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Ritual and Violence in the Rhetoric of Ulster Orangeism

Sectarian rhetoric in Ulster is by no means a new development. Since the foundation of the Orange Order in 1795, its primary goal has been to preserve the Protestant identity and authority in Ireland in opposition to an overwhelming Catholic majority. Though the Home Rule movement did, in effect, catalyze the unification of a formerly-stratified Ulster Protestant population, the period which followed—albeit more violent and volatile—witnessed a rise in the centrality of Orange rhetoric to Ulster Protestant identity, especially in the face of the First World War, the Irish War of Independence, and the partition of the north. Thus, Ulster Protestants participated—and to a lesser extent still participate—in an imagined community in which the expression of national, religious, and social identities relies heavily upon ritual, symbolism, and the invocation of the past to counter Nationalism and Republicanism during and following the Irish independence movement. Yet there existed—and one could certainly argue there still exists—an inherent violence and antagonism within modern Orange rhetoric, ritual, and symbolism. Between Orange songs, language, and debates over marching routes which continue to this day, modern Orangeism draws heavily upon a deeply-rooted culture of struggle, defense, and pride to establish itself as a legitimate expression of the identity of a population which often considers itself marginalized and under constant threat of Republicanism and Nationalism. This paper will show that this expression, drawing upon these cultural preconditions, is inherently violent in and of itself, despite the constant insistence that Orangeism serves to protect, rather than to antagonize.

Irish sectarianism is an intriguing subject for a number of reasons. Primarily, the Protestant-Catholic divide in Northern Ireland resulted in a deadly guerrilla war, known as the Troubles, which ravaged the country for thirty years during the latter half of the twentieth century. Interestingly but perhaps unsurprisingly, the historiography of modern Irish sectarianism can be highly sectarian in and of itself, often inadvertently drawing upon perhaps unavoidable biases with regard to this particular issue which has so drastically influenced modern Irish society. This condition is precisely that which makes the study of Irish history so interesting, but it also requires the historian of modern Ireland to exercise significant caution when conducting an analysis of such a controversial subject.

In order to understand Orange rhetoric and ritual, one must first understand the historical grounds on which societies such as the Orange Order justify their existence. The Orange Order was founded in 1795, and Jim Smyth provides an interesting commentary on the historiographical ramifications of the organization in comparison to the 1798 rebellion. Smyth notes that the Order “has not attracted the same level of scholarly attention” as many of the contemporaneous nationalist movements—a historiographical dearth which “may be explained by the sheer scale of the radical movement. The United Irishmen mounted a more formidable challenge to the government than either its English or Scottish counterparts, while inversely Irish popular loyalism, mobilized by the Orange Societies, never achieved...nationwide support”.¹ Smyth’s comparison of the Orange societies and the United Irishmen is an apt one. Although the Orange movement never achieved the same popularity and support, it persisted—and persists—nonetheless. Smyth argues that despite the fact that the Orange movement of the late eighteenth century paralleled other British Loyalist movements in many ways, “its roots lay deep in the

Ulster countryside”.² That is to say, there was and is something decidedly different about Orange Loyalism in Ulster, a difference which Smyth attributes to the environment in which the movement was born. Founded in Armagh, the Orange Order was “forged in the crucible of sectarian conflict”, which, for Smyth, was “a microcosm of late eighteenth-century Ireland. Each of the three major religious denominations were represented there in roughly equal proportions... each confessional group had a corresponding ethnic identity...and each was present to some degree in all ares of the county”.³ This uniquely diverse region provided the conditions required for the Orange movement to take hold, as “County Armagh experienced a period of escalated tension, resulting in a series of violent confrontations between the Protestant ‘Peep O’ Day Boys’ and the Catholic ‘Defenders’. After one prolonged clash, which has become known as the ‘Battle of the Diamond’, a hamlet near the village of Loughall, Protestants responded by founding a collective secret organization”.⁴ James McAuley and Jonathan Tonge draw upon Smyth to illustrate the development of the Orange Order, which they claim to have been out of necessity rather than any less essential narrative of origin. That is, the Order was formed using Williamite imagery to re-establish Anglo-Irish Protestant authority in contrast to the aims of such revolutionary groups as the United Irishmen— rooting its very genesis in what Orangemen perceive to be the final reaffirmation of their position in Irish society: the Battle of the Boyne. With ritual based on freemasonry and a hierarchical organizational structure, paired a pronounced cultural detachment from the rest of Ireland, the Orange Order in many ways exists in largely the same form as it did in the late eighteenth century. This continuity is a crucial aspect of the Order’s rhetoric and ritual, as the organization has, even into modernity, consistently

preached the significance of its Williamite roots—despite the constantly-changing nature of the Irish socio-political environment.

Martin Forker points out that “members of the Orange Order arguably see themselves as ‘Israelites’, or as ‘God’s Chosen People’, defending their Promised Land against ‘heathens, foreigners and other villains”⁵. This is perhaps the cardinal tenet of Orangeism, and both this necessity for defense and this decided “chosen-ness” are certainly conveyed in music associated with the Orange Order. “Protestant Boys”, published in an 1848 edition of “The Standard Orange Song Book” and sung at Orange functions to this day, features lyrics quite indicative of the Order’s rhetoric of defense. The lyrics read: “Great spirit of William! from Heaven, look down, and breathe in our hearts our forefathers’ fire—teach us to rival their glorious renown, from Papist or Frenchman ne’er to retire. Jacobine—Jacobite—Against all to unite, who dare to assail our Sovereign’s throne, For *Orange and Blue* will be faithful and true, and *Protestant loyalty* ever be shewn”⁶. This excerpt quite explicitly highlights what Forker calls the Ulster Protestant “descent myth”—a narrative which “inextricably connects the ethnic to a particular territory”⁷. He continues to argue that a “usable past is vital in reviving nationalism among the masses”⁸. By grounding the songs of the Order in the events which transpired along the River Boyne in 1690, Orangemen are able to understand themselves within the scope of an imagined community, descended from the Williamites, struggling against the modern Catholic “Jacobites” intent on challenging their Protestant authority.

It is certainly the case that music is a critical aspect of the Orange identity. While common songs such as “Protestant Boys” are sung at Orange functions and demonstrations quite frequently, the musical tradition for which Orangemen are perhaps most known is that of the

Protestant marching band. On this point, Katy Radford argues that “although during Orange parades, bands are not permitted to wear uniforms that denote direct associations with paramilitary bodies, there is little prescription of the music they play, and the ambiguous associations attached to particular tunes are often perceived and interpreted as threatening. To an audience of insiders the repertoire can denote allegiance to one paramilitary group or another”.⁹ That is to say, although Orange marching bands are not technically allowed to present themselves in a manner which suggests an affiliation with one of the many paramilitary groups responsible for the violence during the Troubles, the musical repertoire itself (which features no lyrics to which opposing factions can object) is strongly connected to sectarianism and violence. Radford continues to explain that “to outsiders the repertoire can be heard as being comprised primarily of songs lauding battles, skirmishes and sectarian sacrifice. This reveals a tendency in the cultural practices of Protestant and Catholic traditions in the North of Ireland to conflate historical battles with contemporary incursions and to publicly commemorate losses and victories, much to the chagrin of the other group”.¹⁰ Radford’s commentary relates directly to Orange tendencies mentioned earlier, the most significant of which being the necessity of Orange rhetoric to be heavily grounded in the past—most notably, past military victories in which Protestants banded together and defeated Catholics; usually violently and ruthlessly.

The militaristic quality of the Protestant marching band is not a coincidence. It is inseparably tied to the military drilling which became so prevalent in Orange lodges of the early twentieth century. Timothy Bowman argues that the “UVF itself largely grew out of the Orange Order and the Unionist Clubs, which had started to drill by March 1912”.¹¹ Drilling in Orange lodges, then, represents not only the Protestant necessity (as Protestants saw it) to organize

against the imminent threat of Catholic Nationalists, but also an inherent characteristic of Orange culture. Forker identifies the notion that “all social relationships in Northern Ireland are pervaded by a consciousness of religious dichotomy”, going so far as to claim that “violence is the heart and soul of the sacred”.¹² Given the fact that Orangemen drill and march under banners depicting biblical scenes, these demonstrations reflect not only feelings of religious righteousness and superiority, but also the ethicality—if not necessity—of committing acts of violence in the name of the Protestant faith. Once again, we see the common Orange narrative of religious defense and protection—a notion that is inherently violent in and of itself.

An analysis of Royal Irish Constabulary records from 1912 reveals just how prevalent Orange drilling actually was. Between January and April 1912, the total number of Orange lodges in Ulster in which military drilling was reported to have taken place was 119, totaling over 12,200 participants in demonstrations of military force.¹³ No drilling took place in Donegal or Monaghan, with the vast majority occurring in Antrim, Armagh, Tyrone, and Belfast—supporting the notion that Orangeism was most influential in the northeastern region of Ulster, in which Protestantism had a stronger and more deeply-rooted foothold.

The qualifications of an Orangeman have changed little throughout the two centuries of the Order’s existence. For example, the City of Londonderry Grand Orange Lodge has published the standards to which its members must adhere: “An Orangeman should have a sincere love and veneration for his Heavenly Father...He should cultivate truth and justice, brotherly kindness and charity, devotion and piety, concord and unity, and obedience to the laws...he should love, uphold, and defend the Protestant religion... he should strenuously oppose the fatal errors and doctrines of the Church of Rome, and scrupulously avoid countenancing (by his presence or

otherwise) any act or ceremony of Popish Worship...the glory of God and the welfare of man, the honour of his Sovereign, and the good of his country, should be the motives of his actions".¹⁴ The entire statement is much longer, yet in this excerpt we are able to observe the central tenets of the Orange Order—faith, obedience to the law, and opposition to “the fatal errors and doctrines of the Church of Rome”. The fact that the modern Order uses the word “Popish” to describe Catholicism is indeed indicative of the violence contained within Orange rhetoric. While true, physical violence may not be encouraged per se, there still exists an inherent rhetorical violence which is just as significant within a society attempting to recover from decades—and in fact centuries—of debilitating sectarian conflict.

It is becoming apparent that Orange “violence” does not purely and singularly apply to the physical, military violence often associated with paramilitary groups such as the UVF. Occupying positions of authority, as Protestants did and still do in Northern Ireland, Orangemen were able to use their influence to limit the freedoms of expression of northern Catholics. On this, Ronnie Munck argues that “while the nationalist symbols of the 1916 Easter Rising were made illegal, the Unionist rituals of affirmation, such as the Twelfth of July Orange parades and marches, were promoted regardless of their overt sectarian content”.¹⁵ Munck does note the “overwhelming impression of physical force being used to maintain segregation and contain any Catholic spark of rebellion”¹⁶, and it is certainly the case that there is a strong element of physical violence to Orange rhetoric and policy. But what is almost more interesting—and perhaps more dangerous—is the subtlety of the violent rhetoric of Orangeism which continues to this day. It is the combination of militaristic ritual with the inherent violence of Orange rhetoric

and values which complicates Protestant claims of cultural defense, purity, righteousness, and victimhood in the face of perceived Catholic aggression.

Useful insight can be garnered from the analysis of articles found in the now-defunct *Fortnight*, a politics and culture magazine published in Belfast between 1970 and 2012. While not a scholarly journal by any means, its past contributors include many important Irish political and academic figures, and its articles can serve as unique primary source documents from the Troubles period. In a 1984 article entitled *The Dark Side of the Marching Protestants*, Ken Heskin asks: “what are the reasons why so many Protestants in Ulster behave in ways that mimic the behavior of military personnel?”¹⁷ His answer is largely rooted in psychology, as he makes the claim that the Catholic Church has a substantial hold on the beliefs and identities of its practicing members in Ireland. Conversely, for their Protestant counterparts, “the situation is radically different. First, we are not dealing with a single authoritative voice, but rather with a variety of authorities, often conflicting to a very high degree in their specific beliefs and in the form of their church structure and religious practice”¹⁸. Sociologically and psychologically speaking, Heskin identifies a sort of unifying morality idea for Irish Protestants which he deems to have a distinct “do it yourself” quality.¹⁹ This is an interesting phenomenon in the development of decidedly violent Orange ritual, which Heskin argues was not always present in Orange rhetoric. He identifies a period when the Order “demanded little more of its members than bodily support of the traditional ritual gatherings and public parades”²⁰, and juxtaposes the organization’s allegedly less-violent history with its current antagonistic spirit.

This reflects a very real evolution in the nature and indeed the purpose of Orange rhetoric in Ulster. Writing in the mid-1980s, Heskin continues: “Things are very different now however.

The facade of political harmony has been irrevocably shattered in the Unionist camp and the Orange Order, being ideologically as empty as a Lambeg drum, cannot contain both religious and political differences. Like its members, it is all dressed up but has nowhere to go”.²¹

Obviously, this is not the perspective of an Orangeman, or even an objective observer. Heskin’s 1984 perspective, though, is an invaluable resource in the attempt to understand the nature of Orange rhetoric during the Troubles and the violence contained therein. When he calls the Orange Order “ideologically empty”, he portrays it as a paramilitary organization struggling not only to find its place within a divided Irish society, but within a divided Protestant society as well. As it cannot attain its religious and political “values”, the Order, in Heskin’s opinion, deteriorates into meaningless and senseless violent rhetoric aimed at the far more unified Catholics. This is not to say that Orange rhetoric of the centuries prior to the twentieth was not violent—it most certainly was. Yet the violence of the twentieth century and its consequential sectarianism clearly indicates that the rhetoric and ritual of the Orange Order has disguised its own disunity by way of overtly anti-Catholic and increasingly violent imagery.

The Orange Order is a unique organization borne out of unique circumstances. As such, its rhetoric and its ritual reflect the age-old struggle between Irish Protestants and Catholics, as well as the more modern aspects of Irish society which led to the Troubles of the 1960s through the 1990s. The Order’s parades, namely the twelfth of July celebrations commemorating the Williamite victory at the Boyne, are perhaps the defining expressions of the organization’s values. Heskin has observed that “parades and military-style activities are a much more important feature of life for Protestants in Ulster than is the case for any group anywhere else in the Western world”.²² Orange military drilling began to represent an arms race of sorts in the

North of Ireland from the beginning of the twentieth century, as both Protestants and Catholics prepared for what appeared to be inevitable conflict during the Home Rule movement.

Generalizations aside, there can be no denying the significance of drilling and marching to the Orange Order, a practice directly linked to the very purpose of the Order's existence: to protect Ulster Protestants from the threat of Catholic insurgency. Rooted in Ulster Protestant history, the Order uses historical images and commemorations to not only affirm Protestant authority in Ireland, but also to justify the religious superiority of Protestants over Catholics. Orangemen believe themselves to be chosen by God to occupy Ulster, and they march under banners depicting Biblical scenes which are intended to exhibit their primacy. Rhetoric of Catholic inferiority continues to this day, as evident by the aforementioned *Qualifications of an Orangeman* from the Grand Orange Lodge of the City of Londonderry. While images of military violence have certainly made their way into the rhetoric and ritual of the Orange Order, it is not this imagery which represents the deeper, more nuanced, violence that is the subject of this paper. Rather, the very existence of the Order depends upon a Catholic enemy against which Protestants must defend themselves and their place in Irish society. Without the ambiguous, faceless foe known as "Popery", the Order's rhetorical effectiveness as a unifying institution for Ulster Protestants loses much—if not all—of its potency. The Orange Order is an organization at the center of which lies sectarianism and prejudice. Its insistence on grounding itself in Irish Protestant history—namely Protestant assertion or reassertion of authority over Catholics—has resulted in a continual reluctance to accept Catholicism as legitimate. The Order proclaims the necessity of the defense of the Protestant faith and identity, yet defends its identity by attacking

what has historically been a marginalized Catholic minority in an inherently antagonistic and violent way.

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- 1 Jim Smyth, "The Men of No Popery: The Origins of the Orange Order." *History Ireland* 3, no. 3 (1995): pp. 49.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 James W. McAuley and Jonathan Tonge, "'For God and for the Crown': Contemporary Political and Social Attitudes among Orange Order Members in Northern Ireland." *Political Psychology* 28, no. 1 (2007): pp. 36.
- 5 Martin Forker, "The Role of Symbolism, Ritual, and Metaphor in the Orange Order." *Journal of Irish Studies* 28 (2013): pp. 68-69.
- 6 "Protestant Boys", *The Standard Orange song book : a collection of loyal & constitutional songs, original and select*, 1848, p. 28-29.
- 7 Martin Forker, "The Role of Symbolism, Ritual, and Metaphor in the Orange Order.", pp. 69.
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 Katy Radford, "Drum Rolls and Gender Roles in Protestant Marching Bands in Belfast." *British Journal of Ethnomusicology* 10, no. 2 (2001): pp. 38.
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 Timothy Bowman, "The Ulster Volunteers 1913-1914: Force or Farce?" *History Ireland* 10, no. 1 (2002): pp. 43.
- 12 Martin Forker, "The Role of Symbolism, Ritual, and Metaphor in the Orange Order.", pp. 69-70.
- 13 Irish Government Police Reports, 1914-1921 (CO 904, Boxes 92-122 And 148-156A). Public Records Office, London, England. January- April 1912 CO 904/86; Reports: Police Reports: Inspector General's And County Inspectors' Monthly Confidential Reports.
- 14 *Qualifications of an Orangeman*, the City of Londonderry Grand Orange Lodge.
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- 16 Ibid.
- 17 Ken Heskin, "The Dark Side of the Marching Protestants." *Fortnight*, no. 206 (1984): 10.
- 18 Ibid.
- 19 Ibid.
- 20 Ken Heskin, "The Dark Side of the Marching Protestants.", 11.
- 21 Ibid.
- 22 Ken Heskin, "The Dark Side of the Marching Protestants.", pp. 10.