

Asserting Their Identity: Sectarian Rioting in Australia*

Introduction

In this era of rapid communication, barely a day passes when buzzwords such as ‘culture wars’, ‘identity politics’, ‘hate speech’, and ‘cancel culture’ do not appear in the news feeds on our devices. Often they are accompanied by opinion pieces with earnest predictions of the imminent demise of democracy.

Although such buzzwords are mostly the product of the late twentieth century they have only come into vogue in the past decade.¹ Yet, the lived experience which they denote has been with us ever since humans adopted forms of social organisation.

Psychological research shows that ‘selective pressures have sculpted human minds to be tribal’ and ‘that tribal bias is a natural and nearly ineradicable feature of human cognition and that no group—not even one’s own—is immune.’²

In this lecture I will look back to the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to examine instances of tribal or intergroup conflict under the rubric of sectarianism between Catholics, mostly of Irish descent, and Protestants, mostly of British descent. It was a struggle in which each side was asserting its identity within the new society then being formed in the south-west Pacific. Were such conflict to occur today, it would be described as ‘identity politics’ or a ‘culture war’.

Australia’s troubled past

Although Australia is generally, and rightly, regarded as a relatively stable country where civil disturbances are rare, it is also true that insurrections, rioting, and the breaking up of political meetings have been a feature of the country’s history from the founding of the penal colony at Sydney Cove in 1788. Insurrections such as the Castle Hill rebellion of 1804, the Rum Rebellion of 1808, the Eureka Stockade of 1854, and the anti-Chinese riots at Lambing Flat in 1860-61 are well known. There were also pitched battles between workers and police during industrial disputes such as the shearers’ strikes of the 1890s and the Melbourne police strike of 1923.³

Less well known is the spate of sectarian riots that occurred across the country in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. While stories of sectarian riots in Belfast, Liverpool, and Glasgow might come as no surprise, few would be aware that Australia too has a history of sectarian rioting. In fact, at least 20 such riots occurred between 1843 and 1922 across all six Australian colonies or states, some of them with fatal consequences.

¹ Karyn Amira and Alexander Abraham, ‘How the Media Uses the Phrase “Identity Politics”’, *PS: Political Science & Politics*, Vol 55 No. 4, 2022, pp. 677–681; Clyde McGrady, ‘The strange journey of “cancel,” from a Black-culture punchline to a White-grievance watchword’, *Washington Post*, 2 April 2021. The *Oxford English Dictionary* traces ‘identity politics’ to 1973 and ‘cancel culture’ to 2016 (<https://www.oed.com/search/dictionary>). Although ‘culture war’ was first recorded in 1875–80 as a loan translation of German *Kulturkampf*. The contemporary sense was first recorded in 1985–90’ (<https://www.dictionary.com/browse/culture-war>). ‘Hate speech’ may be older with the OED’s earliest evidence dating to 1938 (<https://www.oed.com/dictionary>).

² Cory J. Clark, et al, ‘Tribalism Is Human Nature’, *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, Vol. 28, No. 6, 2019, pp. 587-592.

³ For an overview of Australia’s tumultuous past see Peter N. Grabosky, *Sydney in Ferment: Crime, Dissent and Official Reaction 1788 to 1973*, Australian National University Press, Canberra, 1977.

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But first we need to consider what sectarianism means in the Australian context.⁴

Sectarianism Conflict in Australia

When the First Fleet arrived in Sydney Cove in 1788 it brought not only convicts and their gaolers but also the baggage of centuries of religious hostility and ethnic antagonism. This baggage was the product of more than 600 years of English domination of Ireland and 250 years of religious schism following Henry VIII's withdrawal of English Christianity from the jurisdiction of Rome. As a result, Britain became predominantly Protestant, while Ireland largely remained Catholic. The combination of racial and religious difference between the Irish and the British was a potent mix that led to a series of wars and civil disturbances in both Ireland and Britain.

For the purposes of this lecture, the two most significant of these was the Battle of the Boyne in 1690 and the Battle of the Diamond in 1795. The first occurred in County Meath about 50 kilometres north of Dublin, when the Protestant king William III, formerly Prince William of Orange, whom parliament in 1689 had proclaimed king of England, defeated the deposed Catholic king James II. William's victory ensured Protestant hegemony in both Britain and Ireland. It was a hegemony reinforced by penal laws that would last into the nineteenth century.⁵

The so-called Battle of the Diamond was a sectarian affray near Loughgall in County Armagh, in which the Protestant Peep o' Day Boys beat off members of a Catholic association known as the Defenders, leading to the establishment of the Loyal Orange Institution, also known as the Orange order. Named in honour of William III, the order's members pledged themselves to support the Protestant ascendancy, to oppose the fatal errors and doctrines of the church of Rome, and to resist the extension of the Catholic church's temporal power. From the 1840s Protestant Irishmen from the north of Ireland formed Orange lodges in the Australian colonies and each year on the Twelfth of July Orangemen would celebrate the anniversary of the Battle of the Boyne.⁶

Sectarianism imported into Australia

Following the founding of the colony at Sydney Cove, it was not long before the antagonisms of the old world took root in the soil of the new. Reverend Samuel Marsden, an English-born magistrate known as 'the flogging parson', regarded the Irish as 'the most wild, ignorant and savage race that were ever favoured with the light of salvation'. Marsden's stereotype took hold in the colony, where the Irish were often scorned as stupid, lazy, rebellious drunkards and depicted in cartoon form with monkey-like

⁴ For a discussion of sectarianism in Australia see Michael Hogan, *The Sectarian Strand: Religion in Australian History*, Penguin, Melbourne, 1987; Jeff Kildea, *Tearing the Fabric: Sectarianism in Australia 1910-1925*, Citadel Books, Sydney, 2002; Malcolm Campbell, 'Bigotry: An Australian History', *Australasian Journal of Irish Studies*, Vol. 21, 2021, pp. 75-89; Mark Lyons, 'Aspects of Sectarianism in New South Wales Circa 1865 to 1880', PhD Thesis, Australian National University, 1972.

⁵ John Childs, *The Williamite Wars in Ireland, 1688-1691*, Humbledon Continuum, London, 2007, pp. 205-225; Charles Ivar McGrath, 'Securing the Protestant Interest: The Origins and Purpose of the Penal Laws of 1695', *Irish Historical Studies*, Vol. 30, No. 117, 1996, pp. 25-46.

⁶ Jim Smyth, 'The Men of No Popery: The Origins of the Orange Order', *History Ireland*, Vol. 3, No. 3, 1995, pp. 48-53; Loyal Orange Institution of N.S.W., *Early History of the Loyal Orange Institution N.S.W.*, Grand Lodge of New South Wales, Sydney, 1926. Although the Orange order in Australia initially comprised Ulster Protestants, this changed during the century with increasing British membership even though Orange celebrations continued to concentrate on Irish historical events such as the Siege of Derry and the Battle of the Boyne.

features.⁷ Another antagonist of Australia's Irish Catholics was the Presbyterian Reverend John Dunmore Lang. Concerned at the influx of Irish Catholic immigrants under the government's assisted immigration scheme, Lang published in 1841 a pamphlet entitled 'The Question of Questions! or, Is this Colony to be transformed into a Province of the Popedom?', in which he warned that the colony was being swamped by 'the shoals of Roman Catholic immigrants that are now pouring in upon us from the south and west of Ireland'.⁸

He was not the only one to be concerned. As in our day, immigration was then a hot-button issue. In 1840 the *Sydney Herald* told its readers 'this Colony is flooded with ignorant and unskilful Irish Roman Catholics'.⁹ Later it warned them:

[I]n the course of a few years, the aggregation [of Papists] may be made to outnumber the members of the Church of England, and that the overthrow of the Protestant Constitution, as well as the exercise of Protestant Worship, must be the eventual catastrophe. The question is whether we shall permit the Romish power to prosper and prevail, and to annihilate the Church of England. Sweeping before it at the same time every class of Protestants also.¹⁰

What raised their concerns was the disproportionate number of Irish arriving under the government's assisted immigration scheme. Between 1837 and 1850, 49 per cent of assisted immigrants arriving in the colony were Irish, the vast majority being Catholics.¹¹

Through the nineteenth century the Irish made up between a quarter and a third of immigrants to the Australian colonies. Of utmost concern was that the Irish were mostly Catholics and Catholics were mostly Irish by birth or descent so that Catholics were about a quarter of the population – a sizeable minority. But a word of caution. While it is broadly true that in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Australia to be Catholic was to be Irish and to be Irish was to be Catholic, it is nevertheless a generalisation.¹²

Causes of Sectarian Conflict

In his 1972 PhD thesis, historian Mark Lyons argued, 'Catholics were very largely responsible for bringing hostility upon themselves. Much of that hostility was a reaction against Catholic sectarianism, rather than the expression of an anti-Catholic predisposition'. To Lyons, Australia was a new world in which there emerged 'a broad

⁷ Dianne Hall, 'Now Him White Man': Images of the Irish in Colonial Australia', *History Australia*, Vol. 11, No. 2, 2014, pp. 167-195

⁸ John Dunmore Lang, *The Question of Questions! or, Is This Colony to be Transformed Into a Province of the Popedom?*, J. Tegg and Co., Sydney, 1841, p. 15. In 1847 Lang published another pamphlet, *Popery in Australia and the southern hemisphere, and how to check it effectually*, Thomas Constable, Edinburgh, 1847.

⁹ *Sydney Herald* 31 August 1840, p. 2.

¹⁰ *Sydney Herald* 21 September 1840, p. 3.

¹¹ Robert J. Shultz, 'The Assisted Immigrants, 1837-1850: A Study of Some Aspects of the Characteristics and Origins of the Immigrants Assisted to New South Wales and the Port Phillip District, 1837-1850', PhD Thesis, Australian National University, 1971, pp. 279-280.

¹² Between 80 and 85 per cent of Irish emigrants to Australia were Catholics (David Fitzpatrick, *Oceans of Consolation: Personal Accounts of Irish Migration to Australia*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca (NY), 1994, p. 14; Oliver MacDonagh, 'Emigration from Ireland to Australia: an Overview' in Colm Kiernan (ed.), *Australia and Ireland 1788-1988: Bicentenary Essays*, Gill and MacMillan, Dublin, 1986, pp. 121-137, p. 132). See also, Richard Reid, *Farewell My Children: Irish Assisted Emigration to Australia, 1848-1870*, Anchor Books Australia, Spit Junction, NSW, 2011

liberal movement with a clear vision of a harmonious colonial society' including an important anti-sectarian strand. He charged that 'whatever conflict existed was largely a consequence of the rejection by Catholics of a social milieu that positively sought their assimilation and eschewed the bigotries of the old world'.¹³

Recent research has tended to support an alternative view. Historian Geraldine Vaughan has marshalled much of that research in a recent book on anti-Catholicism in Britain, Canada, and Australia.¹⁴ Unlike Lyons, who regarded anti-Catholicism in Australia as the product of Catholic rejection of the anti-sectarian olive branch of colonial liberalism, Vaughan argues that anti-Catholicism was 'a multi-faceted phenomenon with theological, political, social and economic dimensions' that existed throughout the British empire because of an association between Protestantism and British identity. In other words, she contends: 'Catholics and their Church were rejected on account of their un-Britishness'.¹⁵ Vaughan also contends that Protestant anti-Catholicism increased through the nineteenth century as a reaction to growing Catholic assertiveness following the Catholic Emancipation Act of 1829.¹⁶ That act had repealed most of the remaining penal laws that had been enacted after 1690, most significantly the laws that had prevented Catholics from becoming members of parliament or holding high office in government and the judiciary. As a result of their new status, Catholics in Britain and Ireland exhibited a resurgence in the political, social, and economic life of the country. As historian Neil Maddox notes:

Emboldened by their success, ... the Catholic population would no longer accept their position as the subject caste of Irish society. Over the course of the century, privileges that Protestants had hitherto taken for granted were torn away, one by one'.¹⁷

This stoked Protestant fears of a Roman threat to the British constitution and to the Protestant state enshrined in the Act of Settlement of 1701.

In Australia, too, Protestants found cause for alarm. Fear of Irish insurrection was not far from Protestant concerns in the Australian colonies. During the Castle Hill rebellion of 1804 some 200 convicts, mostly Irish, many of whom were transported for their part in the 1798 rising, attempted to march on Parramatta and Sydney. Many of the miners at the Eureka Stockade were Irish and their leader Peter Lalor was the brother of James Fintan Lalor, one of the Young Ireland rebels. In the 1860s the rise of revolutionary fenianism in Ireland and amongst the Irish diaspora in the United States became a source of concern in Australia. This was especially so after self-confessed fenian Henry James O'Farrell attempted in 1868 to assassinate Prince Alfred at Clontarf on Sydney's Middle Harbour. The 'fenian scare' was as real to nineteenth-century Australians as the

¹³ Mark Lyons, 'Aspects of Sectarianism in New South Wales Circa 1865 to 1880', PhD Thesis, Australian National University, 1972, pp. viii-x.

¹⁴ Geraldine Vaughan, *Anti-Catholicism and British Identities in Britain, Canada and Australia, 1880s-1920s*, Palgrave Macmillan, Cham (Switzerland), 2022.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 5, 6, 15-16, 17.

¹⁶ *An Act for the relief of His Majesty's Roman Catholic subjects* (10 Geo. 4. c. 7).

¹⁷ Neil P. Maddox, "A Melancholy Record": The Story of the Nineteenth-Century Irish Party Processions Acts', *Irish Jurist*, Vol. 39, 2004, pp. 242-273, p. 242. Maddox also observed: 'The formation of the Orange Order and the celebration of July 12 by parading provided an outlet for an increasingly isolated and threatened class to express its cultural identity, to assert its opposition to the reforming zeal of Parliament and to mount political campaigns against the erosion of Protestant freedoms' (pp. 242-243).

fear of Islamic terrorism is to twenty-first-century Australians after September 11 and the Bali bombing.

Sectarian rioting in Australia

It is against this background that we now turn to look at the sectarian riots that challenged Australia's social harmony in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As mentioned, at least 20 sectarian riots occurred between 1843 and 1922 across all six Australian colonies or states, some of them with fatal consequences. For the most part, those sectarian riots occurred in the context of Catholics of Irish descent reacting to what they regarded as provocations either by Orangemen celebrating the anniversary of William III's victory at the Battle of the Boyne or by ultra-Protestant preachers denigrating in public the beliefs and practices of the Catholic church.¹⁸

Orangemen celebrating William III's victory at the Boyne

I will now look at a few examples of the first type, which usually involved the display of banners depicting William III crossing the Boyne. To many Irish Catholics this was a provocative act. As the *Leader* newspaper explained:

To Catholic Irishmen the picture has a deep and bitter significance... The figure of William crossing the Boyne means to Irishman the final establishment of English domination, civil and religious; the beginning of a long period of cruel oppression on account of religious opinions.¹⁹

The first example concerns a clash that took place in Melbourne on Monday 13 July 1846 outside the Pastoral Hotel in the city centre when Orangemen preparing to hold their Twelfth of July dinner unfurled from the hotel's window a banner depicting William III crossing the Boyne.²⁰ After the banner was unfurled a large crowd began to assemble in the street outside the hotel. With hooting and jeering, the crowd demanded the removal of the banner. Then some young men started pelting it with stones. Others tried to enter the building. The Orangemen retaliated by firing on the crowd from the hotel, wounding several onlookers. The police intervened and arrested many on both sides.²¹

A similar event occurred 21 years later. During celebrations marking Prince Alfred's visit to Melbourne in November 1867, an image of William III crossing the Boyne was displayed on the Protestant Hall in Stephen Street (now Exhibition Street). This prompted stone throwing and jeering, which were followed by shots fired from the building into the crowd, wounding several onlookers, including a 13-year-old boy, who died a fortnight later of his wounds. Ironically, the boy was an English-born Protestant.²²

In 1897 at Coolgardie and in 1901 at Boulder, both being towns in the goldfields of Western Australia, parades of Orangemen celebrating the Twelfth of July were attacked

¹⁸ Of the twenty sectarian riots, thirteen were of the latter type, six were of the former, and one was related to the 1843 elections for the Legislative Council. A summary of each is provided in the Appendix.

¹⁹ *Leader* 30 November 1867, p. 17.

²⁰ *Melbourne Argus* 14 July 1846, p. 2; 24 July 1846, p. 4; *Port Phillip Patriot* 14 July 1846, p. 3; *Port Phillip Gazette* 15 July 1846, p. 3.

²¹ *Port Phillip Gazette* 15 August 1846, p. 2.

²² *Age* 28 November 1867, p. 5; 6 December 1867, p. 5; *Argus* 28 November 1867, p. 5; 6 December 1867, p. 4.

by mobs of Irish Catholics wielding hurley sticks resulting in both cases in a general mêlée.

Ultra-Protestant preachers denigrating Catholicism

The second type of provocation leading to sectarian rioting was ultra-Protestant preachers publicly denigrating the beliefs and practices of the Catholic church. There are several examples of this, including: in 1860 at Maitland, where a Presbyterian minister Reverend William McIntyre was prevented by a violent mob of Irish Catholics from delivering a lecture on 'The Heathenism of Popery';²³ in 1866 in Sydney, where in what the newspapers called 'the Battle of York Street', a mob broke up a lecture by another Scottish-born Presbyterian minister and Orangeman Reverend John McGibbon in which he identified the Catholic church as the Antichrist in scripture;²⁴ in 1874 in Ipswich, Queensland, where a public lecture on Martin Luther by Irish-born Wesleyan minister and Orangeman Reverend David Porteus was broken up by a mob which then rampaged through the nearby streets.²⁵ The list goes on into the early twentieth century.

Asserting their identity

During the nineteenth century the Catholic Irish shared the vision of a harmonious colonial society freed from the bigotries of the old world. But what they sought was integration into that society not assimilation. They resisted the pressure to conform to Englishness so as to retain their identity, particularly as expressed through their adherence to the Catholic religion. When they felt insulted by Orangemen flaunting their national humiliation on the anniversary of the Battle of the Boyne or were offended by ultra-Protestant preachers denigrating their religious beliefs and practices, some reacted violently. While we rightly condemn the rioters and criticise those who provoked them, what emerged from this dialectic of sectarian conflict was a new identity that was uniquely Australian. As Patrick O'Farrell observed, 'The distinctive Australian identity was not born in the bush, nor at Anzac Cove: these were merely situations for its expression. No; it was born in Irishness protesting against the extremes of Englishness'.²⁶

Sectarianism between Catholics and Protestants, has all but disappeared from Australian society. Images of William III no longer have 'a deep and bitter significance' for Australians of Irish descent and terms such as 'the Heathenism of Popery' and 'Antichrist' are no longer hurled at Catholics. Even so, offensive or injurious language, which we now call 'hate speech', continues to exist in Australia, although it is now largely directed at people of other identities, sometimes with results similar to those I have discussed in this paper.²⁷ As the author of *Ecclesiastes* states, 'What has been will be again, what has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun'.²⁸

Thus, there is utility in examining how our forebears faced the challenges of sectarian conflict, just as we in our day struggle to meet the challenges of intergroup conflict that we now call 'culture wars' and 'identity politics'.

²³ *Empire* 31 March 1860, p. 5; *Northern Times* 31 March 1860, p. 2.

²⁴ *Empire* 24 August 1866, p. 5; 25 August 1866, p. 4. The Antichrist is referred to in 1 John 2:18-22; 4:1-6 and 2 John 1:7-11.

²⁵ *Brisbane Courier* 7 November 1874, p. 4; *Queensland Times* 7 November 1874, p. 5.

²⁶ Patrick O'Farrell, *The Irish in Australia*, New South Wales University Press, Kensington, 1993, p. 12.

²⁷ 'Sydney anti-Islam film protests', https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sydney_anti-Islam_film_protests.

²⁸ *Ecclesiastes* 1:9.