



**DAYS  
OF  
THE  
BLACKTHORN**

**FACTION FIGHTERS  
OF KERRY**

**SEÁN MORAGHAN**

# PREFACE

In a study of homicide in nineteenth-century Ireland, it was observed that faction fighting has received surprisingly little attention from historians.<sup>1</sup> This for a phenomenon that lasted for over 200 years, involving gangs of men attacking each other heartily with various cudgels, sticks, reaping hooks and sometimes guns. Similarly, only a single analysis of the activity was undertaken while it was actually occurring.<sup>2</sup> Regarded as an embarrassment by nationalist Ireland both before and after independence, this practice was rarely discussed afterwards.

The present volume is the first county-level survey of faction fighting. Kerry had a strong reputation for the practice, perhaps second in Munster only to Tipperary. The county featured several long-lived factions, as well as one of the most infamous fights ever – the clash at Ballyeagh strand in 1834.

Information about faction activity in the county is not bountiful, but enough exists to give us a sense of who fought where and, occasionally, why. Reports on fights and factions have been drawn mostly from local newspapers, chiefly *The Kerry Evening Post*, the *Tralee Mercury* and *The Tralee Chronicle*. It is important to stress, however, that the fights reported by newspapers are not likely to constitute a comprehensive record of the incidents. Many of the fights occurred in what was still, in the nineteenth century, the obscurity of the wilds of Iveragh or the Dingle peninsula, far from the press rooms of Tralee. Faction fights in which no participants were injured or killed, or

## PREFACE

which were otherwise unremarkable, are also likely to have been considered unworthy of print. Moreover, a dearth of surviving copies of Kerry newspapers from the earliest decades of the 1800s, as well as from the late eighteenth century, leaves the records incomplete. In addition, accounts of court proceedings that mentioned men charged or convicted for assaults at fairs or for riotous assembly often left out any details that would confirm that their cases had to do with faction fighting.

The fights featured here might best be considered as representative of a much wider spread of such events. Molahiffe fair, for example, already had a reputation for hosting faction fights by 1840, one which was commented on again in 1873, yet that reputation is unlikely to have arisen on the basis of just fifteen reports that appeared in the press over the decades. Similarly, the mere six newspaper accounts of fights in Castleisland hardly tally with the claim made in 1846 that the town hosted gangs that had been established since the 1740s or 1760s, or with the testimony of folklore that states that two particular parties fought each other at every fair held in the town.

Press sources have been supplemented with eyewitness tales presented by contemporary writers, particularly foreign travellers, which regularly provide a more visceral sense of the activity than the bare facts in news items, or in press accounts of court cases. Songs, ballads, poems and a little fiction have also been quoted, wherever possible, to give an impression of how factions and fighters were viewed by contemporaries. More importantly, much use has been made of the material housed in the National Folklore Collection; it is mostly due to that trove that we know anything about factions such as the Casúraigh of

Mastergeehy, or anything remotely personal about some of the most famous Kerry fighters.

‘Partly because of their alleged primitivism, factions have been largely ignored by sober, cultured academics,’ it has been said. Here, however, is a glimpse into their once infamous and semi-heroic milieu, into what has been characterised as their ‘vengeful, brutal, drunken, petty world’.<sup>3</sup>

## INTRODUCTION

# THE CURIOUS PHENOMENON OF FACTION FIGHTING

'Nearly every village forms a kind of faction, which has a soubriquet. Factions that began nobody knows when and continue nobody knows why.'

Alexis de Tocqueville, 1835<sup>1</sup>

On town streets or in green fields, at fairs and race meetings, on Sundays and saints' patron days, rival gangs of Irishmen used to meet to battle and beat each other with cudgels and sticks. Tens, hundreds, and on rare occasions, thousands of people might take part. Skill and brutality, bravery and blackguardism were displayed. Magistrates, policemen and clergymen waded into the crowds of fighters in often vain attempts to thwart these encounters, sometimes at a cost to themselves. Fighters risked terrible injuries and sometimes death, while arrested participants faced jail sentences, fines or transportation to Australia. The practice, which appears to have taken place from the 1600s, flourished most visibly during the early 1800s, and lingered on in isolated episodes until the turn of the century. Here was a phenomenon which spanned at least 200 years of Irish life, which puzzled visitors, appalled or entertained Irish commentators, and confounded the civil and clerical authorities.

With a somewhat different emphasis, Sir Jonah Barrington, a former member of the Irish parliament, in 1809 commented of the Irish peasantry:

Battle is their pastime: whole parishes and districts form themselves into parties, which they denominate factions; they meet, by appointment, at their country fairs; there they quarrel without a cause, and fight without an object; and having indulged their propensity, and bound up their wounds, they return satisfied to their own homes generally without anger, and frequently in perfect friendship with each other.<sup>2</sup>

The factions often sported unusual names. In Tipperary there were the Caravats and the Shanavests, afterwards rebranded as the Three Year Olds and the Four Year Olds. The original name of the first group appears to have been derived from the fact that the men wore cravats, while that of their rivals arose from their wearing of old waistcoats (*sean bheisteanna*). In that county, too, were the Black Hens and the Magpies. Abbeyfeale, Co. Limerick, was the home of the Boccaghs ('the Beggarmen').<sup>3</sup> In Kerry, factions generally bore the surname of the most prominent, or founding, family of the faction, the only variations being the Cooleens and the Ballymacks of North Kerry, and the 'Poul-na-mucks' of Killarney, who instead carried the names of the districts associated with them.

Rural factions were run by farmers. 'Of what class in life are the leaders of those clans?', a parliamentary committee asked in 1824. 'They are generally farmers, or the sons of farmers,' replied a witness from Co. Cork.<sup>4</sup> In particular, they were the better off, what were later called 'strong', farmers. Those involved were 'well-

dressed, apparently wealthy', noted a judge in Limerick in 1878.<sup>5</sup> The factions of the Sullivans and the Riordans of Castlemaine were 'headed by the richest farmers on the banks of the Main', it was stated in 1845.<sup>6</sup> Another fighting family, the Foleys of Killorglin, were wealthy enough to buy out the ownership of their lands during the eighteenth century and lived in a fine Georgian farmhouse.<sup>7</sup> It was stated by a local historian in 1868, in relation to the factions of the Cooleens and the Lawlors:

Compared with the majority of the fighting men, the leaders were respectable; they were, for the most part, farmers, while the rank and file were tradesmen, farm-servants, and that great number who had a house of their own, however wretched the hut might be ... There were many others who were distinguished for personal bravery, but whose social standing did not warrant higher ranks than lieutenants and aide[s]-de-camp.<sup>8</sup>

The factions were usually comprised of a prominent local family and its extended kinship network, intermixed with a collection of neighbours, allies and associates who felt an attachment or loyalty to them, all fighting under a common moniker. 'Some farmers, according to their means and connections, could bring into the field from 200 to 1000 men, whenever their honor or that of their adherents was called into question,' noted a newspaper in 1845.<sup>9</sup>

Women also played their part. Typical interventions consisted of hectoring the opposition, cheering on their own party and supplying men with sticks and stones. Some women also fought. Thomas Reid, a Royal Navy surgeon from Co. Tyrone, visited Cahersiveen in 1822:

This happening to be the fair-day in the little town ... I went to see the country people assembled; and never did I see a village fair so crowded. ... In the course of the afternoon a battle took place, in which about a dozen persons of both sexes were engaged, and mauled one another without the least mercy. One man appeared to be an object of general hostility, and he defended himself with wonderful address; but the prowess of a woman vanquished him at last. This Amazon took off her apron, and enclosed in it a large angular stone, and winding this terrific catapult two or three times round her head, she then let fly at the head of her towering antagonist, still holding the ends of the apron in both her hands. The blow brought him to the ground streaming with blood; it was not necessary to repeat it; he lay along as senseless as a log.<sup>10</sup>

Natives and visitors alike have left us portraits of the gangs' fighting scenes. Barrington recalled regularly attending a fair in Queen's County (later Co. Laois) 'solely in order to see the fight which was sure to conclude it'.<sup>11</sup>

To this fair resorted sundry factions, as they were termed – a *faction* consisting of one or two parishes, baronies or town-lands, that were very good friends in small parties or individually, but had a prescriptive deadly hatred to each other at all great meetings, fairs, returns from alehouses ...

Their weapon was almost exclusively an oaken cudgel ... The friends and neighbours of the pugnacious factions, always in bodies, joined more or less warmly in the fray. In truth, it would be totally impossible to keep an Irish peasant, man or woman (if *the drop* was in), from joining in any battle going merrily on ... Two hours, or thereabouts, was considered as a decent period for a beating-match ...

## THE CURIOUS PHENOMENON OF FACTION FIGHTING

Sometimes one faction had clearly the best of it; then they ran away in their turn, for there was no determined stand made by any party – so that their alternate advancing, retreating, running away, and rallying, were productive of huge diversion.<sup>12</sup>

In North Kerry, an army officer, seemingly an Englishman, had a close encounter with a fight between two unnamed factions in 1827:

I suddenly found myself surrounded by a host of combatants, who, at that instant, commenced operations. One fellow seized my horse, that I might not disturb them, and the rest leathery away most famously. Cudgels twinkled and Paddies fell in every direction ... and a man who seemed a sort of leader of his faction broke his shillelah on his neighbour's pate. As I happened to be provided with one myself, and was unwilling to spoil sport, or see sport spoiled, I handed it out, and bade him play out the play. He received the gift with a grim smile of welcome, and in an instant I saw men tumbling like nine-pins 'beneath his sturdy stroke'. In something more than half an hour, a loud hurrah of 'The Boys of Ballinageary [Ballingarry] for ever!' announced that the fray was ended – my friend with the stick had won. He came up to where I stood, took off his hat, and with great propriety of speech and gesture, apologized for the delay I had met with, assuring me that once the signal was given, it was impossible to stop for any gentleman; and as he handed back my stick with eloquent thanks, he hoped I 'took no offence at the taste of a scrimmage that had detained my honour'.<sup>13</sup>

In 1828 a German prince who toured parts of Ireland, including Kerry, attempted to describe the character of the Irish people and noted:

their utter inability to resist ardent spirits, so long as they have a penny in their pockets; the sudden and continual wild quarrels and national pitched battles with the shillelagh (a murderous sort of stick which every man keeps hidden under his rags) in which a hundred take part in a minute, and desist not till several are left dead or wounded on the field; the frightful war-whoop which they set up on these occasions; the revenge for an affront or injury, cherished and inherited by whole villages.<sup>14</sup>

### THE SHILLELAGH AND OTHER STICKS

A letter writer to the *Dublin Penny Journal* observed in 1832 that ‘an Irishman cannot walk or wander, sport or fight, buy or sell, comfortably, without an oak stick in his fist. If he travels, he will beg, borrow, or steal a shillelagh ... if he fights, as fight he must, at market or at fair, the cudgel is brandished on high ... “Leather away with your oak sticks!” is still the privilege, the glory, and the practice of Irishmen.’<sup>15</sup>

The word shillelagh has been explained as being derived from the Irish *sail éille*, ‘thonged stick’, referencing the habit some faction fighters had of tying a strap to their baton so that their weapon could not be fully knocked away from their hands in the heat of a fight.<sup>16</sup> (A writer in *The Tralee Chronicle* remembered ‘great care and much taste being displayed in the beauty and strength of the thong which passed through a hole in the stick about eight inches from the top’.)<sup>17</sup> Alternatively, the term is often linked with the oak forest of Shillelagh, Co. Wicklow, which was renowned for the quality of its timber. In 1802, for example, it was said that the word represented ‘an oak stick, supposed to be cut from the famous wood of Shilala’.<sup>18</sup>



*A Kerryman tucks a cleith ailpín under his arm, 1842. Drawn by J. Hastings. (Courtesy of the National Library of Ireland)*

There were a variety of fighting sticks, and Irish and English language terms to describe them. Among those that appeared in a Kerry context were *ailpín*, which translates as ‘little knobbed stick’; *bata draighin*: ‘blackthorn stick’; *buailteán* (‘boulthaun’): ‘flail’; *cipín* (‘kippeen’): ‘little stick’; and *cleith ailpín*: ‘knob stick’. Further English language terms for different sticks included cudgel, wattle, sucker, and ash plant (or merely plant).<sup>19</sup>

According to Irish-born writers Samuel Carter Hall and his wife Anna Maria, who published a description of the country for English readers in 1841, the shillelagh was ‘generally about three feet long’, whereas the *cipín* and *cleith ailpín* were smaller

weapons. In contrast, the wattle was a remarkable eight or ten feet long.<sup>20</sup> A modern enthusiast of the Irish fighting stick, John W. Hurley, has noted of the *cipín*: ‘as a weapon, it is much easier to carry and conceal, especially under the large, native Irish frieze coats’.<sup>21</sup>

A sucker, meanwhile, referred to a stick that had been cut from the growing base of an ash tree, ‘to make it have more weight at the striking end than the end which you hold in the hand’.<sup>22</sup> Other weapons used in Kerry were straight-edged lengths of wood, which appear to have come from the carpenter’s yard or the sawmill rather than the hedgerow.<sup>23</sup>

Sometimes fighters would use two sticks at once. Limerick man Richard Denihan, whose father had been a faction fighter in Kerry, told folklorist Kevin Danaher that some men ‘used to fight with two sticks. The *buailteán* was about four feet long ... The other stick was a short one about a foot and a half long and ‘twas very stout. The purpose of this stick was to stop the blow.’<sup>24</sup> Denis Casey, the leader of a Glenflesk faction, who appears to have fought in the late 1700s and early 1800s, ‘could whirl two sticks on occasion’.<sup>25</sup> Scottish fencing master Archibald MacGregor, writing in 1791, noted that ‘a number of the Irish are very good at fighting with two sticks ... a short one in their left hand to guard with, and a long one in their right, which they manage with amazing dexterity.’<sup>26</sup>

A very different order of weapon was what was called the ‘loaden butt’, a stick which had its top filled with a piece of molten lead or fitted with a piece of iron (a ferule) to make it more devastating as a weapon. As Richard Denihan commented: ‘A blow from that would smash a bone.’<sup>27</sup>

So fond were some fighters of their favourite sticks that they gave them nicknames. Tadhg Kennedy of Annascaul ‘carried a huge blackthorn stick with long pointed knobs. He called this stick “*Bás gan Saggart*”. This name meant that if anyone got a blow of this stick he would be killed on the spot before a priest or doctor would reach him alive.’<sup>28</sup> Paud Brien, who fought in Askeaton, Co. Limerick, also carried a stick with the same title, and another he nicknamed *Leagadh gan eiri* (‘Down and out’).<sup>29</sup> A historian of Irish fairs, Patrick Logan, recalled a former fighter and a subsequent maker of fighting sticks naming two of his creations ‘Rid the Lane’ and ‘Dead with One Stroke’.<sup>30</sup>

‘The Darling Ould Stick’ could also be praised in song. A ballad set in Co. Meath related: ‘If that stick had a tongue, it could tell you some tales/How it battered the countenances of the O’Neils’. The ballad continued:

*It made bits of skull fly about in the air  
And it’s been the promoter of fun at each fair  
For I swear by the toe-nail of Moses!  
It has often broke bridges of noses  
Of the faction that dared to oppose us –  
It’s the darling kippeen of a stick.*<sup>31</sup>

The fighting stick was seasoned in order to make it as hard as possible. ‘Sometimes it was tempered in a dung-heap, at others in slack lime, but the more usual mode was to rub it over repeatedly with butter, and place it “up the chimney”, where it would be left for a period of several months,’ noted the Halls.<sup>32</sup> ‘The smoke and the heat from the fire beneath resulted in a very lasting

and hardwearing instrument,' recalled a man who, as a young boy, had witnessed one of the last fights in the district of East Kerry known as Sliabh Luachra.<sup>33</sup> The Kerry poet Murrough O'Connor observed:

*No Scymeter can pierce that hardened Wood,  
Which many a Fight at Fairs and Patrons [with]stood;  
A broken Scull ensues at ev'ry St[r]oak,  
They'll bend with Blows, but never can be broke.<sup>34</sup>*

Naturally, participants regularly received blows to the head from the hard sticks. In 1864, when the skull of a still-living Tipperary man was examined, 'it was found to be covered like a chessboard with scars and seams' from former fights between the Caravats and the Shanavests.<sup>35</sup> Seán Dobbs, a man from Abbeyfeale, Co. Limerick, was later remembered as having 'carried a silver plate on his head through life, because of some intermeddling in a faction fight'.<sup>36</sup> The first surviving record of a fatality at a Kerry faction fight that was the result of a stroke to the head with a stick was in Ardfernt in 1762.<sup>37</sup> There was no recovery from the most serious blows; if men who were dealt fractured skulls did not die on the spot, they lingered in bed, finally expiring weeks after a fight. For the rest of the family, if the man was a tenant farmer, his incapacitation or death was a devastating outcome economically as well as personally, as they faced eviction, homelessness and poverty following the loss of the breadwinner.

The consequences for the families of those men who were convicted of killing others were also grim. In 1832 a gentleman boarded a Tralee coach that was also carrying convicts sentenced

to transportation. 'No sooner had the coach stopped than it was surrounded by two or three hundred women, with their innumerable progeny, all joining in one wild howl, expressive of deep sorrow and implacable resentment, bewailing in Irish the fate of those who were leaving their native shores for ever.' Sitting into the carriage, the gentleman talked with a few prisoners. 'The second, an exceedingly fine young man, humble in manner, yet resolute in mien, of the better class ... had killed a man in a faction-fight,' he related. The man could have been sentenced to death, 'but through the kindness of a gentleman at Listowel, life was spared'.<sup>38</sup>

### CAUSES AND MOTIVATIONS

Some faction feuds, perhaps most of them, originally derived from particular root causes, and functioned as ways of venting and renewing grudges and grievances. The lengthy antipathy between the Fitzgeralds and the O'Keefes of East Kerry, for example, was said to be sparked by the abduction (or elopement) of a woman from one of the families.<sup>39</sup> In 1824 the conflict between the Bootashees and the Tubbers of Co. Cork was traced to an argument between two boys from around 1794 over a game of marbles, in which adults became involved.<sup>40</sup> The officer who witnessed the boys of Ballingarry in 1827 asked the faction leader afterwards for the reason behind the quarrel between the parties:

'Och, it was only some words between mysel and Tim Oulaghan, about a girl I wouldn't marry; an' he brought his faction agin' us, an' we fought it out, and beat them like min.'

'And why would you not marry the girl?'

‘Sure, hadn’t she a pearl on her eye like a biled cockle whin I seen her afore the Priest?’<sup>41</sup>

‘You don’t mean to say it was then first you discerned her blindness?’

‘Whin else, your honour? Devil a stem of her I ever seen till then?’

‘And were you going to marry a woman the first time ever you saw her?’

‘Troth and that same’s the custom among huz always. When a girl takes on to be married, her father or mother, or the like, goes match-making, and spakes to any boy they fancy, and if he’s agreeable, and they offer fortin’ according to his expictations, the priesht is invited, and the first thing the girl hears of the match being settled, or who is the man that’s to own her, is whin the frinds arrive to eat the wedding dinner; and late in the evening, when all is hearty, in comes the boy, and thin they see each other for the first time.’<sup>42</sup>

At Ardfert, in 1892, two parties named Bowler and Gurnett fought with ‘stones and shillelaghs’:

[I]t appeared that the germinal point of the antipathy might be correctly traced back to the venerable ancestors of the contending sides. Faction fights were not then infrequent, and the embittered feeling, intensified by imaginary wrongs, was preserved by mutual broils down to a few years ago ... the Bowlers ... continued working for a gentleman [nearby], which action, because the other side and a few [others] regarded the gentleman in question from an obnoxious stand point, the other side considered objectionable. Subsequently, they thought they were right in calling the Bowler family ‘croobeens’ and ‘lick-plates’. This state of petty anarchy was comparatively available in its phases down to the present day ... culminating in a serious riot a few months ago.<sup>43</sup>

Nevertheless, the original cause of a long-standing feud often appeared to have been forgotten by later generations, who simply continued to fight on regardless. The Rev. Horatio Townsend of Co. Cork observed a simple perpetuating dynamic at work as fights continued: 'Grounds of contention can never be wanting among people, in whose memory is carefully deposited the disgrace of a former defeat, and the dear hope of future vengeance.'<sup>44</sup>

Many commentators felt that men engaged in faction fights for the sheer love of fighting: the observant French traveller Alexis de Tocqueville felt that factions fought 'for the sole pleasure of the excitement that a fight gives'.<sup>45</sup> William Carleton, whose life's work consisted of revealing the world of the Irish peasant, wrote of 'the agreeable recreation of fighting ... To be sure, skulls and bones are broken, and lives lost; but they are lost in pleasant fighting – they are the consequences of the sport, the beauty of which consists in breaking as many heads and necks as you can.'<sup>46</sup> Faction fights were thus partly examples of what modern scholars term 'recreational violence'. In her analysis of Irish faction fighting, historian Carolyn Conley commented that the goal of recreational violence 'was not to injure or kill but rather to participate in a mutual display of skill and strength ... Rather than men bent on violence, the characters who emerge from the criminal records are more often people who enjoyed fighting as a sometimes lethal, but rarely malicious, form of entertainment.'<sup>47</sup>

Fighting served emotional and psychological needs too. While another observer explained that factions engaged 'merely for the diversion of fighting, or settling some point under dispute,' he

added that ‘the leading men in those factions do it from a spirit of pride and vanity’.<sup>48</sup> A Limerick clergyman, explaining that factions fought on the basis of ‘honour or revenge’, commented of the former motive: ‘I can hardly define what a person in such a situation of life as they were in would mean by honour; but I should think it would be better expressed by pride; they wished to be superior to the opposite party.’<sup>49</sup>

Faction fighting was not only a matter for the participants, but also for those spectators who enjoyed watching a good fight. In 1812 the Rev. James Hall, a Scotsman, viewed a fierce cudgel fight in Limerick city: ‘To the disgrace of the inhabitants, many of them shouted and applauded those that were most active, calling them by name from their windows, “Bravo! well done!” while they hissed those disposed to be quiet.’<sup>50</sup> By this public means, some fighters could gain for themselves favourable reputations within their communities and be praised in contemporary story, song or verse. In Kerry, stories about Seón Burns of the Cooleens and songs about ‘Big Mick’ Foley from Killorglin remained part of the folklore of their districts for a hundred years after they flourished their sticks.

An element of the fights that remains opaque, however, is how members of factions identified each other so that they only attacked the rival party during their battles, particularly in view of the fact that they sometimes amassed in very large numbers and that some fighters were recruited from so far afield that they cannot have recognised their opponents by sight. Up to 1,600 men took part in a violent faction fight in Tipperary town one day in May 1825, and in Kerry up to 2,000 men and women turned up for the Cooleen versus Mulvihill battle

on Ballyeagh strand in June 1834.<sup>51</sup> A witness at a House of Commons inquiry, noting the large numbers engaged in fights at fairs, commented that he was ‘almost astonished how they know those of each other’s party ... but I do not know that they wear any public emblem’.<sup>52</sup> It is possible that a scarf, neckerchief, shirt or other item of clothing of a particular colour was worn. In Kerry, celebrated strongman Seón Burns always wore a red handkerchief, while faction leader Peter Hurley of Listowel wore an exotic blue scarf.<sup>53</sup>

Some Irish factions may indeed have identified themselves by wearing recognised colours: in a modern analysis of the earliest years of the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA), it was said that ‘local allegiances ... survived and were replicated within the G.A.A., with some teams allegedly taking on the colours that had been used by faction fighters in the preceding decades’.<sup>54</sup>

### RITUALS OF FACTION FIGHTING

A faction fight was often begun with one or more ritualistic devices. Men of one gang would stroll up a town or village street shouting out the name of the rival gang or announcing that they themselves were present and ready for action. This might be accompanied by the practice of ‘wheeling’:

I have seen many a faction fight, every one of which began in the same way, which was thus: one man ‘wheeled’, as they call it, for his party; that is, he marched up and down, flourishing his blackthorn, and shouting the battle-cry of his faction, ‘Here is a Coffey aboo against Reaskawallahs; here is a Coffey aboo – who dar strike a Coffey?’

'I dar', shouted one of the other party; 'here's Reaskawallah aboo', at the same instant making a whack with his shillelagh at his opponent's head. In an instant hundreds of sticks were up, hundreds of heads were broken. In vain the parish priest and his curate ride through the crowd, striking right and left with their whips; in vain a few policemen try to quell the riot; on it goes till one or other of the faction is beaten and flies.<sup>55</sup>

In a prelude to a faction fight at Listowel in 1828, a journalist observed men 'performing many *graceful* and masterly evolutions usual on such occasions – such as uttering savage and diabolical yells, making frightful grimaces, wheeling cudgels, and stamping most gallantly in the mire'.<sup>56</sup> A policeman, in an encounter somewhere in Leinster, was challenged by a faction leader to a bout of single combat, which the latter prefaced 'by three jumps in the air and a war whoop that might have startled a Red Indian, twirling his cudgel at the same time'.<sup>57</sup> Another common practice was for a fight starter to take off his coat and trail it along the ground, demanding, 'Who will tread on the tails of my coat?'<sup>58</sup>

### **'THIS ANCIENT CUSTOM'**

Fighting between various clans, in a more explicitly war-like manner, had been an ancient Irish practice. *The Annals of the Four Masters* catalogued countless fights, battles and territorial incursions in the history of Ireland from 1171 to 1616. Kerry lawyer and politician Daniel O'Connell once complained of these records: 'They are little more than a bare record of faction or clan fights.'<sup>59</sup>

Describing the world encountered by the Jesuit Counter-

Reformation mission to Ireland, a historian stated: ‘There can surely be little doubt that the Ireland to which it came was a society dominated by kinship relations and articulated by feud. Anyone consulting the reports of the Jesuit mission in Ireland about 1600 will be impressed by the reporters’ conviction of the prime importance of feud among the people they were dealing with.’<sup>60</sup> In Kerry, Murroghoh O’Connor linked stick fighting with the O’Connor clan, who had ruled a large tract of the north of the county until the early 1600s:

*Here great O’Conner Monarch of the West,  
Sway’d uncontroul’d, with Peace and Plenty blest;  
If lawless Subjects mutter’d at his Laws,  
Then green Oak Cudgels did decide the Cause;  
No Pike nor military Art was us’d,  
To conquer those that wholesome Laws refus’d;  
But well dry’d Saplins ended the Debate,  
From those whole Thousands met untimely Fate ...*<sup>61</sup>

He may have had reason to know this, as he claimed to be related to these O’Connors (‘You know I can my Lineage justly trace, Sprung from that brave and bold Milesian Race’) and he lived as a tenant on their former territory after it had been confiscated by Trinity College Dublin.<sup>62</sup>

Some subsequent rural factions did have links with the old clan system. One party of O’Donoghues, who fought on the streets of Killarney towards the end of the eighteenth century, was commanded by their titular leader, the O’Donoghue of the Glens, while the O’Keefes of Sliabh Luachra, who fought from

the 1820s as the Daithínigh, had, in late medieval times, been chiefs of the area.<sup>63</sup> Kerry judge Robert Day told a House of Commons committee in 1825 that factions represented ‘a remnant of the old barbarous Irish system of clanship, which still continues’.<sup>64</sup> In 1831 the assistant barrister for Kerry, condemning ‘those disgraceful and unmeaning party feuds’, commented that the time had come ‘when this spawn of a feudal aristocracy should expire. It has lived long enough, Heaven knows.’<sup>65</sup>

Other factions, however, may have drawn upon a much more fanciful sense of status or identity based upon a spurious claim of an ancient lineage or of once having had some local historical importance. Something of the latter spirit appeared in a short story set in South Kerry published in 1842, in which ‘the richest farmer in the parish’ tells his son, ‘I’m a rale descindant of Daniel McCarthy, who was kilt at the battle of Callara, fighting with the Fitzgeralds’, and asserting that he has a claim to the castle of Dunkerron, ‘instead of living in a thatched cabin’.<sup>66</sup> Perhaps, as Murrough O’Connor had observed in his verse portrait of Kerry, ‘Here ev’ry Man’s a Monarch in his Mind.’<sup>67</sup>

The wielding of sticks was noted in fact and depicted in fiction from the middle of the seventeenth century. In the course of a series of sectarian attacks in 1642, a man murdered at Carrickfergus, Co. Antrim, was stated in 1653 to have been struck on the head ‘with a knotted Cudgell or staffe’, also described as a ‘Crabtree Cudgell’.<sup>68</sup> In the second part of a satire, *Pairlement Chloinne Tomáis*, written some time between 1662 and 1665, a clan meeting is guarded by ‘*tríochad do lucht cliubaoidh [agus] tríochad do lucht smístínidhe*’ (thirty men carrying clubs and thirty carrying cudgels).<sup>69</sup> In 1695 the Irish parliament passed the

Sunday Observance Act, which prohibited ‘cudgels, wrestling or any other games, pastimes or sports’ on the holy day.<sup>70</sup>

Faction fights were first mentioned later in the century. Fr James White in his manuscript history of Limerick was said to have recorded ‘a fracas between members of certain trade guilds’ in 1669.<sup>71</sup> A traveller who journeyed in Ireland between 1675 and 1680 wrote that the fair of Quin, Co. Clare, was famous for quarrels between two rival families, the Malounys and the MacNamaras.<sup>72</sup> In 1705 Seán O’Neachtain wrote a comic poem in Irish that depicted an imaginary battle between two groups of men, in which ‘Patrick Fitzsimon gave Eoin a blow with a big cudgel on the top of his skull which made him howl ... This is the time that the crowd of enemies attacked each other knocking each other over, fiercely, stoutly and strongly.’<sup>73</sup> In the early 1700s O’Connor portrayed faction fighting in Kerry as the continuation of an old tradition, calling it ‘this ancient Custom’.<sup>74</sup>

Although the activity was to become best known as a rural one, many of its manifestations before the nineteenth century appeared as a feature of urban environments. What rural and urban factions shared was their being predicated on a strong sense of a particular shared identity. A ‘desperate skirmish’ took place in Cork city in 1729 between the butchers and weavers of the city, during which many of the rioters were crippled and several others later died of their wounds.<sup>75</sup> It was also in Cork that the Blackpool Boys, the Blarney Lane Boys and the Fair Lane Boys fought with one another between the 1750s and 1770s. In September 1765:

the Fair-lane and Blareney-lane People to the Number of two Thousand and upwards assembled in the Fields back of the Cattle-market, when above one hundred Heroes at each Side, armed with Ribbing-Knives, Swords, Sticks, &c. began a desperate Engagement, in which several were maimed, and two Ringleaders of the Fair-lane Party, it is said, are mortally wounded.<sup>76</sup>

Combat between the Fair Lane and Blackpool gangs was described as taking place ‘according to weekly custom’.<sup>77</sup> Similarly, in Limerick city, during the 1770s and 1780s, ‘The County of Limerick Boys’ regularly battled ‘The County Clare Boys’ at Thomond Gate.<sup>78</sup>

It was as a feature of rural life, however, that faction fighting would become most noted. An illustration depicting the activity as if it was a typical country pastime appeared in a Kildare estate map drawn up by John Rocque and decorated by Hugh Douglas Hamilton in 1760, later described as including ‘imaginative pictures of farm and village life: one shows what looks like an Irish “faction fight” in which cherubic figures are seen beating each other with sticks’.<sup>79</sup> In August 1782, in Co. Sligo, it was observed that a gang had recently formed, ‘in number not less than two hundred, who call themselves the regiment of cudgeliers’, and that at the fair of Beltra, ‘above one hundred of them assembled, with oak boughs, and armed with cudgels and other weapons, striking and desperately wounding several people as they passed along ... we hear that they frequently assemble at fairs and on Sundays, have entered into resolutions, and are sworn to one another’.<sup>80</sup> In the same year Bishop Troy of Ossory, a diocese centred in Kilkenny, lamented that people often assembled at

public gatherings ‘with the anti-Christian intention of raising a quarrel, or revenging a real or imaginary insult offered to their relations, friends and partisans’.<sup>81</sup> By 1786 a member of the Irish parliament could conclude that ‘our country people can seldom part at fairs or patrons without broken heads’.<sup>82</sup> Incidents may have become more frequent over time simply as a result of increasing opportunities to meet and fight: in 1684 there were 503 fairs held in Ireland, by 1780 about 3,000.<sup>83</sup>

On 16 June 1808 a correspondent from Kerry informed readers of *The Freeman’s Journal* about ‘village factions’:

The ordinary seats of war, selected by these village-campaigners, are Fair-places; and the time of their choosing, for the proof of each other’s strength, Fair-days. This very selection of time and place is, in itself, a serious evil; the buyers and sellers at those meetings must, in consequence of a disturbance of the peace, lose their market; and of course, the internal commerce of the country must be very materially injured. We have witnessed a few days ago in a neighbouring village, Ardfert, an example of this kind at the Fair of that place.

By then factions and stick fighting in Kerry were likely well established, as there is evidence of the phenomenon having existed from the earliest years of the eighteenth century, and possibly beforehand.

On town streets and in green fields, at fairs, race meetings and saints' patron days, rival Irish gangs used to meet to battle and beat each other with cudgels and sticks. The practice was particularly prevalent in the 1800s, and involved tens, hundreds and even thousands of men and women at a time.

*Days of the Blackthorn* uses eyewitness descriptions, as well as the oral history of local communities, to provide a visceral sense of this exciting and brutal activity in County Kerry. From the Battle of Ballyeagh between the Cooleens and the Lawlors that left eighteen dead to the savage combats of various strongmen, such as Seón Burns or 'Big Mick' Foley, this is a fascinating account of a wild and violent time in Ireland's history.

Seán Moraghan is a historian and folklore researcher with a particular interest in Irish social and political history from 1798 to the Great Famine. He has lived in Co. Kerry for over thirty years.



MERCIER PRESS

CELEBRATING 75 YEARS