1 Introduction: the 1798 rebellion in its eighteenth-century contexts

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Did the 1798 rebellion have an eighteenth-century context, or merely a 1790s one? How important were its British and European dimensions? These questions raise issues of teleology, perspective and causation long familiar, for example, to students of the English civil war of the 1640s.[1] And, although, as Sean Connolly points out, disagreement is more often than not implicit,[2] historians of Ireland's eighteenth century, like historians of England's civil war, have not reached any consensus. Nor, because their differences are more conceptual than empirical, are they likely to. One view holds that the scale of the crisis of the 1790s, the mass disaffection, savage repression and open warfare, can be understood only by reference to deep structural fissures in Irish society, stretching back over decades, or even centuries. Others discern in that view the classic Whig fallacy of hindsight: the past is distorted by the selection of evidence which helps to explain what came after, while countervailing evidence, perhaps of a polity and society at ease with itself, is overlooked or undervalued. Historians have fashioned a variety of overlapping, if not always compatible, eighteenth-century 'Irelands'. These include the 'Hidden Ireland', which is Catholic, Gaelic and poor; the spacious colonnaded mansion of Protestant, public-spirited, Anglo-Ireland; *ancien régime* Ireland which conforms to contemporary European patterns and colonial Ireland, exceptional by European standards, by virtue of its 'alien' ruling elite and deep and abiding sectarian divisions. All of them have implications for the interpretation of the rebellion.

[1] For a lively – and engaged – survey of the disputes between English historians of this period see J. C. D. Clark, *Revolution and Rebellion: state and society in England in the seventeenth and eighteenth century* (Cambridge, 1986).
[2] S. J. Connolly, 'Eighteenth-century Ireland, colony or *ancien régime*?', in D. G. Boyce and A. O'Day (eds.), *The Making of Modern Irish History: revisionism and the revisionist controversy* (London, 1996), pp. 15–33.

Historiography 1: Taking the long perspective

The term 'Hidden Ireland' is taken, of course, from Daniel Corkery's book of that title first published in 1925. Corkery, a literary scholar, set out to explore the Gaelic verse of eighteenth-century Munster, but the context he offered had wider historical application. Others, writing at roughly the same time, and in the first flush of 'independence', subscribed to a similar Catholic-nationalist version of the eighteenth century. No one could accuse these writers of either subtlety or intellectual detachment. Mary Hayden and George Moonan, who produced the standard history textbook for schools in the new Irish state, wrote 'frankly from a national standpoint',[3] and slotted the eighteenth century smoothly into the unfolding struggle of the 'Irish nation' against its English colonial oppressors. Even Edmund Curtis, a Protestant, unself-consciously conflated Catholic Ireland with the 'Irish nation'.[4] In the nationalist schema the Treaty of Limerick in 1691 represents an un-mitigated disaster, followed as it was by the foundation of Protestant Ascendancy, the rule of an 'alien minority' and the subjugation of the majority by penal laws. 'The evil effects' of those laws, according to Hayden and Moonan, 'can scarely be exaggerated. The Protestants developed the vices of slave-owners, becoming idle, dissipated, and neglectful of their duties. The Catholics grew, as a serf population always does grow, cringing, shifty and untruthful. They were lazy because they had nothing to work for; they were lawless because they knew the law only as an enemy.'[5] The rapacity of the – often absentee – landlords was outstripped only by the exploitativeness of the mid-dlemen. And whereas the Protestants oppressed the dispossessed and impoverished Catholics, they were in turn subject to regulation by their masters at Westminster. The wholly Protestant Dublin parliament, a 'shackled and spiritless legislature',[6] was subordinated to English inter-ests, particularly in the matter of trade. In retrospect the 1798 rebellion, or some sort of violent upheaval, can be seen as the almost inevitable outcome of such inequitable and unjust conditions. Reflecting on the historic sense of grievance nourished by the thousand petty tyrannies of Protestant–Catholic, landlord–tenant relations, Patrick Corish is prompted to the thought 'that when a man like Edward Roche of Garylough in County Wexford decided in 1798 to assert his rights in the

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[3] M. Hayden and G. A. Moonan, *A Short History of the Irish People*, part 11, *From 1603 to Modern Times* (Dublin [1921], 1960), iii.
[4] Edmund Curtis, *A History of Ireland* (London [1936], 1961), p. 291.
[5] Hayden and Moonen, *Short History of the Irish People*, ii, p. 338.
[6] Curtis, *History of Ireland*, p. 296.

political nation by becoming an insurgent, it may have been just because he had got tired of being called "Roche"'.[7]

Yet to configure the earlier period through the blood-dimmed lens of the later is, argued J. C. Beckett in suitably Rankean idiom, to misrepresent 'the eighteenth century as it really was'.[8] Beckett's *Anglo-Irish Tradition*, published in 1976, stands as a typically lucid, elegant summary of the essentially Protestant world – from which Corkery's Ireland is hidden – delineated by W. E. H. Lecky in the late nineteenth century, elaborated by R. B. McDowell and others from the 1940s onwards, and receiving its definitive restatement in volume iv of *The New History of Ireland* (1986). Here it is acknowledged that 'traditional memories of conquest and confiscation remained alive among the peasantry and were strengthened by religious distinctions' but this is not allowed to obscure 'the real achievements' of the governing elite. [9] These are most evident in the architectural heritage of Georgian Ireland, in improving organisations like the Royal Dublin Society, founded in 1731, and in the promotion of learning by the Royal Irish Academy, founded in 1785. Ireland, moreover, enjoyed a longer 'period of internal peace and security than ever before or since', moderate prosperity and steady economic growth. Protestant liberalism and religious toleration were likewise on the march before being thrown into hasty retreat by the terrible events of the 1790s. If that picture of benign evolution is accurate, what, then, went wrong? Beckett had the indispensable *deus ex machina* conveniently to hand in the guise of the French Revolution. 'Until the *importation* of French ideas at the very end of the period' he observes, 'there was no sign of any political move against the framework of government'.[10]

A theoretically more sophisticated model for eighteenth-century Ireland which has recently found favour is that of the *ancien régime*.[11] In contrast to the old-style revisionism of the *New History* generation which detected a relaxation of inter-denominational rivalries before the 1790s, this concept, because it entails a confessional state, reinstates sectarianism as a, perhaps *the*, defining force in politics and society. However, the conclusions which are then drawn from that reinstatement

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[7] P. J. Corish, *The Catholic Community in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (Dublin, 1981), p. 139.

[8] J. C. Beckett, *The Anglo-Irish Tradition* (London, 1976), p. 63.

[9] *Ibid.*, pp. 82–3.

[10] *Ibid.*, pp. 63, 82–3. Italics added.

[11] The *ancien régime* concept is put to work by S. J. Connolly, *Religion, Law and Power: the making of Protestant Ireland 1660–1760* (Oxford, 1992), C. D. A. Leighton, *Catholicism in a Protestant Kingdom: a study of the Irish ancien régime* (Dublin, 1994); and Jacqueline Hill, *From Patriots to Unionists: Dublin civic politics and Irish Protestant patriotism, 1660–1840* (Oxford, 1997).

are not always what might be expected. Religion did, to be sure, generate tensions, but these were mitigated, or blunted, by a complex ensemble of social and ideological controls: by the operation of deference, clientship and paternalism, by the ordinariness of penal laws in the Europe of the time, and by the leaderlessness of the lower-class Catholics and their inability to imagine political alternatives to the status quo. Eighteenth-century Ireland was not, in fact, uniquely poor, polarised or lawless. Again, if that analysis is accepted, the question arises: why did the rebellion occur?

Revisionist history is counter-teleological. It denies that great events – the Protestant reformation, say, or the 1832 Reform Act – were in any way inevitable or that they must necessarily have had great (or structural) causes. In place of long-term 'origins' it stresses the role of contingency, proximate political or economic conditions, and the range of alternative possibilites which were open to contemporaries. Nicholas Canny attributes rebellion in early modern Ireland 'an ordered and relatively harmonious community, which enjoyed a modest prosperity as a generally contented partner within a broader British jurisdiction', to 'accident, or the excesses of state, or foreign intervention'.[12]

The colonial model of eighteenth-century Ireland is in some ways the most problematic of all, but it is the one which has the least problem in accommodating the fact of rebellion. Some historians have been as troubled by the imprecision, and misleading connotations of the designation 'colony', as eighteenth-century politicians were by the slight which it implied of constitutional inferiority. Constitutionally Ireland was a kingdom, and that undoubted legal status, and the rhetoric of autonomy which accompanied it, had real-world political consequences. Yet the letter of the statute books notwithstanding, Ireland did exhibit many of the features of a colonial society. As the lord chancellor, John Fitzgibbon, reminded his fellow Protestants in 1789, political power and landed wealth were concentrated in the hands of an elite whose title deeds were lodged by 'an act of violence'. A recent history of conquest, confiscation and settlement together with continued discrimination against the dispossessed Catholic and 'native' majority combined, in the eyes of that majority, to deprive the ruling elite and its laws of legitimacy. The subordination of the Irish parliament, by Poynings' law and the Declaratory Act (6 Geo 1), commercial restictions imposed by Westminster, the control of patronage, and the appointment of the executive, by London, are all, also, characteristic of a colonial relationship. Once the lineaments of the colonial dispensation are disinterred the

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[12] N. Canny, 'Irish resistance to empire? 1641, 1690 and 1798', in Lawrence Stone (ed.), *An Imperial State at War: Britain from 1689 to 1815* (London, 1994), p. 316.

rebellion need no longer 'be regarded as something of an oddity, largely unrelated to the mainstream of political happenings and to the political ethos of eighteenth-century Ireland'.[13] The 'largely tension-free' zone mapped by *The New History* is more like a 'façade', erected upon politically and socially unstable foundations, and intermittently rocked by the 'constant rumble in Catholic–Protestant relations'.[14] Thus the judicial murders of the Jacobite Sir James Cotter in 1720, and of Father Nicholas Sheehy in 1768, should not be viewed as aberrations which disturbed the calm of the 'quiet, unchanging and dull which still characterised eighteenth-century Irish lives',[15] but rather as symptomatic of a profoundly divided society. Similarly, it is a mistake to overestimate the Protestant sense of security, based on military victory, guaranteed by the British connection, and reinforced by the penal laws. Confidence in the future may have enabled the building of country houses and the planting of orchards; it did not confer historical amnesia. On the contrary, Protestants shared a 'lively folk memory' of the 1641 rebellion, sustained by reprints of Sir John Temple's lurid *History of the Rebellion* and annual memorial services held by the Church of Ireland. Significantly, predictions of '1641 come again' began to circulate during the 1790s.[16] Rebellion, or civil war, are not the inevitable outcomes of deep political and sectarian antagonisms; they are not surprising outcomes either.

Historiography 2: The conditions of politicisation

By locating the 1798 rebellion within its long eighteenth-century context it can be interpreted as the final cracking apart of faultlines embedded in the social and political structure. What such positioning cannot, of itself, explain, is why the rebellion did not happen sooner – or later – than it did. Timing holds no puzzle for Beckett or Canny who, as we have seen, appear to assume that the rebellion would not have occurred at all were it not for the impact of an extraneous event, namely the French Revolution. David Dickson, however, poses a more interesting counterfactual. 'Was an armed challenge from below to the Anglo-Irish government in Dublin Castle a likely event' he asks, 'even

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[13] L. M. Cullen, 'The 1798 Rebellion in its eighteenth-century context', in P. J. Corish, (ed.), *Radicals, Rebels and Establishments, Historical Studies xv* (Belfast, 1985), p. 93.

[14] Thomas Bartlett, 'A new history of Ireland', *Past and Present*, 116 (1986), 216–17; Cullen, 'The 1798 Rebellion in its eighteenth-century context', p. 94.

[15] T. C. Barnard, 'Farewell to Old Ireland', *Historical Journal*, 36, 4 (1993), 910.

[16] Bartlett, 'A new history of Ireland', 214–16; T. C. Barnard, 'The uses of 23 October 1641 and Irish Protestant celebrations', *English Historical Review*, 106 (1991), 889–920.

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before Britain and France went to war in 1793, a possible event even
before the fall of the Bastille four summers before that?'[17] In other
words, if the external factor of the French revolution is removed from
the equation, were there internal dynamics within Irish society which
might have resulted in armed conflict anyway?

If there is a master theme to recent work on the 1790s it is mass
politicisation. The rebellion is no longer seen as 'irrational', 'sponta-
neous' or 'agrarian'. The emphasis instead, is on revolutionary organisa-
tion, popular disaffection and the wider *political* framework. The ideas
and example of the French Revolution certainly acted on the Irish crisis
as a catalyst, but the conditions of crisis were already in place by 1789.
Political crisis and politicisation were related to rapid, far-reaching and
complex social and economic change. Historians are generally agreed
that the rate of change began to accelerate around 1760. Commerciali-
sation, urbanisation, increased literacy, better communications and,
perhaps most importantly, population growth, transformed late eight-
eenth-century Ireland. Some of the connections between developments
in economy and society and the intensification of political activity from
'below' are obvious enough. For example, as Toby Barnard remarks,
'the radicalism and mobilisation of the 1790s would be incomprehen-
sible without the towns'.[18] The scale and successes of United Irish
propaganda would be incomprehensible too without the spread of
literacy. At a very minimum the incidence of rebellion in south and east
Leinster and east Ulster is suggestive, because these areas 'were eco-
nomically among the most advanced, outward-looking districts in the
country, [the] areas most affected by the economic development of the
previous half century'.[19]

The correlations between urbanisation and literacy on the one hand,
and politicisation on the other, are 'positive'. On the negative side the
operation of market forces, particularly as it affected land use, could be
socially disruptive. The higher rates of demographic expansion at the
bottom end of the socioeconomic scale also exerted pressure on living
standards. Popular discontent need not necessarily be political, of
course, let alone intrinsically radical, and the cycle of agrarian agitation
in rural Ireland after 1760 is often characterised as apolitical and
conservative in its limited objectives. Those agitations were conducted

[17] D. Dickson, 'The state of Ireland before 1798', in Cathal Poirteir (ed.), *The Great Irish
Rebellion of 1798*, RTE Thomas Davis Lectures (Dublin, 1998), p. 16.
[18] T. C. Barnard, 'The gentrification of eighteenth-century Ireland', *Eighteenth Century
Ireland*, 12 (1997), 148; see too, David Dickson, '"Centres of Motion": Irish cities and
the origins of popular politics', in L. Bergeron and L. M. Cullen, (eds.), *Culture et
Pratiques Politiques en France et en Irlande, XVIe–XVIIe siècle* (Paris, 1991), pp. 101–22.
[19] Dickson, 'The state of Ireland before 1798', p. 25.

by secret societies, the Whiteboys and Rightboys in Munster and south
Leinster, and the Protestant Oakboys and Steelboys in Ulster. Their
grievances were concrete and immediate: the enclosure of common
lands for pasture, county cess (taxes), rents and tithes. Typically, the
secret societies demanded customary rights, and 'fair' rents and tithes,
not their abolition, and in that respect their approach came closer to
defending the 'moral economy' than to social revolution. Thus it can be
argued that before 1789 'there was no sign of any political move against
the framework of government'.[20]

Categorising Whiteboyism as purely agrarian involves very narrow
definitions of 'politics'. The Whiteboys and their successor movements
did not seek to overthrow the state, although there is evidence of the use
of Jacobite symbolism. By nineteenth and twentieth-century criteria
they did not have a coherent political ideology or programme, nationalist
or otherwise, although there is evidence, too, of nationalist symbolism.
And if they could not conceive of an alternative government, by their
actions, codes and authority structures they asserted alternative forms of
legitimacy to those of the state. Whiteboyism, then, can be read as a
function of economic dislocation which confronted the authorities with
a series of localised and containable law and order problems. Or else it
signified something much more: the failure of the (Protestant) landlord
class and the state to achieve hegemony. Terry Eagleton imagines 'the
mass of the Irish people . . . paying their rulers their dues with one part
of their minds while withholding their allegiance with another'. 'It was
legality itself', he writes, 'widely perceived as a colonial imposition,
which failed to legitimise itself in the eyes of many of its subjects.'[21]
From another angle, hardline Protestant accusations of popish plots and
French gold, as groundless as they were predictable, remind us that in
the eyes of at least some contemporaries the Whiteboys crossed the
bounds of agrarian unrest into the domain of political disaffection.

Once characterised as 'rural rioters'[22] the political complexion of the
main lower-class secret society of the 1790s, the Defenders, is no longer
in doubt. The Defenders originated in an area of intense commericalisa-
tion, north County Armagh, in the mid-1780s. The 'Armagh troubles',
a sequence of clashes at country fairs between the Protestant Peep
O'Day Boys and the Catholic Defenders, arms raids and attacks
on property, have been subjected to sophisticated socioeconomic

[20] Beckett, *Anglo-Irish Tradition*, pp. 63, 82–3.
[21] Terry Eagleton, 'Ascendancy and hegemony', in Eagleton, *Heathcliff and the Great
Hunger: studies in Irish culture* (London, 1995), pp. 31, 86.
[22] R. B. McDowell, *Ireland in the Age of Imperialism and Revolution* (Oxford, 1979),
pp. 462, 473.

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analysis.[23] Competition for leases, the erosion of traditional deference-
based social controls, population density and proto-industrialisation in
mid-Ulster's 'Linen triangle', all had a destabilising impact in the
county. However, the troubles were rooted deeply in Armagh's sectarian
landscape. Because each of Ireland's three major denominations,
Catholic, Episcopalian and Presbyterian, were represented in roughly
equal numbers, Catholic assertiveness – in bidding for leases, for
instance – seemed more threatening there than elsewhere. Tensions in
the county were related to the national situation: by the late 1770s the
long tortuous process of dismantling the penal laws had begun and by
the 1780s the demand for further relief – the 'Catholic Question' – had
been placed firmly on the political agenda. Some Catholics were
admitted to liberal Volunteer companies and, in contravention of the
penal laws, armed. The Armagh troubles constitute a local reaction to
those political developments. The Peep O'Day Boys enforced the penal
laws and Protestant legal privilege – 'Protestant Ascendancy' as it would
soon be called – by disarming Catholics. Defender arms raids
repudiated ascendancy.

Defenderism spread from Armagh into neighbouring counties, and
then southwards into Leinster in the early 1790s. Catholic Ulster
remained its heartland, and while it did not penetrate the south west,
by 1795 Defenderism may be regarded as a national movement. The
genesis, social composition and ideology of the movement reveal as
much about the end-of-century crisis, and changing understandings of
it, as does the 'rise' of the United Irishmen. Defenderism made the
transition from local sectarian feuding to mass-based revolutionary
organisation by highly particular adaptations of French Revolutionary
rhetoric, and as informal paramilitary adjunct to the agitation for
Catholic relief. Reports of events in France carried far into the Irish
countryside. 'The great majority of the people in favour of the
French', noted Thomas Russell in 1793, 'in mountains where you
could not conceive that any news could reach.'[24] Allusions to France
and the revolution pepper Defender catechisms. The agitation of the
Catholic Committee likewise touched the remotest corners of rural
Ireland. The committee's signature gathering for its petition in the
spring of 1792, and the parochial elections of delegates to its conven-
tion, held in the spring and summer, amounted to an unprecedented
political mobilisation of the Catholic population. It is no coincidence

[23] D. W. Miller, 'The Armagh troubles' in S. Clark and J. S. Donnelly (eds.), *Irish Peasants: violence and political unrest, 1780–1914* (Madison, WI, 1983).
[24] Christopher Woods (ed.), *Journals and Memoirs of Thomas Russell* (Dublin, 1991), pp. 69, 145.

that in 1792 Defender activity escalated abruptly, in County Meath and County Louth for example.[25] Economic grievances of the sort associated with Whiteboyism continued to inspire Defender agitation. In Meath they sometimes called themselves 'regulators'. But the political dimensions of agrarian protest implicit in Whiteboyism were now explicit.

There are other, equally important, differences between the Defenders and earlier secret societies. Open confrontation replaced the limited violence and (usually) measured policing response by which the 'moral economy' had previously been negotiated. The horrendous levels of violence witnessed during the 1790s signified a collapse of deference on the one side, and of all semblance of restraint on the other.[26] Defenderism was never a 'peasant' phenomenon. The occupational diversity of the rank-and-file reflected, rather, the social diversity of a commercialising society. Its members included canal workers, publicans, schoolmasters, blacksmiths and pedlars as well as small tenant farmers and agricultural labourers. There were Defender lodges in Dublin city.

Defenderism encapsulates the crisis of the 1790s in a number of ways. Whereas its social composition is indicative of economic change – and indirectly of the stresses and strains of modernisation – its ideology amalgamates the old and the new in a manner which illuminates the devastating impact of the French Revolution on Irish society. Defender sectarianism and anglophobia tapped rich folkloric versions of Irish history. Protestants were, indeed, an 'alien minority', the spawn of Luther and Cromwell. The Defenders were millenarian, and the millennium consisted in the recovery by the dispossessed of their confiscated lands. They were also revolutionary, and drew inspiration from the American and French experience, as well as domestic radical proselytism. Their catechisms and passwords packed an explosive blend of biblical, Jacobite, Jacobin and masonic symbolism. The Tree of Liberty, the river Jordan and Patrick Sarsfield invoked a world-view at once deeply confused and profoundly political. The United Irishmen set out to 'make every man a politician'. Defenderism and its atavisms demonstrate that while the strategy of the secular and 'enlightened' republican leadership achieved notable success, it neither initiated, nor could it dictate the pace or direction, of politicisation.

[25] Jim Smyth, 'Defenderism, popular politicisation and the Catholic Question', in D. Dickson and H. Gough (eds.), *Ireland and the French Revolution* (Dublin, 1991).
[26] See Thomas Bartlett, 'The anti-milita riots of 1793 and the end of the moral economy', *Past and Present*, 99 (1983), 41–64.

Contrasts: the British context

The peculiarities of Defenderism can no more be understood outside Irish history than the Chouan counter-revolutionaries can be uprooted from the soil of western France. This becomes even clearer when we consider what did *not* happen in Britain in the 1790s. Britain, of course, underwent more rapid, and more extensive, social and economic change in the late eighteenth century than Ireland. It too suffered the stresses of urbanisation, population growth and the dislocating effects of market relations. Yet, although the French Revolution revitalised British radicalism (and conservatism), Britain, unlike Ireland, avoided a radical-led plebeian insurrection. Historians are struck by the stability of British society[27] and the contrast with Ireland is instructive.

One of the ironies, and historiographical dividends, of the current trend towards an inclusive, four nations, 'British' history, is that it can underline Irish distinctiveness in a British Isles context as effectively as a more self-conscious focus on similarities, parallels and integrations can overturn parochial and reductive assumptions about Irish exceptionalism. One resource of British stability in the 1790s lay in the ebullient sense of Britishness shared by King George III's English, Scottish and Welsh subjects; the United Irishmen (and from 1795 their allies the Defenders) moved to outright separatism. Put another way, in Ireland the British project failed. Eighteenth-century politicians, in or out of doors, at College Green, Westminster, Dublin Castle or Whitehall, would have been bemused to discover that Ireland at the time was 'a generally contented partner within a broader British jurisdiction'.[28] On the contrary, British ministers were often convinced, not entirely rationally, of Irish (Protestant) aspirations to 'independency', and during the course of the century those suspicions gradually gave way to a reality.

A comparison between the trajectories of Scottish and Anglo-Irish senses of identity in the ninety years after 1707 throws the emergence of Irish Protestant nationalism into sharper relief. In 1706–7 opposition to the proposed Anglo-Scottish union stemmed from three main sources: Presbyterianism, Jacobitism and nationalism. Lord Belhaven famously protested the fate which awaited 'our ancient mother, Caledonia'. Members of the Edinburgh 'mob' proclaimed that 'they were Scotsmen and would be Scotsmen still'. The Irish parliament meanwhile solicited Queen Anne for inclusion in the union. By 1792 these positions were completely reversed. In that year the United Irishmen sent a fraternal

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[27] An exception to this rule is Roger Wells, *Insurrection! The British experience 1795–1803* (Gloucester, 1983).
[28] Canny, 'Irish resistance to empire', p. 316.