest Proposal*, 7.

[14] *Ibid*., 6.

devourers of men.[15] This article aims to demonstrate that *A Modest Proposal* belongs to a wider clerical campaign against rapacious landlords and graziers, overlooked by both historians and literary critics. The problem of pastoralism enables us to identify the target of Swift's hostility much more convincingly than the better-known debates over landlord absenteeism or English restrictions on Irish trade. As we shall see, the issue of tillage also recapitulated the repeated failure of English settlers to engineer the social and economic improvement of Ireland. The following article therefore recovers a distinctively Irish critique of a distinctively Irish process of reconquest and recolonization. This context not only explains Swift's line of attack in *A Modest Proposal*; it also illuminates the 'wild fancy and perverse logic'[16] of its infamous plan for roasting the children of the Irish poor.

I

Modern literary scholars have generally approached *A Modest Proposal* from two angles of interpretation. The first of these relates to the familiar figure of the 'projector', whose naive recipes for social and economic improvement are parodied by Swift.[17] The

[15] G. M. Logan and R. M. Adams (eds.), *More: Utopia* (Cambridge, 2002), 18; see Quentin Skinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought* (2 vols., Cambridge, 1978), i, 221–28, also ch. 9.

[16] Rosenheim, *Swift and the Satirist's Art*, p. 50.

[17] George Wittkowsky, 'Swift's *Modest Proposal*: The Biography of an Early Georgian Pamphlet', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, iv (1943), 75–104. For attempts to link the *Modest Proposal* to orthodox 'mercantilist' theory, particularly the maxim that the wealth

Irish parliament had considered a variety of schemes for regulating the poor in 1695, 1697, 1698, 1709, 1711, 1717, 1723 and 1725, and the depression of the 1720s prompted a number of pamphleteers to revisit the issue. In 1723, when heads of a bill 'for the better employing of the poor' were drawn up, there were new tracts from the English-born bishop Francis Hutchinson and the Tory gentleman Sir William Fownes, as well as an extended treatise on agriculture written by the veteran commonwealthsman Viscount Molesworth.[18] The favourite solution to the problem of vagrancy was a badging scheme whereby invalids, widows and children would be licensed to beg, while the able-bodied would be subject to a punitive regime in a house of correction – the same recipe later offered in Swift's own *Proposal for Giving Badges to the Beggars in all the Parishes of Dublin* (1737). Molesworth recommended a more draconian remedy for the 'swarms of Bastards' who had fled their native hedges and ditches to infest the streets of the capital. These hardened vagrants constituted 'a Race of People like Gypsies', beyond the pastoral attention of any priesthood; the only remedy was to have them shipped off to 'the wildest of our Plantations abroad, and left there to their chance in this World'.[19] So established

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of a nation was determined by the number of its people, see Louis A. Landa, 'A Modest Proposal and Populousness', *Modern Philology*, xi, (1942), 161–70.

[18] [Robert, Viscount Molesworth], *Some Considerations for the Promoting of Agriculture, and Employing the Poor* (Dublin, 1723); [Francis Hutchinson], *A Letter to a Member of Parliament, concerning the Imploying and Providing for the Poor* (Dublin, 1723); W. F. [William Fownes], *Methods Proposed for Regulating the Poor* (Dublin, 1725).

[19] [Molesworth], *Some Considerations for the Promoting of Agriculture*, 40–41.

was the literature on Irish improvement that it was already a subject of satire, as revealed by the appearance of one deliberately perverse proposal, *Thoughts of a Project for Draining the Irish Channel* (1722).

The harvest failures of 1727-29 stimulated a remarkable barrage of economic treatises including Arthur Dobbs' *Essay on the Trade and Improvement of Ireland* (1729-31).[20] More ambitious and original works would follow in the next decade, including Samuel Madden's 'improvement' manifesto, *Reflections and Resolutions for the Gentlemen of Ireland* (1738) and Bishop Berkeley's *Querist* series (1735-37), with its innovative contribution to monetary theory. In this efflorescence of Irish economic writing it is not uncommon to find human beings discussed as if they were commodities, or women considered as 'Breeders'.[21] In employing this terminology, and in their shared commitment to the quantitative method, advocates of Irish improvement were following the example of Sir William Petty, the founder of 'political arithmetic', and the first writer to pose the problem of Irish underdevelopment as an economic rather than a moral one.[22]

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[20] In addition, Sir John Browne, James Maculla and William Maple all published several works in 1729.

[21] David Bindon, *An Abstract of the Number of Protestant and Popish Families in the Several Counties and Provinces of Ireland* (Dublin, 1736), 11.

[22] On Petty, see Adam Fox, 'Sir William Petty, Ireland, and the Making of a Political Economist, 1653–87', *Economic History Review*, lxii (2009), 388–404; Ted McCormick, 'Transmutation, Inclusion, and Exclusion: Political Arithmetic from Charles II to William III', *Journal of Historical Sociology*, xx (2007), 259–278.

Swift owned a copy of *Political Arithmetick* (1690) in which Petty undertook 'to express my self in Terms of *Number*, *Weight*, or *Measure*', in order to bring a more scientific spirit to his subject.[23] It is very likely that he had also read *The Political Anatomy of Ireland* (1691; reprinted 1719), in which Petty pioneered the statistical investigation of family size, religious demography, land redistribution, government expenditure and trade activity in Ireland. Petty's great ambition was to define the economic relationship between land and labour so that the value of a human being could be expressed in monetary terms. In computing the demographic consequences of the rebellion of 1641 and its aftermath, Petty observed that, whereas the economic value of an English person was £70, the Irish were better assessed 'as Slaves and Negroes are usually rated' with men at £25 and children at £5 each.[24] This calculation would have fascinated Swift, and he must also have been entertained by Petty's fantastical scheme for the 'transmutation' of Ireland's inhabitants. Petty's astonishing plan for social engineering involved the exchange of 200,000 Irish papist males for an equal number of Britons as a method of creating a union of interests between the two islands. The next phase was a transfer of women on a similarly industrial scale. Petty explained:

> There are among the 600 M. ... poor *Irish*, not above 20 M. of unmarried marriageable Women; nor would above two thousand *per Ann*, grow and become such. Wherefore if ½ the said Women were in one year, and ½ the next transported

[23] William Petty, *Political Arithmetick, or, A Discourse concerning the Extent and Value of Lands, People, Buildings…* (London, 1691), preface.

[24] William Petty, *The Political Anatomy of Ireland* (London, 1691), 21.

> into *England*, and disposed one to each Parish, and as many *English* brought back and married to the *Irish*, as would improve their Dwelling but to an House and Garden of 3 l. value, the whole Work of natural Transmutation and Union would in 4 or 5 years be accomplished.[25]

Reading Petty's visionary blueprint for ethnic assimilation, in which the inhabitants of Ireland are swallowed up their British counterparts, it is not difficult to see why *A Modest Proposal* has been read as a satire on political arithmetic in general and its Irish colonial applications in particular.

It would be misleading, however, to assume that Swift was engaged in a parody of Irish political arithmetic, or at least that such a parody indicates an outright rejection of this impressive body of writing. Certainly there was much about this new science to irritate someone of Swift's politics and temperament. The counting and categorising of populations had whiggish overtones unlikely to appeal to him. Petty had conducted the Down Survey, the vast investigation of Irish estates confiscated under the usurper Cromwell. More generally, the emergence of political arithmetic has been associated with the growth of the fiscal-military state during the great wars between the 1688 revolution and the Hanoverian Succession.[26] But Swift was on friendly terms with Arthur Dobbs and Sir William Fownes; he approved of Thomas Prior's fast-selling

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[25] *Ibid*., 30.

[26] John Brewer, *The Sinews of Power: War, Money and the English State, 1688–1783* (London, 1989), ch. 8.

pamphlet, *A List of the Absentees of Ireland* (1729), and Molesworth's 'excellent discourse' on agriculture.[27] During the 1720s he repeatedly advocated the same sort of practical improvements later adopted by the Dublin Society (established in 1731): the construction of highways, turnpike roads and other public works, the draining of bogs, and the eradication of the Irish language.[28]

The second major preoccupation found in discussions of *A Modest Proposal* concerns the organising conceit of cannibalism. Like the Native Americans, with whom they were sometimes compared, it had been reported that the ancient Irish ate human flesh. This accusation went back to the Greek ethnographers Herodotus and Strabo, who conjectured that the Irish were descendants of the barbarian Scythians. During the Elizabethan period the 'Scythian' view was repeatedly stressed by Camden and Spenser; we also find it recapitulated in Sir William Temple's *An Introduction to the History of England* (1695), published while Swift was working as his secretary. Temple not only defended the view that Ireland's original inhabitants were Scythians, but noted that their influence was still evident in some of the customs of the natives in Ulster, including booleying (the seasonal migration with cattle herds between summer pasture and winter

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[27] Ferguson, *Swift and Ireland*, 165-6. Desmond Clarke thought it probable that Dobbs had been taught by Swift during his time at Carrickfergus: see *Arthur Dobbs, Esquire 1689-1765, Surveyor-General of Ireland, Prospector and Governor of North Carolina* (London, 1958), 17.

[28] 'Answer to Several Letters sent me from Unknown Hands',

234–38.

grazing lands), and 'Eating Blood they drew from living Cattle'.[29] Montaigne, among others, had perpetuated the claim that the Scythians roasted and ate human flesh.[30] A series of influential essays by Claude Rawson has pursued the ways in which Swift's pamphlet redirects the imputation of cannibalism so that the distinguishing mark of the savage is applied not to the natives but to the English settlers and their descendants.[31] Like Montaigne's essay 'Des cannibales', *A Modest Proposal* throws into uncertainty our complacent assumptions about the boundaries that separate European civilization from barbarous peoples.

Hints of the cannibal motif appear in some of Swift's other 'famine' tracts mentioned above. Like *A Modest Proposal*, the anonymous *Answer to a Paper, Called A Memorial Of the Poor Inhabitants* (1728) is a rejection of the 'Visionary' solutions to Ireland's difficulties offered by well-meaning commentators. One recurring theme is the unnatural transposition of human beings and animals. During his first weeks in Ireland, the anonymous author is puzzled by the abundance of cattle in the fields and the 'Dearth of *Human Creatures*'. There are, perhaps, echoes here of Gulliver's first encounter with the Yahoos, whom he initially takes to be animals grazing in a field.[32] Swift rails against Irish landlords for stocking their farms with sheep and black cattle at a time when Ireland

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[29] Sir William Temple, *An Introduction to the History of England* (London, 1695), 26.

[30] J. M. Cohen, *Michel de Montaigne: Essays* (London, 1958, repr. 1993), 113.

[31] Rawson, *God, Gulliver, and Genocide*.

[32] *Answer to … A Memorial*, p. 7; David Womersley (ed.), *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Jonathan Swift: Gulliver's Travels* (Cambridge, 2012), 333.

was prohibited from exporting the manufactured products derived from these animals. Even a 'Wild *Indian*' would be ashamed of such stupidity.[33] Worse still, peasant communities were uprooted by the 'abominable Race of Graziers' in order to make way for livestock. Large tracts of land that had once supported twenty or thirty framers with their cottagers and labourers were now desolate ranches, managed by 'one or two Herdsmen and their boys'.[34] Around this Swift contributed a paper to the *Intelligencer* lamenting the fact that so many proprietors were seized by 'the Fancy of Grazing after the Manner of the *Scythians*,' and were 'every Day depopulating the Country', while his sermon, 'The Causes of the Wretched Condition of Ireland' singled out those 'cruel landlords' who were 'unpeopling' the kingdom by 'forbidding their miserable Tenants to till the Earth'.[35]

Although Swift believed that the ignorance and laziness of tenants contributed to the backwardness of Irish agriculture, it was their landlords he blamed for rural depopulation, a social evil he repeatedly linked with the allegedly Scythian ancestry of

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[33] *Answer to ... A Memorial*, 5. Black cattle were a native British breed, used for both beef and dairy farming.

[34] *Ibid*., 4–5, 7.

[35] Jonathan Swift and Thomas Sheridan, *The Intelligencer*, ed. James Woolley (Oxford, 1992), 178 (a reprint of *A Short View of the State of Ireland*, published in Dublin on 19 March 1728); 'Causes of the Wretched Condition of Ireland', in Herbert Davis *et al*., *The Prose Writings of Jonathan Swift* (16 vols., Oxford, 1939–74), ix, 8.

the Irish.[36] His very first economic tract, *The Proposal for the Universal Use of Irish Manufacture* (1720) opens by berating the 'Politick Gentlemen' of Ireland for clearing the common people off vast tracts of land in order to create grazing grounds for their sheep.[37] Swift was one of many writers to attack the graziers, and not the only one to note the paradox that 'the more Sheep we have, the fewer humane Creatures are left to wear the Wooll, or eat the Flesh'.[38] The younger Edward Synge, bishop of Ferns and Leighlin, lamented that so many cottiers had been driven into the mountains and bogs by the exorbitant demands of landowners, 'while the rich Plains and Valleys, lye unimprov'd, uncultivated, and possess'd only by the Beasts of the Field.[39] One distinctive and recurrent feature of Swift's famine writings, however, was the connection he made between the 'unpeopling' of the Irish countryside and those barbarous man-eaters of ancient times, the Scythians, from whom the Irish were reputedly descended.

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[36] [Jonathan Swift], *A Short View of the State of Ireland* (Dublin, 1728), 9.

[37] [Jonathan Swift], *A Proposal for the Universal Use of Irish Manufacture* (Dublin, 1720), 4.

[38] *Answer to … A Memorial*, 5-6.

[39] Edward Synge, *Two Affidavits in Relation to the Demands of Tythe-Agistment in the Dioces [sic] of Leighlin* (Dublin, 1736), 20.

The nomadic Scythians who had inhabited the steppe north of the Black Sea provide an interpretative key for those interested in reading *A Modest Proposal* as a comment on social relations in eighteenth-century Ireland, not merely between landlord and tenant but between settler and native. Perhaps it is not too much to say that the colonial angle has become the dominant approach to Swift's Irish writings during the last decade or two. Edward Said believed that English colonial attitudes comprised the logic against which the *Modest Proposal* rebelled, since, as he put it, 'once you dehumanize people into a mere bundle of unchanging attributes it is a very short step to turning them into articles of consumption'.[40] The persona of the projector, according to another critic of a post-colonial bent, reflects the ideological aspiration of the dominant colonizer 'to write the peasant people as a commodity and thereby transform them from people into disposable goods for the economic improvement of Ireland'.[41] But to leave matters there is to scratch the surface of a complex economic argument. As we have already seen, Swift was actually sympathetic to economic improvers such as Molesworth, 'excepting what relates to the Church' (that saving clause carries a hallmark Swiftian sting).[42] What was wrong with the landed class, he believed, was their repeated willingness to sacrifice

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[40] Edward Said, 'Swift as Intellectual', *The World, the Text and the Critic* (1983), 86.

[41] T. O. McLoughlin, *Contesting Ireland: Irish Voices against England in the Eighteenth Century* (Dublin, 1999), 86.

[42] *Some Arguments against Enlarging the Power of Bishops, in Letting of Leases* (Dublin, 1723), 21: the rest of the pamphlet concerned the church.

the improvement of Ireland – a vision he shared with other patriotic reformers – in pursuit of their own short-term gain.

To delineate the specifically Irish meanings of 'improvement', that great watchword of the eighteenth century, we should begin by recalling two core themes of that rich corpus of early modern writing on Ireland in which Gaelic social and cultural institutions were anatomized and denigrated. The first concerns the system of extortion and protection known as 'coyne and livery'. This mode of social organization was frequently denounced as a form of servitude by English observers and indeed sometimes incited metaphors of cannibalism, as in Sir John Davies's influential treatise, *A Discovery of the True Causes Why Ireland was Never Thoroughly Subdued* (1612), discussed in some detail below. The other concerns the entrenched view, articulated most explicitly during the Elizabethan era, that the clash between civility and barbarism in Ireland was manifested above all in the opposition between the sedentary agricultural practices of south-east England and the semi-nomadic life of pastoralism to which the Irish were allegedly addicted. One of the achievements of Swift's 'famine' tracts is to capsize this tradition of ethnography in which Gaelic political forms, social institutions and land-use are depicted as jammed somewhere in the state of nature in contrast to the fully-developed civil society enjoyed by the English.

When Ireland was colonized in the century between 1560 and 1660, it was in fact being re-colonized; and the re-colonizers understood their presence in Ireland as both an extension of earlier 'Anglo-Norman' settlements and as part of a political and military

struggle to supplant them. When the Drapier complained that the English 'look upon us as a sort of *Savage Irish*, whom our Ancestors conquered several hundred Years ago', he was representing his Protestant countrymen not merely as the descendants of Elizabethan, Jacobean and Cromwellian adventurers, but as the heirs of one of the great expansionary movements of late medieval Europe, when the frontiers of Latin Christendom were pushed into the dark peripheries of the continent.[43] Historians have emphasised that some Elizabethan officials and speculators were familiar with accounts of the Spanish conquests in south America; but attempts to demonstrate that English perceptions of the native Irish were decisively reshaped by contact between Europeans and the new world have not been successful.[44] For Sir John Davies, a principal architect and theorist of the Ulster plantation, the obvious models for successful colonization were the Romans, who 'refused not to communicate their Lawes to the rude & barbarous people, whom they had Conquered', the Normans in England, and those who pacified his native Wales under Edward I and Henry VIII. [45]

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[43] H. C. Davis (ed.), *The Drapier's Letters to the People of Ireland* (Oxford, 1935, corrected edn., 1965), 81; Robert Bartlett, *The Making of Europe: Conquest, Colonization and Cultural Change 1950-1350* (London, 1993).

[44] For a persuasive overview see S. J. Connolly's *Contested Island: Ireland 1460-1630* (Oxford, 2007), 264–5. David Armitage, *The Ideological Origins of the British Empire* (Cambridge, 2000), chs. 1–2, likewise reads sixteenth-century Anglo-Irish conflict in the light of medieval English and European precedents rather than transatlantic influences.

[45] Sir John Davies, *A Discovery of the True Causes Why Ireland was Never Intirely Subdu'd* (London, 1612), 124–25.

By the latter decades of the seventeenth century the ethnic distinctions so central to Elizabethan commentaries on Ireland had been largely subsumed within the polarized categories of 'Protestant' and 'Papist'. But the fervent antipopery that Ireland's ruling elite shared with their British and North American counterparts never entirely obliterated older notions of the cultural inferiority of the Gaelic Irish. These national stereotypes dated back to the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, when the people, language, and legal forms of the southern English had first penetrated throughout the British Isles. Anglo-Norman expansion brought the inhabitants of the most centralized, unitary monarchy in Europe into contact with an alarming multiplicity of overlapping kingships in which power structures seemed fragmentary and fluid. In Ireland, as in Wales, English settlers found 'a feuding, militarized, tribute-gathering, faction-ridden society'.[46]

The intractability of Gaelic Ireland had always been construed as a socio-economic malformation as well as a political defect. A major source of disorder for Sir John Davies and other critics was the system of exactions imposed by the Gaelic lords on their territories. But the defining feature of Irish primitivism, in the eyes of its dectractors, was the primacy of pastoralism rather than the arable farming that dominated in lowland Britain. It was the cultivation of fields that demarcated the civilized world from the barbarian. Thus the twelfth-century chronicler Giraldus Cambrensus, who

[46] R. R. Davies, *The First English Empire: Power and Identities in the British Isles 1093-1343* (Oxford, 2000), 187.

assumed that well-populated, village-centred, cereal-producing England was the pinnacle of social evolution, lamented that the Irish had 'not progressed at all from the primitive habits of pastoral living'. Since the island contained so much fertile and productive land, Giraldus concluded that only their rooted laziness could explain the failure of the Irish to cultivate it: 'They live on beasts only, and live like beasts.'[47]

In the Tudor period, likewise, analyses of Irish backwardness continued to refer to the incorrigible pastoralism of the Gael. The difference between settled and nomadic communities remained fundamental to definitions of civil society. Irish commentators were influenced by sixteenth-century scholars such as Johannes Boemus, who had censured the Scythians and their offshoots because 'they wandered through wilderness and desert places driving their flockes and heardes of beasts before them'.[48] It is well known that Spenser took the practice of transhumance as proof that the Irish were partially descended from the Scythians, and were therefore cousins of the 'Tartars' and the other nomadic peoples around the Caspian sea. While Giraldus was recording his negative impressions of Ireland's inhabitants, the Tartars were becoming the barbarian people par excellence in 'civilized' Europe. Associated with the biblical tribes of Gog and Magog, they were said to be 'gory-teethed, and their throats were at all times ready for the chewing of human flesh and the swallowing of human blood' ['*dentibus*

[47] Gerald of Wales, *The History and Topography of Ireland*, trans. John J. O'Meara, (London, 1982), 102.

[48] Nicholas Canny, 'The Ideology of English Colonization: From Ireland to America', *William and Mary Quarterly*, vol. xxx (1973), 587.

sanguinolenti, et eorum fauces ad carnem hominum comedendam et humanum sanguinem absorbendum omni tempore sunt paratae'].[49] Almost certainly, Spenser was the source for the connection in Swift's mind between the medieval Irish and the Scythians. But the virtues of husbandry, tillage and cultivation were commonplaces in Elizabethan proposals for the social and cultural reform of the Irish. Thus Sir Thomas Smith justified his colonial experiments on the Ards peninsula with the prediction that the natives would be transformed into a domesticated agricultural workforce if taught 'the English manner of ploughing', and if they were no longer 'eaten out with coyne and livery or any other such exactions'.[50] The way to make Ulster populous and civil was rather 'by keeping men occupyed in Tyllage, than by idle following of herds, as the Tartarians, Arabians, and Irishe men do'.[51]

Insofar as there was a doctrine of racial supremacy underpinning Elizabethan imperialism this was it. The 'agriculturalist' argument would be reformulated as the labour theory of property set out in the fifth chapter of Locke's *Second Treatise* (1690). Written while Locke was also revising his *Fundamental Constitutions of Carolina*, the chapter 'Of Property' is organized around a detailed comparison of European and

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[49] W. R. Jones, 'The Image of the Barbarian in Medieval Europe', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, xiii (1971), 400 (my translation).

[50] D. B. Quinn, 'Sir Thomas Smith (1513–1577) and the Beginnings of English Colonial Theory', *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, lxxxix, (1945), 552–3.

[51] John Patrick Montaño, *The Roots of English Colonialism in Ireland* (Cambridge, 2011), 150.

Amerindian land use in which the moral as well as economic superiority of England's intensive food production and market-driven agriculture is asserted. European land cultivation apparently contributed greater benefits for mankind as a whole by facilitating both population increase and material betterment. Here Locke found a powerful justification for the appropriation of 'waste' land without the consent of the occupiers: 'For I aske whether in the wild woods and uncultivated wast of America, left to Nature, *without any improvement, tillage or husbandry*, a thousand acres will yield the needy and wretched inhabitants as many conveniences of life as ten acres of equally fertile land doe in Devonshire where they are well cultivated?'[52] James Tully has unearthed crude anticipations of Locke's theory among New England colonists of the 1630s such as the Puritan clergyman John Cotton ('he that taketh possession of it, and bestoweth culture and husbandry upon it, his right it is').[53] But two decades earlier Sir John Davies was already arguing along similar lines that there was a divine obligation on the British monarchy to promote new settlements in Ireland because, left to their own devices, the Gaelic septs 'would never (to the end of the world) build houses, make townships, or villages, or manure, or improve the land as it ought to be'. Such a fruitful country could not be left a wilderness. If the island was 'fully stocked and manured', Davies

[52] Peter Laslett, (ed.), *John Locke: Two Treatises of Government* (student edition, Cambridge, 1988), 294. For the background, see David Armitage, 'John Locke, Carolina, and the *Two Treatises of Government*', *Political Theory*, xxxii (2004), 602–627.

[53] James Tully, 'Rediscovering America: The Two Treatises and Aboriginal Rights', in *An Approach to Political Philosophy: Locke in Contexts* (Cambridge, 1993), 150–51.

speculated, '500 acres will be of better value than 5000 are now'.[54] At least one historian regards Davies' vision for plantation as a vital turning-point in the history of imperialism, since he suggests that land can be appropriated by outsiders not merely when it is unoccupied or uncultivated, but in circumstances were it is underdeveloped or, as contemporaries often put it, unimproved.[55]

As J. G. A. Pocock long ago observed, Davies' *Discovery of the True Causes* was 'perhaps the most outstanding piece of historical writing achieved by an Englishman in James I's reign'.[56] It certainly became a fundamental text for Irish Protestants. The treatise was reprinted in Dublin twice during the 1660s and twice again as an appendix to Sir James Ware's *Antiquities and History of Ireland* (Dublin and London, 1705; London, 1714). Swift's close friend and collaborator Thomas Sheridan would produce another Irish edition in 1733, prefaced by a catalogue of conspicuously Swiftian political grievances.[57] Sheridan's library contained a copy of Ware's *Antiquities*; and there can be

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[54] Davies to Salisbury, 8 Nov. 1610, in Sir John Davies, *Historical Tracts* (London, 1786), 288.

[55] Ellen Meiksins Wood, *Empire of Capital* (London, 2003), 81–2: 'It is impossible to overestimate the significance of this conceptual move.'

[56] J. G. A. Pocock, *The Ancient Constitution and the Feudal Law* (2nd edn, Cambridge, 1987), 62.

[57] John Davies, *Historical Relations: Or, A Discovery of the True Causes why Ireland was never entirely Subdued*, with a preface by Thomas Sheridan (Dublin, 1733), 'Dedication'.

little doubt that Swift was familiar with this work.[58] The *Discovery of the True Causes* had been extensively plagiarized in *The Present State of Ireland* (1673) and was complimented in Cox's *Hibernia Anglicana* (1689); it was cited in the post-revolutionary era by Catholics and Dissenters as well as churchmen.[59] Key passages were extracted in Bishop William Nicolson's *Irish Historical Library* (1724), and Prior's *List of the Absentees of Ireland* praised the work just a few weeks before *A Modest Proposal* appeared.[60]

As solicitor-general and then attorney-general for Ireland, Davies had been engaged in the final dismantling of Gaelic forms of land tenure and inheritance and their replacement with English common law and property rights. He believed that this revolution was the key to civilizing of the natives of Ireland, who would in time enclose and improve their lands, plant gardens and orchards, and build settled villages and towns.

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[58] *A Catalogue of Books the Library of the Rev. Dr. Thomas Sheridan* (Dublin, 1739), item 108.

[59] *The Present State of Ireland: Together with some Remarques upon the Antient State thereof* (London, 1673); Cox, *Hibernia Anglicana*, vol. i, [B1v], 94. For Catholic and Presbyterian writers see [Hugh Reily], *Ireland's Case Briefly Stated; or, A Summary Account of the Most Remarkable Transactions in that Kingdom since the Reformation* (n.pl., n.pr., 1695), p. [v] and [John McBride] *A Sample of Jet-Black Prelatick Calumny* (Glasgow, 1713), 11.

[60] William Nicolson, *The Irish Historical Library* (Dublin, 1724), 144–45; Thomas Prior, *A List of the Absentees of Ireland* (Dublin,1729), 29.

The Irish would be assimilated to English manners, much like the Welsh before them. More distinctively, Davies anticipated the philosophical histories of the enlightenment by framing Anglo-Irish conflict as a clash between two incompatible legal and social systems. In pre-colonial Ireland the Gaels existed in complete subjection to their chieftains: Gaelic systems of land tenure and social organization 'made the Lord an absolute Tyrant, and the Tennant a very Slave and Villain'.[61] Indeed the institutionalized extortion of subsistence and labour from their septs made the Irish 'little better than *Cannibals*, who do hunt one another; and he that hath most strength and swiftness, doth eat and devour all his fellowes'.[62]

Davies' theme was the apparent intractability of the Irish. Why was it that, for more than 400 years, while great monarchies had risen and fallen, Ireland had never been 'thoroughly subdued and reduced to Obedience of the Crown of *England*'? The manners of its people were still manifestly barbarous.[63] In Davies' innovative analysis the real obstacle to civilization was not Gaelic Ireland at all, but the 'Old English' settlers whose degeneration was also a core theme of Spenser's *View of the Present State of Ireland*. Coyne and livery was in fact an Old-English invention, or more exactly a compound of the Gaelic *coinnmheadh* – the lord's entitlement to hospitality and the English 'livery' – the exaction of straw and corn for his horses. This primitive tax constituted 'the most heavy oppression that ever was used in any Christian or Heathen Kingdom'. Although its

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[61] Davies, *Discovery of the True Causes*, 161.

[62] *Ibid.*, 151.

[63] *Ibid*., 2.

roots were Gaelic, Davies blamed the medieval English settlers for generalising this ruinous institution which subsequently produced two 'notorious effects': the depopulation of much of the island and the legendary idleness and beggary of its people.[64]

At the centre of its highly original argument, the *Discovery* described how the incomplete conquest of Ireland had produced a bastardized ruling class, which had become entangled in the Gaelic legal and cultural system it ought to have destroyed. The first English settlers – the Anglo-Normans or 'Old English' – had been condemned to maintaining an unstable frontier in Ireland. Since English expeditions were underfunded and undermanned, and inadequately supported by monarchs focused on internal challenges or on conflicts with France or Scotland, the Old English never achieved the critical mass necessary to reform Ireland; instead *they* became degraded by *it*. Not only were the new proprietors forced to take native tenants, but over time they found themselves lapsing into the exploitative role of the Gaelic chieftains they had supplanted. The turning point came when Maurice Fitz Thomas of Desmond reverted to coyne and livery, the system of billeting 'which consisted in taking of *Man's-meat*, *Horse-meat*, and *Money*, of all the Inhabitants of the Countrey, at the Will and Pleasure of the Souldier, who as the Phrase of Scripture is, *Did eat up the People as it were Bread*'.[65] The Old English settlers thus constituted a barrier to the extension of English common law, since

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[64] *Ibid*., 157–58.

[65] *Ibid*., 157.

this would undermine the system of impositions from which they derived their military and economic power.

For a century after the 1660s Davies' *Discovery of the True Causes* remained the standard, authoritative account of the English colonial enterprise in Ireland and at the same time its most enduring and perplexing critique. During this period the usual framework for discussing further settlement in Ireland was the loose cluster of ideas associated with 'improvement', one of the master nouns of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century social discourse.[66] In England it was a defining enthusiasm of the landed elite, a badge of politeness, enlightenment and benevolence; in Ireland it inevitably carried extra colonial connotations. Improvement expanded and contracted in meaning, connecting the reshaping of the local landscape with the national narratives that underpinned the imperial British state. In the narrow sense, the word signified the institutionalized reforms and investments that increased agricultural productivity. It might entail the reclamation of mountainous land, the draining of bogs, the planting of trees and quickset hedges, the fencing and ditching of unenclosed lands, the enrichment of soil by liming or manuring – the whole gamut of commitments which were now routinely specified in

[66] Paul Slack's *The Invention of Improvement: Information and Material Progress in Seventeenth-Century England* (Oxford, 2015) offers an excellent account. For Irish applications see David Dickson, *Old World Colony: Cork and South Munster 1630-1830* (Cork, 2005), esp. ch. 6; Toby Barnard, *Improving Ireland? Projectors, Prophets and Profiteers, 1641-1786* (Dublin, 2008).

leases between landlord and tenant.[67] On the grander, national level, improvement combined economic progress, social reform and religious change. Hence Sir Richard Cox's boast that 'all the Improvement [the Irish] or their Country received, and the great difference between their Manners and Conditions now and then, is to be ascribed to the English Government, under which they lived far happier than ever they did under the Tyranny of their own Lords.'[68] The gospel of improvement was a direct descendant of the old language of civility and plantation that had framed Tudor policy in Ireland.[69]

One fundamental assumption of Irish improvers was the ignorance and perversity of the Irish cultivator. In his much admired pamphlet, *Some Considerations for the Promoting of Agriculture*, Molesworth recommended that non-denominational schools for husbandry be founded in each county 'wherein an expert Master of the *English* methods, shou'd teach at a fix'd yearly Salary'.[70] The seventeenth-century assumption that economic transformation depended on the importation of British colonists with their superior technical skills and industry lived on in attenuated form. It is echoed in Swift's *Answer to a Paper, Called A Memorial*, in which the ultimate blame for the Irish crisis is placed on the 'shameful practice of two [sic] many *Irish* Farmers', who exhausted their lands with excessive ploughing, and 'either through Poverty, Laziness or Ignorance',

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[67] Some of these are discussed in [Hutchinson], *Letter to a Member of Parliament*, esp. 3–6.

[68] Cox, *Hibernia Anglicana*, i, [L2].

[69] Slack, *Invention of Improvement*, esp. ch. 3.

[70] [Molesworth], *Some Considerations for the Promoting of Agriculture*, 30–31.

failed to manure their farms.[71] On the expiration of leases, Swift continues, the landlords could hardly be blamed for letting their lands to graziers; though he abruptly reverts to his default position that the squires were the essence of the problem, 'for to them is owing the Depopulating of the Country, the vast Number of Beggars, and the Ruin of those few sorry Improvements we had'.[72]

In the 1720s the injustice of coyne and livery was a thing of the past. But those who reflected on the social character of Ascendancy Ireland were acutely conscious that they had never succeeded in transplanting the idealized English social structure of landlord, yeoman and industrious labourer onto Ireland's allegedly fertile soil. It was only in the 1720s that doubts about the entire direction of Protestant Ascendancy were openly aired, however, as constitutional relegation and the dramatic resurgence of the Catholic priesthood were followed by the shipwreck of a battered economy. The re-colonizers of Ireland had apparently foundered on the same sort of socio-economic realities that overwhelmed their Old English predecessors. Once again the incompleteness of conquest left the expropriators dependent on their slavish Irish tenants rather than the sturdy Englishmen they once hoped to attract. Over time they had become enmeshed in the same hybrid relations of dominance and exploitation that characterized the Old English fiefdoms and the Gaelic septs. Outside Ulster, it was widely acknowledged that the inhabitants of Ireland were divided into tyrannical masters and servile labourers, just like those barbarous societies that had for centuries supplied the

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[71] *Answer to … A Memorial*, 2–3.

[72] *Ibid*., 4.

defining negative image of civilized Europe. To capture this syndrome Swift seized on the same image popularized by Davies, portraying the ethnic recidivism that afflicted Ireland's colonial elite as a form of institutionalized cannibalism.

III

One of the benefits of setting *A Modest Proposal* against the previous ten years of Swift's admonitions is that we can grasp better the strands of social criticism that inform it. Swift's quarrel with the gentry arose in part from the common accusation that many landlords were abandoning their oldest tenants and canting their lands on short leases; but he singled out 'the Politick Gentlemen' who, as we have seen, evicted cottiers in order to create sheep ranches.[73] These accusations echoed through his writings of the 1720s. Swift identified 'Engrossing Graziers' as the enemies of agricultural improvement in a pamphlet of 1723, and in one of the unpublished *Drapier's Letters* he denounced 'that pernicious Practice of Graziers, engrossing vast Quantities of Land … whereby the Country is extremely depopulated'.[74] In *A Short View of the State of Ireland* (1728), he associated, for the first time, the ranches of the south with the nomadic pastoralism of the barbarous Scythians, the purported ancestors of the Gaelic Irish.[75]

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[73] *Ibid.*, 4.

[74] *Some Arguments against Enlarging the Power of Bishops*, 6; Davis (ed.), *Drapier's Letters*, 169.

[75] [Jonathan Swift], *A Short View of the State of Ireland* (Dublin, 1728), 9.

In this respect, as in so many others, Swift's diagnosis of Ireland's ills was anticipated by William King, archbishop of Dublin (1703-1729). King was not simply the pre-eminent churchman of the era but a major power-broker and opinion-former. The steady erosion of Ireland's constitutional autonomy since 1714, in both its civil and ecclesiastical institutions, had facilitated a rapprochement between the dean of St Patrick's and his archbishop, whose delightfully malevolent streak perhaps compensated for his respectable whiggism. King's identification with the poor was a persistent theme in his private correspondence, revealing a genuinely compassionate concern which Swift carefully eliminated from his own writings. In a considered paper on the Irish economy drawn up in the later 1710s, and circulated among his Dublin friends over several years, the archbishop deplored the primitive diet of 'the common Irish' – potatoes, watercress, boiled kale and wild rape, butter milk, and boiled cow's blood. The miserable cabins of the Irish poor were constructed from turf and straw, had no doors or windows, furniture or beds or blankets, he continued, so that 'an Essex calf lys much better than most of the people of Ireland'. Unexpectedly, King also defended the Irish against longstanding accusations of congenital indolence. As leases fell for renewal and rents began to rise he complained desperately that the poor had already given 'their bread, their flesh, their Butter, their shoes, their stockings, their beds, their house furniture and Houses to pay their Landlords and Taxes'. In a final flourish which would have intrigued Swift, he declared that the desperate cottiers had nothing else to give, 'except we … flay them and

sell their skins.'[76] A decade later, *A Modest Proposal* would include the gruesome recommendation that Irish baby skins could make 'admirable *Gloves for Ladies*, and *Summer Boots for fine Gentlemen*'.[77]

A number of Swift scholars have noticed this essay but have failed to appreciate the importance of King's economic views. The two churchmen had discussed Ireland's dysfunctional landed class as early as the hougher disturbances of 1711-12, a complex eruption of agrarian protest. The displacement of cottagers to make way for sheep and cattle was already causing disquiet in many parts of the south, but this tendency met with remarkably little resistance. It was only in Galway and adjacent areas in the west that resentments concerning large-scale stock-rearing produced violent unrest; here bands of 'houghers', sometimes disguised with blackened faces and wearing white shirts over their clothes, responded to the extension of pasture by slashing the hamstrings of cattle and sheep. In 1710 the first parliamentary bill 'to prevent the maiming of cattle' was passed, directed against the inhabitants of the remote region of Iar Connacht, 'people of a Barbarous Disposition' who had 'Confederated' to destroy the cattle of those local landowners who were not 'Ancient Inhabitants and Natives'.[78] Over the next two years thousands of sheep and bullocks were slaughtered as the houghers issued proclamations

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[76] 'Some Observations on the Taxes pay'd by Ireland to support the Government' (1716), esp. 13, 17, Trinity College Dublin (TCD), Lyons MSS 1995–2008/1086b.

[77] *Modest Proposal*, 8.

[78] *By the Lords Justices and Council of Ireland: A Proclamation*, 30 Nov. 1711 (Dublin, 1711), single sheet.

from their 'councill-chamber' and extorted money from the surrounding communities.[79] In contemporary descriptions of Iar Connacht we sometimes glimpse the yahoos encountered on Gulliver's voyage to Houyhnhnmland. The politician and pamphleteer Francis Brewster recorded that the destruction of livestock in Mayo and Galway had been common during the Jacobite war, driven by hatred of the 'English sheep' that had come to dominate the plains with the result that 'the vulgar Irish were driven for the most part into the mountainous and woody Parts'.[80] It was the Houyhnhnms' fear that Gulliver might 'seduce the [Yahoos] into the woody and mountainous Parts of the Country and bring them in Troops by Night to destroy the *Houyhnhnms* Cattle' that eventually led to his expulsion from the perfect society of philosophical horses.[81]

In spite of the ethnic overtones just mentioned, the drivers of the hougher disturbances were primarily socio-economic. The agrarian rebels of the west championed the

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[79] See S. J. Connolly, 'Law, Order and Popular Protest in Early Eighteenth-Century Ireland: The Case of the Houghers', in P. J. Corish (ed.), *Radicals, Rebels and Establishments* (Belfast, 1985), 51–68, and *idem*, 'The Houghers: Agrarian Protest in Early Eighteenth-Century Connacht' in in C. H. E. Philpin (ed.), *Nationalism and Popular Protest in Ireland* (Cambridge, 1987), 139–62.

[80] *Ibid*., 149.

[81] Womersley (ed.), *Gulliver's Travels*, 421–22. Part of Davies' argument was that the failure to bring settler and native within a common system of legal protection had forced the Irishry to 'flye but into the Woods and Mountaines, and there liue in a wilde and barbarous maner' (*Discovery of the True Causes*, 117).

customary rights of 'poore christians' against the 'cruell landlords and farmers' who established dairy farming and sheep walks. A petition on behalf of the unemployed poor sent to the recorder of Galway, complained that 'the cultivating God's earth is taken from us by the stock masters'.[82] In February 1712 Archbishop King sent an account of the disturbances to Swift, then in London. Excessive demands for rent increases were the root of the problem, he had been informed, and the poor were being kicked out of their farms and replaced by livestock:

> … these poor people are turned to stock-slaying or [must] starve, for the Land will yield a great deal more when there is found only a shepherd or cowherd to pay out of it, than it can yield when some inhabitants are first to be fed out of it. This turning the poor people to grazing has made them desperate, and they every where endeavour to destroy whole stocks of Cattle, that they may get Land to plow at the former rate.[83]

In the 1720s some commentators would claim that the decline of tillage farming led directly to Ireland's inability to feed its population. For Archbishop King the issue was not so much the shortage of grain as the social evils of mass unemployment and vagrancy which dramatically overwhelmed the informal systems of poor relief in Dublin at this time. Part of the problem was that landlords commonly leased extensive tracts of their

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[82] Connolly, 'Houghers', 152–53.

[83] See King to Swift, 16 Feb. 1712, Woolley, *Corr*. i, 415–6 (punctuation modified). See also King to Edward Southwell, 11 Mar. 1712, TCD MS 750/4/1/16.

estates to 'head' tenants who then sublet to smaller occupiers. It was a frequent complaint that the human chain intervening between owner and occupier disabled the landlord from the sort of active estate management that facilitated improvement in England. Molesworth denounced the 'land-jobbers' who bought up long leases and then let to a ladder of sub-tenants.[84] Swift also censured the 'immediate' tenant who led a comfortable existence but sublet to others, 'and so to a third and fourth in Subordination, till it comes to the Welder (as they call him) who sits at a rack Rent'.[85] But the other, weightier, factor identified by King as a source of economic distress was 'the great Stock Masters who ingross the Land making more of it that way than Tenants can pay', with the result that poor families were forced onto 'Barren places and Mountains, w[e]re they are miserably starved'. Writing to the Rev. Edward Nicholson of Sligo, a zealous proponent of the charity-school movement, King rejected the common view that the poverty of the Irish arose from laziness and ignorance. The archbishop related an exasperating encounter with a boastful gentleman who had 'improved his Estate' by letting it to a middleman who subsequently expelled a hundred families in order to stock it with animals. Thus were entire communities consigned to the inevitable career of the beggar. The prophetic register of the archbishop's response would have delighted his dean: 'What mean ye that beat my people into pieces, and grind the faces of the poor? saith the Lord GOD of hosts.'[86]

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[84] [Molesworth], *Some Considerations for the Promoting of Agriculture*, p. 13. See also [James Arbuckle], *The Tribune* (London, 1729), 125–6.

[85] *Some Arguments against Enlarging the Power of Bishops*, 15.

[86] [King] to [Edward Nicholson], 20 Dec. 1712, TCD MS 750/4/86–7.

The encroachment of large-scale pasture farming into fertile plains once farmed by small cultivators was a source of widespread anxiety, particularly in the 1720s and 1730s. On the better soils of Leinster, Munster and the eastern parts of Connacht, the continental and transatlantic demand for beef and butter stimulated the creation of extensive ranches and dairy farms. One clergyman explained disapprovingly that 'the Gentlemen in *Munster* and *Connaught* generally deal altogether in Stock, follow the Markets, buy and sell like Graziers and pay themselves without seeking or encouraging industrious Tenants'.[87] The once numerous class of smallholders had traditionally formed partnerships to take leases from their landlords and sometimes possessed livestock of their own but were now pushed onto upland soils.[88] Economic historians have questioned whether the move from arable to stock rearing was as pervasive or as ruinous as contemporaries believed, though there has never been a detailed study of the subject.[89] That there was a perceived problem, however, is confirmed by the history of legislative attempts to correct the imbalance. Bills for the promotion of tillage were drawn up by the Commons and sent to England in 1710, 1711, 1715, 1717, 1719 and 1721 but blocked by the privy council; in the 1727-28 and 1729-30 sessions, finally, two bills were passed, 'For regulating the measures made use of in buying and selling corn, and for promoting husbandry in this kingdom' and 'For the Encouragement of Tillage

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[87] *An Apology for the Clergy of Ireland. In Respect of their Civil Rights, especially as to Agistment for Dry and Barren Cattle* (Dublin, 1738), 8.

[88] Dickson, *Old World Colony*, 99.

[89] L. M. Cullen, An *Economic History of Ireland since 1660* (London, 1972), 47.

and Better Employment of the Poor', with the result that farmers possessing more than 100 acres were required to reserve five per cent of their lands for tillage.

Alarm about the advance of the grazier featured in all the most articulate improving tracts, including Samuel Madden's *Reflections and Resolutions for the Gentlemen of Ireland* (1738) and even Berkeley's *Querist* (1735-37), which was mostly concerned with trade and monetary circulation.[90] When the County Clare MP David Bindon produced his translation of Melon's pioneering *Political Essay upon Commerce* (1738), he added a denunciation of 'the lazy Method of employing large Tracts of Land in grazing of Cattle' in the most fertile areas of the south, which he believed blocked all hope of agricultural improvement.[91] Perhaps the most sophisticated analyst of the problem was Arthur Dobbs, who regretted that whole villages of the 'Native Irish' had been broken up and 'turn'd adrift' by landlords determined to 'enlarge their sheepwalks and grazing farms'. Here was the origin of the strolling women who now infested the streets of Dublin with their swarming infants, the scene with which *A Modest Proposal* begins. As part of his ambitious survey of Ireland's economy, Dobbs attempted a detailed comparison of the profits arising from pastoral farming and tillage respectively.

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[90] Samuel Madden, *Reflections and Resolutions Reflections for the Gentlemen of Ireland* (Dublin, 1738), 27–8, 50–1, 125–36. George Berkeley, *The Querist, containing Several Queries, Proposed to the Consideration of the Public* (Dublin [1735]). Four of the 317 queries are concerned with the tillage/pasture issue: 91, 93, 94 and 104.

[91] [Jean-François Melon], *A Political Essay upon Commerce*, trans. with notes by David Bindon (Dublin, 1738), x–xi.

He discovered that the export of cattle and sheep products was 'the least beneficial of our Exports, tho' it makes up the greatest Article in our present Trade'. While Dobbs calculated the annual profit derived from pasture as at best 12*s*. 5 *d*. per acre, he computed that arable farmers made a profit of between £1. 10*s*. and £3 on their land. Since tillage was labour-intensive, they were also able to employ twenty times the number of families as livestock farmers.[92]

There were two further reasons why Swift concentrated his hostility on the growth of livestock farming rather than, say, the remittances paid to the absentee landlords who preoccupied other patriotic commentators. One was the prevalent view that pasturage was both a 'lazy' way of life and prevented population increase, a double reproach to Protestant Ascendancy. After all, anglicized Ireland defined itself against a negative construction of Gaelic society as stuck at a pre-agricultural stage of development characterized by indolence and transhumance. The moral rationale of colonial settlements in Ireland was, in part at least, their dedication to building solid houses, planting orchards and cultivating the earth. The leading improver Samuel Madden feared that Ireland's Protestant rulers had kept the poor in the same condition of ignorance in which they had found them, and 'stupidly employ'd the best Part of them and our Lands, just as the *Spaniards* do the *Indians* and the vast *Savannah*'s of *America*, to feed great Droves of Cattle.[93] One pamphlet on tillage, prefaced with a recommendation from Swift

[92] Dobbs, *Essay on the Trade and Improvement of Ireland*, 27.

[93] Madden, *Reflections and Resolutions*, 27.

himself, contrasted the prolific Protestant settlements of the north with the grasslands of the south, where some of the best land in the kingdom was 'almost unpeopled', inhabited only by 'a few Wretches, dispersed among the Beasts of the Field' whose condition of poverty constituted 'a Shame and Reproach to a Christian Country; being more vile than the condition of *Indian* Savages.'[94] Calls for activism on behalf of the established church joined together the restoration of impropriate tithes and glebe lands, the maintenance of resident clergymen in all parishes, the building of churches and schools and the 'planting' of Protestant tenants by landlords on their estates. The rural desolation wrought by the stock-masters undermined this entire vision, as King's close ally, Archbishop Synge of Tuam, explained. What was the point of upbraiding the poor man for failing to learn the art of husbandry?

> He may with too much truth say, God indeed has given us a Spacious and Naturally fruitful Country, sufficient, if cultivated, to support a great Number of People. And he has told us in his Holy Word, that *he hath given the Earth to the Children of Men* … But alas such vast tracts of Land are now taken out of the Hands of Human kind, and put under great Flocks and Herds, that we can get no place where to bestow [our] Labour, but are forced with our Children to flie for Sanctuary to the Mountains, where neither *Husbandry* nor *Handicrafts* can find employment, but we

[94] *Some Thoughts on the Tillage of Ireland* (Dublin, 1738), 28–9.

> are compelled to Spin out a Miserable Life in the greatest Poverty, without having so much as the Opportunity of being useful either to our selves or others.[95]

Swift had another, more immediate concern with agrarian improvement. The extension of tillage directly threatened the livelihoods of the Anglican clergy, for, as one of his fictional projectors observed sarcastically, 'dry Cattle pay nothing to the spiritual Hireling'.[96] One of the issues that brought the ecclesiastical leaders of Ascendancy Ireland into confrontation with their secular counterparts was the tithe of agistment, the term for tithes claimed on pasture land for dry and barren cattle. The legal basis of this tithe had never been clearly established, and it was not enforced outside Ulster. Eventually the matter would be settled in 1735 when the House of Commons resolved that clerical demands for the tithe of agistment constituted an illegal burden upon the landlords and tenants, responsible among other things for encouraging emigration to colonial America.[97] The surrounding controversy prompted Swift's notorious poem *The Legion Club*, a venomous attack on Irish parliamentarians. But the issues were first aired

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[95] Edward Synge, *A Brief Account of the Laws now in Force in the Kingdom of Ireland, for Encouraging the Residence of the Parochial-Clergy, and Erecting of English Schools* (Dublin, 1723), 6–7, 13, quotation on 32.

[96] 'The Answer to the Craftsman', in Hayton and Rounce (ed.), *A Modest Proposal and other Works*, 348.

[97] *The Report from the Committee Appointed to Take into Consideration the Petition of Samuel Low, and Others ... In relation to the New demand of Tythe Agistment of Dry and Barren Cattle* (Dublin, 1736).

in 1707, when the move to grazing in parts of the south and west threatened to diminish clerical incomes; and churchmen fought a series of legal battles over agistment in the 1720s.[98] In the minds of Swift and other Anglican spokesmen, the connection between the threat to ecclesiastical property and the failure of Irish agriculture was enduring. One philanthropic writer in 1729 took exception to the growing outcry against tithes and ecclesiastical dues: 'the Landlord will have every Penny of his Rent, and yet often complains of the Vicar and Parish Clerk, as *Oppressors*, for requiring their *Small Dues* from his poor Tenants'.[99] Synge countered that it was not tithes but the 'Exactions of Lordlords' that caused the exodus of Protestants to north America, for they could not find farms when 'Gentlemen chuse to stock their Lands with *Beasts* rather than *Men*'.[100]

The debate on tillage has been ignored by Swift scholars, even those who have been interested in economic thought. But it was a persistent preoccupation in his Irish writings of the 1720s, as we have seen. It was also particularly topical at the moment when *A Modest Proposal* was written and published. Swift spent the summer of 1729 with the Achesons in County Armagh, returning to the deanery on 8 October, by which time the parliamentary session was already underway. Two weeks earlier the Commons had

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[98] See Louis A. Landa, *Swift and the Church of Ireland* (Oxford, 1954), ch. 3, esp. 135–50; also Swift's second memorial to Harley on the First Fruits [7 Oct. 1710], Woolley, *Corr*., i, 299.

[99] *The Case of the Poor of the Kingdom of Ireland, Stated and Considered, upon the Common Principles of Christianity* (Dublin, 1729), single sheet.

[100] Synge, *Two Affidavits*, 21.

drawn up its customary response to the Lord Lieutenant's 'speech from the throne'. A number of 'angry men', including the County Donegal M.P. Colonel Alexander Montgomery, had pressed unsuccessfully for the inclusion of some reflections on the depressed condition of the country.[101] On 21 October the Commons resolved itself into a committee of the whole House to consider the state of the nation. Officials were relieved that 'violent measures' were not, after all, pursued. To their surprise, Robert Allan merely moved for 'some proper Laws for the Improvement of tillage' and Colonel Montgomery then spoke for an hour:

> … setting forth all the grievances of the nation, our want of publick Spirrit, the poverty of the Kingdom, the ill consequences of our people goeing to America, occasion'd he pretended by the oppression of Landlords by setting their lands too high, and the hardships of collecting tythes, by the luxury of the better sort of people, by the extravagance of the Ladies in their silks Laces and other vanities, by the irregular and uncertain state of our coyn, by the tricks of bankers and merchants, by our excesse in drinking french wines, by our gentlemen and Ladies goeing abroad and liveing out of their native country, by the neglect of our Laws for tillage, by the continuall addition to our establishment …[102]

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[101] Coghill to Edward Southwell, 27 Sept. 1729, in D. W. Hayton (ed.), *Letters of Marmaduke Coghill, 1722–1738* (Dublin, 2005), 73.

[102] Coghill to Southwell, 23 Oct. 1729, ibid., 74–5; *Journals of the House of Commons of the Kingdom of Ireland* (Dublin, 1796), iii, 589.

The similarities between Montgomery's outpouring and the long list of reforms rejected towards the close of *A Modest Proposal* heightens the temptation to connect the tract to contemporary parliamentary battles. Montgomery reiterated the necessity of a tillage bill, and when the committee finally reported at the beginning of December it passed a resolution 'that the Want of the proper Encouragement of Tillage has been one great occasion of the Scarcity of Corn for many Years past in this Kingdom, and of the Fall of his Majesty's Revenue'.[103] It is often assumed that *A Modest Proposal* was written wholly or partly at the Markethill estate of the Acheson family, and was prompted by the suffering Swift witnessed during the second summer he spent in County Armagh. But Swift returned to the deanery on 8 October, two or three weeks before *A Modest Proposal* went to press. Although still preoccupied by the 'scene of distress' in the north, he cannot have been immune to the political excitement of a new parliamentary session.[104] The list of 'other Expedients' dismissed in the pamphlet's climactic passage directs our attention to the paralysis of the Irish legislature. Certainly Swift seems to have parliamentary action rather than the moral self-correction in mind when he scoffs at readers who still entertain hopes '*Of quitting our Animosities, and Factions, nor Act any*

[103] *Ibid*., iii, 613. A second resolution warned about the dangers of devaluing the value of 'the Species of the Moydore Coin' in Ireland.

[104] Swift to Pope, 31 Oct. 1729, Woolley, *Corr.* iii, 263.

longer like the Jews, who were Murdering one another at the very moment their City was taken.[105]

IV

The aim of this article has been to reconstruct more precisely the political and ideological contexts of *A Modest Proposal*. Even among some Swift specialists, the satire is still carelessly read as a protest against 'the tragedy of Ireland being "eaten up" by the colonialist policies of England'.[106] But England is a distant presence in the *Modest Proposal*; to trace the pamphlet's genealogy back through the polemics of the previous ten years is to find ourselves pursuing Swift's hatred of the Irish landlord class in its various social, economic and political manifestations.[107] We began with Swift searching for new ways to convince Dublin's ruling classes that they were 'absolutely undone', during the summer of 1729. Public debate at the time ranged across a combination of perceived problems: mass vagrancy, absentee landlords, the restrictions placed on Irish trade, the addiction of gentlemen and their ladies to foreign rather than home-produced

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[105] *Modest Proposal*, 14. The same passage appears in St. George [Ashe], A Sermon Preached to the Protestants of Ireland, now in London, at the Parish-Church of St. Clement Dane, October 23, 1712 (Dublin, 1712), 24.

[106] Carole Fabricant, 'Swift the Irishman', in Christopher Fox (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Jonathan Swift* (Cambridge, 2003), 60–61.

[107] Contrast 'Causes of the Wretched Condition of Ireland', 200, where Swift begins with the restrictions placed on Irish trade by 'our rigorous Neighbours'.

fashions. But the image Swift chose for the undoing of Ireland was that of the country's tenants being devoured by their landlords, and that image was valuable because of the multiple layers of polemical insinuation it contained.

The predicament confronting Swift's *faux* philanthropist was the task of providing for the unemployed poor, which 'under the present Situation of Affairs, is utterly impossible by all the methods hitherto proposed'. The root cause of this unprecedented impasse was the delinquency of the landed gentry, who 'neither build Houses … nor cultivate Land'.[108] For a century and a half the cultivation of Irish soil had been a barometer of the civilising process, and this is surely one reason why the recurring figure of the grazier had become for Swift a form of shorthand for Irish perversity and self-destruction. His enduring fascination with the threat posed by pastoral farming is confirmed by 'An Answer to The Craftsman' (*c*. 1730), the unfinished paper which Irvin Ehrenpreis rightly described as an 'appendix' to *A Modest Proposal*.[109] In this second *reductio ad absurdum*, another of Swift's deranged projectors looks forward to the day when stock masters are the only inhabitants left on the island, together with their 'Trulls, their Bastards, and their Horse-Boys', rearing cattle and sheep for slaughter in England, 'to which employments they are turned by nature, as descended from the *Scythians*, whose diet they are still so fond of'.[110]

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[108] *Modest Proposal*, 5.

[109] Irvin Ehrenpreis, *Swift: The Man, His Works, and the Age. Volume 3: Dean Swift* (Cambridge, Mass., 1983), iii, 683.

[110] 'Answer to the Craftsman', 346.

The grazier offered one route to the theme of cannibalism, via his putative Scythian forbears. There were certainly others. In *A Modest Proposal* it is an 'American acquaintance' in London who provides the inspiration for the cannibal scheme in the first place.[111] But Swift's contemporaries understood that Europe itself was a product of colonial enterprises, as the Latin cultures and communities of medieval Europe had expanded from their core regions. Contemporary notions of barbarism were derived from earlier encounters between the settled empires of the Romans or their successors and the apparently nomadic pastoralists of outer Europe – including the Lapps of northern Scandinavia, the Tartars on the Russian steppe and the Gaelic Irish. [112] Swift wrote at a time when commentators instinctively looked for similarities rather than differences between the recently discovered peoples of the New World and the prototype savages of the European borderlands. The Scythians were allegedly both herdsmen and man-eaters. In Swift's writings they were reincarnated in the new class of cowherds widely blamed for depopulating the Irish countryside.

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[111] *Modest Proposal*, 6, 9.

[112] In 1741 the most severe famine of the century reignited the debate on tillage: see for example *A Proposal for Lessening the Excessive Price of Bread Corn in Ireland* (Dublin, 1741) and [Publicola], *A Dissertation on the Inlargement of Tillage* (Dublin, 1741). Both recycled the sixteenth-century texts that contrasted European husbandry with the cattle-herding of uncivilized peoples such as the Numidians, 'Tartarians' etc.

The connected problems of finding employment for the poor and correcting the deficiencies in Irish agriculture were discussed in the improvement pamphlets of the 1720s and in legislation such as the 'Act for the Encouragement of Tillage, and Better Employment of the Poor' introduced in the House of Commons in November 1729. Some reformers shared with the modest proposer a particular focus on the children of the poor. By removing infants from their parents and training them as servants, James Arbuckle hoped that within a generation 'the present Race of *Cotters* [would be] abolished and in their Stead, a Race of careful, industrious Husbandmen established'.[113] Public debate on the state of tillage also featured the paradoxical substitution of animals for human beings, as we have seen a number of times. Indeed the claim that the natural social order was being inverted by processes of commercialization was already evident in the primitive threats that accompanied the hougher disturbances: 'Take timely notice before the cry,/ For I am the person that does defie/ Both great and small, but God above,/ Who loves a man beyond a cow.'[114] Among other things, *A Modest Proposal* was thus a fantastical re-run of the exercise attempted by Arthur Dobbs in his *Essay on the Trade and Improvement of Ireland*, published in the same year: to demonstrate that human animals could be just as profitable as livestock. Hence the attention devoted to the cost of nursing and fattening babies, or the projector's careful calculation that of the 120,000 children born in Ireland annually, 20,000 should be set aside and reared for breeding, 'whereof only one fourth part to be Males'.[115] Indeed the starting point for this exercise

[113] [Arbuckle], *Tribune*, 125.

[114] Connolly, 'Houghers', 152.

[115] *Modest Proposal*, 6–7.

in political arithmetic – the estimate that Ireland contained 200,000 'breeding Women' – seems to have been taken directly from Dobbs.[116]

In the light of our current preoccupations with empire, race and otherness, *A Modest Proposal* is increasingly read as an attempt to literalise the violence at the centre of European expansion. Indeed it is now widely hailed as a masterpiece of anti-colonial polemic. What is wrong with the post-colonial approach is *not* that it mis-describes Ireland as a colony, but that the models of colonialism it employs obscure so much of what is distinctive about the Irish case – its entanglement with English and European state formation over the *long durée*, its syncretism, the multiple points where it connects and overlaps with 'metropolitan' processes. Three decades after William's victories at the Boyne and Aughrim, Ireland's ruling classes had demonstrably failed to remake in their own image the society they dominated. Reliant on the labour of the native population, the New English re-colonizers were as helplessly ensnared in Ireland's intransigent social and political structures as their Old English precursors. In each case the larger project of transforming Irish society was sabotaged by local elites intent upon extracting the maximum profit from the estates they or their ancestors had expropriated. It is perhaps unsurprising then to find the cannibal metaphor recurring in other 'Anglo-Irish' writers, as when Bishop Berkeley was forced to admit that some Irish landlords were 'Vultures with Iron Bowels'.[117] Samuel Madden came even closer to Swift's

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[116] Dobbs, *Essay on the Trade and Improvement of Ireland*, part 2, 11.

[117] [George Berkeley], *A Word to the Wise: or, An Exhortation to the Roman Catholic Clergy of Ireland* (Dublin, 1749), 25.

analysis when he observed that the proliferation of sheep walks and cattle ranches 'eats up our People like a Plague, and lays our Country waste'.[118]

A Modest Proposal thus subverted the moral claims made for Protestant Ascendancy by collapsing the fundamental antitheses – cultivation/waste, freedom/oppression, civility/barbarism – that had served for so long to legitimize the English presence in Ireland. But it was no part of Swift's satirical purpose to challenge the political and social order itself. There was never any doubt among patriots, improvers and clerical reformers that there existed a scale of human civilization in which the Latinate cultures of Western Europe were at the top and the indigenous Irish were found near the bottom. The possibility that the savage Gael might possess a nobility of his own does not seem to have crossed their minds.[119] Nor did Swift ever seriously question the institutional outcomes of Ireland's re-colonization: the Protestant succession, the Anglican establishment and the Williamite land settlement.

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[118] Madden, *Reflections and Resolutions*, 129. Earlier, on 50–1, Madden wrote: 'It is but putting our selves a Degree or two above the *Savage Indians* there [the American wastes], if we have only tame Beasts to roam about our Lands instead of wild ones, for 'tis Demonstrable that the first devour more People than the latter.'

[119] Cf Montaigne's use of the cannibal: Philippe Desan, *Montaigne: A Life*, translated by Steven Rendall and Lisa Neal (Oxford, 2017), ch. 4.

The remedies for Irish underdevelopment seemed clear – the taxation of absentee landowners and the promotion of indigenous textiles. To these measures should be added the campaign for a tillage bill, as recommended in Swift's *Answer to ... A Memorial*, compelling farmers to plough a fixed proportion of their land; the enforcement of this measure could have saved the nation £1 million and made it 'more populous by above two Hundred Thousand Souls'.[120] Irish poverty absorbed patriotic writers because of its material and moral implications for the ruling class. The legitimation of Protestant Ascendancy depended not only on the claims of the landed elite to exercise authority for the good of their subjects, including the poor, but on demonstrating that they had instituted a more just and progressive social order than their predatory Gaelic counterparts. It was these pretensions that constituted the satirical target of *A Modest Proposal*. Swift's purpose was not to assert the humanity of the natives, as some modern readers still suppose. It was to find a suitably decisive means of dehumanizing the settlers who had failed so comprehensively to meet their social responsibilities and who, in this vital respect, had become *Hiberniores Hibernis ipsis*.

[120] *Answer to ... A Memorial*, 4.