

**Brutal Savages in an Unknown Island: Conspiracy, Mimetic Desire, Sacrificial
Violence, and the Scapegoating of Irishness in Late Colonial New South Wales, 1860 –
1880**

*Though crouching minions preach to us to be the Saxon's slave,
We'll teach them all what pikes can do when hearts are true and brave.
Fling Freedom's banner to the breeze, let it float o'er land and sea –
We swear to make our native land from the tyrant's thralldom free!
...Too long we've borne with smoldering wrath the cursed alien laws,
That wreck our shrines and burn our homes and crush our country's cause;
But now the day has come at last: Revenge our watchword be!
We swear to make our native land from the tyrant's thralldom free!¹*

Information regarding the incident that took place in the picturesque beachside Illawarra suburb of Bellambi during the early hours of the morning on Saturday, the 26th of May, 1877, remains scarce, although it can be safely assumed that the witnesses who flocked to the scene would be able to recall its grotesque details with vivid accuracy for years to come. After waking to the ominous sound of crackling in the near distance, trudging masses of townsfolk found themselves nudged from their beds and sucked unwittingly towards the unfamiliar source of pulsing orange heat and light at which a crowd had begun to slowly form in a trance-like stupor. A house had been set ablaze, its glowing embers curling into the night air and spirals of toxic smoke spewing into the crowd. As those present watched the fiery collapse of the building into smoldering mounds of rubble, they realized, to their horror, that more nightmarish images than they could have imagined lay flickering before them in the hazy gloom. Within a few yards of the burning ruins a dog's decapitated head, cut cleanly to the neck, sat unblinking on the grass next to the mangled headless corpse of its former body,

¹ "Tone Is Coming Back Again", in *The '98 Song Book*, ed. Irish Book Bureau (Dublin: Kerryman Ltd., n.d.), 22
– 23

legs sprawled wildly in a sticky pool of blood. Near the dog rested the grisly charred skull and what remained of the skeletal shoulders and upper ribcage of a man, no longer resembling anything describable as human. Most tragic of all, a few yards further on the yard lay a pathetic splatter of ashen bones, fleshy organs, and dismembered extremities, loosely clustered around what could vaguely be discerned as the lifeless bodies of two small children who had been burned alive².

Upon their arrival at the ghastly scene, the police sergeant and his men discovered among the ruins of the building and the mess of human and animal remains a slate, on which was scrawled the frantic handwritten final testament of Mr. Peter Brawen, who now lay dead and dismembered in the grass next to his two children, George and Mary. Brawen had written:

“...I cannot live any longer. During the last ten years I have wished a thousand times I had never been born. I love my children too well to leave them to be tormented by their brutal mother, that dirty, drunken, selfish, and unfeeling Irish savage. I bequeath her to Satan, and curse her with my last breath, and rejoice at the near approach of her end.”³

The maiden name of the “dirty, drunken, selfish...unfeeling Irish savage” on whom Brawen blamed his own actions in the slaughtering of their children was Bridget Walsh⁴. Walsh, testifying at a coroner’s inquest after the incident, revealed that she hailed from the coastal town of Kilrush in County Clare, Ireland, and had lived in the colony of Sydney for twenty-four years⁵. Walsh was depicted unsympathetically by the local papers as “a compound of

² “THE MONTH’S EVENTS.”, *The Age*, 11 June, 1877, 3

³ “Horrible Occurrence. DEATH AND BURNING OF THREE PERSONS AT BELLAMBI.”, *Kiama Independent and Shoalhaven Advertiser*, 1 June, 1877, 4

⁴ “The Bellambi Tragedy.”, *Illawarra Mercury*, 1 June, 1877, 2

⁵ Incidentally, Kilrush was one of the worst-afflicted districts in all of Ireland throughout the years of the Great Famine, with the destruction of the population through hunger, disease, and violent evictions being so great that it never regained its pre-famine numbers. It might be inferred that Walsh, having left Kilrush for Sydney in 1853, almost certainly lived through immense hardship during her time in the town. See Ciarán Ó Murchadha, *The Great Famine: Ireland’s Agony 1845 – 1852* (London: Continuum, 2011), 123 – 125, and Thomas

volatile ignorance and eccentricity” who had “led...a devil’s life” of “damnable villainy and cunning” and was “constantly abusing and deprecating” her infanticidal husband, who by contrast was an “intellectual”, “thoroughly honest”, “reserved”, “civil”, “obliging”, and “straightforward” English gentleman. Particular emphasis was placed on the “craftiness” of Walsh’s cultish indoctrination of little George and Mary into the Catholic Church via a clandestine christening ceremony which was hidden from Brawen for years – an outrageous glimpse into the type of “drunken conduct and violent actions” against which an upstanding father would inevitably – nay, practically be obliged to – retaliate. Indeed, the blunt statements from Walsh herself that she intended to bury her children’s bones in a Catholic burial ground whilst Brawen’s remains could “go to his own place”, and that she had been “put...out of the house” for attending a funeral at a Catholic chapel⁶, probably did little to endear her to a majority Anglo-Saxon Protestant and anti-Catholic readerbase⁷.

An apparently minor and inconsequential detail of the Brawen family tragedy of which the subtle contextual significance to the inhabitant of late colonial New South Wales would be almost certainly lost on the contemporary observer can be found in Walsh’s first name: Bridget. Although the idea might seem absurd to one unanchored from the archaic racial antagonisms and the fashionable cultural traditions, folktales, and vernacular of the nineteenth century, the appearance of this name would no doubt have triggered – even if merely on the level of subconscious association – a reaction from its readers, despite the purely random and coincidental nature of its occurrence in connection with the events in Bellambi. For, as a “Bridget”, Peter Brawen’s wife was predestined to social ostracism under the pretext of the apparent boorishness, lack of civility, savagery, and laziness to which the

Keneally, *The Great Shame: A Story of the Irish in the Old World and the New* (Milson Point: Random House Australia, 2001), 120 – 121.

⁶ “The Bellambi Tragedy.”, *Illawarra Mercury*, 2

⁷ Estimates place the proportion of Irish Catholics to the total population of Australia in 1891 at 18.6%, versus 48.8% English. In 1881, self-identifying Catholics made up 27.6% of the population of New South Wales. See Donald Harman Akenson, *Small Differences: Irish Catholics and Irish Protestants, 1815 – 1922: an International Perspective* (Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1988), 61 – 63

name in conjunction with her Irish Catholic heritage ascribed her character.⁸ “Bridget” was the nickname for the most frequent racialised caricature of Irish women featured across illustrated periodicals and satirical magazines throughout the popular media landscape of Australia in the nineteenth century: a stupid, clumsy, and often violently alcoholic and vaguely simian low-income migrant female worker or domestic servant.⁹ The stereotype travelled from Great Britain and, later, the United States into the Australian colonies after the mid-nineteenth century, when “Bridget” began to appear alongside or even in place of the familiar character “Paddy” or “Pat”: a “violent, unreliable, rebellious ‘other’ to English masculine authority”.¹⁰ The “laziness, moral inversion, ingratitude [and] unreasonableness” of the Irishman, frequently rendered with an even more ludicrous degree of slander and dehumanization than his female counterpart, was attributed to the absence of core British traits and values which invariably followed from the brutality of life in peasant society and the inborn fiery temperament genetically inherited by its servile inhabitants.¹¹ These insights can, at least partially, clarify the rationale behind the fervent collective utterance of thousands of Australians upon receiving the news that an (abortive) assassination attempt had been carried out on Prince Alfred, Duke of Edinburgh, at a picnic park in Clontarf during his visit to the colony in 1868, nine years prior to the Bellambi tragedy: “Pray, God, that he be not an Irishman.¹²”

⁸ April Schultz, “The Black Mammy and the Irish Bridget: Domestic Service and the Representation of Race, 1830 – 1930”, *Éire-Ireland* 48, no. 3&4 (2013), 177 – 182.

⁹ Elizabeth Malcom and Dianne Hall, *A New History of the Irish in Australia* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2019), 129 – 130

¹⁰ Bronwen Walter, *Outsiders Inside: Whiteness, Place, and Irish Women* (London: Routledge, 2001), 61

¹¹ Michael de Nie, *The Eternal Paddy: Irish Identity and the British Press, 1798 – 1882* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2004), 267 – 268

¹² “Attempted Assassination of the Duke of Edinburgh, at Middle Harbour.”, *Freeman’s Journal*, 14 March, 1868, 9

What drives human societies in times of conflict to default to the “scapegoat mechanism” – the process of countering the destabilizing influence of emerging collective schism by outsourcing blame to arbitrarily-selected victims¹³? How does the birth of political institutions and political organization spring from the subjection of a scapegoated community to literal or symbolic ritual acts of sacrificial violence? And to what extent can the historian sufficiently qualify the Irish community of nineteenth-century New South Wales for this role, and explain the steady ascendancy of the Irish-Australian experience from discrimination to normalization within the context of multitudinous experiences of prejudice? The curious case of the Bellambi triple-homicide and its subsequent representation in the colonial press calls to mind a number of questions regarding the embroilment of the Irish-Australian colonial subject within broader discourses of race, national sovereignty, state-building, and the reconstruction of the intersection of the body and human desire under imperialism. This paper will endeavor to answer these questions through an examination of historical evidence which incorporates the mimetic theory of sacred violence proposed by French anthropological philosopher René Girard (1923 – 2015). A Girardian approach to the scapegoating of Irishness in nineteenth-century New South Wales can facilitate new understandings of the role played by racialised stereotyping and intolerance towards the Irish “Other” in the formulation of normative social cohesion, and why paranoid skepticism of the Irish community was essential to the maintenance of Anglo-Saxon colonial authority. To borrow a much-cited phrase from controversial American Marxist historian Noel Ignatiev (1940 – 2019), such an analysis can help the modern observer to grasp why the Irish were shunned and dehumanized in the fledgling colony in the years before they “became white”¹⁴, and the implications that an analysis of this phenomenon has for how we interpret the consequences of our competing fears and desires.

Although a rich body of scholarship exists regarding the history of the Irish in Australia, it has traditionally neglected to locate the Irish-Australian experience within a deeper strata of phenomenological or anthropological social analysis. The historiographical record typically

¹³ D. Vincent Riordan, “The Scapegoat Mechanism in Human Evolution: An Analysis of René Girard’s Hypothesis on the Process of Hominization”, *Biological Theory* 16 (2021), 242.

¹⁴ Noel Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White* (Milton Park: Routledge Classics, 2009)

situates Irishness as a nondescript sub-category of the European white settler experience in colonial Australia without particular emphasis on the differentiation of Irish national or ethnic identity from a general, vague typology of “Britishness”, or even fails to distinguish Irishness as a distinct classification at all. A collection of essays published through the University of New South Wales in 2005 titled *Australia’s History*, for instance, contained only a few fleeting references to the Irish and did not cite any works concerned with Irish-Australian history, despite being marketed as a “landmark volume” on “the most important areas of Australian historical work today”. Further attempts to subsume Irishness into Britishness are evidenced by the two-volume *Cambridge History of Australia* published in 2013, which featured a mere eight entries on the Irish in the first volume, compared with forty-two on Chinese-Australians, and no entries on the Irish in the second volume at all.¹⁵ In the realm of popular mass-market histories of Australia, in fact, the problem appears even more dire: across three recent best-sellers – John Birmingham’s *Leviathan* (2000), Geoffrey Blainey’s *Rise and Rise of a New Australia* (2016), and Meredith Lakes’ *The Bible in Australia: A Cultural History* (2018) – not a single index entry for “Ireland” or “Irish” is to be found.¹⁶ Clearly, an updated assessment is in order.

The present situation afflicting the historiographic representation of the plight of the Irish in Australia is, in actual fact, of value to its critics, in the sense that it reveals much about how authority manufactures silence as a mechanism of obscuring the uncanny verisimilitude present between the Self and its reflection in an ostensibly irreconcilable Other. Under this interpretation, the anxieties of the colonial system are manifested as a crisis of identity sparked by a face-to-face encounter with its supposed opposite, intensified by the unbearable

¹⁵ Martyn Lyons and Penny Russell (eds.), *Australia’s History: Themes and Debates* (Sydney: University of New South Wales, 2005); and Alison Bashford and Stuart Macintyre (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Australia* (Port Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 2013). Examples taken from Malcom and Hall, *A New History*, 16 – 17.

¹⁶ John Birmingham, *Leviathan: The Unauthorized Biography of Sydney* (Milson’s Point: Random House Australia, 2000); Geoffrey Blainey, *The Story of Australia’s People: The Rise and Rise of a New Australia* (Docklands: Penguin Random House Australia, 2016); and Meredith Lake, *The Bible in Australia: A Cultural History* (Sydney: NewSouth Publishing, 2018).

realization that the sacred and profane are one and the same. As scholar Michael de Nie writes: “Britons classified who they were by whom and what they were not” because the characteristics that entailed Britishness “uniquely qualified Britain to serve as a mentor or custodian for less developed nations such as Ireland or India”. The Irish were “a constant and undeniable presence, a group that was inside the political union yet not ‘one of us’ ...[as they] represented qualities the British sought to deny within themselves and their society – emotionality, intemperance, violence, and ignorance... The Irish were the mirror opposite of the British, but they were still a reflection.”¹⁷ Girard’s hypothesis that “hated is expressed, not for difference, but for its absence” because “persecutors are never obsessed by difference but rather by its unutterable contrary, the lack of difference”¹⁸ is hence evidently applicable to the scapegoating of Irishness in late colonial New South Wales at the hands of an insecure Anglo-Saxon Protestant majority.

Despite revisionist contemporary attempts at downplaying or obfuscating the unique historical positionality of Irish national and ethnic identity, there is no doubt that in nineteenth-century Australian society it appeared self-evident to Anglo-Saxon settler civilians of English or Scottish descent that the Irish were a “different” race of people, plagued by moral, physiognomic, and intellectual inferiority, and deserved to be approached with fear and disgust.¹⁹ Eminent Australian historian Robert Hughes, in his 1986 classic *The Fatal Shore*, has described the Irish in Australia as “a doubly colonized people” who were treated as a special class of “ideologically and physically dangerous traitors” and thus “oppressed with special vigilance and unusually hard punishments”.²⁰ Their presence in the colony was met with the scorn and derision of a potentially insurrectionary and anarchistic threat to England’s authority over her domain which urged immediate quenching for the sake of securing order and national stability. The conjunction of this dichotomous political

¹⁷ de Nie, *The Eternal Paddy*, 29, 269

¹⁸ René Girard, *The Scapegoat* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1986), 22

¹⁹ Malcom and Hall, *A New History*, 25 – 26

²⁰ Robert Hughes, *The Fatal Shore: A History of the Transportation of Convicts to Australia, 1787 – 1868* (London: Vintage, 2003), 181

mythology of Irish Catholic inferiority and English Protestant peaceful superiority with the racialised anxieties and impulses of a stringently reactionary settler-colonial ruling class authorized the Empire to nominate its imported community of transgressive and disloyal white minorities for the role of national punching-bag. In this context, the Irish-Australian community, with its motley cast of insolent, drunken Paddy's and pea-brained, blundering Bridget's, became the perfect outlet for the achievement of collective catharsis *vis-a-vis* symbolic ritual sacrificial punishment.

In the promulgation of the attitudes, behaviors and stigmas held towards the Irish by New South Wales's white majority in public domestic life, it is made apparent that thousands of non-Irish residents of the colony must surely have pondered – or, perhaps, subliminally entertained at a level beyond conscious discernment – the question: how might *I* position myself in opposition to the Irish? What social or political strategies might I actively adopt to signal my differentiation from the Irish Catholic community; to outwardly present the fact that I am '*not one of them*'? The quiet emergence of tactics of financial discrimination, social humiliation, legislative prejudice and state surveillance against Irish-Australians in collective response to this question highlights the role of memetic ephemeral mythologies of "Otherness" in stripping scapegoated communities of political and cultural agency. Here, Girardian theory synthesizes neatly with the proposal of American political scientist Murray Edelman (1919 – 2001) to investigate the symbolic significance of political myth in instigating mass movements. Edelman believed that the beliefs, values, and ideological positions of a national collective consciousness "are mobilizable rather than fixed", and thus the significant outcomes of political activity "are not particular public policies labelled as political goals, but rather the creation of political followings and supports i.e., the evocation of arousal or quiescence in mass publics"²¹. Like Girard, he considered rituals – activities which involve their participants "symbolically in a common enterprise, calling their attention to their relatedness and joint interests in a compelling way" – to delineate the sacred from the profane in political society.²² He believed that it was through the mythology and symbolism

²¹ Murray Edelman, *Politics as Symbolic Action: Mass Arousal and Quiescence* (New York: Academic Press, Inc., 1971), 4.

²² Murray Edelman, *The Symbolic Uses of Politics* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985), 16.

of political events, rather than in the content of statutes, court decisions, and administrative rules, that members of the public “achieve a role and a political identity” as social status and capital are relocated.²³

Historians of the Irish experience in Australia would do well to absorb Edelman’s prescient analysis of the role played by symbolic social ritual in conjuring the political mythologies necessary to justify prejudice. The scapegoating of Irish identity in the direct aftermath of moments of political crisis such as the 1804 Castle Hill Uprising²⁴ or the attempted assassination of Prince Alfred provide pertinent examples of the channeling of the “anxieties and impulses” of the ruling class into “specific political role[s] and self-conception[s]” to be filled by ordinary civilians willing to sacrifice a modicum of morality and individual responsibility for the chance to re-define their social identity in opposition to Otherness by acting a part in an elaborate performance of friend versus enemy. By displaying a “No Irish Need Apply” or “Protestant Preferred” advertisement in a local tabloid²⁵, by snickering at racialised caricatures in a satirical magazine, or by ratting to the State on a group of young men at the shops having a conversation in Gaelic²⁶, the settler civilian could attach themselves to a myth which replaced their “gnawing uncertainty and rootlessness with a vivid account of who are friends, who are enemies, and what course of action must be pursued to protect the self and significant others”.²⁷ Edelman’s talk of friends and enemies is reminiscent of the famous “friend-enemy distinction” hypothesized by German conservative political theorist and prominent Nazi party member, Carl Schmitt (1888 – 1985). Schmitt proposed that “the specific political distinction to which political actions and motives can be

²³ Edelman, *Politics as Symbolic Action*, 3 – 5.

²⁴ Irish Australians were subjected to martial law and various dehumanising surveillance processes after a botched convict rebellion largely spearheaded by Irish rebels. See: David Hill, *Convict Colony: The Remarkable Story of the Fledging Settlement that Survived Against the Odds* (Perth: Allen and Unwin, 2019), 234 – 247.

²⁵ Malcom and Hall, *A New History*, 131 – 146

²⁶ Hughes, *The Fatal Shore*, 187 – 189.

²⁷ Edelman, *Politics as Symbolic Action*, 54.

reduced is that between friend and enemy”, and, in the eyes of the State, the enemy is always the group, community, or force which threatens its integral sovereignty and institutional mechanisms of legitimization.²⁸ Thus, although the privileged sovereign (the State, and the elite class that rules it) stands “outside the normally valid legal system, he nevertheless belongs to it”, because “sovereign is he who decides on the exception”.²⁹ In other words, the scapegoat mechanism instrumental in maintaining the structural hegemony and functional legitimacy of the colonial State allowed for the weaponized transformation of the national and ethnic identity of transgressive minority communities into contested territory.

In this way, the anti-Irish hostility of colonial New South Wales’ Protestant Anglo-Saxon population was informed by the recognition of the Other as a mirror image of the collective majority. To confront Irishness as an enemy was to come unspeakably face-to-face with a reflection of colonial fear and desire in the face of the scapegoat: a face which could not be avoided, and which held the persecutor captive and helpless upon their recognition of themselves in it.³⁰ Some of the revulsion with which the Anglo-Saxon Protestant regarded such an experience is captured in a revealing passage from a letter written by English Victorian novelist, clergyman and historian Charles Kingsley to his wife in which he describes his travels in Ireland:

“I am haunted by the human chimpanzees I saw along that hundred miles of horrible country...[for] to see white chimpanzees is dreadful; if they were black, one would not see it so much, but their skins, except where tanned by exposure, are as white as ours”.³¹

In this passage, the recognition of the Self in the scapegoat is laid bare. According to Girard, scapegoating functions as a mechanism of avoidance: identity is constructed and maintained

²⁸ Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 26.

²⁹ Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 5 – 7.

³⁰ Roel Kaptein, *On the Way of Freedom* (Dublin: The Columbia Press, 1993), 12.

³¹ Frances Eliza Kingsley (ed.), *Charles Kingsley: His Letters and Memories of His Life* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 107

through the vilification of a common external enemy, and this enemy is then exploited for individuals, groups and societies to avoid having to face their own internal conflicts, responsibilities, and tensions.³²

The case study of anti-Irish prejudice in nineteenth-century New South Wales reveals much about the construction of the scapegoat as a tool of social cohesion and source of state legitimization, particularly within the context of wider colonial discourses of race and sovereignty. It offers a cautionary warning against the fatal mythologies of symbolic ritual violence and the artificial (re)construction of ethnic identities at the hands of political authority. Locating the scapegoating of Irishness through a Girardian lens within the intersection of human desire and colonial subjugation offers the reader the chance to reflect upon the manifestation of collective anxiety in national crises which utilize the mimetic activation of the scapegoat mechanism in order to pit a political body against itself in a Hobbesian “war of all against all”. It is clear that the insights garnered from this analysis is of immense value in understanding and responding to the resurgent currents of prejudice, blame, and victimization presently plaguing the modern world. Only when the scapegoat mechanism is discarded in favor of an attitude of mercy and forgiveness will humanity’s capacity for persecution finally cease.

³² David Stevens, “Unmasking the Gods of Violence: The Work of René Girard”, *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review* 77, no. 307 (1988), 313

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