

The Carrickshock Incident, 1831: Social Memory and an Irish *cause célèbre*¹

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This article examines the ways that a violent incident in Irish history has been remembered and interpreted over the past 170 years. The event occurred on an isolated road in south Kilkenny in December 1831 when an armed police column clashed with a large crowd, resulting in the deaths of 17 people. Unlike most incidents of this kind, the majority of the victims (13) were constables. The uniqueness of the occurrence made it a *cause célèbre* at the time and has helped to perpetuate its memory in the locality ever since. As with larger, more familiar sites of memory, successive generations of local people have remembered the incident in various ways since the early nineteenth century. Their objects of remembrance and their understanding of the event have also shifted dramatically over time, suggesting that the process of collective memory at the micro level can be as varied and complex as on the national stage. *Cultural and Social History* 2004; 1: 36–64

Though people would later describe the event as a ‘battle’, it bore little resemblance to a set-piece military encounter. Unanticipated and unorganized, it was notable mainly for its confusion, its shapelessness and its stark brutality. ‘A brief but desperate deed of blood’ was how a journalist described it when he visited the scene of the encounter a few hours afterward.²

It happened in a corner of the barren townland known as Carrickshock (*carriag-seabhac*, ‘the hawk’s rock’) in south Kilkenny around

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² *Kilkenny Journal*, 17 Dec 1831, as cited in *The Times*, 20 Dec 1831.

mid-day on Wednesday, 14 December 1831, at the height of the tithe war. Thirty-eight armed constables were guarding a hired agent, or process server, as he delivered legal summonses to tithe defaulters: that is, people – mostly Catholics – who had not paid the taxes levied upon them to support the local Church of Ireland parson. Called out by the ringing of chapel bells, a crowd of more than a thousand men, women and children surrounded the police as they moved along a road between the villages of Hugginstown and Ballyhale. They wanted the process server, a local man named Edmund Butler, whom they intended to punish by forcing him to his knees, beating him and making him eat his summonses. ‘Give us Butler!’ they yelled repeatedly to the constables, ‘We’ll have Butler or blood!’ The man in charge of the column, Captain James Gibbons, a middle-aged veteran of the Napoleonic Wars who had fought at Waterloo and was a constabulary officer of six years’ standing, doggedly refused.

People and police soon found themselves squeezed tightly together in a narrow lane, or boreen, that was enclosed on both sides by high stone walls. The swelling crowd pressed in on the constables, making movement in any direction impossible. Suddenly, a young man lunged in among the police, grabbed the process server by his coat and tried to pull him toward the outside. A constable yanked Butler back. Then, without warning, someone hurled a fist-sized rock that slammed into Butler’s skull. He pitched forward and dropped among the legs of the constables, his papers flying about him. Captain Gibbons, astride his horse at the rear of the column, shouted the order to fire. A handful of constables got off rounds, but because they were packed together so densely in the constricted boreen, none could take proper aim, let alone reload.

With that, people began to wrench heavy rocks from the walls and heave them down upon the constables. ‘The stones hit each other [in the air] they were so thick’, recalled one who was there, ‘they were like a shower’. Others attacked the police with pitchforks, clubs, hurling sticks and their bare hands. Minutes later, 13 constables – including Captain Gibbons – and the process server Edmund Butler lay dead or dying, most from shattered skulls and appalling stab wounds. Another 14 officers suffered severe injuries; only 11 of the 38 came away unharmed or with minor scrapes. Of the crowd, three were killed and an unknown number injured.³

Although clashes between armed authorities and groups of civilians were depressingly familiar events in pre-famine Ireland, this brief encounter seems to stand apart from most of the others. Besides the extent of its carnage – 17 dead and scores badly injured in the space of a few minutes – it is remarkable chiefly because of who its victims

³ This description of the incident is based mainly upon the depositions of surviving constables found in the National Archives of Ireland, Chief Secretary’s Office, Registered Papers (hereafter NAI, CSO, RP), 1831, K-25.

were. Unlike other encounters of this kind in which crowds usually bore the brunt of the violence, most of the casualties at Carrickshock were policemen. What was more, their attackers did not use firearms.

Nevertheless, the Carrickshock incident is not a prominent event in Irish history. For one thing, it lacked some of the familiar prerequisites: contemporaries recorded no acts of uncommon bravery; no stirring words spoken before, during, or after the fighting; no participants boasting that they had won a memorable victory. Nor did the incident have momentous consequences: it did not bring about the abolition of tithes or even change the way that they were collected. It is not surprising, therefore, that in most general histories of nineteenth-century Ireland the affair is literally a footnote, if it is mentioned at all.

But to people in the locality it has always been much more than a footnote. It was when History with a capital 'H' came to their neighbourhood; when something extraordinary happened that set their community apart from other places. For more than a century and a half, they and others would interpret the incident through poems, songs, pamphlets, paintings, sculpture, novels, speeches, rumours, public demonstrations, folk tales, commemorative monuments and yards upon yards of newsprint. These were the means by which people tried to make sense of what happened in that muddy laneway on that December morning and to communicate it to others. They were expressions of collective remembering, what has come to be called 'social memory'.

The ways that societies remember their pasts have become a subject of intense scholarly interest of late, particularly among historians of France, Britain, Russia and the United States.⁴ The impact of this phenomenon upon Irish historiography can be gauged in a host of recent studies that have examined how later generations constructed and utilized some of the country's more prominent sites of memory – the siege of Derry, the 1798 rebellion, the great famine, the 1916 rising chief among them. Without exception, they have shown how 'Big Events' drift in and out of public consciousness over time and are interpreted according to the changing needs, preoccupations and perceptions of successive generations. Their research suggests, in other words, how some dominant sites of memory have worked in an Irish context.⁵

But how have less conspicuous events such as Carrickshock been popularly imagined and portrayed? How have people in small, some-

⁴ One observer even suggests that a kind of 'memory industry' now sets the agenda for historical scholarship. Kerwin Lee Klein, 'On the Emergence of *Memory* in Historical Discourse', *Representations*, 69 (2000) pp. 127–50.

⁵ See especially Ian McBride (ed.), *History and Memory in Modern Ireland* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2001), and *The Siege of Derry in Ulster Protestant Mythology* (Four Courts, Dublin, 1997); Kevin Whelan, "'98 After '98: The Politics of Memory' in Kevin Whelan, *The Tree of Liberty: Radicalism, Catholicism and the Construction of Irish Identity, 1760–1830* (Cork University Press, Cork, 1996) pp. 133–75; James S. Donnelly Jr, *The Great Irish Potato Famine* (Sutton, Gloucester, 2001); and Máirín ní Dhonnchadh and Theo Dorgan (eds), *Revising the Rising* (Field Day, Derry, 1991).

times remote localities depicted and commemorated incidents that they perceived as notable? How did their expressions of remembrance differ from those of people living outside the community who represented what might be called the hegemonic or national interpretation of the event? How, if at all, did images of extraordinary occasions in a locality's past change over time? Such questions are more easily asked than answered because, despite burgeoning interest in the construction of memory generally, Irish historians have barely begun to examine how the process operated at the micro level.⁶ The paper that follows is intended as a preliminary step toward that end. It is part of a work in progress that uses a single event in a small community – the Carrickshock incident – to explore wider issues of memory, public violence and political culture.

I

In the same way that certain ideas about the more famous triumphs and disasters in Irish history formed themselves around poetry and song, nationalist commemorations of Carrickshock began almost immediately with written verses. The incident inspired no fewer than six contemporary poems and ballads, all of them composed in the days and weeks immediately following the incident.⁷ One of them, a lugubrious verse entitled 'The Moor of Carrig-shock', appeared in two liberal newspapers during the first weeks of 1832 and was apparently never reprinted.⁸ Two others were the work of Seamus Ó Cathail (d. 1832) of Killamory, a local hedge-school teacher. Written in Irish, Ó Cathail's poems circulated orally or in handwritten form prior to their publication in the twentieth century.⁹

Three other ballads – *Carrickshock Victory* (also known as *Slieve na Mon* and *The Downfall of Tithes*), by another hedge-school teacher, Watt

⁶ A notable exception is Guy Beiner's important study of the social memory of the 1798 rebellion in Connacht: 'To Speak of '98: The Social Memory and Vernacular Historiography of *Bliain na bFrancach*', unpublished PhD thesis, University College, Dublin, 2001.

⁷ Two additional ballads concerning Carrickshock are said to date from the 1830s, but I have been unable to verify their existence prior to the twentieth century. They are: 'Ye Gallant Sons of This Irish Nation', University College, Dublin, Department of Irish Folklore, Irish Folklore Commission (hereafter IFC), Main collection MS 1660, p. 109; and 'All You Who Love Honour and Glory' in E.V. Drea, *Carrickshock: A History of the Tithe Times* (Munster Express, Waterford, 1925; 1928) p. 44.

⁸ The poem's laboured imagery and melodramatic tone are epitomized in its opening lines: 'Lone Carrig-shock! Thy desolate defile/So recently be-dew'd with human blood/That thy rank weeds have ranker grown the while/Since life's own crimson tide did o'er thee flood'. *The Comet*, 19 Feb 1832; *Kilkenny Journal*, 22 Feb 1832.

⁹ Seamus Ó Cathail, 'Carriag Seac' [Carrickshock], *Éigse: A Journal of Irish Studies*, 1, 1 (1939) pp. 265–80, and 'Carriag Seac' and 'Oíche na dTine Cnámh' ('Night of the Bonfires') in Dáithí Ó hÓgáin, *Duanaire Osraíoch: cnuasach d'fhilíocht na ndaoine ó Chill Chainnigh* (An Clóchomhar, Dublin, 1980) pp. 42–4.

Murphy of Mooncoin,¹⁰ and the anonymous *A New Song Called the Battle of Carrickshock*¹¹ and *Kean's Farewell to Ireland*¹² – were published as penny broadsheets. Their popularity was considerable: more than a half-dozen copies of *Carrickshock Victory* alone are scattered among the so-called 'outrage papers' in the National Archives of Ireland, a good indication that it was in heavy demand (and that Dublin Castle considered it dangerous).¹³ The appeal of these ballads was due in large measure to the ways that they mirrored plebeian tastes, conventions and attitudes. In so doing, they gave initial shape to the collective Catholic memory of the event.

One of the distinguishing features of the popular ballads is their earthy imagery and their allusions to specific places and individuals, especially the dead and wounded constables. An entire stanza in Ó Cathail's *Carriag Seac* lists the villages where the policemen were stationed; another describes what happened to certain of them during the fighting:

Bhí *Baxter* ann sínte *Prescott* agus *Egan*,
 Is fear na *citations* a tréigean a tsnó
Budds – an cneamhaire – gur sáthadh é le *bayonet* –
 Is le háthas scéil seo bímidne ag-ól!

(Prostrate there lay [Constables] *Baxter*, *Prescott* and *Egan*,
 And the man of the *citations* [i.e., Edmund Butler, the process
 server], how changed his countenance,¹⁴
 And [Constable] *Budds* – the little knave – fell 'neath a *bayonet* –
 In the joy of such tidings, let us be drinking!)¹⁵

Besides their specificity, the broadsheets revel in the violence and carnage of the event. One ballad describes the dead and wounded policemen as 'yellow, greasy';¹⁶ another depicts them 'weltering in black

¹⁰ NAI, CSO, RP, 1832/1063, 1310, 1500, 2267, C/1431, L1572; 1844, 27/13449. It can also be found in Georges Denis Zimmermann, *Songs of Irish Rebellion: Irish Political and Street Ballads and Rebel Songs, 1780–1900*, 2nd edn (Four Courts, Dublin, 2002) pp. 206–8. On Watt Murphy, see T. Ryan, *Mooncoin, 1750–1975*, part 1 (n.p., Mooncoin, 1975) pp. 15–16.

¹¹ NAI, CSO, RP, 1832/233; *The Times*, 13 March 1832.

¹² NAI, CSO, RP, 1832/950. William Keane (Kean or Kane) was a local hedge-school teacher who was accused of being a ringleader in the incident.

¹³ The ballad remained popular for decades. Douglas Hyde heard it during a visit to the United States in the 1890s and an oral version was still in circulation in Ireland around 1900. Douglas Hyde, *Religious Songs of Connacht* (T. Fisher Unwin; M.H. Gill, London and Dublin, 1896) vol. 1, p. 255n.; *The Irish Book Lover*, 31 (June 1949) pp. 26–7. See also NAI, CSO, RP, 1844, 27/13449; *Cork Constitution*, 3 July 1836; Maura Cronin, 'Memory, Story and Balladry: 1798 and its Place in Popular Memory in Pre-Famine Ireland' in Laurence M. Geary (ed.), *Rebellion and Remembrance in Modern Ireland* (Four Courts, Dublin, 2001) pp. 129–30.

¹⁴ Butler suffered three fractures to his lower jaw and a crushed skull. *Waterford Chronicle*, 17 Dec 1831.

¹⁵ Ó Cathail, 'Carriag Seac' in Ó hÓgáin, *Duanaire Osraíoch*, p. 43, and translation in *Éigse*, p. 272. Constables William Budds, Thomas Egan and John Prescott were killed. No one named Baxter is listed among the casualties. NAI, CSO, RP, 1831, K-25.

¹⁶ Ó Cathail, 'Carriag Seac', *Éigse*, p. 271.

gore'.¹⁷ They also celebrate the mutilation of the constables' bodies, as in this passage from the popular *Carrickshock Victory*:

They had the rabble along before them,
Like wolves opposing the Shepherd's flock.
'Till in death's cold agonies they left them groaning,
In the boreheen of Carrickshock.

Who could desire to see better sporting,
To see them groping among the rocks.
Their skulls all fractured and eye-balls broken,
Their fine long noses and ears cut off.

A *New Song Called the Battle of Carrickshock*, set to the popular tune *St Patrick's Day*, describes how:

When the boys sallied round as they came to the ground,
And frightened those hounds with their bawling,
But a crack in the Crown soon brought Butler down,
And the process server for death was left sprawling.
The Captain ordered fire when he saw him in the mire,
The conflict became most alarming,
But a blow on the jowl soon brought him down,
Before Patrick's day in the morning.

Then the Peelers did fall, without murmur or bawl,
Then their guns and their bayonets were shattered,
How sad was their case, when their eyes, nose and face,
When their lives and firelocks were battered.

Verses of this kind exemplify what is perhaps the most conspicuous feature of the contemporary ballads: their vengeful and triumphalist tone. All of them represent Carrickshock as A Good Thing; a crucial victory for 'Us' against 'Them', a sure sign of the imminent destruction of Protestantism and the restoration of the land to its rightful owners. Watt Murphy's ballad *Carrickshock Victory* recalls the predictions of Protestant annihilation in 1825 that had been foretold in the so-called 'Pastorini prophesies' that swept through the region a decade earlier.¹⁸ These now became linked to the events at Carrickshock and to the better days that would surely follow:

We heard the text of the divine sages,
That when the date of the year is gone,
That one true Catholic without a weapon
Would banish legions from Slievenamon. ...

¹⁷ *Kean's Farewell to Ireland*, NAI, CSO, RP, 1832/950.

¹⁸ See James S. Donnelly Jr, 'Pastorini and Captain Rock: Millenarianism and Sectarianism in the Rockite Movement of 1821-4' in Samuel Clark and James S. Donnelly Jr (eds), *Irish Peasants: Violence and Political Unrest, 1780-1914* (Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1983) pp. 102-39.

When this brave victory we consummated
 Sad despair did the traitors brand
 We are true sons of brave Milesians
 And lawful heirs unto Paddy's land
 Our cries shall pursue through the purest region
 The powers of fate cannot annoy our throng
 We will shout for joys of congratulation
 Rise a laugh, *chree he geal*, on slieve na mon!¹⁹

The triumphalism that distinguishes the Carrickshock ballads also featured in various public gatherings during 1832 and 1833 that commemorated the event. The most spectacular of these was a massive assembly in July 1832 near the village of Ballyhale – literally within sight and sound of Carrickshock a mile and a half away. This was the largest and most colourful in a series of mass meetings organized in south Kilkenny and parts of Munster that summer to protest against excessive tithes. Reportedly numbering 200 000 people, many of them having travelled up to 25 miles from four counties and ‘arranged under their respective [local] banners’, it was unquestionably the most imposing gathering to be held in the region prior to Daniel O’Connell’s famous ‘monster meetings’ of the 1840s.²⁰

But the Ballyhale meeting was not simply about tithes. It was also intended to commemorate the Carrickshock incident seven months earlier. This was evident in the deliberate choice of a meeting place almost on top of the battle site, as well as in many of the visual references that were on display. Typical was a delegation of thousands from the Piltown area who marched onto the meeting ground behind an immense banner that caricatured the Revd Hans Hamilton, the Church of Ireland minister whose tithe demands had sparked the Carrickshock encounter. The painted canvas, a modification of a cartoon that had appeared a few months earlier in the anti-tithe publication *The Parson's Horn-Book*, portrayed him sitting astride a crippled horse and whipping an emaciated family who struggled to support a bloated Church of Ireland parson on their shoulders.²¹ Some 700 horsemen and a brass band accompanied another group of several thousand on foot from parishes near Waterford who proudly displayed a large coffin draped with a banner reading:

¹⁹ NAI, CSO, RP, 1832/2267. Slievenamon is a mountain, roughly 15 kilometres from Carrickshock, that dominates the landscape of south-west Kilkenny and south-east Tipperary. It has rich associations in nationalist history and mythology. See, for example, Seán Nugent (ed.), *Slievenamon in Story and Song: An Anthology* (Seán Nugent, Kilsheelan, n.d.).

²⁰ *The Times*, 14 July 1832; *Waterford Chronicle*, 10 July 1832; *Kilkenny Journal*, 11 July 1832.

²¹ Anon., *The Parson's Horn-Book* (The Comet, Dublin, 1831), illustration facing p. 6.

TITHES

The frightful source of misery and bloodshed!
Died on the ever-memorable 14th of December, 1831 [i.e., at
Carrickshock]

Requiescat in pace – Amen

Those who walked behind the coffin pretended to be mourners, keen-
ing with mock solemnity, wrote *The Times's* correspondent who wit-
nessed the scene, everyone joining in chorus, “Arra, why did you die?
Wurristru! O Wurristru!” and shouting in triumphant glee!²² Later on,
orators made pointed references to the killing of the constables, while
people in the audience interrupted them from time to time with shouts
of ‘Carrickshock!’²³

The mammoth meeting at Ballyhale also served another purpose
directly related to the events at Carrickshock. It was obviously timed
to influence the outcome of the impending trial in Kilkenny of 18 men
charged with the killings and was but one part of a well-organized and
determined campaign to sway the opinions of jurors. We can never
know the extent to which the members of the juries *were* intimidated
by the image of their tenants and neighbours massing in the tens of
thousands a stone’s throw from Carrickshock on the eve of the trial.
We know only that a fortnight later they voted to acquit three of the
defendants, before the Crown withdrew its case against them all.²⁴

News of their verdict, in turn, touched off jubilant public demon-
strations across the region. On the evening of the acquittals,
Humphrey O’Sullivan in nearby Callan recorded in his diary:

There are thousands of bonfires on our Irish hills all around, as far
as I can see; namely, on Slievenamon hundreds of fires on Slieved-
ele, on the Walsh Mountain, on Slievardagh, on the hills of Cran-
nagh and on every hill and mountain in four counties ... and on
Carrickshock of course.²⁵

The following evening a large crowd marched into Thomastown
behind a band of music and, as an eyewitness wrote, ‘with banners
flying ... they marched up opposite the [constabulary] guard-house
and gave three cheers for Carrickshock.’ In Waterford harbour, mean-
while, ships hoisted their banners and fired their guns throughout the
day to the cheers of the inhabitants, while in Kilkenny a reporter
described how ‘every elevated spot within view of the highest points

²² *The Times*, 14 July 1832.

²³ *Kilkenny Journal*, 11 July 1832.

²⁴ The trial of one defendant had taken place the previous March. It ended in acquittal
and the Crown postponed the trials of the remaining defendants until July.

Transcripts of both trials are in James Mongan, *A Report of the Trials of John Kennedy,
John Ryan and William Voss for the Murder of Edmund Butler at Carrickshock on the 14th
December, 1831* (R. Milliken, Dublin, 1832).

²⁵ Humphrey O’Sullivan, *Cinnlae Amhlaoibh úí Súileabháin: The Diary of Humphrey
O’Sullivan*, ed. Michael McGrath (Irish Texts Society, Dublin, 1936), vol. 3, p. 169.

of the city was crowded with bonfires so thickly spread that they presented a brilliant resemblance of a star-studded sky'. Further to the south, the bonfires were reportedly so numerous that 'a vast line of light ran along the banks of the river Suir from the country of Wexford to the County of Tipperary'.²⁶ The local poet Seamus Ó Cathail, caught the popular mood with a special verse in Irish, *Oíche na dTine cnámh* ('The Night of the Bonfires'), that proclaimed:

Ní mire cú a rithfeadh ar thaobh cnoic,
 Ná sneachta gléiheal á shéideadh ar bhán,
 ... Níor rith chomh héascaidh leis na tinte cnámh!
 Ní raibh cnoc ná coill im' radharc sa réim úd
 Ná raibh sop á shéideadh agus réabadh ar fál
 Ag tabhairt fios feasta don óg is aosta
 Gur bhuaigh Oíche Fhéil' Séamais ar Oíche Fhéil' Seáin!

(Not the quickness of a hound running on a hillside,
 Nor pure-white snow being driven on a grassland,
 ...Did run so freely as the bonfires!
 There was neither hill nor forest in my sight on that occasion
 Nor wisp of blowing straw and uprooted field
 That did not proclaim to young and old for evermore
 That St James's Eve had triumphed over St John's Eve!)²⁷

Ó Cathail suggests in the stanza's final line that the jury's verdict, coming as it did on 24 July (St James's Eve), inspired country folk to light more bonfires than they commonly did on the traditional 'Bonfire Night' of 23 June (St John's Eve), a major event in the Irish rural calendar.²⁸ Nor was this the last time that people would build bonfires to honour the memory of Carrickshock. They appeared again in a number of Kilkenny villages on the second anniversary of the battle; more ominously, an enormous commemorative fire blazed away that same night on the very site of the killings.²⁹

By that point, the image of Carrickshock had become a memory marker, a conspicuous outcropping in the mental landscape of the community that local people frequently pointed out to visitors. Alexis de Tocqueville was told about it in some detail – he called it 'a terrible event' – when he stopped in Kilkenny in 1835;³⁰ a young assistant with the Ordnance Survey received a lengthy account of the incident, sup-

²⁶ *Waterford Chronicle*, 26 July 1832; *Kilkenny Journal* and *Kilkenny Moderator*, 28 July 1832; *The Times*, 31 July 1832.

²⁷ 'Oíche na dtinte cnámh', Ó hÓgáin, *Duanaire Osraíoch*, p. 44. I am grateful to David Livingstone-Lowe for this translation.

²⁸ On midsummer festivities, see Kevin Danaher, *The Year in Ireland: Irish Calendar Customs*, 4th edn (Mercier, Cork and Dublin, 1972) pp. 134–53.

²⁹ *Kilkenny Moderator*, *Leinster Express*, *Waterford Chronicle*, 4 Jan 1834.

³⁰ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Alexis de Tocqueville's Journey in Ireland, July–August, 1835*, trans. and ed. Emmet Larkin (Wolfhound, Dublin, 1990) p. 76.

posedly from a participant, when he visited the area in 1839;³¹ William Makepeace Thackeray had it described to him in 1842 as he travelled through south Kilkenny.³² When Augusta, Lady Gregory, compiled snippets of Irish history from stories that she had heard over the years from ‘beggars, pipers, travelling men and such pleasant company’, the fight at Carrickshock ranked alongside such topics as the tithe war, the famine, the 1848 rebellion and other ‘memorable’ events of the early nineteenth century.³³

The event inspired at least one contemporary artist, a Mr Powell of Piltown, Co. Kilkenny, to produce a panoramic depiction of the fight at Carrickshock shortly after the event. A writer for the liberal *Kilkenny Journal* who examined Powell’s canvas in May 1832 described it this way:

Captain Gibbons, Butler the process-server, several police and one or two of the countrymen lie dead and a vast number of figures, represented in assaulting the police, who are scattered through the crowd with clubs, stones and pitchforks, give a vivid idea of what the momentary desperate struggle must have been.

Powell, who probably painted the elaborate banner (described above) that the Piltown delegation carried to the Ballyhale anti-tithe meeting, did not disguise his sympathies. According to the *Kilkenny Journal*, his canvas lent a heroic dignity to the men and women who attacked the police:

The comfortable dresses of the farmers, the ragged robes of many in the crowd and the cool recklessness of danger, so characteristic of the Irish and visible even on the countenances of females assisting their wounded relatives, are well drawn and render the picture really valuable as a correct delineation of the appearance and manners of the Irish peasantry.³⁴

It was almost predictable that Carrickshock would become a symbolic weapon to be used against policemen in subsequent encounters. ‘Carrickshock! Gibbons! Do your best! We are ready for you! ... Now let us have another Carrickshock of it!’ – so shouted country people at constables who posted tithe notices near the village of Mooncoin in October 1832.³⁵ Four months earlier, a contingent of 300 children had paraded the streets of Kilkenny ‘whistling a dead march’ behind a barrow containing the make-believe corpse of a murdered officer. Their

³¹ Wallace Clare (ed.), *A Young Irishman’s Diary, (1836–1847): Being Extracts from the Early Journal of John Keegan of Moate* (n.p., March, 1928) pp. 20–21. I am grateful to Dr Gillian Smith for alerting me to this reference.

³² W.M. Thackeray, *The Irish Sketchbook, 1842* (Sutton, Gloucester, 1990) p. 45.

³³ Augusta, Lady Gregory, *The Killartan History Book* (Maunsel, Dublin, 1909) p. 33.

³⁴ *Kilkenny Journal*, 2 June 1832. I have found no subsequent references to the painting.

³⁵ John Burke to Sir John Harvey, 8 October 1832, NAI, CSO, RP, 1832/1821; *The Freeman’s Journal*, 10 Oct 1832, reported that ‘the police were in the utmost danger of being Carrickshocked’.

public game of 'Soldier's Funeral' – coming as it did within months of the Carrickshock killings and only days before the start of the Carrickshock trials in the city courthouse – prompted magistrates to arrest two boys, one of them only eleven, who led the massive procession.³⁶

References to the killing of the constables became part of an ongoing repertoire of intimidation that local crowds routinely employed in confrontations with policemen. When, in 1867, thousands in Waterford surrounded a party of constables who were escorting a group of Fenians to the city jail and pelted them with rocks, a woman in the crowd suddenly cried out, 'Hurrah for Carrickshock!' Her shout – at once a jibe and a black-humoured reminder of the stoning to death of more than a dozen policemen nearly four decades earlier – was eloquent testimony to the tenacity of Carrickshock in the local imagination.³⁷ So were the experiences of a Hugginstown man who recalled that when he was growing up during the 1860s and 1870s: 'I had a terrible fear of Carrickshock. The rust-coloured sediment which oozed the fissures of its rocks was looked on by my childmates and myself as the bloodstains of the battle'.³⁸

Scores of myths and rumours surfaced almost immediately in the wake of the killings and enlivened popular memory. One related how a policeman who was billeted with a local family on the night before the incident stayed awake praying until dawn. 'Before he left at day-break', claimed a Hugginstown man years later, 'he bade good-bye to all the household, telling them they would never see him alive again. He, poor fellow, was found on the morrow among the slain'.³⁹ Another story described how an elderly man, who had witnessed pitch-cappings at the time of the 1798 rebellion, walked among the wounded policemen after the fighting and calmly killed those who showed signs of life.⁴⁰ Yet another told of how Captain Gibbons, the police commander, had not really been killed in the encounter: the government had secretly spirited him away to France where he was supposedly recovering from his wounds.⁴¹ The uncommonly good weather that prevailed on the morning of the encounter (it was the second day of sunshine after nearly a fortnight of heavy rains and flooding) was

³⁶ *The Times*, 30 June 1832.

³⁷ *The Times*, 19 June 1867. Similarly, a sheriff and a police escort encountered an angry crowd when they stopped at Lismatigue Cross on their way to an eviction in 1881. A woman leaped forward shouting 'Come on boys! We'll give them another Carrickshock!' and attacked the sheriff. Drea, *Carrickshock*, pp. 17–18.

³⁸ Drea, *Carrickshock*, p. 1.

³⁹ Drea, *Carrickshock*, p. 22.

⁴⁰ Drea, *Carrickshock*, p. 25. See also the testimony of Michael Costello, IFC, Schools MS 849, p. 144: 'When the battle was over, coopers named Coffey came with heavy weapons and struck the wounded on the shins. Those who showed signs of life received summary treatment. Those who asked for the priest were spared, but all the rest were killed in a most cruel manner.'

⁴¹ House of Commons, *Select Committee of the House of Commons on Tithes: First Report*, HC 177 (1831–2), vol. 21, p. 84. For a variation on this story, see IFC, Schools MS 849, p. 145.

remembered for decades as a sign of divine favour toward the crowd in its fight with the constables.⁴² The Irish Folklore Commission archives contain numerous tales relating to the incident. They deal with women killing policemen as they fled the scene of the battle; with local fighting factions permanently ending their feuds to take on a common foe; with participants on the run from authorities in the aftermath of the battle; and with the treacheries of landlords and informants.⁴³

The examples we have examined thus far – from ballads, to speeches, to angry shouts, to rumours and folktales – are reminders that collective remembering functions largely through language; it occurs mainly in a world of words. But it also takes place in a world of things and these, in turn, enhance the narratives through which earlier events are recalled.⁴⁴ As Seamus Heaney remarks, ‘Objects which have been seasoned by human contact possess a kind of moral force; they insist upon human solidarity and suggest obligations to and covenants with generations who have been silenced’.⁴⁵ The popular nationalist memory of Carrickshock was also constructed around artefacts connected with the incident, artefacts that helped to evoke vivid conceptions of the encounter. These included, above all, weapons used in the battle. Members of the crowd carried away a number of policemen’s bayonets and treasured them for decades as relics of the skirmish. Two of these weapons, along with a pitchfork that had been used to kill a policeman, were collected from veterans of the battle in 1864 and put on public display as part of a remarkable exhibition of patriotic Irish artefacts that American Fenians organized that year in Chicago.⁴⁶ Another bayonet was removed from the body of a dying local man and it remains in the possession of his descendants to this day.⁴⁷ According to local legend, this same young man died with his head resting upon a particular rock in the boreen wall. When in 1927 the Hugginstown hurling team awarded medals to its members and announced that it was changing its name to the ‘Carrickshock Champions’, a journalist thought it important to record that they did so directly in front of the legendary rock in the wall. It was, he implied, a ceremony that linked the achievements of the young athletes with an equally young local martyr and with the best-known event in the history of their locality.⁴⁸

⁴² *Kilkenny Journal*, 12 Dec 1917; O’Sullivan, *Cinnlae*, vol. 3, pp. 93–5.

⁴³ IFC, Schools MS 849, pp. 144, 146, 301; Main collection MS 1240, p. 195.

⁴⁴ Alan Radley, ‘Artefacts, Memory and a Sense of the Past’ in David Middleton and Derek Edwards (eds), *Collective Remembering* (Sage, London, 1990) pp. 57–8.

⁴⁵ Seamus Heaney, ‘A Sense of the Past’, *History Ireland*, 1, 4 (1993) p. 33.

⁴⁶ *Irish People*, 5 March 1864. On the exhibition itself, see Brian Griffin, ‘“Scallions, Pikes and Bog Oak Ornaments”: The Irish Republican Brotherhood and the Chicago Fenian Fair, 1864’, *Studia Hibernica*, 29 (1995/97) pp. 85–98.

⁴⁷ *Kilkenny Journal*, 12 Dec 1917. A photograph of this bayonet is reproduced in John Gaule, FSC, ‘The Battle of Carrickshock: An Episode from the Tithe War, 1831’, unpublished MS, private collection (n.d.), final page.

⁴⁸ *Munster Express*, 16 Dec 1927.

It was almost inevitable that the boreen itself would become an object of veneration, a sacred space, a site of memory in the most literal sense of the term. As we shall see, this was most evident during the first decades of the twentieth century when local people made the narrow laneway a place of annual pilgrimage. But perhaps the most eloquent expression of its status in popular memory occurred during the war of independence. On the night of 8 March 1920, nearly 60 armed members of the Kilkenny Brigade of the Irish Republican Army staged a major assault on Crown forces; their target was the Royal Irish Constabulary barracks in Hugginstown. IRA commanders could have gathered their raiding party in any number of spots around the village in the hours before the attack, but the assembly point they selected was, appropriately enough, the Carrickshock boreen. Almost a mile from the barracks and on the downward slope of an open hillside, it offered no tactical advantages whatsoever. Its value lay solely in what it represented to the men who assembled there, not to mention the local population who would learn of it later. By commencing their assault from the very spot where local people had triumphed decisively over policemen nearly a century earlier, they were forging an unambiguous link between the two events. The subsequent success of their operation, which saw the constabulary arsenal captured and the barracks destroyed, enhanced the symbolic potency of Carrickshock all the more.⁴⁹

II

No single group, including local nationalists, could ever monopolize the memory of Carrickshock. People from outside the community contested it from the start and, not surprisingly, the most outspoken of these were Protestant anti-nationalists. They saw Carrickshock as a metaphor for papist cruelty, a stark reminder of the innate barbarity and evil intentions of the Catholic lower orders. In local tory newspapers the incident was variously portrayed as an act of 'cold-blooded villainy', a 'savage massacre' and the work of 'blood-thirsty wretches' who 'succeeded but too well in leading on their victims to slaughter'.⁵⁰

Loyalist accounts of the killings bristled with volatile sectarian images, the most prominent being the way that the bells of the Catholic chapels in Hugginstown and other villages rang out on the morning of the encounter to gather the massive crowd. 'While the chapel bells summoned a savage, ferocious and priest-ridden peasantry', recounted the writers of an 1836 evangelical tract, the constables and process server 'were decoyed, surrounded and barbarously butchered

⁴⁹ *Kilkenny People*, 13 March 1920; Jim Maher, *The Flying Column: West Kilkenny, 1916–1921* (Geography, Dublin, 1988) ch. 4.

⁵⁰ *Kilkenny Moderator*, 17, 21 Dec 1831; *Leinster Express*, 4 Jan 1834.

in the narrow defile of Carrickshock'.⁵¹ The very notion of chapel bells calling Catholics out to slaughter policemen was repellent enough to many Protestants; even worse was the suspicion that local priests had orchestrated the affair.⁵²

More than 30 years later, the English writer Henry Addison included an entire chapter on Carrickshock in his semi-fictional memoir of police work in pre-famine Ireland that epitomized anti-nationalist sentiment. In his judgement, the murder of the 13 constables and process server was nothing less than 'the most savage butchery that ever disgraced the annals of Ireland'.⁵³ His breathtakingly inaccurate description of the fight, though brief, repeated certain motifs that other Tory writers had developed over the previous decades. These included the assertion that Gibbons and his men were lured into a carefully laid trap, a claim that persisted into the late twentieth century.⁵⁴ Addison also elaborated upon the common loyalist assertion that the crowd behaved with particular callousness toward their victims. The corpses of the dead policemen, he wrote, 'were pierced with innumerable wounds. The[ir] arms were seized with avidity and then the murderers ... marched off glorying in the act and even singing songs of delight'.⁵⁵

The remainder of Addison's 1862 narrative (curiously subtitled 'A Pleasant Excursion') is an improbable description of his adventures in and around Carrickshock a few days after the incident, in the company of a ranking constabulary officer. Addison tells how the two men somehow discovered by moonlight a severed finger and a piece of human skull on the site of the killings, after which they barely escaped with their lives from a drunken mob who were celebrating the acquittals of the men who murdered the policemen. Related in the lurid style of a penny-dreadful thriller, their supposed escapades underscored the savagery that Carrickshock had come to represent in the perceptions of anti-nationalists.⁵⁶

If loyalists remembered Carrickshock in such unequivocal terms, most nationalists from outside the locality saw it as a problematic site of memory. Unlike local people who, as we have seen, took unambiguous pride in the incident because it represented the destruction of their persecutors, middle-class nationalists from Dublin and elsewhere were decidedly ambivalent. Daniel O'Connell spoke for many when he

⁵¹ Michael Crotty, *The Catholic, Not the Roman Catholic, Church, Exhibited in Letters of the Reverend Messieurs Michael and William Crotty, Catholic Priests of Parsonstown* (D.R. Bleakley, Dublin, 1836) p. 36.

⁵² See, for example, *Dublin Evening Mail*, 20 Dec 1831.

⁵³ Henry R. Addison, *Recollections of an Irish Police Magistrate and Other Reminiscences of the South of Ireland* (Ward and Lock, London, 1862) p. 29.

⁵⁴ See, for example, Edward Garner, *Massacre at Rathcormac: Last Battle in the Tithe War* (Éigse, Fermoy, 1984) p. 13; R.H. Curtis, *The History of the Royal Irish Constabulary* (Moffat, Dublin, 1869) pp. 31–2.

⁵⁵ Addison, *Recollections*, p. 35.

⁵⁶ On Addison's views of Ireland and the Irish, see Virginia Crossman, 'The Resident Magistrate as Colonial Officer: Addison, Somerville and Ross', *Irish Studies Review*, 8, 1 (2000) pp. 23–33.

condemned the killing of both constables and civilians alike. He and other nationalist spokesmen distanced themselves from the violence of the encounter and they ignored loyalist accusations that it was premeditated or that it was rooted in sectarian hatred.⁵⁷ Reports in the liberal press said little or nothing about chapel bells summoning the crowd and they hurried over details of the fighting. In their eyes, Carrickshock was simply a terrible accident waiting to happen, a deplorable but predictable consequence of British misrule and the iniquitous tithe system.⁵⁸

Nationalist historians who wrote about the incident took a similar approach. Here, for example, is R. Barry O'Brien's succinct blend of generalizations and inaccuracies:

And then came the 'battle' of Carrickshock. The peasants met the police hand to hand and foot to foot. There was a fierce fight which lasted for over an hour. The chief of the police was killed. The leader of the peasants – an old '98 man – was killed. But the police force was completely routed, leaving many of their men dead upon the field.⁵⁹

Even writers of more advanced nationalist views, such as John Mitchel and Michael Davitt, considered the event unworthy of extensive analysis, though the latter declared that it showed the benefits that could arise from the concerted actions of ordinary Irish people. 'A dozen repetitions of Carrigshock in the three southern provinces in the early part of 1846', wrote Davitt concerning the government's coercion policies at the time of the famine, '... would have largely saved the situation'.⁶⁰

Carrickshock featured prominently in at least two novels of the nineteenth century. The first was William Carleton's *The Tithe Proctor*, which appeared in 1849. Though Carleton was an outspoken anti-repealer, he portrayed Carrickshock in much the same way that O'Connellites had done in the early 1830s. To him, the event was an unhappy by-product of gross injustice and what he called 'a corroboration of the disorganized condition of society which then existed'. Not only did Carleton reinforce the image of Carrickshock that O'Connellites had promoted nearly two decades earlier, but he gave his predominantly middle-class readers the fullest, most detailed and most accurate description of the encounter to appear in book form prior to the twentieth century. Drawing upon newspaper reports and trial records, he

⁵⁷ See the report of O'Connell's speech at a meeting in the Corn Exchange, *Kilkenny Journal*, 4 Jan 1832.

⁵⁸ See coverage of the incident during 1831–32 in *The Comet*, *Kilkenny Journal* and *Waterford Chronicle*.

⁵⁹ R. Barry O'Brien, *A Hundred Years of Irish History* (Pitman, London, 1911) p. 103.

⁶⁰ Michael Davitt, *The Fall of Feudalism in Ireland, or, The Story of the Land League Revolution* (Harper and Brothers, London and New York, 1904) p. 53; John Mitchel, *The History of Ireland from the Treaty of Limerick to the Present Time* (D.J. Sadlier, London, 1868), vol. 2, p. 174.

presented a vivid narrative of the events leading up to the bloodshed. His account, like others from the pens of middle-class nationalists, delicately sidestepped a description of the fighting itself. It was also refreshingly free of the partisan rhetoric that coloured most other treatments of the incident in the nineteenth century.⁶¹

Alas, the same could not be said of another novel of the period that dealt with Carrickshock. This was a melodramatic *tour de force* that appeared in serial form in an Irish-American periodical in 1880 entitled 'Ulick Grace, or, A Tale of the Tithes'. Its author was the poet, journalist and Fenian, John Locke, a native of the area. His book tells the story of a dashing young man of substance named Ulick Grace who helped to lead a popular uprising against tithes that culminated in the fight at Carrickshock. Predictably, Locke saw the battle as a testament to the fighting skill of Irishmen, but as a Fenian he considered it to be an isolated occurrence, a one-off victory that had little to do with the ultimate goal of destroying British rule in Ireland. Locke therefore found it necessary to relate the incident in some way to the larger national struggle. He did so by inserting a scene at the conclusion of the fighting in which the jubilant insurgents declared themselves eager to continue their revolt 'and die, if need be, as their fathers did, in chivalrous Ninety-Eight'. This prompted their young leader to deliver a cautionary speech that calmed his followers and gave, in effect, the authorized Fenian interpretation of Carrickshock: 'We had better put by our arms for a more auspicious day', Ulick declares:

And each one do the best he can to be ready to answer when the national tocsin sounds. ... The tithe system will never rise from the bloody grave in which you buried it in glorious Carrickshock. God grant we may one day find a grave as deep for the whole system of foreign rule with which Ireland is yet cursed.⁶²

III

Locke offered a way of interpreting Carrickshock that had not featured prominently before. By situating it within the framework of Fenian strategy, he removed the memory of the incident from its mainly parochial context and linked it to wider political issues. This was something that later commentators would do with increasing frequency, especially after the turn of the century when Carrickshock began to loom larger in popular consciousness than it ever had before, and the need to commemorate it seemed particularly urgent.

⁶¹ William Carleton, *The Tithe Proctor: A Novel. Being a Tale of the Tithe Rebellion in Ireland* (Simms and McIntyre, London, 1849).

⁶² John Locke, 'Ulick Grace, or, A Tale of the Tithes', *The Celtic Monthly, An Illustrated Irish American Magazine*, 3 (1880) p. 549.

Just as 'bigger' historical events such as wars and revolutions undergo what have been called 'memory spasms' that generate sporadic flurries of commemorative activities, so Carrickshock became an object of intense remembrance in the early 1900s. For nearly three decades, local people publicly honoured the event on an unprecedented scale and, in the process, constructed a master narrative that either subsumed or swept aside previous nationalist and loyalist interpretations.

This new interest in Carrickshock also represented a major shift in the forms that its remembrance took. Here, some observations of the German scholar Jan Assman might be helpful. Assman draws a distinction between two types of collective memory, one of which he labels 'communicative', the other 'cultural'. By 'communicative' memory he refers to everyday exchanges about the meaning of a past occurrence. These are usually informal, they are transmitted mainly by word of mouth and they are protean, disordered and non-specialized. They typically occur within a restricted time span of around 80 to 100 years and they receive their initial shape from contemporaries of the events. Most of the local expressions of memory concerning Carrickshock that we have examined thus far fall under this category. These include the ballads, the artefacts and the folktales, even though most of the latter were not recorded until the late 1930s and early 1940s – just beyond Assman's 80- to 100-year time span. Regardless of when they appeared in written form, however, the stories originated in the nineteenth century and they circulated among local people long before they were set down for the Irish Folklore Commission.

By contrast, Assman notes, 'cultural memory is characterized by its distance from the everyday'. It is more formalized and consists of objectified culture; that is, of rituals, written texts, images and monuments that are designed to recall fateful events in a community's past.⁶³ In the case of Carrickshock, these kinds of expressions became increasingly apparent from the turn of the century onward, though there was a necessary overlap between them and expressions of communicative memory. Just as published accounts of the battle appeared in the nineteenth century, for example, so folklore narratives (albeit a few generations removed from the event) and even contemporary ballads continued to circulate orally well into the twentieth.

The most prominent expressions of cultural memory centred upon the ritual staging of colourful annual gatherings at the site of the encounter where dignitaries spoke, bands played and crowds in the hundreds marched, sang and prayed. This development sprang from a number of sources: patriotic fervour, community pride and a growing conviction among nationalists throughout Ireland that stirring historic

⁶³ Jan Assman, 'Collective Memory and Cultural Identity', *New German Critique*, 65 (1995) p. 129; see also Wulf Kansteiner, 'Finding Meaning in Memory: A Methodological Critique of Collective Memory Studies', *History and Theory*, 41 (2002) pp. 182–3.

events – particularly violent ones that displayed the bravery of ordinary Irish men and women – had to be publicly honoured. As well, by the first decade of the twentieth century – almost precisely the 80- to 100-year time frame that Jan Assman ascribes to ‘communicative memory’ – there were few, if any, people still alive who could actually remember the fight at Carrickshock. It was passing rapidly out of living memory and many feared it would soon be completely forgotten unless something were done to focus attention upon it. What was needed, in other words, was an ‘invented tradition’ that could re-establish continuity with a past that seemed to be slipping irretrievably away. Public anniversary ceremonies offered an obvious solution.

These yearly gatherings also fitted nicely with the aspirations of an energetic young politician from the area named Nicholas J. Murphy, who became a principal force behind the initial Carrickshock commemorations. In the summer of 1907 the sitting MP for South Kilkenny resigned his seat and, following a bitter contest, his party colleagues in the United Irish League chose Murphy to fill the position. At the time of his selection Murphy, from the village of Ballyhale, stressed his ties to the region, declaring that, in contrast to his opponent for the office, he came before the party convention as a local candidate. ‘I was born and reared under the shadow of historic Carrickshock’, he boasted, a spot that he eulogized as ‘the Irish Thermopylae’. The tiny ‘battle boren’, he said, was nothing less than the blessed spot where ‘tyranny and ascendancy received their first blow in Ireland and it is but fitting that Carrickshock should have a humble part in dealing the last’.⁶⁴

Carrickshock helped to catapult Murphy into office and, as if in gratitude, he identified himself with the incident even more closely during his tenure as MP. Largely because of him, a group of local nationalists came together in late November 1907 to discuss how they might stage a public commemoration on the approaching anniversary of the battle. Three weeks later, hundreds huddled in lashing winter rain at the boren around a makeshift platform from which Murphy and other local dignitaries delivered speeches on the meaning of what had taken place on that spot 76 years before.⁶⁵

The tone that prevailed at this and subsequent commemorations was strikingly different from that of seven decades earlier. Gone was the rhetoric of the contemporary ballads and broadsheets with their jubilant references to battered faces, broken eyeballs, the abolition of tithes and the reclaiming of land from Protestant oppressors. In their place were encomiums to the ‘martyrs’ of Carrickshock, by which was meant not the process server and the 13 murdered officers, many of

⁶⁴ *Kilkenny Journal*, 13 July 1907. Likewise, a candidate for Murphy’s seat in 1909 declared that the honour of being selected ‘was enhanced when it was conferred by a nationalist constituency hallowed by such great traditions as ... the nationalists who fought the battle of Carrickshock’. *Kilkenny Journal*, 4 Aug 1909.

⁶⁵ *Kilkenny Journal*, 30 Nov, 21 Dec 1907.

whom were Catholics and natives of the area, but the three members of the crowd who were killed. Butler, Gibbons and the constables were all but erased from popular memory, thrust into a kind of Orwellian memory hole and replaced by a trio of local heroes.

This development seems remarkable, considering that the voluminous constabulary records and the newspapers of 1831–32 barely mentioned the three dead civilians and then only in the most general way. Only one eyewitness appears to have referred to any of them by name: that was a constable who, a few days after the incident, recalled bayoneting a man whom he identified simply as ‘Trassy’.⁶⁶ This was James Treacy, 20 years old and the son of a prominent local farmer. He and two other members of the crowd, Patrick Power and Thomas Phelan – older men who also died of their wounds – were almost completely ignored in written contemporary accounts of the incident. Newspapers and trial records barely mentioned them; they are not identified in any of the nineteenth-century histories that referred to Carrickshock; even the triumphalist ballads of the 1830s, which, as we have seen, took elaborate pains to identify dead and wounded constables, made no references to them whatsoever.⁶⁷ If the three local men featured at all in the collective memory of Carrickshock, they did so as shadowy figures who presumably existed in unrecorded stories passed among local residents over the years.

This changed abruptly with the resurgence of interest in the event in the early twentieth century. From 1907 onward, Treacy, Power and Phelan emerged as the focal points of commemorative activities. William Keane, another figure who survived the battle, was usually honoured separately and with less fanfare. He was a local hedge-school teacher who played a prominent role in the events leading up to the fighting and who later fled Ireland in disguise. Though his story had a definite appeal (enhanced by his appearance on the day of the battle in a glazed leather military cap and a colourful sash), Keane was never revered to the same degree as the three who died.⁶⁸ Speakers, writers, artists and clergymen lauded the fallen trio as martyrs to the Catholic faith and the nationalist cause. As one orator confidently predicted in 1925, ‘the names and the fame of Treacy, Power and Phelan, shall ring down the corridors of time, till this world shall cease to be and time itself shall have melted into eternity’.⁶⁹

The apotheosis of the three men, though seemingly sudden, was almost predictable in a culture steeped in representations of heroic sacrifice. Annual tributes to another trio of nationalist heroes – William

⁶⁶ Deposition of Sergeant Peter Harvey, NAI, CSO, RP, 1831, K-25, p. 28.

⁶⁷ Only the *Dublin Evening Post*, 22 Dec 1831, appears to have named any of them, noting the death of one ‘Power’.

⁶⁸ On Keane and his activities following the battle, see Richard Lahert, ‘*An Maor agus an Meirleach* (The Mayor and the Outlaw): A Postscript to the Carrickshock Affray’, *Decies*, 49 (1994) pp. 45–54.

⁶⁹ *Munster Express*, 19 June 1925, as cited in Drea, *Carrickshock*, appendix 2.

Allen, Michael Larkin and Michael O'Brien (the Manchester martyrs who were hanged in 1867) – had been familiar events in the community for nearly 40 years.⁷⁰ Over the previous decade, nationalists had immersed themselves in the colourful, country-wide festivities connected with the centenary of the 1798 rebellion. These commemorations produced an outpouring of pamphlets, books, songs and stone monuments that celebrated a pantheon of other youthful martyrs: Wolfe Tone, Lord Edward Fitzgerald, Robert Emmet and John Kelly, 'The Boy from Killan', among them.⁷¹ These figures loomed large in nationalist discourse, and local people instinctively drew upon them to frame their perceptions of Treacy, Power and Phelan. 'The three martyrs of Carrickshock' became local versions of familiar nationalist icons, home-grown heroes whose bravery and sacrifices seemed no less impressive than the Tones, Emmets and other notables from Ireland's past. If anything, their ties to the region and the fact that dozens of their descendants still lived in the community gave them a presence in popular memory that the more distant figures of national remembrance could never possess.

This applied particularly to the most celebrated member of the triumvirate, James Treacy. His was invariably the first name listed whenever the three men were mentioned in speeches and newspaper reports. Journalists and orators dubbed him 'the hero and organiser of that battle', or they referred to the insurgents simply as 'Treacy and his comrades', or 'James Treacy and his gallant men'. The known details of his life accentuated his heroic status. He was young, educated and the son of a substantial farmer whose ties to the region reportedly stretched back for centuries.⁷²

These few bare facts became the framework for elaborate constructions of Treacy's heroic image that appeared in popular literature. One writer, for instance, drew an implausible word portrait that owed an obvious debt to the authors of melodramatic fiction. It reads in part:

James Treacy ... was a splendid specimen of mountain manhood – tall, straight and supple as a larch. To see him coming to Mass on Sundays ... blue cloth body-coat (swallow-tailed); satin, low-cut, double-breasted, flowered vest; brown cloth knee-breeches, with brass gilt buttons and drab, narrow ribbon tied at the knees ... his head was crowned by a silk velvet tall hat. ... Is it any wonder moun-

⁷⁰ It was at a local Manchester martyrs commemoration in 1907 that Murphy and his colleagues first considered the possibility of staging a Carrickshock demonstration. *Kilkenny Journal*, 30 Nov 1907. The Manchester martyrs were publicly commemorated in Hugginstown as recently as Nov 2002.

⁷¹ See Timothy J. O'Keefe, "Who Fears to Speak of '98?": The Rhetoric and Rituals of the United Irishmen Centennial, 1898", *Eire-Ireland*, 27, 3 (1992) pp. 67–91.

⁷² Richard Lahert, *Hurrah for Carrickshock!: A Ballad of the Tithe War Times with Explanatory Notes* (n.p., Tralee, 1986) p. 37; IFC, Schools MS 848, p. 111.

tain girls set their caps for him? Yet it was not ordained that he should make any one of them happy.⁷³

The new-found emphasis upon Treacy had to do with more than his background and his alleged physical attributes. It also helped that members of his family were still prominent in the area in the early twentieth century. One of his nephews was the Very Reverend Canon Patrick Treacy, parish priest of Connahy, Co. Kilkenny, who was the featured guest and speaker at numerous Carrickshock commemoration ceremonies. Canon Treacy also headed the local memorial committee. Another nephew, John Treacy, lived at the large family house in Kilkurl through the 1920s and served alongside his brother on the committee.

Despite a scarcity of contemporary evidence about James Treacy's actions during the fight, in later narratives he was portrayed as the commander-in-chief of the insurgents. According to the official historian of Carrickshock, a local man named Edmond V. Drea, Treacy was nothing less than 'the central figure in that ever memorable and victorious combat ... that dauntless hero, that Walsh Mountain Leonidas ... [who] roused and inspired his comrades to achieve that crowning and crushing victory for our religion and its rights'.⁷⁴ Drea and others portrayed the 20-year-old as a master strategist, positioning and deploying detachments of the crowd with the skill and panache of a seasoned field officer. Consequently, what had actually been a messy and chaotic free-for-all assumed the appearance of a well-orchestrated battle. Drea, whose locally published account went through at least two printings during the 1920s, also constructed a melodramatic death scene for his young hero in which Captain Gibbons himself somehow singled Treacy out from among the immense, tightly packed crowd and brought him down:

Gibbons ... drew his pistol and shot Treacy through the breast. Treacy fell and, knowing his wound fatal, called to his comrades while yet his voice was able, 'I'm dead, boys; but let ye fight away.' He then turned on his side and died. A wild shout for vengeance rose from the now thoroughly excited crowd.⁷⁵

IV

Carrickshock had found its hero, but what of the event itself? How did the generations who celebrated it so assiduously in the first decades of the twentieth century remember it? What meanings did it hold for

⁷³ Drea, *Carrickshock*, p. 17.

⁷⁴ *Munster Express*, 19 June 1925, as cited in Drea, *Carrickshock*, appendix 2.

⁷⁵ Drea, *Carrickshock*, p. 24. Another printing was contemplated in 1953. *Munster Express*, 23 Dec 1953. Drea's book is extremely rare. I quote from what is apparently the only publicly available copy in Ireland, that held by the Kilkenny County Library.

people living in a small corner of rural Ireland during a period of rapid change and national upheaval?

The subjects that orators focused upon at the anniversary gatherings provide some clues. Prior to 1914, speakers linked the anti-tithe crusade of the 1830s to the aims of the United Irish League and the ongoing agrarian struggle against graziers and oppressive landlords.⁷⁶ In the 1920s, they pointed to 'the wave of irreligion that was passing over the world' in the form of immoral books, periodicals, films, 'jungle dances' and jazz music. 'God forbid that even a ripple of this [wave] should taint the souls of our Irish boys', thundered a Waterford priest in 1924. 'If that wave should come in this direction', he assured his listeners, 'it would meet the same sturdy opposition as was hurled at the Crown forces [at Carrickshock] when they came to rob the people of their property when they had failed to rob them of their Faith'.⁷⁷ By the time of the centenary ceremony in December 1931 – a mere six months before the massive 31st International Eucharistic Congress convened in Dublin – a local priest told the hundreds gathered that 'Carrickshock was a fight for religion, first and before all. This was the motive, the religious motive, that inspired the people of South Kilkenny to make this stand'.⁷⁸

So important was the spiritual theme to the Carrickshock ceremonies that the organizers of the 1931 event announced that their memorial would be entirely of a religious character 'and devoid of anything savouring of a political nature'.⁷⁹ But politics were never absent from the commemorations, and in some years they loomed larger than in others. In the tense atmosphere of 1916, the authorities banned the anniversary observances and stationed nearly 70 constables in Hugginstown to make sure that none took place. Local residents outwitted them, however, gathering surreptitiously in their hundreds at the boreen to hold a quiet ceremony on the night before the announced commemoration.⁸⁰ The following year, Hugginstown people defied another government ban and marched with torchlights behind the Sinn Féin fife and drum band to the boreen.⁸¹ In 1934 the local branch of the Blueshirt organization – a political movement that aped the trappings of continental European fascism – assumed control of the commemoration and linked the bravery of Treacy, Power and Phelan to the cause of their allies in the Fine Gael party.⁸² A decade after that, Eamonn Coogan, the local Fine Gael representative in Dáil Éireann, raised the spectre of Carrickshock to underscore the possibility of violence in recent rent agitation in Co. Donegal. 'It took a Carrickshock

⁷⁶ *Kilkenny Journal*, 21 Dec 1907; *Munster Express*, 26 Dec 1908, 13 Dec 1913.

⁷⁷ Speech of Revd Nicholas Walsh, *Munster Express*, 20 Dec 1924.

⁷⁸ Speech of Revd W. Brennan, *Munster Express*, 24 Dec 1931.

⁷⁹ *Munster Express*, 11 Dec 1931.

⁸⁰ *Munster Express*, 16 and 23 Dec 1916; 20 Dec 1946.

⁸¹ *Kilkenny Journal*, 22 Dec 1917.

⁸² *Munster Express*, 7 and 14 Dec 1934. On the Blueshirt movement, see Mike Cronin, *The Blueshirts and Irish Politics* (Four Courts, Dublin, 1997).

in my constituency to end the tithe war', he declared in April 1945, 'and we are beginning to find some rumblings of serious trouble brewing which may come to a head if the matter of the relationship of landlord and tenant is not tackled in a practical fashion'.⁸³ Meanwhile, other orators during the late 1940s and early 1950s viewed with alarm 'the various "isms" which unfortunately were rampant in the world today' and hoped that 'the Communist influences of Europe would gain no adherents for the Godless creed in Carrickshock or the surrounding historic countryside'.⁸⁴ A local politician in 1954 used the commemoration ceremony to reflect on the subject of Northern Ireland, concluding that 'there was only one way of getting the six counties back – and that was the same as the men of Carrickshock – by the gun'.⁸⁵

As writers and orators used the concerns of their own day to fashion new images of Carrickshock, they also enlarged its importance. One of them ranked it among the three great turning points in modern Irish history, the other two being the 1798 rebellion and the 1916 rising.⁸⁶ Another endowed it with nothing less than global significance, proclaiming that when the people of Hugginstown and Ballyhale crushed the Crown forces in 1831, 'they turned the tide and marked ... not alone an epoch in the history of this country, but of that of the civilised world (cheers)'.⁸⁷

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From the start, organizers of the commemorations expressed a determination to honour the heroes of Carrickshock with a permanent stone monument on the battle site.⁸⁸ Owing largely to the disruptions of 1914–23, it took more than a decade to generate sufficient money for the project. Finally, in July 1925, what was probably the largest crowd ever to assemble in the area since the mammoth anti-tithe gathering of 1832 turned out at the battle site to watch the Revd Canon Patrick Treacy dedicate and bless the Carrickshock memorial (Figure 1).⁸⁹

Like scores of other nationalist monuments that went up around Ireland in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the one at Carrickshock is in the form of a large Celtic cross, similar to those found in cemeteries around the country. It is unremarkable as a work of art except for an impressive bas-relief on its base (Figure 2).⁹⁰ This shows a group of sturdy insurgents, comfortably clad in knee-breeches,

⁸³ *Dáil Éireann Debates*, 18 April 1945, vol. 96, p. 2086.

⁸⁴ *Munster Express*, 19 Dec 1947; 1 July 1949; 23 Dec 1953.

⁸⁵ *Munster Express*, 31 Dec 1954.

⁸⁶ Speech of Revd Patrick Treacy, *Munster Express*, 20 Dec 1924.

⁸⁷ Speech of Edward Walsh, *Munster Express*, 26 Dec 1908.

⁸⁸ *Kilkenny Journal*, 21 Dec 1907.

⁸⁹ *Munster Express*, 19 June 1925, as cited in Drea, *Carrickshock*, appendix 2.

⁹⁰ The bas-relief was the work of the Revd E.A. Foran of New Ross.



Figure 1 The Carrickshock monument. The site of regular commemoration ceremonies since its erection in 1925.

stockings, brogues and (despite the December weather) light shirts, who are attacking with sticks, pitchforks and stones from the right foreground. Their bodies strain forward, giving the scene a sense of overpowering movement from right to left. Facing them – as if across a spacious battlefield rather than the packed, claustrophobic laneway – but represented as noticeably smaller figures than the attacking farmers, are the armed and uniformed constables, some of whom are firing on the crowd. Centre-left, Captain Gibbons falls backward from his rearing horse while the process server, Edmund Butler, cowers on the ground, his bag, hat and documents strewn about him. In the centre of the sculpture the mortally wounded James Treacy lies propped on one elbow urging his comrades with his dying breath to fight on. Above him an insurgent tries to aid a wounded companion as another prepares to hurl a rock. The sides of the monument are engraved with dedications in Irish and English to the memory of Treacy, Power and Phelan, while the rear panel lists the names of all the men who had served on the memorial committee over the preceding two decades. Added below them, almost as a postscript, is a mis-spelled reference



Figure 2 Bas-relief on the Carrickshock monument by the Revd E.A. Foran. It encapsulates the nationalist master narrative of the event that emerged in the early twentieth century.

to William Keane, the hedge-school teacher: ‘Olso [*sic*] in memory of William Keane who was out standing [*sic*] in the fight’. It is significant that the monument makes no mention whatsoever of the 13 dead constables and the process server.

The art historian Albert Boime uses the term ‘hollow icons’ to suggest that monuments like the one at Carrickshock invariably become filled with multiple meanings.⁹¹ With its religious symbolism, its eulogies in words and images to Treacy and his comrades, and its total obliteration of the memory of their opponents, the memorial is a reification of the master narrative of Carrickshock that emerged at the turn of the century. But it is also an accolade in stone to the people of the locality who organized the annual ceremonies over the previous two decades, especially the men who sat on the memorial committee. The monument became as much a visible and lasting tribute to their endeavours as to those of the men who fought and died in 1831. In later years, orators would refer to the deceased members of the memorial committee as ‘saintly’, and there was a short-lived effort to pay homage to them, however indirectly, by holding the annual commemorations on the anniversary of the monument’s unveiling in mid-summer rather than near the date of the battle.⁹²

⁹¹ Albert Boime, *Hollow Icons: The Politics of Sculpture in Nineteenth Century France* (Kent, Ohio and London, 1987).

⁹² *Munster Express*, 20 Dec 1946; 3 June and 1 July 1949. Organizers also hoped that a summer event would attract larger crowds.

The dedication of the memorial in 1925 marked a turning point in the history of the public commemorations. Over the decade that followed – a decade of economic gloom and political disillusionment – attendance at the anniversary ceremonies dwindled steadily until, by 1935, the gatherings ceased altogether. As they did, the monument fell into disrepair, and death claimed the last of the local men who led the long campaign to honour the memory of Carrickshock.⁹³ There were sporadic efforts to revive the annual commemorations following the Second World War, but it was obvious that times and local attitudes had changed. Attendance at the gatherings was comparatively meagre during the late 1940s and early 1950s, and there were few younger faces among those who did turn out.⁹⁴

Despite declining enthusiasm, certain expressions of remembrance persisted into the post-war years. One of them contained a faint echo of the competing versions of Carrickshock that first erupted in the 1830s. In 1952 the essayist and historian Hubert Butler recalled a recent outing that the Kilkenny Archaeological Society made to the battle site. When the members assembled at the boreen, Butler noted, they arranged themselves along sectarian lines: ‘Most of the Protestants went home from the bottom of the hill, but I [he was a Protestant] went to the top’, where the Catholics had gathered to hear a brief history of ‘this bitter controversial event’ from a local priest.⁹⁵

This meeting was among the last of its kind. During the remainder of the 1950s, local organizers searched for ways to generate larger, more youthful turnouts. Possibilities included a proposal in 1953 to stage a pageant at the boreen ‘on the lines of the conflict’ that would be part of the ill-fated national festival known as *An Tóstal* that the government planned for that year. But nothing seemed to work. By 1955 the ceremonies were reduced to small night-time processions by torchlight from Hugginstown to the battle site, where a priest led participants in the rosary. Newspapers record no formal battle commemorations after 1957, though the boreen has since become the venue for yearly Manchester martyrs observances, thereby merging local and national objects of remembrance.

The local memory of Carrickshock has taken on some new, somewhat ironic features in recent years. To mark the 150th anniversary in 1981, a team of workers and local volunteers re-landscaped the area around the monument in hopes of attracting tourists.⁹⁶ Two decades later, it appeared as if another project might overshadow their efforts and bring more people closer to the boreen than anyone could have imagined. In August 2001 the National Roads Authority announced

⁹³ *Munster Express*, 20 Dec 1946.

⁹⁴ *Munster Express*, 23 Dec 1953.

⁹⁵ Hubert Butler, *Escape from the Anthill* (Lilliput, Mullingar, 1985) p. 340. The address to which Butler refers is: T.J. Clohosey, ‘Carrickshock: The Tithe War’, *Old Kilkenny Review*, 5 (1952) pp. 10–15.

⁹⁶ *Kilkenny Standard*, 11 and 18 Dec 1981.

that their preferred route for the dual carriageway linking south Kildare with Waterford (scheduled for completion before the end of the present decade) ran within 200 metres of the Carrickshock battle site. As of this writing, there were no plans to remove the monument, though it is clear that its immediate surroundings will be substantially altered.⁹⁷

There is also irony in the way that the proprietors of a local guest-house tried to capitalize on the battle in the late 1990s by christening one of their suites 'The Carrickshock State Room'. Their hotel was none other than the former vicarage of the Revd Hans Hamilton whose tithe demands were the cause of the protest in 1831; it is also the place to which many of the wounded and dying constables fled following the encounter. 'Named in commemoration of the Battle of Carrickshock', the hotel owners proudly boasted on their website, 'reminiscent of a weekend in Tuscany ... We believe that this room has a delightfully romantic feel to it'. Featuring a Jacuzzi and stocked with champagne and handmade Irish chocolates, it was described as 'ideal for that weekend away with special friends... It is the ultimate luxurious experience'.⁹⁸

With references to tourism and romantic weekends in luxurious staterooms, we have obviously moved a long way from earlier constructions of Carrickshock and their allusions to mutilated bodies, bloody retribution, papist savagery and heroic sacrifice. Such stark imagery has dominated the social memory of the battle for nearly two centuries in large part because the event itself was so violent. But it also stems from a persistent belief on the part of local nationalists that their identity – their very sense of who they were – depended upon whether or not they controlled the memory of Carrickshock. This conviction reflects Milan Kundera's famous observation that 'the struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting'.⁹⁹

As a result, a dominant version of the event – its master narrative – emerged around the beginning of the last century. It has faded considerably since its heyday in the 1920s, but it is still there. It can be found in the essays that Hugginstown schoolchildren still write every year about Carrickshock, with their references to the bravery of James Treacy and his comrades. It turns up in feature articles that local newspapers publish from time to time, one of which appeared in the *Munster Express* on the eve of the 170th anniversary of the incident in November 2001. Related by long-time local resident Jimmy Heane, the story repeats familiar details of the master narrative, emphasizing the

⁹⁷ For example, two smaller roads within 50 metres of the monument are to be widened, resurfaced and partially extended to complement the motorway. See <http://n9-n10kilcullen-waterford.ie/study-area-map.htm> ARUP Consulting Engineers, N9/N10 Kilcullen to Waterford – South, Land Owner Sketches/Aerial Photography, Sheet 12. Accessed 18 Oct 2002.

⁹⁸ <http://www.knocktopherhall.com>. Accessed 12 Aug 2000.

⁹⁹ Milan Kundera, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, trans. Michael Heim (A.A. Knopf, New York, 1980), part 1, ch. 2.

activities of the hedge-school teacher William Keane.¹⁰⁰ Similar motifs dominate the stanzas of a remarkable 1556-line, fully annotated, blood-and-thunder poem entitled *Hurrah for Carrickshock!* that a Kilkenny man, Richard Lahert, produced in the late 1980s. Its tone can be gleaned from this description of the fighting in the boreen, a description that resurrects the spirit of the broadsheet ballads of 1832:

Then lithe as mountain hare –
 And that is not a vaunt –
 James Treacy grabbed the proctor,
 Saying: ‘This is the man we want!’
 A peeler grabbed the proctor back,
 ’Twas but a brief respite,
 For Butler’s skull was broken
 By rock and mallet smite.
 ... Pitchfork, scythe and hurley
 Were used to maim and kill
 In that brief but savage battle
 That makes one shudder still.¹⁰¹

In an indirect but no less important way, the local hurling team has come to embody the heroic image of the incident. The Hugginstown branch of the Gaelic Athletic Association adopted the name Carrickshock in 1927, just as the wave of commemorative fervour crested. Since that time, steady press coverage of club matches has made ‘Carrickshock’ a familiar term in Kilkenny and beyond. The club identifies itself explicitly with the battle through its banner that features at its centre the Carrickshock monument, flanked on either side by crossed hurling sticks – a visible though perhaps unintended reminder of the weapons that members of the crowd used against the constables in 1831. Carrickshock hurling matches themselves have sometimes acted as mnemonics of the battle, as the Kilkenny artist and sculptor Tony O’Malley discovered when he attended a local contest:

When Carrickshock were playing I once heard an old man shouting with a tremor in his voice, ‘come on the men that bate the tithe proctors.’ There was real fervour in his voice; it was like the Matt the thrasher scene in [Charles J. Kickham’s novel] *Knocknagow*. It was a battle cry, with the hurleys as the swords but with the same intensity.¹⁰²

It would be easy to dismiss the master narrative of Carrickshock – with its melodrama, its inventions and omissions, its heroes and its

¹⁰⁰ ‘Battle of Carrickshock & William Keane’, *Munster Express*, 23 Nov 2001. See also Gaule, ‘Battle of Carrickshock’, which contains a wealth of useful information.

¹⁰¹ Lahert, *Hurrah for Carrickshock!*, p. 8.

¹⁰² Tony O’Malley, ‘Inscape: Life and Landscape in Callan and County Kilkenny’ in W. Nolan and K. Whelan (eds), *Kilkenny: History and Society* (Geography, Dublin, 1990) p. 626.

villains – as bad history. But to do so misses the point. For it is not so much ‘history’ we are concerned with here but memory; and memory, as Peter Novick notes, ‘is in crucial senses ahistorical, even anti-historical:

Collective memory simplifies; sees events from a single, committed perspective; is impatient with ambiguities of any kind; reduces events to mythic archetypes. ... [It] has no sense of the passage of time; it denies the ‘pastness’ of its objects and insists on their continuing presence. Typically a collective memory, at least a significant collective memory, is understood to express some eternal or essential truth about the group – usually tragic. A memory, once established, comes to define that eternal truth and, along with it, an eternal identity, for the members of the group.¹⁰³

Novick is referring to the collective memory of the holocaust of 1939–45 among Jewish Americans and to what it can tell us about how millions of people interpret their pasts. But his observations apply equally to ways that small communities in small countries have remembered small events that have seemed no less momentous to them.

¹⁰³ Peter Novick, *The Holocaust and Collective Memory: The American Experience* (Bloomsbury, London, 1999) pp. 3–4.