Prologue

1 Protestant descendancy in Ireland

I

One of the most abusive and abused terms in Irish historical parlance is 'the Protestant Ascendancy', signifying a privileged group defined by religious profession and exercising undue legal, political, administrative, economic, social, and moral power. It is undeniable that 'Roman Catholics' and 'Dissenters' were excluded from certain offices and civic rights under the 'penal laws' until the late eighteenth century, so that a relatively small group of men (but not women) adhering to the established church controlled most of Ireland's material and moral assets. Long after the extension of the county franchise to qualified Catholics in 1793 and even after 'Emancipation' in 1829, local ascendancies retained control of urban corporations and Protestants virtually monopolised senior state appointments. Yet, even at its height, the 'Ascendancy' was utterly unrepresentative of Irish Protestants. Apart from the exclusion of Presbyterians and Nonconformists, it was restricted to the small minority of Churchmen with sufficient wealth or pedigree to claim access to landed estates or public office, or to vote in parliamentary and local elections. Poorer Protestants gained little or no material benefit from supporting an 'Ascendancy' to which they did not in practice belong: they needed to be bribed, wooed, and bullied to secure their political and moral support in times of crisis.

During the two centuries of Irish history straddled by the chapters that follow, the foundations of legal, economic, and social ascendancy were inexorably undermined through repeal of discriminatory laws and professional barriers, broadening of patronage, Church disestablishment, and acquisition of landed estates by the state on behalf of tenant occupiers. More profoundly, state-sponsored mass education and an increasingly global outlook, fostered by mass emigration, placed all élites (whether Protestant or Catholic) under increasing pressure. Those who had endorsed or benefited from the former Ascendancy were acutely aware that the 'tide of history' was against them, and reacted to this awareness

in different ways. Some clung to privilege and resisted reform to the bitter end; some invested the substantial compensation accompanying each reform in enterprises designed to reinforce their social or political influence; some kept their heads down and tried to protect their personal and communal interests by avoiding collision with the emerging nationalist élite.

In assembling this book I have raided a drawerful of unpublished and rather obscure published articles, reflecting my struggle in recent years to make sense of the often quixotic and perplexing history of Irish Protestantism. My aim has been to identify new sources to tackle familiar questions, and new questions to apply to familiar sources. My work concerns the social and political ramifications of religious affiliation and belief, rather than ecclesiastical organisation or religious doctrine. Part I consists of detailed studies associated with my unfinished study of the Loyal Orange Institution.[1] It examines aspects of the military, political, literary, and religious history of the 'Orange Order', the most dogged incarnation of Protestant determination to preserve 'Protestant Ascendancy in church and state', and subsequently to resist and impede what was viewed as a new Roman Catholic ascendancy. It is truly remarkable that so many brethren, who had never enjoyed access to legal or social privileges, were prepared to fight the Ascendancy's battles and supply a much-needed moral and popular basis for conservative politics.

Chapter 2 ('Orangeism and Irish military history') demonstrates the ubiquity of Orange lodges in the armed services of the Crown, often in defiance of military regulations, and the importance of militarism in the minds and memories of Orangemen ever since 1795.[2] Military service, whether against foreign powers or domestic rebels, offered powerful evidence of the Order's loyalty to the Crown (as distinct from government) and its ability to mobilise thousands of Protestants in practical support of 'law and order'. Chapter 3 ('The Orange Order and the border') examines the diminishing appeal of Orangeism in southern counties and the Order's

[1] Variants of the essays on Orangeism (Chapters 2–5) previously appeared respectively in the *Irish Sword*, xxii, no. 89 (2001), 268–80; *Irish Historical Studies*, xxxiii, no. 129 (2002), 52–67; *Review of English Studies*, lxiv, no. 263 (2012), 127–44; and *Bulletin of the MHSIA*, xvii (2012), 5–38. I am indebted to those who discussed preliminary presentations to the Military History Society of Ireland, Dublin (13 Oct. 2000), the Belfast Natural History and Philosophical Society (8 Feb. 2001), a conference on 'Living with the Border, 1922–5', Ulster Museum, Belfast (7–8 Nov. 2000), the Cambridge Group for Irish Studies, Magdalene College, Cambridge (1 Mar. 2011), and the Methodist History Society of Ireland Edgehill College, Belfast (14 Oct. 2011).

[2] In the twelve years since my findings were published, my research on military Orangeism has multiplied. Whereas most other chapters have been fairly lightly revised, I have here incorporated a statistical analysis of the Orange Yeomanry, a detailed account of one of the military lodges established during the Great War, and reference to some additional studies of the topic.

response to partition, which called into question the very nature of 'loyalty' for an Orangeman who chose to remain in southern Ireland after 1922. Chapter 4 ('The gardener and the stable boy') analyses the concealed impact of a partly Orange background on the lives and writings of two great Irish poets, W. B. Yeats and Louis MacNeice. Though neither joined the Order, both carried traces of Orangeism to their graves, detectable not only in Yeats's anti-Catholic rhetoric and glorification of violence, but also in MacNeice's latter-day nostalgia for the sober verities of his childhood in Belfast and Carrickfergus. Chapter 5 ('Methodism and the Orange Order') documents the importance of religion in the lives of brethren, concentrating on the little-known but deepening involvement of Methodist ministers in the Order as it diversified from its primarily Episcopalian origins. Orange lodges were not just convivial clubs with submerged political and economic functions, but sites for popular evangelisation and moral improvement. Even liberal clergy, for whom the battle with Rome was secondary to spreading the gospel among the indifferent masses, often chose to become Orange chaplains.

Part II comprises two unpublished studies of the Ulster Covenant, occasioned by centennial conferences held in Armagh and London in 2012.[3] These originated in my biographical pursuit of MacNeice's remarkable rector-father (at once a loyalist, an Orangeman, an evangelical, a reconciler, and a conspicuous non-Covenanter).[4] Chapter 6 ('Ulster's Covenanters') examines the rationale for Ulster Protestant resistance to Home Rule in 1912, based on the hope that some sort of Protestant ascendancy could be restored in part of the island as a reward for abandoning the 'South and West of Ireland' to Rome Rule. Particular attention is paid to both positive and negative responses by Protestant clergymen, in a period of evangelical revival and religious optimism facilitated by church disestablishment. No episode did more to unify the disparate Protestant communities and classes of Ulster, and more to divide Ulster Protestants from their southern brethren, than Carson's campaign in 1912. Even those who disapproved in principle of the Covenant, with its implicit threat of violence, were awed by the communal solidarity and social cohesion that it temporarily inspired. Chapter 7 ('Ulster's non-Covenanters') shows how hazardous it was for clergymen to oppose or stand apart from the popular will, and how courageously a few men like Frederick MacNeice confronted that challenge.

[3] Covenant conferences at the Robinson Library, Armagh, 28 Apr. 2012 (Church of Ireland Historical Society) and King's College, London, 7 Sept. 2012 (Irish Historians in Britain).
[4] David Fitzpatrick, *'Solitary and Wild': Frederick MacNeice and the Salvation of Ireland* (Dublin, Lilliput Press, 2012).

Part III is the outcome of my recent attempt to advance the prolonged and often bitter debate on sectarianism in the Irish revolution.[5] Chapter 8 ('Protestant depopulation and the Irish revolution') reassesses the factors leading to the reduction by one-third of southern Ireland's Protestant population between 1911 and 1926, using fresh evidence from Methodist records to demonstrate the limited impact of forced emigration. This demographic study is complemented by Chapter 9 ('The spectre of "ethnic cleansing" in revolutionary Ireland'), which examines in minute human detail the impact of the revolution on the lives of Methodists in West Cork. It illustrates the resilience of southern Protestant communities when attacked, their refusal to succumb to campaigns sometimes categorised as 'ethnic cleansing', and the process by which these communities regrouped and rebuilt themselves within the Irish Free State. Since its first publication in 2013, this chapter has been enriched by access to some captivating intelligence files.

Together, the essays in this book offer a fresh perspective on what I have termed 'descendancy'.[6] By this I mean the states of mind engendered by shared awareness of the declining power and influence of a past ascendancy that was in many respects imaginary. 'Descendancy' also connotes descent from a common stock, conferring entitlements that seemed perpetually under threat. Most studies of Irish history since the 1790s have focused on the processes by which ascendancy was dismantled and a new governing élite created. My concern here is with the attitudes and strategies adopted by the eventual losers rather than the victors. In doing so, I have tried to avoid either apologetics or sentimentality when probing the psychology of those undergoing 'descendancy'. Rather than dimly illuminating 'the twilight of the Ascendancy', the decline of the 'big house', or Yeatsian fantasies of 'Anglo-Irish solitude', I concentrate on Protestant democracy as practised in fraternities, church congregations, and isolated sub-communities. At a period when more Irish people than ever before are trying to understand and reimagine 'the other side', I hope this book will help readers to think more dispassionately about alternative meanings

[5] See Trinity History Workshop, *Terror in Ireland, 1916–1923*, ed. David Fitzpatrick (Dublin, Lilliput Press, 2012); David Fitzpatrick, 'Ethnic Cleansing, Ethical Smearing and Irish Historians', *History*, xcviii, no. 329 (2013), 136–45. Variants of Chapters 8 and 9 appeared in *Irish Historical Studies*, xxxviii, no. 152 (2013), 643–70, and *Bulletin of the MHSIA*, xviii (2013), 5–70. These publications emerged from my Parnell Lecture in Irish Studies, Magdalene College, Cambridge, 11 Feb. 2013, and associated seminars in Hertford College, Oxford, the Institute of English Studies, University of London, and the University of Edinburgh; I am indebted to the organisers and participants for fruitful suggestions and criticisms.

[6] Though rarely used, this label has been appositely applied to the period 1790–1830 by Thomas Bartlett in *Ireland: A History* (Cambridge University Press, 2010), 206–66.

of the word 'Christian'. The voices of the 'descendancy', however strident or muted, deserve to be heard.

II

The notion of a unified 'Protestant community' in Ireland has always been an aspiration rather than a credible representation of reality. Many factors tended to divide those professing some variant of 'reformed' Christianity. The doctrinal and organisational differences between Presbyterians, Methodists, and Episcopalians, and also between competing factions within those general labels, were often no less marked and passionately contested than those between any individual Protestant denomination and the 'Church of Rome'. The resentments engendered by church establishment did not expire with disestablishment, despite the attempt of many bishops and parochial clergy after 1871 to remould their church into an evangelical body appealing rather than dictating to Irish souls. Many nominal Protestants, especially in cities, had little or no connection with any formal religious practice apart from rituals of baptism, marriage, and burial. Distrust and distaste for various aspects of Roman Catholicism was of course an important unifying factor, since these sentiments were the very basis of the Reformation and constantly reinforced in sermons, tracts, and informal exchanges. Yet shared negativity towards a rival and much larger community, if not accompanied by the development of supportive institutions and structures, offered a very shaky foundation for proclaiming the existence of an Irish Protestant community.

Throughout the era of 'descendancy', strenuous attempts were made by Protestant visionaries to create a truly communal basis for anti-Catholicism. Religious revivals, especially that of 1859, transcended denominational boundaries and offered the promise of immediate enlightenment, for anyone not blinkered by clerical interference with the revelation of God's will through the medium of the 'Open Bible'. Shared aversion to nationalism, portrayed as the political incarnation of Catholicism, was deployed by Episcopalian, Presbyterian, and Methodist leaders as a tool for combining and mobilising their followers in a social as well as political movement. Though primary schooling remained predominantly confessional, being mainly under clerical management, institutions such as Trinity College, Dublin and a growing range of boarding and secondary schools catered for most varieties of Protestants but relatively few Catholics.

A widening array of societies dominated by laymen (and increasingly women) gave substance to this ecumenical aspiration: temperance crusades, youth movements, sporting clubs, self-improvement groups, and especially fraternities. Though the Orange Order was by far the most

effective of Irish Protestant fraternities, there were several other 'loyal institutions' more or less closely connected with Orangeism. These included the Royal Arch Purple and Grand Black chapters, confined to active Orangemen and representing something of a moral élite, as well as the Apprentice Boys of Derry and many smaller clubs or networks whose membership was restricted to Protestants. Even the Freemasons (Free and Accepted Masons), despite their non-sectarian doctrine and extensive Catholic membership in Ireland up to the early nineteenth century, became almost exclusively Protestant as a result of papal and clerical condemnation. Such organisations provided practical opportunities for hundreds of thousands of male Protestants of many creeds to act and socialise together. For many participants, these fraternal activities were more important than attachment to any particular church.

Yet Protestant communalism remained amorphous and undisciplined by comparison with its Catholic counterpart, in which a much larger proportion of nominal adherents was prepared to adhere to a common discipline and direction, justified by doctrine and implemented by an increasingly cohesive parochial network. The Catholic Church in Ireland was by no means the fearsome monolith portrayed by its adversaries, being riven by episcopal, factional, and local disputes and fragmented by endemic tensions between prelates and pastors, parish priests and curates, secular and regular clergy, and lay and clerical leaders. Nevertheless, the Catholic Church proved far more effective than any Protestant agencies in applying communal discipline. Such was its power that most children of 'mixed' marriages (when tolerated) were brought up as Catholics, while 'perverts' to Protestantism faced social ostracism condoned and often led by priests. Even most of the supposedly non-denominational 'national' schools became in practice Catholic schools funded by the state, yet managed by priests, with Catholic teachers and Catholic religious instruction (delivered outside normal school hours). The very success of the clergy and hierarchy in insulating the Catholic community from contamination had the unintended side-effect of strengthening pan-Protestant communal bonds. But for the spectacular tightening of Catholic discipline and expansion of Catholic institutional provision in the course of the nineteenth century, the Protestant community would have been even more fractured and ineffectual.

The rhetorical insistence of both religious parties on the need to patrol and fortify intercommunal boundaries papered over an obvious subtext: the persistence of intermarriage and therefore 'hybridity' on both sides, the continued if limited availability of non-exclusive schooling, and the existence of non-sectarian societies and clubs. If these transgressions had not continued, there would have been no need for either Catholic

or Protestant zealots to ceaselessly condemn and counteract such practices. But the communal exclusivists faced an even more fundamental problem – the extraordinary affinities between the mentality and culture of Irish Catholics and Protestants. However vehemently these affinities were denied by most protagonists, the underlying differences often appeared trivial when viewed by outsiders applying British, European, or American standards. Irish Catholic and Protestant demographic practices alike were remarkable for high marital fertility, low illegitimacy, and heavy emigration. Both communities showed an unusual level of conformity to the prevailing moral code, and a strong sense of mutual obligation within families and neighbourhoods. Communal division was further mitigated by the shared antagonisms of Protestant and Catholic tenant farmers to exploitative landlords, and of workers to ruthless employers. Such shared interests always threatened to break down communal boundaries, necessitating further (increasingly effective) attempts to stifle intercommunal solidarity on class lines. Religious polarisation was not a faithful and timeless reflection of the unbridgeable gulf between two races, nations, or cultures, but a carefully fostered strategy for defending the group interests of two competing but surprisingly similar subpopulations.[7]

III

A central theme of this book is sectarianism, as perceived and practised by Protestants. By 'sectarianism', I mean actions and attitudes calculated to advance the common interests of a 'sect' or religious group, implicitly or explicitly at the expense of rival sects or groups. Though sectarian rhetoric is deeply offensive to educated and liberal-minded readers today, it was ubiquitous in past religious, political, and social discourse. My aim is to treat past rhetoric as a useful signifier of underlying attitudes and interests, to avoid the reductive assumption that all manifestations of sectarianism are abhorrent and irrational, and above all to clarify its functions and why it appealed so widely, even to otherwise liberal minds. This approach should allow some insight into the mentality and hopes of Irish Protestants during the era of 'descendancy', as they struggled to counteract or at least retard the unmistakable decline in Protestant power after the 1790s.

[7] Donald Harman Akenson has done more than most to illuminate the underlying affinities of the rival Irish communities, especially in *Small Differences: Irish Catholics and Irish Protestants, 1815–1922: An International Perspective* (Kingston, Ont., McGill-Queen's University Press, 1988); see also David Fitzpatrick, *The Two Irelands, 1912–1939* (Oxford University Press, 1998).

The most obvious attraction of sectarian mobilisation was the promise of preferential access to employment, property, marriage partners, or other desirable goods and services in short supply. There is nothing peculiar to Ireland about combining in groups for such purposes. Yet the incentives for group-based competition were particularly forceful in a perennially sluggish economy characterised by century-long depopulation and notoriously inflexible property and marriage markets. Sectarianism was one of many discriminants encouraging individuals to advance their material interests through collective action. There is no inherent logical difference between choosing locality, occupation, class, political affiliation, or religious profession as the basis for joining a collective enterprise. In each case, participants are motivated not merely by the material benefits of working within a group, but by a sense of entitlement and moral superiority. Those combining under the banners of nationalism or socialism believed they were fighting a righteous as well as an advantageous cause in their struggle against colonialism or capitalism. The righteous generally identified themselves as victims of oppression and discrimination, even when outsiders and opponents took the opposite view.

Of all these categories, religion was probably the most likely to inspire long-term loyalty to the common cause. An individual might change residence, occupation, or political affiliation more or less at will, so that loyalties based on such connections tended to be temporary and reversible. Religion, however, was widely regarded as a bequest of birth and heritage rather than a matter of merely individual choice. Protestants might move fairly freely between reformed denominations but, as already argued, the costs associated with conversion to or from Catholicism were high. In an age when religious faith remained central to self-identification for most Irish people, combinations grounded in religion were more likely to endure. It follows that the incentive to associate on sectarian lines was exceptionally strong, driven by a particularly acute sense of moral superiority. Remarkably, Protestants were no less inclined than Catholics to regard themselves as victims of a ruthless and powerful opponent, despite their reputation as beneficiaries of an ascendancy. From the historian's perspective, Catholic and Protestant combinations might appear as mirror images. For participants, they were contending in a Manichean struggle for the very soul of Ireland.

For convinced Protestants, there was no contradiction between working collectively in the Protestant cause and in the cause of Ireland, Britain, or humanity. Since Protestantism embodied freedom of individual conscience, as against Catholic submission to restrictions imposed by an external spiritual authority, the triumph of Protestantism was essential for human liberation. Once freed from the spiritual 'despotism of a foreign