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Mary C. Babcock, Gonzaga University, undergraduate student, “Outlaw Heroes: A Beacon of Hope for the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Irish Peasantry”

Abstract: Outlaw heroes have long been popular figures in Irish folklore, as the lower-class praised them for their Robin Hood-like actions of robbing the rich and giving to the poor. Why the Irish lower-class, specifically the peasantry, supported this is puzzling; what led the Irish peasanty to idolize such criminal activities? This paper explores this question and proposes that the Irish people idolized outlaw hearos such as highwaymen, Tories, and rapparees because they represented defiance during a time of great oppression. This paper explores the moral guidelines outlaw heroes needed to follow to remain in the public’s favor, the social and political context that gave rise to the outlaw heroes’ popularity, and the availability of outlaw hero literature to prove this point. An exploration of these factors led to the conclusion that the Irish people, mainly the peasantry, revered outlaw heroes because they represented not only defiance, but hope, during a time of oppression for the Irish peasantry. The outlaw heroes were how the Irish peasantry coped with the miserable conditions they were forced to live in, securing them a spot in Irish legend and a symbol of the plight of the Irish peasant.

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Outlaw Heroes: A Beacon of Hope for the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Irish Peasantry

Folklore plays a significant role in any society's history. Folk tales go back thousands of years and present moral lessons that its people still adhere to today. Irish folklore is no exception to this, as its folk tales are widely known and still celebrated today in Ireland. The figure of the outlaw hero plays a large role in Irish folklore. These outlaw heroes are Robin Hood-like figures who rob the rich to give to the poor. Outlaw heroes tended to be praised by lower-class people, such as the peasantry, because they felt the heroes stood up for them and liked that they threatened the middle and upper classes. Why the Irish peasantry supported this is puzzling; what led the Irish peasantry to idolize such criminal activities? Further investigation reveals why the Irish peasantry found itself drawn to these criminals. The Irish people idolized outlaw heroes such as highwaymen, tories, and rapparees because they represented defiance and gave the Irish people hope for freedom in a time of great oppression.

Ten habits set the moral guidelines that outlaw heroes needed to follow for the public to consider their crimes justified and acceptable. Even though they were outside the control of the law, the outlaw hero had to maintain some of the moral guidelines determined by the ten habits to maintain the respect of the peasantry. The ten habits of the outlaw hero included being a friend of the poor, being oppressed, being forced into outlawry, being brave, being generous, being courteous, not indulging in unjustified violence, being a trickster, getting betrayed, and living on after death.[i] These habits can be found in the stories of all outlaw heroes. Outlaw heroes William Brennan and Jeremiah Grant were both famous for their uncanny ability to escape capture.[ii] Another outlaw hero, Donal O'Keefe, had his lover, Margaret Kelly, famously betray by him by arranging an ambush on O'Keefe's hide-out in exchange for a large ransom from the local government. O'Keefe was captured and killed because of Kelly's betrayal.[iii] Redmond O'Hanlon, another legendary outlaw hero, was also betrayed by a loved one. O'Hanlon's foster

brother and fellow tory, Art McColl O'Hanlon, accepted a one-hundred-pound reward and amnesty from William Lucas of Drumintyan, the man hired to oversee Redmond's assassination by the Duke of Ormond, the Lord Lieutenant of Ireland. Art went through with the deal and killed Redmond on April 25, 1681 in County Down.[iv] These folklore stories are only a few examples of the habits that people expected outlaw heroes to follow. The other habits are similarly represented in other stories, showing that outlaw heroes met most of the ten habits set out in the moral guidelines for them to follow.

The most important habit outlaw heroes needed to follow was to never rob or harm the poor or the weak in any way.[v] The expectation was that outlaw heroes would follow the other habits, but it would not affect their title as an outlaw hero if they failed to meet one. However, if an outlaw hero robbed or harmed the poor, the people had the power to call them out on their misbehavior. An example of this is Redmond O'Hanlon attempting to take advantage of a poor servant boy on his way to collect a large sum of money for a merchant. O'Hanlon stops the servant boy on his way and asks him his business. The servant boy, having no idea he is talking to the "formidable" Redmond O'Hanlon, explains that he is on his way to collect a sum of money for a merchant and is nervous that Redmond O'Hanlon is going to rob him. O'Hanlon offers to meet the servant boy on his way back and escort him home to ensure his safety. When O'Hanlon meets the servant boy, he demands the money. The boy refuses, flinging the money over a hedge into the woods. As O'Hanlon dismounts his horse to get the money, the servant boy jumps on O'Hanlon's horse and races home, leaving O'Hanlon the old mare he was riding.[vi] This story upholds the habit that outlaw heroes need to protect the poor, not rob, or harm them. By stealing O'Hanlon's horse, the servant boy is calling O'Hanlon out on his misbehavior. The

servant boy is forcing O'Hanlon to fail in this instance, allowing him to face the consequences of his actions and reaffirming the significance of protecting the poor for outlaw heroes.

Positive and negative highwayman ballads further articulated the moral expectations of outlaw heroes. Positive highwayman ballads were ballads in which "the protagonists of these narratives are best seen as idealized representations of the outlaw hero."[vii] Popular positive highwayman ballads include, "The Highwayman," "The Jolly Highwayman," "The Maltman and the Highwayman," "The Flying Highwayman," and, perhaps the most popular and widespread of them all, "The Wild Colonial Boy." These kinds of ballads praised outlaw heroes who followed the moral guidelines expected of them and served as an example of hero outlawry at its best. "The Jolly Highwayman", justifies the outlaw hero's crimes as necessary for providing for his aging mother. Irish peasants could relate to the struggle of providing for a family and respected "The Jolly Highwayman" in his noble endeavor to take care of his family by robbing the rich. The outlaw heroes in the positive highwayman ballads only taking from the rich and not the poor justified their crimes and made them admirable in a sense, as the Irish peasantry could relate to their struggles and approved of the highwayman's target victims.

Negative highwaymen ballads provided examples of outlaw heroes violating their moral guidelines and suffering the appropriate consequences as a result.[viii] Examples of negative highwaymen ballads include "The Yorkshire Farmer," "The Yorkshire Bite," "The Highwayman Outwitted," and Redmond O'Hanlon's poor treatment of the servant boy mentioned earlier. In each of these ballads, an outlaw hero violates one of the ten habits and is accordingly punished by the peasant they are treating poorly. In "The Yorkshire Farmer", a highwayman tries to take advantage of a gullible farmer. The farmer realizes the highwayman's intentions and cunningly escapes by convincing the highwayman his money is in his saddle, throwing the saddle, and then

sending himself and the highwayman's horse on its way, punishing the immoral highwayman accordingly for preying on a poor farmer.[ix] By disapproving such "un-highway-like" actions, these ballads uphold the potency of the outlaw hero tradition moral guidelines and further confirm its status as a sanctioned code of behavior. Negative highwaymen ballads also encouraged the Irish peasantry to uphold the sanction code of behavior by giving them the power to punish and keep the behavior of outlaw heroes in line with their moral expectations.

The ten habits of the outlaw hero reflected the larger social and political context the Irish people were living under during the eighteenth century. During this time, many Irish people, particularly the peasantry, directly interacted with the government for the first time through paying taxes and making court appearances. In addition to their increased interaction with the state, the increased oppression of the Irish peasantry through the Penal Codes led to widespread discontent with English rule and a feeling of political defeat among the Irish people. In his 1830 book, *Traits and Stories of Irish Peasantry*, Irish novelist William Carleton sheds some light on the peasant's frustration with this defeat. He explains how the Irish peasants considered themselves a fighting people, writing, "many a time my grandfather boasts to this day, that the first bit of bread he ever *ett* was a phatie."[x] The term "phatie" refers to a punch. Carleton's grandfather was bragging that he was getting into fights from a young age on and took great pride in it. Carleton also wrote that fighting was "the root of prosperity to a fighting people", meaning that an Irish peasant's self-worth was derived from their ability to fight and exert their dominance over others. The pride Irish peasants took in their identity as a fighting people further explains the appeal of outlaw heroes as they fought back against the peasant's oppressors. The image of the outlaw hero as a victim of government oppression and a friend to the poor appealed greatly to the Irish peasantry.

Irish peasants saw in outlaw heroes "a hero whom ordinary Irishmen and women can vicariously enjoy brief victory, and imagine their collective dignity in the midst of political defeat and consequences" despite the common theme in the folk tradition of outlaw heroes' stories ending with compromise or disaster.[xi] The Irish people understand that outlaw heroes represented "defiance rather than a full revolutionary spirit," and the lack of major social and political change that came out of the outlaw heroes' acts contented them rather than upset them.[xii] Historian Dáithí Ó hÓgáin describes the Irish people's apathy towards the lack of real change from the outlaw heroes' defiance as a "quasi-defeatist atmosphere."[xiii] They celebrated the little victories the outlaw heroes had over the oppressive state, but never used these small-scale wins to mobilize as a larger group and fight against the state for sustained, long-term change. The Irish people idolized outlaw heroes because they gave them hope during a dark period of oppression, but the apathy and inability of the Irish people to rally together for sustained change shows that the outlaw heroes served as more of a distraction from reality rather than inspiration for change.

Outlaw hero folklore became so popular and widespread among the Irish people because of the availability, affordability, and the appeal of Irish criminal biography literature throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The most popular Irish criminal biography, *The Lives and Actions of the Most Notorious Irish Highwaymen, Tories and Rapparees*, was first printed in the mid-eighteenth century and was frequently reprinted at a low price. A copy of the book only cost three pence, which was cheaper than newspapers which cost four or five pence at this time.[xiv] These cheap and widely available biographies were a fun luxury good for Irish peasants to spend their hard-earned money on. Their affordability made these biographies especially popular among Irish peasant children, as it was a fun toy their parents could afford. The

popularity of these criminal biographies among Irish children cemented the legacy of outlaw heroes within Irish folklore. Irish children grew up idolizing outlaw heroes, so much that these outlaws became a popular Irish legend. The availability, affordability and appeal of Irish criminal biography literature allowed outlaw hero folklore to become widespread among the Irish people, especially the Irish peasantry.

The genealogy of literature on crime also shows how popular and widespread Irish criminal biographies, such as *The Lives and Actions of the Most Notorious Irish Highwaymen, Tories and Rapparees* became in Irish society. Criminality before the eighteenth century represented those "outside" of society, such as beggars, the poor, and criminals, as countercultures to conventional society. As a result, beggars and robbers had their own hierarchies with their own rules and laws that differed from those of conventional society's. Early forms of Irish criminal biographies included classification literature, which focused on explaining and classifying what crime was. Books such as the 1566 book, *A Caveat or Warning for Common Cursetors, vulgarly called vagabonds*, served as explanations and classifications of the criminal "countercultures." Historian Niall O Ciosain discusses how this kind of literature presented a "static picture of crime," meaning one definition of crime that covered multiple kinds of criminals.[xv] Picaresque novels expanded the notion of crime being a counterculture with its own set of morals. This allowed narrative focused on individual robbers to present a more sympathetic picture of criminals, painting then as loveable and "rogue."[xvi] These novels often had the keyword, "rogue" in their title, such as *The English Rogue* and even *Irish Highwaymen*, which was commonly referred to as "Irish Rogues." Picaresque novels allowed criminals to escape the "static picture of crime" and be a more diverse group with sometimes noble intentions.

Another common form of literature on crime before the mid-eighteenth century was the "last speeches" of condemned criminals before their deaths. In these speeches, criminals detailed their crimes and professed repentance. Merchants sold these speeches at executions as "a written counterpart to the public ritual of seventeenth and eighteenth-century execution."[xvii] These narratives further diversified the definition of crime, allowing criminals to have a say in their own reputation. These texts attracted better-off readers because learning about crime and the criminal's methods interested them. The prominent noble rover habit in these texts drew the less privileged to these speeches because of the influence of the picaresque novels.[xviii] Not only did criminal biographies cement the legacy of outlaw hero folklore within Irish culture, but they also dispersed the literature through all levels of Irish society. Even though they did not hold outlaw heroes in the same regard as the peasantry, upper and middle-class Irish people at the least understood who the outlaw heroes were and what they stood for.

Because of how widespread among all facets of society the outlaw heroes were, they had a considerable impact on Irish society. Historian Ray Cashman describes how "in outlaw lore we see the Irish representing themselves to themselves, reflecting on their greatest strengths and weaknesses, and commenting on their place in the world."[xix] The adventure and excitement of the stories drew in the upper- and middle-classes of Irish society, but the message behind them did not resonate as much with these classes as it did the peasantry. Despite this disconnect in the perceived meaning of the stories amongst the Irish social classes, the outlaw heroes were renowned folk legends that all members of Irish society grew up hearing about. While outlaw heroes had the greatest direct effect on the peasantry, their stories touched all members of Irish society.

The effect of the outlaw heroes on Irish society is further illustrated through its lasting impact on Irish culture. Outlaw heroes such as Redmond O'Hanlon and James Freney were especially popular in Irish culture. James Freney was so popular that in 1847, Ireland's Attorney General, John Edward Walsh, observed that the games and sports Irish peasant children played incorporated Freney's famous deeds into them.[xx] Outlaw hero figures dominated popular children's games in addition to literary culture. Irish children loved the adventurous stories of the outlaw heroes and grew to idolize them in some cases. The same goes today with children's fascination with characters from popular movies or books, such as Elsa and Anna from the 2013 Disney movie *Frozen.* As a result, outlaw heroes such as James Freney were incorporated into children's games and sports. The stories and songs passed down each generation about outlaw heroes engrained them in Irish folklore and cemented their legacy within Irish culture. Through these stories and songs, outlaw heroes became an integral part of Irish peasant children's childhood. As with Attorney General John Edward Walsh, the Irish peasantry's support and enthusiasm for outlaw heroes was so strong that Unionists and even government officials noticed it. Outlaw heroes became such a fundamental part of the Irish peasantry's culture, that classes of Irish society usually disconnected from the peasantry, such as the government, took notice of the peasantry's enthusiasm for outlaw heroes.

The Irish people, mainly the peasanty, revered outlaw heroes because they represented defiance and hope during a time of great oppression. The variety of literature and aspects of Irish peasant culture that spread the outlaw hero tales allowed the outlaw hero to become an important figure in Irish folklore and Irish culture. Outlaw heroes represented everything the Irish peasants wanted to do. They wanted to rebel against their oppressive government, they wanted to stand up for themselves, and they wanted a win after so many years of failure. The outlaw heroes were

how the Irish peasants coped with the miserable conditions they were forced to live in, allowing the legend of the outlaw heroes lived on long past their time. Today, Irish people connect with their past and the struggles of their ancestors through the outlaw heroes. They serve as a reminder of the plight of the Irish peasant, forever protecting the people they defended for so long before.

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[i] Graham Seal, *The Outlaw Legend: A Cultural Tradition in Britain, America and Australia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 11.

[ii] Ibid., 9.
[iii] Ray Cashman, "The Heroic Outlaw in Irish Folklore and Popular Literature," *Folklore* 111, no. 2: 198-99.
[iv] Ibid., 194-95.
[v] Seal, *The Outlaw Legend*, 7.
[vi] Cashman, "The Heroic Outlaw," 197.
[vii] Seal, *The Outlaw Legend,"* 31.
[viii] Ibid., 39.
[ix] Ibid., 39-40.
[x] William Carleton and William Henry Brooke, *Traits and Stories of the Irish Peasantry,* Corvey Collection, Dublin, http://hdl.handle.net/2027/uiuo.ark:/13960/t96694r3k.
[xi]Cashman, "The Heroic Outlaw," 191.
[xii] Ibid.
[xiii] Dáithí Ó hÓgáin, *The Hero in Irish Folk History*, (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1985), 191-92.
[xiv] Niall Ó Ciosáin, "Highwaymen, Tories, and Rapparees," *History Ireland* 1, no. 3 (1993): 19.

[xv] Ibid., 20.
[xvi] Ibid.
[xvii] Ibid.
[xviii] Ibid.
[xix] Cashman, "The Heroic Outlaw," 192.
[xx] Ibid., 191.