Edmund Burke and the Imagination of History

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Abstract and Keywords

In the 18th century Ireland and England were different from each other. At the end of the 19th century they were still different #x2014; different from each other and from what they had been. This chapter does not discuss the political, economical, and societal differences between Ireland and England but focuses on the particular manifestations of Anglo-Irish relations in cultural terms. The chapter begins with history because the literary movement is deeply concerned with the bonds existing between the past and the present and because of the implied historical interpretations of the olden times. The chapter also touches on Edmund Burke's writings and the sentiments he had for the Anglo-Irish culture and the issue of Protestant Ascendancy.

Keywords: Ireland, Protestant Ascendancy, Ascendancy, Anglo-Irish relations, Edmund Burke

1. Anglo-Irish Relationscs
My failing to have a nice ear for vowel sounds, and the Anglo-Irish slurred, hurried way of speaking, made me take the words ‘Ireland’ and ‘island’ to be synonymous. (Elizabeth Bowen)¹

In the eighteenth century Ireland and England were different from each other. At the end of the nineteenth century they were different—different from each other and from what they had been. Moreover, the means and effects of their alteration were far from identical. Finally, the Irish and the English differed in how they described and accounted for these various differences.

Such a cat’s cradle of tense parallels could be made more solid simply by a few references to industrialization, trade, social infrastructure, education, religious policy. Indeed, the history of Ireland’s relations with England, England’s relations with Ireland, is most familiar in the forms of such extensive differentiation. With a treaty of independence in 1921 the two gave the most concrete institutional recognition to this state of affairs. Yet, at least until 1921, and arguably afterwards too, there should be added to our model a higher level of relation in which Ireland and England, so to speak, concurred, a level at once ideological and effective in which the two were contained on terms of some extensive comparability and equity. In the eighteenth century this can be identified principally as the Monarchy or, more abstractly, the Protestant Succession: the king of England was also the king of Ireland. In the nineteenth century, we speak of the United Kingdom, and the significant alteration is not simply the Union but the emphasis on the kingdom or, more abstractly, the State.

The emergence of the state as a prime initiator in matters of social policy was associated particularly with England, because the organs of political and financial power were located specifically in England. In Ireland the state was indeed active, at times hyperactive, but it was quickly shadowed by a less tangible entity, a concept more romantic than utilitarian, the Nation. To be sure, none of these terms is new: all of them were current in the reign of Elizabeth. But the manner in which they bore upon the realities of life on the two islands marked the difference between the islands in the period under discussion.
The English and the Irish differed as to the differences between them, nor did they agree on the similarities which exacerbated their dispute. This is not to suggest that relations between the two should be approached in a purely descriptive manner. Were I attempting a political account, I should want to deal with the actual forces at work in English and Irish society—and beyond—which produced the situation I have outlined. That is, I should demonstrate that the comparability and equity I have spoken of is radically distinguishable from any formal or moral notions of justice. But as I am to concentrate on a particular manifestation of Anglo-Irish relations in cultural terms, a further economic and political analysis lies beyond my scope. Nevertheless, we begin with history—and for two reasons. First, the great literary movement towards which our inquiry is directed was deeply concerned with the bonds existing between the past and the present. History was seen as a condition in which the present existed—Yeats's Celtic Revival, Joyce's nightmare. The perspective upon the past varied: it was for Yeats one of longing, for Joyce one of resentment and revolt: for both of them it involved a painful recognition of history as a potent form of reality. And second, even the most fleeting attempt at description carries with it implied historical interpretations: no normative account of how things stand is, in this context at least, without its subterranean assumptions of how things might have been.
Prior to the Norman invasion, Ireland had not been unified in any recognizable form. The Normans who arrived at the end of the twelfth century were never permitted to establish themselves so firmly as to make possible a kingdom rivaling Henry II's England. Over the centuries, the smaller island had never been totally separate from the larger, never totally subdued, nor liberated, nor administered, nor neglected. The Reformation transformed a distinction between Gael and Norman into a schism between Catholic and Protestant, adding to this a new international dimension to Irish affairs through the possibility of a pan-Catholic alliance between Spain and the unreformed Irish (both Gael and Norman). Sometimes English preoccupations with Europe and (later) America allowed certain Irish factions a measure of free manoeuvre: at other times, quite other arrangements were required. At all times, it was felt that a sense of anomaly affected relations between the two kingdoms. The charges and recriminations generated by this sense of anomaly are familiar enough: it does not seem to have occurred to either party that a dual kingdom incorporating two islands divided by an extensive and treacherous sea constituted an anomaly within their common tradition of social organization inherited from antiquity: that tradition bespoke territorial consolidation and (with some exceptions or delays) centralization. In 1784, C. T. Greville wrote to the Duke of Rutland, Lord-Lieutenant of Ireland under the Rockingham ministry: 'Ireland is too great to be unconnected with us, and too near us to be dependent on a foreign state, and too little to be independent.' The imaginative shape, or shapelessness, of the observation is at least as significant as its content.
In 1784, of course, the American War of Independence was the recent catalyst. Ireland's exclusively Protestant parliament had two years earlier won a measure of legislative independence from Westminster, in the face of Britain's Atlantic preoccupations. Power in Dublin was still divided between the king's representative (with his secretaries), the administration in Dublin Castle, and the factions of the Irish (p.46) parliament. Since the beginning of the century, when the Williamite wars had intensified the Reformation divisions to an unprecedented level of legislative control, a system had grown up by which the effective running of the king's business was 'undertaken' by a powerful lobby in return for the control of local patronage. The result was that much power rested with a small group who were neither a cabinet nor a civil service: they were the 'undertakers'. And if the system was modified towards the end of the century, it was still the case that both power and authority were vested all but exclusively in the hands of a Protestant elite.
The distressful plight of Irish Catholics under the penal laws has come in for some revisionist analysis in recent years. While a new recognition of the success of many Catholics in business and trade, and the less than absolute application of the law in matters of civil manners and so forth, is timely, it as yet remains undenied that Catholics were excluded from every kind of direct political representation and office. The proportion of the population thus treated is not easily calculated: the question is of course complicated by the exclusion of Protestant dissenters from the establishment. What is of greater urgency for the modern reader of Anglo-Irish relations is a recognition of the balance of population between Britain and Ireland. In 1796 John Keogh complained to Edmund Burke that 'Government appear to forget that the Inhabitants of Ireland are about One third of all his majesty's Subjects in Europe.' It would be mistaken to interpret this approximate statistic in the light of a twentieth-century definition of democracy as universal suffrage. Nevertheless, Ireland earned the attention, if not always the respect, of British politicians as a substantial part of the king’s realm: that the Irish included a large number who were alienated to some degree by reason of their religion and who had a history of collusion with continental foes did not diminish that attention. It may be said in passing that one of the most important of the altered differences between Britain and Ireland as from the late eighteenth to the late nineteenth century was the very substantial shift in demographic proportion caused by industrialization in England and famine and emigration in Ireland. The tensions of the late eighteenth century are perhaps more readily collated to Keogh’s statement of proportion than to any head-counting within the denominations in Ireland.

Within Ireland the Catholic majority was politically neutralized, though never to the complete security and satisfaction of the more volatile Protestant representatives. In 1792, Burke sought to explain the constitutional adjustments of 1782 by arguing that internal conditions had altered—not numerically, but yet materially—so as to require an alteration of relations between the two kingdoms. Britain, he maintained,
saw that the disposition of the leading part of the nation would not permit them to act any longer the part of a garrison. She saw that true policy did not require that they ever should have appeared in that character; or if it had done so formerly, the reasons had now ceased to operate. She saw that the Irish of her race were resolved to build their constitution and their politics upon another bottom.⁴

Burke did not always advance so positive an account of 1782. He did, however, stress the peculiar difficulties—of language, as much as anything else—caused by the dual alterations of proportionate interest between England and Ireland and between the social groupings within Ireland. ‘The Irish of her race’ is one of the more analytical versions of a nomenclature which occurs also as ‘Anglo-Irish’, ‘West Briton’, and—in the linguistic arena—‘Hiberno-English’. It has the merit of distinguishing between social function (birth, residence, etc. in Ireland) and ancestry (deriving from English planters, etc.), while at the same time conjoining those elements in a more positive manner than the schismatic hyphen of its principal rivals. When the social world of the Anglo-Irish was finally eclipsed (in the generation of Elizabeth Bowen who has written so beautifully on the subject) it was as if the hyphen, which had always been a signally diminished equation mark, (p.48) which had always been a signally diminished equation mark, became a minus sign, a cancellation.
In the same letter of 1792 to Sir Hercules Langrishe, Burke employed the ‘too much and too little’ device of C. T. Greville to emphasize his point: ‘The Protestants of Ireland are not alone sufficiently the people to form a democracy; and they are too numerous to answer the ends and purposes of an aristocracy.’ The internal problem, as Burke presents it, resembles Greville's in outer form. But ‘too great to be unconnected’ and ‘too little to be independent’ is as near to tautology as paradox. Furthermore, Greville was speaking of geographical proximity which, while it may be affected by changes in strategic alliances and in the technology of war and trade, is in a sense a stable relation. Burke in contrast is dealing with classes, and classes are not prescribed bodies of men and women. It is true, of course, that men and women sometimes may behave as if class were just as it is here denied to be. But as class consists of a series of relations in social, economic, political, and cultural activity, there will be many individuals involved in more than one ‘class’ by dint of the complexity of their social existence. Class conflict, therefore, does not resemble the warfare of opposing armies, each dressed in exclusively distinguishing colours. Conflict arises when the requirement of different sets of relations are brought antagonistically to bear on an area of social activity where each claims validity.
It will be clear that the operations of language may be crucial in deciding how such conflicts develop. Antithesis (offered by Greville in terms of distance and proximity, by Burke in terms of class roles and forms of government) is a frequently employed expression of Anglo-Irish relations at the end of the eighteenth century. Without comment on or commitment to the substantive arguments embodied in these pronouncements, we note their characteristic balance of similarity and dissimilarity, their neo-classical formalism. However, the substantive arguments are not absolutely distinguishable from their formalism. Eighteenth-century rhetoric encouraged the definition of issues in the shape of resolvable antitheses, by the value it found in such formulations of moral choice and aesthetic effect. To see the problem as coherent was to go some way towards its solution. Of course, this last view of Augustan optimism sometimes disguises the deflection of attention away from the crucial (but problematic) issues towards others which have the attraction of being resolvable, even if they are to an extent marginal to the urgent inquiry. (Thomas Gray’s Christianity in the Churchyard Elegy is not so much a matter of personal belief as of an acknowledged and conventional system of deflected despair: the irresolvable may be lulled to sleep if rocked on the balanced knees of Antithesis.) The differences between England and Ireland, however, complicated any attempt to apply the antithetical trope to Anglo-Irish relations. By suppressing or neglecting important areas of concurrence, the hostile commentator (from whichever side of the argument) could present the grounds of comparison as too ill-defined to support any resolution—John Keogh’s complaint to Burke focuses precisely on this tactic.
In Burke's writings we find a different reaction. Increasingly as the revolutionary decade advances, recurringly whenever he writes of Ireland, Burke is searching for other, additional rhetorical devices by which to convey a deeper sense of the crisis he dreaded. If solutions are necessarily determined by the range and limitation of the language in which the crisis is explored, then for Burke the revolutionary decade called for something more strictly radical in the political language of those who opposed revolution. The values of Augustanism might be conserved but only by a drastic departure from the norms of Augustan optimism. The gathering darkness of Burke's utterances on Ireland in his last years is well known: it should not be held apart from the stylistic experiments of the *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. Burke was rarely guilty of neglecting the concurrences in order to exaggerate the differences: England and Ireland were bound together in the imperial system, this was as firmly held by Burke as his eloquent denunciation of the Irish Undertakers of English policy in Ireland. The underlying unity which he saw at the bottom of Anglo-Irish relations was informed by his acute perception of the internal divisions of Ireland. His (p.50) formulation of those divisions allows no happy neglect of external realities. Reading the letters of his last seven years we become aware that he all but makes explicit an imminent tragic conflict between elements in Irish society which are simultaneously irreconcilable and inseparable. Such a perception of things is no olympian detachment: to it Burke contributes the shape of his own complex origins, the experience of an Irish-born English statesman, of Catholic descent, confronted with the violent purism of revolution. It is convenient to summarize the French Revolution as a contest between Jacobinism and the *ancien regime*: in any such scheme of things, Burke is on the side of the ancients. But he spoke against France as an English whig, one of the party who consolidated the bourgeois liberties of the constitution: in this he has some affinity, however estranged, with the underlying logic of Jacobinism. If this nexus were not sufficiently complicated, we add also that as a child of Irish Catholicism who increasingly responded to appeals from that quarter, he also spoke and wrote as the victim of triumphant English whiggery. That tragic note sounds the end of Burke's Augustanism, and heralds Yeats's distinctive assimilation of Burkean politics to a tragic aesthetic.
It was Oscar Wilde who observed that we have everything in common with the Americans—except language. And if late twentieth-century tourists are still discovering that words do not mean quite the same in Boston (Mass.) and Boston (Lines.), it is no less true that the language of politics employed in the late eighteenth century by British and Irish alike had its hidden discrepancies. Where this condition bred new terms, or terms peculiar to one side of the debate, the problem was merely one of familiarity. Where the same word acquired diverging meanings, or developed a new meaning disguised as venerable usage, the results were less easy to control. Of course, to speak of words having meanings on some one-to-one basis is undoubtedly to invoke a concept of language now regarded as naive: this altered perspective on the relationship of language to reality is a further area in which the treachery of an ahistorical, timeless, and universal acceptance of words as fixed should be exposed. Moreover, in time the language of the Anglo-Irish debate is taken up into a growing literature: the relations between so-called ordinary language and literary discourse complicate our approach by positing formal synchronic patterns for analysis and admiration. When Yeats interrogates himself in ‘The Man and the Echo’

Did that play of mine send out
Certainmen the English shot?6
he is not inquiring as to his guilt in the matter of James Connolly's death in that he is not attending exclusively to the diachronic patterns of causation and responsibility. He is posing the question—in characteristically dialectical terms—as to how the language of literature relates to life, life here summoned up in the forceful image of death. His theoretical focus, that is, is upon the synthetic nature of literature. If, for a moment, we anticipate the entire extent and conclusion of this present argument, we can note a significant transition: we move from the antithesis of Augustanism to the synthesis of modernism. Neither antithesis nor synthesis is without its contradictions—or rather, Burke abandoned antithesis precisely because it no longer conveyed the full contradiction of the crisis he foresaw. And in Yeats such theoretical inquiries as those of ‘The Man and the Echo’ usually impinge upon politics with a special and urgent intimacy: it is as if the synthesis were anxious to demonstrate its appetite for ‘the real’ by publicly displaying the elements it thought to subsume. In due course we shall look closely at major texts by Burke and Yeats with these general features in mind. The intervening years are vital to an understanding of the bonds which draw Yeats and Burke together: divergences of meaning between Yeats's century and Burke's are at least as treacherous as those between Boston (Mass.) and Boston (Lines.)

Ireland was strategically important in the king's realm: its inhabitants formed a substantial proportion of his European subjects. Its governmental structure resembled that of Britain: with a monarch (always the reigning British king or queen), and a parliament consisting of Lords and Commons.
The manner in which the Irish parliament was subordinate to Westminster and the English privy council need not detain us here, nor the means by which in the eighteenth century it became the forum of an exclusively Protestant elite. It is not the Protestantism of the Irish parliament which distinguished that body from its English counterpart, but rather the differing denominational allegiances of the parliament and the population en masse. Nevertheless, that lack of concurrence in belief had its effect on the tone of Irish Protestantism, which was on the whole theologically lower than the English Established Church. Pluralism, absenteeism, and the use of ecclesiastical office as a valued token in the system were perhaps no less evident in Ireland than in England. Laxity, at least a marked lack of enthusiasm for enthusiasm, was certainly to be detected in the Irish Church. Transition to nineteenth-century conditions altered many aspects of this image of Irish Protestantism. Extension of the franchise in the nineteenth century in effect extended the areas of denominational conflict; and with the Oxford Movement giving a higher tone to the English Church, and evangelicalism penetrating the Irish, the isolation of Irish Protestantism grew on several fronts. Protestant enthusiasm, fired by a new electoral battle with the Catholic majority in Ireland and by a renewal of ‘Reformation’ zeal, became a means towards political ends, and the legacy of that politicizing of the Irish Protestant churches remains a volatile element in the politics of our own period.
The very word ‘Protestant’ had diverging meanings in the two islands, soon to be joined in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland. For the English, the Reformation produced two parties—the Anglican (Established) Church and Protestant dissenters from the Church: for the Irish, the distinction was more often between the Protestant (Established) Church and various dissenting sects, Presbyterian for the most part. In the twentieth century, the Irish usage has become blurred, but the present writer's uncle, living in south Ulster in the 1950s, used to distinguish (jocularly but with a recent propriety) between Protestants and Presbyterians. **(p.53)** Such instances in which Boston (Lines.) and Boston (Cork) diverge in their use of a word may not seem important. But words combine to form potent and emotive phrases. It is true that in England and Ireland Protestant had its broad and inclusive meaning, and that the concurrence is of broader significance than the divergence. With the arrival of the Hanoverians anxiety about the Protestant Succession was greatly diminished by that dynasty's monotonous reliability in producing male heirs. But towards the end of the century, there emerged a new phrase in Ireland, Protestant Ascendancy, in which the reactions of a revolutionary age were quickly gathered. That now familiar phrase, transparent in its descent to the age of Yeats, is indeed treacherous with altered meanings.

Ascendancy is the central political idea under discussion, Edmund Burke the principal commentator on its emergence in the 1790s. As to the Protestantism of Protestant Ascendancy, two perspectives should be noted at this point. The first is the inclination of some elements in Irish dissent towards deism and to related political notions. These dissenting radicals were distinctively connected with trade, and regarded politics as a matter of commerce rather than theology. The Reverend Edward Hudson, writing to the Earl of Charlemont on 5 July 1799 from Ballymena, County Antrim, described these emerging values as they were affected by the abortive rebellion of the previous year: his letter catches the shifting terminology of these new alignments and reactions:
Things here wear a very different aspect from what they had done for some years past, and indeed, if ever people had reason to be thankful, they of this country have. It is literally a land flowing with gold and silver, which whoever has need not fear the want of milk and honey. Our northerns are not like Dublin tradesmen, who, when trade is good, work one day and drink two. On the contrary, they are working double tides to improve the favourable opportunity ... The word ‘Protestant’, which was be coming obsolete in the north, has regained its influence, and all of that description seem drawing closer together. I only wish their affections may not be so entirely to each other as to exclude all others from a share of them. The Orange system has principally contributed to this. I was no friend to the introduction of it into this (p.54) country, and it has in fact produced the evil I apprehended from it, but, I must confess, it has also produced good which I did not foresee, and which in the then state of the country I did not think could have been produced ... Why, in the name of God, will they not leave us alone at such a time as this? Why interrupt that tide of prosperity which is flowing in upon us? What a stupid question! That very prosperity induces the attempt.  

Hudson is a shrewd witness to Protestant attitudes—his promised land of milk and honey is the profit earned by gold and silver. It is unlikely that ‘Protestant’ was in danger of becoming obsolete in Ulster prior to 1798, though the elements existing within the broader sense of the term were tending towards divergent political objectives. Certainly the aftermath of the abortive rebellion, together with a wartime economic boom, saw a gradual coming together of the reformed denominations, established and dissenting. The imminent Union with Britain, to which Hudson hesitantly refers in concluding his letter, involved promises of emancipation for Catholics to which the dominant Protestant interest objected. The bankers of Dublin, with the Orange-men, constituted a formidable opposition to Union, which only the appropriate arguments of reward and conjured-up papist aggression could overcome.
The second perspective in which the ascendancy of Protestantism should be considered refers to relations with Catholics rather than with fellow-Protestants. Hudson notes the feeling that Catholics are to be excluded from the affections of the converging Protestants ‘and all of that description’. This growing antagonism is hardly new in itself—remember 1690, or 1641 for that matter—but there is a distinctive quality contributed to it by the revolutionary state of Europe. Edmund Burke had expressed the situation more trenchantly than Hudson, in a letter to his son:

A very great part of the mischiefs that vex the world arises from words. People so on forget the meaning, but the impression and the passion remain. The word Protestant is the charm that locks up in the dungeon of servitude three millions of your people. It is not amiss to consider this spell of potency, this abracadabra, that is hung about the necks of (p.55) the unhappy, not to heal, but to communicate disease. We some times hear of a Protestant religion, frequently of a Protestant interest. We hear of the latter the most frequently, because it has a positive meaning. The other has none.
Our two perspectives on the Protestantism of Protestant Ascendancy—a convergence of the reformed denominations, and a growing antagonism towards the Catholics—may of course be conflated. Hudson neatly translates the biblical land of milk and honey into the prosperity of his ‘northerns’: Burke insists that Protestantism is interest, not religion. Both are concerned to acknowledge the talismanic quality of such a word as Protestant: what lies between them in simple chronological terms is the rebellion in which Protestant-becoming-radical is defeated, and Catholic-becoming-rebel is exposed and exhibited. Burke did not live to see the rebellion he all but prophesied, and his was a darkly coloured testimony to sectarian feeling in the 1790s. An authenticating mark—and a limitation—of his account of Protestantism as interest is its ferocity; his account of the birth of Protestant Ascendancy is similarly compromised by the multitude of his own engagements in the image he strives to convey. A fuller investigation into the origins of Protestant Ascendancy will follow; for the moment we have noted its readiness on the margins of our argument, readiness to assume to a grander degree the hypnotic powers attributed by Burke to the phrase. From the literature of Yeats's age we know that those powers were exercised and remarkably transformed. It remains to be seen what particular vacuum will be appropriated by the new talisman.
Ireland, like Britain, was monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy; that is, it was ruled by 'kings, lords, and commons'. The theory was clear enough. In January 1792, it was summarized in the Irish parliament: 'Aristocracy ... reflects lustre on the crown and lends support and effect to democracy while democracy gives vigour and energy to both, and the sovereignty crowns the constitution with dignity and authority ...'.

This has a suitably Whiggish turn to it, for it is the work of Henry Grattan, doyen of Irish parliamentarians between the constitutional adjustment of 1782 and the Union of 1800. Though he is paraphrasing an English minister's definition, Grattan is also adhering to familiar and traditional explanations. Aristocracy is that element under the constitution which descends from the feudal order of nobles whose military service to the crown was rewarded with hereditary distinction. Of course the British nobility included many who could not trace their titled line further back than a few generations, and the creation of new peerages was by no means restricted to military men. There was nevertheless a consensus of feeling that the British nobility, no matter how it had developed in post-medieval society, still perpetuated the spirit of its origins. The trouble in Ireland was that the prehistory, so to speak, of aristocracy, was entirely different.
The dislocated sense of an aristocracy in eighteenth-century Ireland has several sources. One of these was the disturbed and divisive history of the medieval period, and its survival in modern consciousness. Another, even more immediate in its impact, was the existence on the Continent (and to some extent at home) of a Catholic aristocracy bearing distinctly Irish titles but excluded from Irish political life. Some of these exiles were descendants of Elizabeth I's defeated Irish earls, others were Jacobite relics, the scions of 'Wild Geese' migrants. The twelfth baron Trimleston, petitioning for Catholic rights in 1759, had returned from exile in France, and had inherited his title and estates. This residual Catholic element among the bearers of Irish titles underlined the influx of newly created beneficiaries of recent confiscation and plantation. For those who had access to the Gaelic poetry of Daithi O Bruadair (1650–1694) and Aodhagain O Rathaille (1670–1728) the superiority of the old aristocracy over the new was a familiar theme. In short, the history of the smaller island had seen the development of an Irish peerage with relations to society as a whole quite distinct from those which had given the English aristocracy its lustre.

There was a crucial extension to the evidence of the Irish aristocracy's dislocation from the ideal—the extensive use of the peerage as a form of political patronage. Within a hundred years its ranks almost doubled. R. B. McDowell neatly encapsulates the British attitude to Irish nobility by recording that

on one occasion George I was said to have professed himself more ready to grant an Irish peerage than a K.B., adding for good measure that he could make a lord but not a gentleman; and George III, it was rumoured, when he would not permit a Welsh baronet to make an avenue from his house to Saint James's Park, softened the refusal by the offer of an Irish peerage.11

Thus, in addition to embodying in hereditary form the divisions of Irish history, the peerage also demonstrated Ireland's accessibility to the English administration in matters of rewards for services rendered. After 1782, the Irish opposition became especially interested in this debasement, as they saw it, of the Irish peerage. In his speech of 19 January 1792 from which we have already quoted, Grattan finally apostrophized the English minister he had paraphrased as
He who sold the aristocracy and bought the democracy—he who best understands in practice what is this infusion of nobility—He who has infused poison into this aristocratic and this democratic division of power, and has crowned the whole with corruption. He well knows all this as far as Ireland is concerned to be theatrical representation, and that the constitution of the country is exactly the reverse of those scenes and farces which are acted on the public stages, of imposture and hypocrisy.  

It has been customary to regard this critique by Grattan and his associates of the Irish peerage in terms of Whig liberty. Certainly, the view of Grattan advanced by Yeats in the third section of ‘The Tower’ owes much to W. E. H. Lecky’s consolidation of Grattan’s reputation in his *Leaders of Public Opinion in Ireland*:

>I declare
They shall inherit my pride,
The pride of people that were
Bound neither to Cause nor to State,

(\textit{p.58}) Neither to slaves that were spat on,
Nor to the tyrants that spat,
The people of Burke and of Grattan
That gave, though free to refuse ...

This is a further instance of Yeats’s identification of the peasant and the nobleman, for those who shall inherit his pride are ‘upstanding men That climb the streams until The fountain leap’. These lines intimately associate the Connemara fisherman and ‘a rich man’s flowering lawns’ where

Life overflows without ambitious pains:
And rains down life until the basin spills.
The evocation of Grattan's magnanimity, and the assumed empathy with Burke, are part of Yeats's transformation of history into symbol. In this the poet exploits the long-standing convention that the Irish parliament in its last two decades is referred to as Grattan's Parliament. If the poem is read as presenting in this third section a eulogy of Grattan, then what is suppressed is the impotence of Grattan's style, the isolation of those 'Bound neither to Cause nor to State', the purely oppositional nature of Grattan's condemnation of Irish aristocracy, 'tyrants that spat'. Many commentators evidently wish to read Yeats in this manner, and have no objection to the suppression in that the eulogy satisfies their sentiments. We may do the poet a greater service if we observe the aptness of his choosing as his spiritual forebear one whose style was only painfully related to his active life. Recently, the biographer of 'Speaker' Foster has declared sententious the explanation of Henry Grattan Junior that his father was 'too high to be sold to any Government', and has seen Grattan's refusal to serve in office as 'flamboyant coyness'. There is certainly a discontinuity between the world of rhetorical trope and that of effective power; in Grattan's experience 'unity of being' was remote. John Fitzgibbon, essentially a pragmatist, felt that 'the recollection (p. 59) of Mr. Grattan's splendid periods is but a slender compensation for poverty and the most absolute dependence on Great Britain.' That was in 1785: Burke's tribute in February 1792 effects a neat balance of Grattan's qualities, though the final clause is revealing:

Grattan's speech is a noble performance. He is a great man, eloquent in conception and in Language, and when that is the Case, being on the Right side is of some importance to the perfection of what is done. It is of great consequence to a Country to have men of Talents and Courage in it, though they have no power.
The connection between Grattan’s assault on the Irish peerage and his withholding himself from office should not be drawn too definitively in terms of magnanimity. There can be doubt that a public figure, who declines effective power in office, may yet exercise a beneficial influence on the manner in which the state’s business is conducted. However, by the purely oppositional nature of Grattan’s critique of Irish aristocracy, I do not simply mean that he was thoroughly opposed to its debasement: I mean that his attitude was shaped and informed purely by that which he opposed. He did not so much propose an alternative view of society, simply a selection of better individuals and better motives. According to Grattan’s powerful ally George Ponsonby, it was a favourite theme in 1792 ‘to accuse this side of the House as an aristocracy’, and Anthony Malcomson has recently argued that the Ponsonby/Grattan notions of reform were aimed at increasing the representation of landed property rather than at a noble-minded giving though free to refuse.18 What Grattan certainly feared and resented was the tendency towards ‘the monarchy of clerks’ by which all Irish interests were subordinated to a civil service directed from London.
Historians are familiar with the low reputation of the Irish peerage in the late eighteenth century. The *cause celebre* in this regard is of course the Act of Union: to ensure its (p.60) passage, the Crown promised sixteen new baronies and fifteen promotions of existing peers to higher ranks of the nobility. In this way, the Union-title so neatly exemplified in Maria Edgeworth’s Lord Clonbrony in *The Absentee* came into existence. It can be argued that twentieth-century notions of political morality should not be read back into a context where very different forms of pension and reward were employed—accordingly the Union-titles merely extend the pattern condemned by Grattan in 1792. But there was one crucial distinction between the creation of—say—eighteen new titles for the 1776 elections and the 1800 exercise. It is this, in the eighteenth century patronage was a reward for services rendered and still renderable: in 1800 the Irish parliamentarians rendered themselves incapable of service. This, at least, is an accepted view with much to recommend it: as Oliver MacDonagh has persuasively argued, the fecklessness displayed by Maria Edgeworth’s Rackrents in her novel of 1800 is prophetic of nineteenth-century developments in Irish land-ownership. However, the voluntary liquidation of the Irish parliament and the transfer of Irish representation to Westminster should also be seen in the broader context of European romantic nationalism, a creed which supplied new criteria for the embarrassment of the Irish aristocracy. For many reasons, therefore, we hear little of a positive nature about Irish aristocracy as such, in the nineteenth century. The term had imploded into a functionless vacuum or was otherwise deprived of any power to impress. The eclipse of one term, however, may make possible the emergence and transformation of another. ‘Ascendancy’ gradually came to act in Hiberno-English debate many of the roles attributed to aristocracy in England. The means whereby this substitution occurred are not without irony, not without the treachery of altered meaning and forgotten history.

*(p.61)* 2. The Birth of Ascendancy
Ascendancy #x2014;shows belief in astrology

(J. M. Synge)
In the matter of Anglo-Irish culture of the late eighteenth century Edmund Burke is an expert witness. That is, he knows too much. An impartial committee of inquiry is readily confused and irritated by the kind of familiarity and intimacy which Burke lends to his testimony. He is unwilling (and, at times, unable) to reduce his experience to the categories of objectivity. His thought runs ahead to the consequences of an argument, or runs back to the origins of a complaint. It is not that he lacks sagacity or a sense of occasion: on the contrary, his public utterances on Ireland roll with the same music as the *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. There is, however, another side to Burke to which the modern reader has access, the private side of the orator as revealed in his voluminous correspondence. From a consideration of both sides of the witness, we can now see that Burke is not only expert witness, but also prosecutor, plaintiff, and accused.

He had been born in 1729, the second son of Richard Burke, a Dublin attorney. The elder Burke had been a Catholic, and his wife (a Miss Nagle) continued to practise her religion privately. Edmund was educated as a Protestant, entered Trinity College Dublin, and subsequently the Middle Temple in London. He married Jane Nugent in 1756, whose father Christopher remained a Catholic and a friend of Samuel Johnson's. Burke's career lay almost entirely in England, first as journalist, writer, and secretary, and—after 1765—as an MP in the Whig interest. He visited Ireland on a number of occasions, but there is no historical foundation for Yeats's line in 'The Seven Sages':

*The First. My great-grandfather spoke to Edmund Burke In Grattan's house.*²²
Despite his career in Westminster, Burke remained attached to the country of his birth, championing Irish trade and Catholic emancipation. It is particularly worth noting the coinciding of his campaign against France (commencing in 1790 with the Reflections) with his growing commitment to emancipation for Catholics and with his anxiety concerning conditions in Ireland. The ill-fated experiment of appointing Burke's patron, the Earl Fitzwilliam, as Lord-Lieutenant in Ireland (1795) marked a key moment in his relationship with his homeland. From the recall of Fitzwilliam in February 1795 to his own death in July 1797, Burke's letters are dominated by the imminence of death and inescapable conflict in Ireland. In December 1796, he wrote to The Reverend Thomas Hussey, later Catholic bishop of Waterford:

You state, what has long been but too obvious, that it seems the unfortunate policy of the Hour, to put to the far largest portion of the Kings Subjects in Ireland, the desperate alternative, between a thankless acquiescence under grievous Oppression, or a refuge in Jacobinism with all its horrors and all its crimes. You prefer the former dismal part of the choice. There is no doubt but that you would have reasons if the election of one of these Evils was at all a security against the other. But they are things very alliable and as closely connected as cause and effect. That Jacobinism, which is Speculative in its Origin, and which arises from Wantonness and fullness of bread, may possibly be kept under by firmness and prudence. The very levity of character which produces it may extinguish it; but the Jacobinism which arises from Penury and irritation, from scorned loyalty, and rejected Allegiance, has much deeper roots. They take their nourishment from the bottom of human Nature and the unalterable constitution of things, and not from humour and caprice or the opinions of the Day about privileges and Liberties.23
Burke's sense of the inadequacies of antithesis is evident here. ‘If the election of one of these Evils was at all a security against the other’ is a conditional clause from which Irish Catholics might derive no security whatever. The letter to Hussey is valuable in that it reveals the vigour—not to say, violence—of Burke's feelings, vigour which was more harmoniously arranged in some of his published comments. It also reveals the identification of opposites which gives to (p. 63) his thought a dialectical compaction and concreteness. It is part of his withering irony to dramatize this tragic pact between the upholders of the Protestant Succession in Ireland and the Jacobins of Paris by means of transferring epithets: thus, the Dublin administration becomes ‘the Irish Directory’ and Napoleon is ‘the Zealous Protestant Buonaparte’ whose successes are greeted as ‘Protestant Victories on the plains of Lombardy’. There is more to this tactic than a juggling of words, a rearrangement of the terms of a trope: the central implication of Burke's account is that the Catholics of Ireland cannot succeed in their legitimate demands against such a combination of hostile foes.

But Burke's scathing use of Protestant as a synonym for Jacobin or Bonapartist should not lead us to assume him a zealous Catholic partisan. In his early writing on the Penal Laws, he was at pains to speak of ‘our common Christianity’, and in his letter of 1795 to William Smith he commends particular attention to ‘the great points in which the leading divisions are agreed’. He was often accused of secret devotion to the sacraments of the Catholic Church, but the motive was generally malicious. Undoubtedly Burke's imagination had a decidedly Christian shape—fortitude and charity are characteristic forms which his advice takes in moments of crisis. But even the distressed letters written after the death of his beloved son, Richard, reveal a philosophical temper within his religious belief. In a public pamphlet he described his grief and his consolation:

The storm has gone over me; and I lie like one of those old oaks which the late hurricane has scattered about me. I am stripped of all my honours, I am torn up by the roots, and lie prostrate on the earth! There, and prostrate there, I most unfeignedly recognise the Divine justice, and in some degree submit to it.
The gradually emerging repetitions, and the modulated qualification of the last phrase, reveal Burke as peculiarly sensitive to the manner in which language acts upon feeling. If he employs terms like Protestant provocatively, it is not simply because of his Catholic ancestry: the roots of his late assault upon the Irish Directory lie in his lifelong interest in the language of history. When we look to his account of Protestant Ascendancy, we should recall not only his vigour but also his philosophical temper, his long meditation on Irish affairs and his more immediate anxiety.

Burke's view of history was not so much Irish or English but Anglican. He was profoundly appreciative of the via media which the Church of England had established, and had no sympathy with papal medievalism or unitarian anarchy. His more extended writings on Irish history reflect this latitudinarian position while striving simultaneously to respond to deteriorating conditions among the religious factions in Ireland. The *Tracts on the Popery Laws* date from 1765 and arise directly from the recent outbreak of sectarian violence which had touched on his own family. The various letters of the 1790s—to Hercules Langrishe, William Smith, and to his son Richard—are no less implicated in the atmosphere of increasing communal tension. One constant principle of his argument is that, whatever Irish Catholics may or may not have done in the reign of Charles I or Elizabeth, the perpetuation of punishment upon succeeding generations is foolishly divisive. Nor is it legislation alone which perpetuates division; the writing of history is itself an intervention into events which might otherwise be more harmoniously shaped. Referring to the works of Clarendon and Temple, he deprecates those miserable performances which go about under the names of Histories of Ireland [and which] do indeed represent those events after this manner: and they would persuade us, contrary to the known order of nature, that indulgence and moderation in governors is the natural incitement in subjects to rebel.28

It is Burke's repeated belief that a relaxation of the laws restricting the rights of Catholics would produce a greater integration of the king's Irish subjects into his realms. In the 1765 *Tracts*, however, he juxtaposes to Clarendon and Temple an alternative record:
But there is an interior History of Ireland, the genuine voice of its records and monuments, which speaks a very different language from these histories, from Temple and from Clarendon; these restore nature to its just rights, and policy to its proper order.  

We detect here the pre-romantic philosopher of the sublime and the beautiful rather than the author of the *Reflections*) monuments and inner histories are the stuff of mid-century antiquarianism. Though the *Tracts* remained unpublished in Burke's lifetime one can see him entering a crucial and timely qualification to this view in the *Letter to Richard Burke* (1792):

> The miserable natives of Ireland, who ninety-nine in a hundred are tormented with quite other cares, and are bow’d down to labour for the bread of an hour, are not, as gentlemen pretend, plodding with antiquaries for titles of centuries ago to the estates of the great lords and ‘squires for whom they labour.

Gentlemen's suspicions of antiquarian research as the latest form of Catholic conspiracy should be considered in the context of a new romantic interest in the past. Sylvester O’Halloran's *General History of Ireland* (1774), Joseph Cooper Walker's *Historical Memoirs of the Irish Bards* (1786), and Charlotte Brooke's *Reliques of Irish Poetry* (1789) are the better-known examples of a movement in historiography to which Burke had made his slight contribution in 1765. The *General History* was to have an influence on Standish O'Grady in the 1870s akin to religious conversion, and in the 1830s the Ordnance Survey discovered that inquiries into local tradition and genealogy produced embarrassing evidence of an 'interior history'. Such consequences did not attend the early antiquarians to any notable extent, though it is note-worthy that the antiquarian O'Halloran in Maria Edgeworth's *The Absentee* plays a central role in reconciling past and present, Jacobite and Williamite. What is significant in the 1790s is not so much the achievement of the researchers as the trepidation of the 'gentlemen'. And Burke's timely qualification is in part designed to placate their anxieties.
These anxieties had European as well as local causes. The French Revolution, though welcomed by the Whigs in general, was soon interpreted as having radical implications for British society. Raymond Williams has discussed the manner in which Jane Austen’s fiction relates, not to a settled landed society, but to a society in which land is either held or sought as a palpable form of security in a time of great social change. Back in 1765 Burke had already recognized the conserving inertia of property, and found the exclusion of Catholics from long leases positively a threat to social stability:

This confinement of landed property to one set of hands, and preventing its free circulation through the community, is a most leading article of ill policy; because it is one of the most capital discouragements to all that industry which may be employed on the last improvement of the soil.

By the 1790s the rights of Catholics to hold land had been modified, but the apprehension of Protestants that their monopoly was thereby threatened increased in proportion to the European crisis rather than the local one. Burke is remarkable for the manner in which he sees economic policy, religious bias, and historiography as forming a coherent social and cultural pattern. Those upon whom he was soon to turn his scorn were remarkable for the manner in which they substituted the single concept or slogan of Protestant Ascendancy for the complexity of a society in crisis.

The progress of the French Revolution required of the British government some further reconciliation with the king’s Catholic subjects in Ireland. An unsettled Ireland was a dangerous breach in Britain’s defences, and since 1782 (and earlier) Ireland had displayed a plethora of discontents.
Political radicalism among Presbyterians and traditional petitions for restored civil rights from Catholics were further complicated by the spread of violence in the countryside. Protestant Peep O'Day Boys and Catholic Defenders were active from the late 1780s onwards, and the Orange order was born in 1795 as the consequence of accelerating sectarian strife. If the Defenders had some ancestry in the Whiteboy movement of mid-century, and if their name truly reflects some initial emphasis on defensive tactics, the Protestant ‘grass roots’ organizations represented a new element in Irish unrest. Explicitly sectarian in composition, they approached social and economic matters on the assumption of a supremacy as much mythological as historical. Burke was quite capable of seeing incidents of sectarian prejudice in exaggerated terms, and he may never have fully grasped the implications of the new movement among the Protestant tenantry. In 1792, however, he concentrated most effectively and ironically on the slogan of the hour, Protestant Ascendancy.

It would be foolish to attempt to establish the exact moment at which the phrase was conceived. The elements of the term are, after all, common enough in themselves—even if we make allowances for the slippery meaning of Protestant in Anglo-Irish affairs. Thomas Leland, whose History of Ireland escaped Burke's comment in the Tracts by appearing in 1773, is said to have been fully aware of the false colouring of his work and to have justified himself by claiming a need to support ‘the English ascendancy in Ireland since the reformation’. By this token, ascendancy is the condition enjoyed by those principles or forces which predominate or are in the ascendant in the sense that a planet may be said to be so. Dr Johnson, in his dictionary, illustrates the word by a quotation from Watts which has, for us, an ironical application—‘Custom has some ascendancy over understanding, and what at one time seemed decent, appears disagreeable afterwards.’ As a potent collocation, Protestant Ascendancy may be dated with some certainty to the early weeks of 1792, when Hercules Langrishe and others were active in reviving proposals for a generous restoration of civil rights to Irish Catholics. Given the subsequent currency of the phrase, in particular given the manner in which Yeats will deploy it while invoking Edmund Burke as his mentor, a close history of its evolution in 1792 is called for.
By the end of 1791 the British government were resolved on a relaxation of the penal laws in Ireland. The relative independence of the Dublin parliament together with the complexity of any negotiation with the Irish establishment presented a considerable obstacle to their intentions. On 26 December, Henry Dundas, the Home Secretary, wrote both an official and a private letter to the Earl of Westmorland, the Lord-Lieutenant in Dublin Castle. Emphasizing the importance of conceding this reform to achieve harmony between the two kingdoms, Dundas made it plain that Irish Protestant resistance to the king’s advisers and their plans would serve only to isolate them from the traditional support they enjoyed in their relations with Westminster. Westmorland replied in some consternation on 11 January 1792, and while he stressed the strength of the ‘Protestant gentry’, of the ‘Protestant interest’, and, bluntly, ‘Protestant power’, there is no sign of the phrase ‘Protestant Ascendancy’. More precisely, the word ‘ascendancy’ is cited only in such a way as to indicate that its imminent collocation with ‘Protestant’ has as yet no currency. Proposals to enfranchise Catholics, even if limited to elections for county seats, would mean that ‘they would gradually gain an ascendancy, and would soon be enabled to make a successful attack on the tithes and established clergy, so odious to themselves and the Presbyterians …’. Between 11 and 14 January, Westmorland communicated the gist of Dundas's (p.69) dispatch to ‘the principal persons called the Irish cabinet’, to John Fitzgibbon (the Lord Chancellor), John Beresford, Charles Agar (the Archbishop of Cashel), Sir John Parnell, the Attorney-General, and the Prime Sergeant:

They all agree in the impracticability of carrying in Parliament either the Point of Arms or Franchise &c in the impolicy of attempting it, & they foresee the Ruin of the Protestant Ascendancy of the Peace & Quiet of the Country in success of such a proposal.
This less than articulate letter is the earliest context in which ‘the Protestant Ascendancy’ has been found. Westmorland’s earlier letter, by not using it, suggests that the phrase may have originated in his meeting with Fitzgibbon, Beresford, and the others. (Indeed it is tempting to consider the Lord Chancellor as its possible author, bearing in mind his immediate Catholic forebears.) Within a few days, Major Robert Hobart, the Chief Secretary, in writing to Dundas repeatedly used the phrase to emphasize the strength of resistance to reform: more particularly he insisted that

the connection between England and Ireland rests absolutely upon the Protestant ascendancy. Abolish distinctions, and you create a Catholic superiority. If you are to maintain a Protestant Ascendancy, it must be by substituting influence for numbers.40

These contexts, whether in Westmorland’s correspondence or Hobart’s, are, however, private, and do not amount to more than a couple of letters written within less than a week of each other. The day after Hobart wrote to Dundas, Westmorland wrote to the Prime Minister, Pitt, detailing the constitution and social structure of Ireland so frankly as to accept Edmund Burke’s term for the situation prior to 1782 as appropriate to conditions ten years later:

(p.70) That frame is a Protestant garrison (in the words of Mr. Burke), in possession of the land, magistracy, and power of the country; holding that property under the tenure of British power and supremacy, and ready at every instant to crush the rising of the conquered. If under various circumstances their generals should go a little refractory, do you lessen your difficulties or facilitate the means of governing, by dissolving their authority and trusting to your popularity and good opinion with the common soldiers of the conquered? Allegory apart, do you conceive England can govern Ireland by the popularity of the government?41
And to drive home the point about estates held under British tenure, and as the result of conquest, there was the rising murmur among Protestant landowners, as Westmorland acknowledged, ‘the lower Catholics already talk of their ancient family estates.’ These confidential exchanges between Dublin and London, in which the phrase Protestant Ascendancy emerges alongside talk of renaissant Catholic claims to land and title, were due to receive a resounding endorsement in the public forum of the Irish parliament meeting on 19 January 1792. And yet it was not parliament, but a lesser assembly, which seized upon the new coinage.

The debate on Langrishe’s proposals has already been cited in support of Grattan’s position at this time. In reply to Langrishe’s notion for a relief bill, the member for County Wexford, George Ogle, declared

> for my part, Sir, I ever have maintained, and with my last breath I will maintain the protestant ascendancy:—nor can I think it with in the power of human wisdom to do any thing effectual for the Roman Catholics, without endangering that ascendancy in church and state.  

It is clear from this, as from Hobart’s letter, that the phrase is used as the equivalent to Protestant interest (or to the ascendancy of Protestantism) and not to any specific social ‘class’ or party. As yet there is no sense of the phrase meaning the Protestant gentry, or indeed the Protestant aristocracy. That such a collective noun should be discerned is quickly evident—the same morphosis is occurring to aristocracy in the 1790s. Wolfe Tone, of all people, on 23 July 1792 confides in his journal that ‘the Catholics and the Protestant ascendancy are left to fight it out.’ At the same time he records that ‘wherever there was a meeting of the Protestant ascendency, which was the title assumed by that party (and a very impudent one it was), we took care it should be followed by a meeting of the Catholics.’ But before the collective noun emerged, some definition had to be imposed as much on the public mind as on the words of the new slogan.
Ogle's phrase and sentiment was to recur throughout the debate in parliament, but elsewhere in Dublin a more extended definition of its meaning was imminent. On Friday 20 January 1792, the Christmas Assembly of the city Corporation met in the Exhibition House, William Street. The ninth item of business resulted in a committee's being established ‘to prepare an address to his majesty expressive of our attachment to his majesty's person, family, and government, and our determination to support the present constitution both in church and state’. As the committee's efforts have enshrined one of Anglo-Ireland’s most evocative phrases in our rhetoric, it is only proper to record the participants: they were the Recorder (Denis George), with six Aldermen (William Alexander, John Carleton, John Exshaw, Henry Howison, William James, and Nathaniel Warren), and six members of the common council (John Giffard, Ambrose Leet, and Messrs Manders, Powell, Sail, and Twaites.) The address they prepared reads in full:

To the king's most excellent majesty.

The humble address of the Lord Mayor, Sheriffs, commons, and citizens

of the city of Dublin.

May it please your majesty.

We, your majesty's most dutiful and loyal subjects, the Lord Mayor,

(p.72) Sheriffs, commons, and citizens of the city of Dublin in common council assembled, beg leave to approach the throne with the most unshaken sentiments of loyalty and affectionate regards for your majesty's person, family, and government.
Sensibly impressed with the value of our excellent constitution both in church and state, as established at the glorious revolution, we feel ourselves peculiarly called upon to stand forward at the present crisis to pray your majesty to preserve the Protestant ascendancy in Ireland inviolate and to assure your majesty that we are firmly resolved to support it free from innovation and are determined most zealously to oppose any attempt to overturn the same, having a firm reliance on the attachment of your majesty and that of your royal progeny to that constitution, which the house of Brunswick was called forth to defend.

In testimony whereof, we have caused the common seal of the said city to be here on to affixed this 20th day of January, in the year of our Lord, 1792.\(^{46}\)

This is the first stage of the definition of Protestant Ascendancy, which the Corporation will carry a stage further in September of the same year. The crucial development is the identification of ascendancy with the constitution itself, with the principles of the glorious revolution, rather than simply with ‘the Protestant interest’ or ‘Protestant power’. In due course the Corporation transmitted its address to the king through the offices of the Lord-Lieutenant, and proceeded to convey the same sentiments to the two members sitting for the city constituency. These were Henry Grattan and Lord Henry Fitzgerald, brother to Lord Edward Fitzgerald who was to die six years later while resisting arrest as leader of the United Irishmen rebellion. Grattan and Lord Henry were entreated to ‘oppose with all your influence and great abilities any alteration that may tend to shake the security of property in this kingdom or subvert the Protestant ascendancy in our happy constitution’.\(^{47}\) In addition, the Corporation ordered the publication of its address in the *Dublin Journal* and the *Dublin Evening Post*, and the dispatch of (p.73) copies to the chief magistrates of the cities and corporate towns in the country.\(^{48}\)
With the English government keen to accommodate the discontented Catholics, the Irish Opposition in full cry for reform, and the Catholics themselves organized and articulate, the Corporation may well have feared that parliament might have been carried over in the heat of the moment into an extension of Catholic rights damaging to Protestant interests. And whereas parliament was representative principally of land and patronage, the Corporation had a real interest in maintaining the privileges of Irish Protestants as they bore upon commerce and the professions. Langrishe wished to see Catholics free to participate equally in trade and the learned professions, free to bear arms, to intermarry with Protestants, and to vote. ‘The Point of Arms’ and the franchise were rights which none of Westmorland’s advisers could recommend, for the first would have effectively eliminated the convenient state of affairs whereby only government supporters among the lower orders had legal access to firearms, while the second would have soon threatened the permanence of the government itself. ‘Mr. Beresford expresses the strongest attachment’, Westmorland had reported, ‘& desires to do whatever his opinion could justify, but could not declare even to support any concession without L[d] Waterford’s approbation, whose opinions at their last conversation were averse.’ As for the Archbishop of Cashel, he ‘was unwilling to relax at all, tho he saw no mischief in allowing them admission to Trades & liberty of education, he was averse to admission to the Law & even intermarriage ...’.\(^{49}\) The Corporation of Dublin spoke clearly of ‘the security of property’, and in the eyes of a hostile newspaper its motives were basely monopolist:

*We cannot but admire the *modesty* of the Board of Aldermen, in pretending to address the worthy representatives of the city of Dublin, to support their *alert combination*, in favour of their own authority and consequence: and to keep away any possibility of being brought to share the good things of the *city*, with any of their fellow subjects of \((p.74)\) a certain description—city leases, city Maces, city monopolies, and contracts are eligible *douceurs*, which the good and loving master G—, with all his tender regards, cannot possibly allow his Catholic friends to be troubled with any share of.*\(^{50}\)
The sly association of the Aldermen with the subversive combinations of working men is part of a deflating metaphor which runs through the *Morning Post*'s commentary. In its view what is at stake is not the constitution but material rewards of a municipal monopoly. The *Dublin Chronicle*, reporting the Corporation proceedings, records that ‘Messrs Howison, Saul, Powell, Cope, Giffard and some other Members spoke in terms of warm condemnation’ of Catholic aspirations.\(^{51}\) Cope it was who moved that an address be presented, with Bond and Binns objecting. The participation of the common members in the debate underlines its essentially merchant priorities. Giffard, whom the *Morning Post* singled out for ridicule, was an apothecary by trade, who advanced himself by an appointment as surveyor and gauger to the Custom House site when that development was floated under John Beresford's auspices. In 1792, he represented the Apothecary's Guild on the Corporation, and was an intermediary linking the Castle and a spy among the United Irishmen: in 1795 he was dismissed from a post on the *Dublin Journal* and in need of cash from the Lord-Lieutenant if he were to avoid ruin.\(^{52}\) John Giffard, apothecary, gauger, middleman-spy, and journalist, is significant not because his fellow members of the Corporation may with facility be symbolized in his career, but because his advancement and insecurity together summarize the conditions which called forth ‘Protestant Ascendancy’. The phrase is traceable from Dublin Castle to the parliament in College Green, and thence to the Corporation where the involvement of the guild members was prominent. The January initiative did not in itself succeed, and the Chief Secretary wrote to Westmorland that ‘all idea of a Catholic game (if ever such was entertained) is at an end, and that the British Government will decidedly support the Protestant Ascendancy’.\(^{53}\) When Burke came to discuss the emergence of the new phrase he dwelt with a sardonic emphasis on the to-and-fro trading between Corporation and Castle, and on the mentality which characterized Catholic aspirations as a game.
Edmund Burke's involvement in the struggle for Catholic rights was maintained primarily through his son, Richard, who was employed by the Catholic Committee as its agent. Young Burke had come to Dublin on 13 January, and participated in the discussions leading to the parliamentary debate. The House of Commons returned to the issue in February, and in the renewed debate greater attention was given to the meaning of the concept of Protestant Ascendancy. Keen to insist that Irish Protestants should themselves decide the fate of the Catholic question, Richard Sheridan (not the dramatist) advised that

the Roman Catholics of Ireland may now learn that it is to the wisdom and liberality of the Protestants of Ireland they ought to look, and that foreign or ministerial negotiation [sic] must be ever suspicious and never successful: every man must agree, that they are entitled to every benefit and advantage compatible with the preservation of the Protestant ascendancy ...54

Grattan's parliament is renowned for its achievement of a limited independence from Westminster, and its critics deplored the unreformed basis of its representation in so far as it placed this independence potentially under the control of the intransigents. Sheridan's speech is not untypical of the prickly Irish Protestant insistence on rights surpassing those of the British parliament. Fear of Catholic alliances with French or other external radicals was entirely understandable; fear of negotiations with government ministers is symptomatic of that inwardly directed strategy which was to characterize the culture of the 'Protestant Ascendancy' in the nineteenth century. Sheridan's attitude to Langrishe's renewed proposal was far from dismissive, he thought three of its four proposals 'innocent, perhaps desirable', but he (p.76) proceeded to elaborate his notion of ascendancy in such a way as to transform his reservation into a veto: as he knew that
‘Protestant ascendancy’ might be used perhaps by some in a very narrow, and by others in a too enlarged sense, he begged leave to submit his idea of Protestant ascendancy to the House: by Protestant ascendancy he meant, a Protestant king, to whom only being Protestant we owed allegiance; a Protestant house of peers, composed of Protestant Lords spiritual in Protestant succession, of Protestant lords temporal, with Protestant inheritance, and a Protestant house of commons, elected and deputed by Protestant constituents; in short a Protestant legislative, a Protestant judicial, and a Protestant executive, in all and each of their varieties, degrees, and gradations."
If we recall, however, that broadly similar disabilities were maintained in Britain and that the centrality of religious conformism was a self-evident truth in the late eighteenth century, then the resistance of Irish Protestants can be seen as something more than the defence of commercial and social advantage. The real contrast in the argument is not so much between Catholic and Protestant; but between those like Sheridan and Ogle and, shortly, the Corporation of Dublin who expressed loyalty to Protestantism rather than to king or parliament on the one hand, and those on the other hand like Grattan and Burke who acknowledged the primacy of social relations in discussing matters of individual religious belief. If we are here witnessing the public baptism of what W. B. Yeats will later call ‘the Protestant Ascendancy with its sense of responsibility’, we are also witnessing the early exertions of a new force, described by Grattan as Protestant bigotry without religion. This ideology, descending from the intransigents of Grattan’s parliament to the generation of Ian Paisley, is necessarily contradictory: asserting the absolute value of Protestantism above all calculations of social amelioration, it nevertheless founds itself upon ascendancy within society, ascendancy in matters of education, trade, property, political participation. To the eighteenth-century mind, even to the ecclesiastical mind of that period ‘Protestant’ connoted certain principles in relation to Christian belief. Protestantism was likely to substitute the protest for the belief. It is this which Burke alludes to in the ‘Letter to Richard Burke’ when he observes sardonically, ‘we sometimes hear of a Protestant religion, frequently of a Protestant interest. We hear of the latter the most frequently, because it has a positive meaning. The other has none.’
Richard Burke's letters to his father in January and February 1792 form one of the most important accounts of the emergence of Protestant Ascendancy. The phrase, as we have seen, occurred in Ogle's speech of 19 January and is expanded in the Corporation's address to the king the following evening. Young Burke, however, does not use the phrase until about 1 March when he dismisses ‘the foolish partizans of the protestant ascendancy’ and ‘the ascendancy gentlemen’. As late as 6 October he is referring to the Protestant Ascendancy as ‘a new name which the enemies of the Catholics have adopted’. But before that date his father turned his formidable rhetorical skills to an analysis of what may be very properly called the new coinage. The ‘Letter to Richard Burke’ may be dated to a period between mid-February and 10 May 1792. Given the concentrated analysis of our phrase, it seems likely that Richard's letter of c.1 March stimulated his father's endeavours.

The Letter to Richard Burke remains unfinished, and it lacks perhaps the polish of those productions which Burke was able to revise at leisure. Yet leisure was not always the most conducive state in which he worked, and the nervous energy of Burke's focus is complementary to the solemn architectonics of his reflectionary style. Here the object under scrutiny is neither the idealized past nor the conjured distortions of a Jacobin future; it is a distinctively shifting and treacherous present:

(p.78) A word has been lately struck in the mint of the Castle of Dublin; thence it was conveyed to the Tholsel, or city-hall, where, having passed the touch of the corporation, so respectably stamped and vouched, it soon became current in parliament, and was carried back by the Speaker of the House of Commons in great pomp, as an offering of homage from whence it came. The word is Ascendancy. It is not absolutely new. But the sense in which I have hither to seen it used was to signify an influence obtained over the minds of some other person by love and reverence, or by superior management and dexterity. It had, therefore, to this its promotion no more than a moral, not a civil or political, use. But I admit it is capable of being so applied; and if the Lord Mayor of Dublin, and the Speaker of the Irish parliament, who recommend the preservation of the Protestant ascendancy, mean to employ the word in that
sense, that is, if they understand by it the preservation of the influence of that description of gentle men over the Catholics by means of an authority derived from their wisdom and virtue, and from an opinion they raise in that people of a pious regard and affection for their freedom and happiness, it is impossible not to commend their adoption of so apt a term into the family of politics. It may be truly said to enrich the language. Even if the Lord Mayor and Speaker mean to insinuate that this influence is to be obtained and held by flattering their people, by managing them, by skilfully adapting themselves to the humours and passions of those whom they would govern, he must be a very untoward critic who would cavil even at this use of the word, though such cajoleries would perhaps be more prudently practised than professed. These are all meanings laudable, or at least tolerable. But when we look a little more narrowly, and compare it with the plan to which it owes its present technical application, I find it has strayed far from its original sense. It goes much further than the privilege allowed by Horace. It is more than \textit{parce detortum}. This Protestant ascendency means nothing less than an influence obtained by virtue, by love, or even by artifice and seduction; full as little an influence derived from the means by which ministers have obtained an influence, which might be called, with out straining, an \textit{ascendancy} in public assemblies in England, that is, by a liberal distribution of places and pensions, and other graces of government. This last is wide indeed of the signification of the word. New \textit{ascendancy} is the old mastership. It is neither more nor less than the resolution of one set of people in Ireland to consider themselves as the sole citizens in the common wealth; and to keep adominion over the rest by reducing them to absolute slavery under a military power; and, thus fortified in their power, to divide the public estate, which is the result of general contribution, as a military booty solely amongst themselves.\textsuperscript{61}
So far Burke has concentrated solely upon the application of the word ascendancy to the new policy, directed against proposals to grant Catholics civil rights, and he has found disturbing innovations in the usage. His manner is as much hesitant as strategically devious, and his sentences run ahead of the rhythm of his argument. The initial conceit of the phrase as a coinage minted by the public authorities, and then stamped and approved for circulation, is not maintained; instead there follows an involuted recourse to the previous history of ascendancy as a moral term untouched by political or civil usage. This attention to the word as such is then followed by a comparison between ascendancy as it might be achieved by a statesman in the public assemblies of England and the latest Irish usage. ‘A liberal distribution’ of patronage evidently distinguishes the English practice from the Irish—and here Burke's emphasis must be heard to fall upon liberal. With this indirect critique of Irish nepotism, he finally defines new ascendancy as the old mastership.

This is only half of Burke's meditation on the term; he now turns his attention to the Protestant element in Protestant Ascendancy and once again stresses the potency of language as such:

The poor word ascendancy, so soft and melodious in its sound, so lenitive and emollient in its first usage, is now employed to cover to the world the most rigid, and perhaps not the most wise, of all plans of policy. The word is large enough in its comprehension. I cannot conceive what mode of oppression in civil life, or what mode of religious persecution, may not come with in the methods of preserving an ascendancy. In plain old English, as they apply it, it signifies pride and dominion on the one part of the relation, and on the other subserviency and contempt—and it signifies nothing else. The old words are as fit to be set to music as the new; but use has long since affixed to them their true signification, and they sound, as the other will, harshly and odiously to the moral and intelligent ears of mankind.
This ascendency, by being a Protestant ascendency, does not better it from the combination of a note or two more in this anti-harmonic scale. If Protestant ascendency means the proscription from citizenship of by far the major part of the people of any country, then Protestant ascendency is a bad thing; and it ought to have no existence. But there is a deeper evil. By the use that is so frequently made of the term, and the policy which is ingrafted on it, the name Protestant becomes (p.80) nothing more or better than the name of a persecuting fact ion, with a relation of some sort of theological hostility to others, but without any sort of ascertained tenets of its own, upon the ground of which it persecutes other men; for the patrons of this Protestant ascendency neither do, nor can, by anything positive, define or describe what they mean by the word Protestant. It is defined, as Cowley defines wit, not by what it is, but by what it is not.  

62 Once again we can see Burke wrestling with a novel concept. The direction of his analysis is by now familiar enough. A significant assumption, however, is that the penal laws did not so much restrict the rights of Irish Catholics as exclude them from citizenship. This emphasis becomes important when Burke develops it in relation to the way in which Protestant Ascendancy will exacerbate ‘that worst of all oppressions, the persecution of private society and private manners’.  

63 The full title of Maria Edgeworth’s Castle Rackrent, ‘an Hibernian tale taken from the facts, and from the manners of the Irish squires before the year 1782’, indicates the extent to which the novelist approaches society through the microcosm of manners.
Burke's analysis of the new slogan was written in England, in the form of a letter to his son intended from the outset for publication; although it was prepared for the Works of May 1792, the text was unfinished. From this circumstance we can identify a certain urgent irresolution in Burke's thought on the subject. His letters written later in the year substantiate this conclusion by revealing further evidence of his exploratory and yet vigorous interrogation of the phrase. One reason for his difficulty was simply distance from the centre of debate; another was the involuted nature of the debate, generating greater psychic tension in the participants than observers might at first have found reasonable. In the Irish House of Commons, the most extensive and accessible account of Ascendancy came—not surprisingly—from Grattan himself. Richard Burke provided his father with an amusing account of the February debate, juxtaposing the intransigents and Grattan very effectively:

(p.81) Then all the fiery protestants got up and unbottled their nonsense; when they had exhaust'd themselves they began to be a little ashamed of themselves, and after two or three just and grave lectures from the other side, they entirely changed their tone; It was at last 'our catholic brethren' and the idea of perpetual exclusion from the franchise, was generally exploded; tho' when ever any of them argued the point it was upon principles which go to perpetuity and with increasing strength. If the Ponsonbys had not bitch'd the question and played the fool, we should have made a great figure even on the division. Grattan reserved himself to the last and did admirably. Tho' we divided but 25. I know from the best authority, that there were 50 in the majority who were with us in their hearts.64
Richard did not possess his father's penetrating knowledge of Irish politics and the deviousness of great factions like that of the Ponsonby brothers. The elder Burke, however, fully agreed with his son's estimate of Grattan's performance, and it was on this occasion that he recorded his tribute to Grattan's eloquence and nobility, ending with the telling clause about men of talents and courage who lack power. Though Grattan's reputation has inevitably suffered since the panegyrics of his son were transposed into art by W. B. Yeats, his speech on Protestant Ascendancy shows considerable sensitivity to broader movements in European thought than those of Dublin Corporation or the Catholic Committee.

Grattan's speech begins by summarizing very succinctly the existing laws restricting the rights of Catholics, and proceeds immediately to detail three recent controversies on the subject of political freedom—America, Ireland in 1782, France in 1789—which underline the urgency and rationality of Catholic appeals. The utter evaporation of the Stuart cause, and the distraction of the papacy in its conflict with France, remove all objects and resources of Catholic disaffection. The Catholic approaches the Protestant applying simply for participation in a society which he fully acknowledges as lawful and without any Jacobite and chimerical rival, 'he desires you to name your own conditions and terms of abjuration, touching any imputed claim on this subject.

(p.82) After this broadly conceived prologue, Grattan then proceeds less predictably into a theological argument augmenting the general philosophical case:
I am well aware in questions of this sort how little religion affects their determination: however, we must not like ardent disputants, in the fury of the controversy forget the subject, nor [with] the zeal of the sectarist, lose all recollection of the Godhead:—it is necessary to remind you, that the Catholics acknowledge the same God, and the same Redeemer, and differ from you only in the forms of his worship and ceremonies of his commemration; and that however that difference may be erroneous, it is not sufficiently heinous to warrant you in dispensing with the express and prime ordinances of your own religion, which enjoin certain fraternal affection towards all men, and particularly towards fellow christians whom you must allow to be saved, and are commanded to love ...\(^{67}\)

This brief homily may have struck the House as platitudinous: certainly none of the Protestant intransigents saw fit to quote theology in defence of their ascendancy. Yet Grattan’s assumptions are significant in two respects. First, they are the ground upon which he erects the rhetorical paradox of the intransigents’ position according to which Catholics are ‘objects to their brethren of perpetual proscription, and objects to our God ... of perpetual salvation’.\(^{68}\) The hypothesis is directed into a contradiction in terms, so to speak, illustrating to the Augustan mind of the Irish parliament the moral logic inherent in Catholic relief. The second respect in which Grattan’s theological premisses are significant is simply that his assumptions will rapidly disappear in the nineteenth century when anti-Catholic evangelicalism will effectively deny the possibility of salvation to the devout and practising papist.
In this regard, Grattan makes explicit assumptions which are shortly to be challenged, thus pointing once again to the transitional nature of the Protestant Ascendancy debate in the 1790s. No doubt, the hardening of attitude among Irish Protestants in the 1820s and after has its parallel on the Catholic side: in the nineteenth century the Irish priesthood was less tied by bonds of family or class to the dominant Protestant elite, and was by its training more inclined to speak its mind in terms of *ex ecclesia non salus est*. The exclusivism of nineteenth-century sectarian claims has its secular form also, in the emergence of a romantic nationalism which veered in some instances towards theories of racial purity. Grattan's conclusion to his theological discourse touches upon this emergent interest in racial history, while yet reserving for himself a strictly eighteenth-century perspective: if Christianity does not sanction the proscription of fellow Christians, and if the political climate has dissolved the threat of disaffection, 'we must therefore have recourse to some other law':

we imagine we have found it in our own peculiar situation; that situation we state to be as follows: the Protestants are the few and have the power; the Catholics have not the power and are the numbers: but this is not peculiar to us, but common to all nations—the Asiatics and the Greeks—the Greeks and the Italians—the English and the Saxons—the Saxon, English and Normans,—the vanquished and the vanquisher—they all at last intermingled; the original tribe was in number superior; and yet that superiority never prevented the incorporation, so that this state of our settlement is not peculiar to Ireland, but the ordinary progress of the population and the circulation of the human species, and as it was the trick of Nature, to preserve by intermixture, from dwindling and degeneracy, the animal proportions.
This aspect of Grattan's argument is directed against those provisions of the penal laws which levied penalties in terms of property and personal estate on those who intermarried between the denominations. It implicitly identifies the urge towards marital introversion which was to become such a concern of Irish Protestants later, and sets up a case which Yeats dismisses in his drama of *mesalliance*, 'Purgatory' (1938). Indeed Grattan's concluding words on the subject have—ironically—a Yeatsian ring to them:

In some tribes it might have been other wise, but they must have died, before they could reach history, a prey to their disputes, or swept off, by the tide of other nations washing them away in their little divisions, (p.84) and leaving something better on their shore—solitude or a wiser people.70

It is only after these impressive preliminaries that Grattan turns to the question of Protestant Ascendancy. Unlike Burke, who fixes upon the newness of the coinage, or at least, of the collocation of words, Grattan acknowledges the existence of the condition now loudly proclaimed as Protestant Ascendancy. In keeping with their very different origins in eighteenth-century Ireland, he does not share Burke's contempt: 'here another principle is advanced, connected indeed with the argument of [peculiar] situation, the Protestant Ascendancy—I revere it—I wish for ever to preserve it, but in order to preserve I beg to understand it'.71 His difficulties here are not those of Burke who is confronted with a novelty in political phraseology. Grattan is sincerely attached to the constitution under which Church and State are Protestant; he merely urges the inclusion of Catholics to the security of this constitution. His difficulty centres on the problems raised when the condition of Protestant Ascendancy is transformed into the touchstone by which all issues are to be resolved. In short, he interrogates the new slogan on three grounds—its ability to attract the Catholic majority to the defence of Ireland in the event of foreign attack; its ability to resist a Union with England, and finally and most immediately:
can it defend itself against a corrupt Minister?—Is the Protestant Ascendancy able to prevent oppressive taxes, control the misapplication of public money, obtain any of the constitutional bills we have repeatedly proposed, or repeal any of the obnoxious regulations the country had repeatedly lamented?  

Answering his own inquiries in the negative, Grattan finds the notion of Protestant Ascendancy—if it is to be taken as an active force in political and social life—to be spurious: there is in this House one man who has more power in Parliament than all the Protestant Ascendancy—I need not tell you, [you] know (p.85) already, as the Protestant parliament is now composed that which you call the Protestant Ascendancy is a name. We are governed by the Ascendancy of the Treasury.  

Later, in 1795 when the country was already sliding towards the widespread violence of ‘98, he summarized the system in Ireland as ‘the monarchy of clerks—a government to be carried on by post’. But for the moment, it was a ‘Ministerial and an Aristocrate Ascendancy’. ‘From all this what do I conclude?—That the Protestant ascendancy in Ireland requires a new strength, and that you must find that strength in adopting a people, in a progressive adoption of the Catholic body ...’.  

The outcome of the February debates was a limited but significant concession to Catholics who were to be admitted now to the professions, to higher education, and who were no longer to suffer penalties on marriage to Protestants. A proposal to admit them to the franchise was, however, defeated, and in a sense the Protestant Ascendancy declined to adopt the Catholic body politically. In Britain, most of the existing penal legislation had been repealed the previous year, and the reconciliation with Catholics which Pitt sought appeared to be well under way. By the end of the year 1792, deteriorating Anglo-French relations brought the issue once again to the foreground of discussion, and once again the notion of Protestant Ascendancy was both flourished and ridiculed by opposing factions.
Once again the Corporation of Dublin was in the vanguard, though the stimulus to their fervour lies close to Richard Burke. In January, prior to the debate on Langrishe's motion, a sub-committee of the Catholic pressure group had drawn up a paper addressed to the people of Ireland; according to the northern radical William Drennan, the paper, though signed by Edward Byrne (a leading Catholic merchant), was ‘said to (p. 86) be drawn up by young Burke’. In April a ‘Circular letter proposing a Roman Catholic Convention’ was issued (and apparently printed) under Byrne's name, though it too had been devised by Richard. At a post-assembly of the Corporation held on 11 September, a further publication of Byrne's was considered; it was resolved to publish a letter to ‘the protestants of Ireland’ affirming the aldermen’s loyalty to ascendancy. Having rehearsed the circumstances which led to the Glorious Revolution and which called forth ‘severe but necessary restrictive laws’ the letter turned to ‘the protestant ascendancy, which we have resolved with our lives and fortunes to maintain’:

And, that no doubt may remain of what we understand by the words ‘Protestant Ascendancy we have further resolved, that we consider the protestant ascendancy to consist in A Protestant King of Ireland, A Protestant Parliament, A Protestant Hierarchy, Protestant Electors and Government, The Benches of Justice, The Army and the Revenue. Through all their Branches and Details, Protestant: And this System Supported by a Connection with the Protestant Realm of Britain.’

The final claim of loyalty to Britain passes over in silence the British reforms of 1791, and instead insists that ‘the protestants of Ireland would not be compelled by any authority whatever to abandon that political situation which their forefathers won with their swords, and which is therefore their birth-right; or to surrender their religion at the footstool of popery.’
Much of this was relayed by Richard Burke to his father in London in his letters of 6 and 10 October. Burke had already expressed his views on the nature of Protestant Ascendancy— it was the old mastership—but he was now provoked into more fragmentary (though no less telling) definitions in his reply to his son. He refers contemptuously to ‘the Jobbing ascendency’ and their policy ‘of representing the Country to be disposed to rebellion in order to add to their Jobbs for the (p.87) merit of keeping it under’.\(^80\) Grattan visited him in England and reported that ‘they who think Like them are in a manner obliged to decline all society’ because ‘the ascendants are as hot as fire’.\(^81\) The Ascendancy is, ultimately, ‘that Junto of Jobbers’.\(^82\) There can be no doubt that it was the intervention of the Dublin Corporation, with its interests in commerce, which prompted Burke’s image of Protestant Ascendancy as a word lately struck in the mint. The junto of jobbers embraces more than the Corporation—it touches upon the whole system of patronage by which the Dublin administration governed the country. Burke’s later comments on the Protestant Ascendancy have that anguished impatience and abruptness which is characteristic of his last years. Indeed the last paragraph of the *Letter to Richard Burke* in its incompleteness catches his central response to the revolutionary decade in Ireland: ‘All titles terminate in prescription; in which (differently from Time in the fabulous instances) the son devours the father, and the last prescription eats up all the former.’\(^83\)

Prejudiced though Burke undoubtedly was on the question, and distraught though he was in his final years, his assessment of Ascendancy carries more conviction than any other. This is partly due to the purely assertive character of the ascendants’ own definition and justification, who offer nothing to compare with Grattan’s political and theological analysis. William Drennan, in many ways diametrically opposed to Burke politically, concurs with him in seeing the Ascendancy as ‘only a few men actuated by the most monopolizing spirit’.\(^84\) Writing from Dublin about April or May of 1793, Drennan records a temporary commercial consequence of the post-assembly resolutions which the ascendants can not have anticipated:
The city appears as quiet as usual, but you meet hosts of manufacturers on the quays begging for relief, and probably there will be parochial meetings for this purpose, who may take this opportunity of expressing (p. 88) their detestation of a war that has been the cause of such national calamity; but many think that the war has rather accelerated or ripened the evil than been the sole cause of it. They date the origin of the calamity from the period of the Protestant Ascendancy resolutions, in which the Corporation of Dublin was so distinguished ...

Drennan's economic analysis can be faulted, but he confirms the importance of the Corporation in giving currency to the new slogan, and thus confirms the date of its adoption. If George Ogle and Richard Sheridan vie with the Corporation for the distinction of announcing the birth of Protestant Ascendancy, it is to Edmund Burke that we must look for the most penetrating account of its social origins. By his conceit of the Tholsel and the mint, and by his repeated accusation of jobbery, Burke emphasized the close association of Ascendancy and commercial advantages as enjoyed by a Protestant elite challenged by an emergent Catholic bourgeoisie.
Given the manner by which Protestant Ascendancy became the rallying cry primarily of the landed classes adhering to the Church of Ireland, the Burkean imagery is noteworthy, indeed crucial in revealing the concrete bourgeois motivation of Ascendancy. In time the phrase will enter Yeats's political aesthetics, and in the course of that development its identification with landed property is intensified, despite its origins among the merchant-aldermen and the farmers of patronage. Lord Abercorn in 1792 dismissed ‘the silly ... phrases of Protestant interest and Protestant Ascendancy’, though in the commonly accepted definitions of later years he was typical of the Ascendancy position. This transference of the phrase from its commercial-bourgeois origins to a provenance of landed estate should be interpreted specifically in relation to the gradual erosion of landed estate as a political reality during the nineteenth century in Ireland; that is, it should be seen as the propagation of a false sociology. Such a process can be traced equally clearly in relation to the alleged historical moment of Ascendancy: for Yeats and those who follow him, the flowering of the Protestant Ascendancy was a period (rather imprecisely defined) in the eighteenth century associated broadly with the names of Swift, Berkeley, Goldsmith, Grattan, and Burke. Recovering the evidence of the Dublin Corporation resolutions, we can begin to appreciate the extent to which this historical identification reads back into the reigns of Queen Anne and the first two Georges a condition anxiously asserted in the last revolutionary decade of the century.
There is a third dimension to this transformation of the jobbing ascendants into a cultural tradition, and it is specifically linguistic. The years of the French Revolution saw a significant change in the language of social relations in England—new words were borrowed from France or were imposed by the energy of events in Europe and at home. Aristocracy, meaning government by the best (noblest) citizens, has a long pedigree, but aristocrat as meaning an individual who favours such government or is a member of such a governing ‘class’ is a popular formation of the French Revolution dated by the Oxford Dictionary simply to the year 1789. An almost identical process can be observed in the case of democracy and democrat. At the general level, it is obvious that this development is part of the tendency to define class as the aggregate of numbers of individuals on the basis of birth, status, function or whatever: accordingly, it is impossible to belong to more than one class, and this view can be contrasted with the classic Marxist notion that class is constituted by relations and not by biological individuals. In more local terms, we can see the same process which affected aristocracy and democracy at work within the 1790s notion of ascendancy. George Ogle and Richard Sheridan essentially meant by Protestant Ascendancy a state of society in which all executive, legislative, and judicial office was vested in members of the Established Church. In its September 1792 resolution the Corporation of Dublin follows suit. But it is entirely in keeping with the evolution of aristocracy and aristocrat that the personnel should supersede the principle, and that almost simultaneously ascendancy should be used to identify a social group. Burke defines new (p.90) ascendancy as the old mastership but, cautious of neologisms, he hesitates to adopt the group terminology: ‘the ascendents’ is his usual term which, in its absence of sonority, assists him to recognize a ‘Junto of Jobbers’.  

Throughout the summer Catholic meetings and petitions had been vigorously challenged by Protestant declarations and resolutions. The appearance of this opposition at first gave a check to the plan of the reformers, until the latter obtained a legal opinion in their favour to the effect that their procedure, so long as it was peaceably conducted for the purpose of petitioning, was in no way a violation of the law. It was in this autumn mood of Protestant intransigence that one newspaper sought to typify the ascendancy spirit:
A Protestant ascendancy BREWER at Castle Bellingham has unfortunately turned all his ale to vapid by the warmth of his religious zeal, that all his Roman Catholic customers have left off drinking it. In vain does he declare he had no guile in signing the manifes to of the county Louth inquisition against the devoted Catholics. They have resolved to drink no man's ale, who would swallow all their rights, and have come to are solution of letting his tub stand upon its own bottom. If every little ignorant demogogue was thus spiritedly bereft of support by the people, on whose characters, principles and national rights he presumed to trample, we should have less of vapouring for the ignorance and bigotry of those ascendancy Bashaws who infest society, and bring their little firkins of religion to market.88
The mocking spirit of this, allied to Burke’s more formidable invective, may be difficult to reconcile with the subsequent dignities of the Anglo-Irish Protestant Ascendancy. The Dublin resolutions, personified perhaps a shade unfairly in the wretched figure of John Giffard, do relate logically to the sarcasm of the reformers. But the logic is that of a widespread social neurosis, a British and Irish *grande peur*. Ascendancy, by its upward movement from being the synonym of mere interest to being the principle of the constitution itself, facilitated the stimulation of anxiety among Protestants. Yet it took over thirty years to create an electoral context in which the numerical superiority of Catholic voters was fully effective. Approaching the Catholic Emancipation crisis, Baron Rossmore wrote in August 1827 to Daniel O’Connell reporting the contents of a letter he had sent to George Canning, the Prime Minister, ‘pointing at the necessity of tearing up the Ascendancy faction by the roots’.\(^{89}\) Ascendancy was for some, as late as 1827, the badge of faction, but the manner of its evolution and dissemination was covert. In so far as Hobart reports it to London, it appears to be handed down from above—the Aldermen encouraging the guild representatives to resolve with their lives and fortunes, emphasize this direction. Yet its effect depended on the reception accorded by middleclass Protestants rather than by London or the Irish nobility. Catholics, reformers, and radicals decried the overheated rhetoric of Giffard and the Castle Bellingham brewer, but their attitude only tends to confirm the ideological nature of the ascendancy appeal. Intending to subvert neither Church nor State, Catholics found it difficult to take the plethora of slogans and accusations as the substance of the debate, whereas it was precisely the substitution of ideology for reality which characterized the 1792 crisis. Only Burke, and Burke only to a limited extent, recognized the importance of acknowledging the reality which this substitution ultimately conferred upon a false sociology. This blend of anxiety, assertion, and deluded rationalism leads naturally into the United Irishman rebellion of 1798, and colours the relations between landlord and tenant in the first third of the nineteenth century. Those two areas constitute the ground upon which Anglo-Irish fiction will grow: the events of 1792 provide a vocabulary and not a theme.

That phrases were at the time flying thick and fast may be judged by a letter which Abercorn received from his sup-
porter George Knox in December 1792, distinguishing finely between Protestant Supremacy and Protestant Ascendancy.90 We may conclude from these ‘hard and soft’ options that in the very late eighteenth century there were two notions of Protestant Ascendancy. One simply was the state of affairs (p. 92) as it stood: of this Burke wryly suggested that it ‘would be more prudently practiced than professed’; and Grattan added that though he revered it he found it difficult to justify as a political ne plus ultra. According to this reading, Protestant Ascendancy did exist prior to 1792 but had not been so named: the naming of it constituted more than the mere identification of a familiar condition, it marked a need to go beyond the experience to establish a doctrine. Furthermore, this implicit condition was neither unalterable nor to any high degree admirable—it was the status quo diluted with a hint of compromise and a tincture of self-interest. The second notion was, in local terms, an aggressive call to resist the admission of Catholics to citizenship, or it was the doctrine in the name of which such a call was made. The second notion required no extensive proto-history, either implicit or explicit for it was specifically a response to the pressures of the revolutionary age. In broader terms than the local, this second interpretation exemplifies the emergence of an ideology, that is, a false sociology according to which real changes in society are presented in unreal formulations so as to facilitate these changes by deflecting attention towards the chimeras of abstraction. The larger political implications of this development lie beyond a study of specifically literary forms of consciousness, though in the Anglo-Irish instance the two are rarely separable for very long. We have seen how the notion of an aristocracy in Ireland was bedevilled by an acute consciousness of lapses from the ideal. (The acute consciousness is at least as important as any deficiency or delinquency of morals.) Already, in Regency England, there is soon discernible that ‘bourgeoisification’ of the aristocracy which is often thought to be characteristically Victorian. In Ireland, the pattern differs significantly. A Protestant elite, administering a largely rural society, assumes the identity of the Ascendancy, thereby gradually arrogating to itself the status of a raffish aristocracy and the security of a restricted bourgeoisie from which Catholics will be rebuffed by a flamboyant sectarianism devoid of Christianity. The evangelical fervour of the 1820s and after is an essential part of this process of exclusion and introversion. As for the culture
of this stratum of Irish society, so memorably incorporated into poetry by W. B. Yeats, MacNeice saw in it ‘nothing but an obsolete bravado, an insidious bonhomie and a way with horses’. The critic who approaches Yeats by way of his attitude to the Protestant Ascendancy of late Victorian and Edwardian times should bear in mind that Yeats, even at his most thoroughly elegiac or celebratory, is always a dramatic intelligence assuming, assisting or creating dramatic tensions and transformation within the material he chooses to employ. That he should find culture where MacNeice finds bravado is not blindness on Yeats's part, but part of a comprehensive poetic strategy: one is more likely to identify imperception in Yeats if one insists on interpreting the poetry simply as celebration or elegy to the neglect of ironic and dramatic tonalities.

The contradictions inherent in this emergent identity, upon which Yeats was later to meditate so actively, were quickly manifested. It was Edmund Burke's view that for many months rebellion in Ireland was deliberately provoked; and when it came in 1798 it proved a terrible demonstration of the passions represented by the new factionalism and the new phraseology of the decade. An anonymous pamphleteer, writing in the wake of the rebellion, traced the sequence of events from the constitutional revision of 1782 down to the massacres at Wexford Bridge:

If an agreement had been made at the Revolution [i.e. in 1782] to select one county in Ireland, for trying an experiment of the effect of Protestant Ascendancy, I defy any man to point out a circumstance that has been wanting to make that experiment in the most satisfactory manner in the county of Wexford. Who that knew the county of Wexford, or had ever heard of the Protestant boys of Wexford, could have conceived that the Roman Catholics should have risen there? And yet such is the fact: the rebellion not only broke out there, but was marked with atrocities that disgrace human nature. Does this example encourage us to extend Protestant Ascendancy over the rest of the kingdom?
Rebellion in Ireland, at a time of European war, led directly to the Union of Ireland with Great Britain in 1801. But the sequence of events stemming from the 1792 debates, through provocation and rebellion to Union, provided a traumatic incentive to various parties for the adoption of the term, Protestant Ascendancy. For the Protestants, it was the central object of the Glorious Revolution itself, identified increasingly with a pre-Union golden age, but sedulously maintained in a contemporary mythology of castles and cabins. The final selection of ‘the Ascendancy’, as distinct from some term comparable in its structure to aristocrats democrats, is a preference not only for personnel over principle, but it is a preference for an abstraction of class within which the sociology of Ireland may be conjured anew. Burke himself warned his son of the dangers involved in the Catholics adopting the new terminology as a means of demonstrating the moderation of their claims, ‘what is it that they got by adopting at all this new Idea of Protestant ascendency?’. For the Catholics to take up such terms was to render themselves passive before ‘this spell of potency, this abracadabra, that is hung about the necks of the unhappy, not to heal but to communicate disease’. Despite these warnings of the insidiously reciprocal effect of an ideological imposition in the language, Protestant Ascendancy is indeed taken up by Irish Catholics as describing at once a degenerate oligarchy and a principle of exclusion from prestige. This manifestly bilateral scheme provided compensation for the renunciations implicit in the Union and in the subsequent modernization of the economy, together with the concomitant cultural trauma.
That Burke recognized the nature of Protestant Ascendancy in its emergence can hardly be doubted. In two observations, more reflective than those of November 1792, he later related the phenomenon to broader perspectives. Indicating a shrewd appreciation of the way in which ‘in all ideology men and their circumstances appear upside-down’,95 (p.95) he proffered a bitterly sardonic tribute: ‘I think it very possible, that to a degree the Ascendents were sincere. The understanding is soon debauched over to the passions; and our opinions very easily follow our wishes’.96 It would be mistaken to summarize this dictum as meaning simply that people usually manage to think to their own advantage. Here indeed is a text fit to be borne in mind as we approach Yeats's ultimate drama of passionate ascendancy, ‘Purgatory’, for Burke's central meaning is the symbolic identity of our faculties, intellectual and sensual. In another observation he provides a further means of relating the particularities of local politics in Ireland to the broader pattern of those expansionist doctrines he opposed in his major campaigns:

I think I can hardly overrate the malignity of the principles of the Protestant ascendency, as they affect Ireland; or of Indianism, as they affect these countries, and as they effect Asia; or of Jacobinism, as they affect all Europe, and the state of human Society itself.97
The profligate exploitation which Warren Hastings personifies for Burke, the bourgeois monarchy which the Jacobins ultimately bequeath to Honore Balzac, and the Protestant Ascendancy which the Dublin Aldermen will contribute to Yeats’s problematic aesthetics—all these form part of the social fabric in which the romantic movement traced its devices. It has been customary to see many of these as retrospective—the occasional medievalism of Keats, the Hellenism of Shelley, and the pervasive recursus of Wordsworthian memory. And Anglo-Irish literature particularly is accepted as obsessed by the past, dominated by its ‘backward look’. Yet no one would question the intensity with which the English romantics were engaged with contemporary experience, were indeed engaged with forming and articulating contemporary experience. It has been the peculiar fate of the Anglo-Irish skein in the romantic tapestry that its concern with the past should be taken as literal, local, and exclusive. The Dublin University Magazine’s attempt to diagnose the condition of literature in Ireland in the 1830s reveals the proper balance of this concern with the past (seen as abbreviated and vestigial) and a complementary apprehension of the future as bodied forth in England’s more advanced condition. The process by which Yeats ultimately renders that past literature traditional is necessarily linked to the notional separation of Ireland from England; and the tragic price paid for this transformation of the inchoate into the sublime is the extinction or elimination of that Ascendancy through which the process was sustained. Burke’s testimony on the subject of Protestant Ascendancy serves to remind us that our method is literary history, a practical consciousness of the past as produced (in our material) in literature, and not the stratigraphy of events heaped one upon the other in some unchanging diagram. So too his insistance on the affinities of Dublin, Paris, and Bombay should teach us that the childish assumption of Ireland’s uniqueness and separateness—Elizabeth Bowen’s confusion of Ireland and Island—substitutes geology where one should attend to the intricacies of a colonial culture.

Notes:
(1) Elizabeth Bowen Pictures and Conversations (London: Allen Lane, 1975), p. 31
(2) Historical Manuscripts Commission (henceforth HMC) Rutland MSS, vol. iii, p. 155; for a further and more elaborate example of antithesis in formulating Anglo-Irish relations in this period see a draft letter from the Earl of Buckinghamshire to Edward Tighe, HMC, Lothian MSS, pp. 394–6.


(5) Ibid.


(9) Burke, Works, vol. vi, p. 69.

(10) Irish Parliamentary Debates (Dublin, 1792), vol. xii, p. 7.


(13) W. B. Yeats, Collected Poems, pp. 222–3.

(14) Ibid.


(16) Quoted Malcomson, p. 364.

(17) Burke, Correspondence, vol. vii, p. 83.


(20) Oliver MacDonagh, *The Nineteenth Century Novel and Irish Social History* (Dublin: National University of Ireland, [1971]), p. 5.


(22) W. B. Yeats, *Collected Poems*, p. 271.

(23) Burke, *Correspondence*, vol. ix, p. 162.

(24) Ibid.


(26) Ibid.

(27) Ibid.

(28) Ibid.

(29) Idem.

(30) Ibid.


(34) Burke, *Works*, vol. vi, p. 43


(35) See Burke, Correspondence, vol. vii, p. 104, n. 9; the phrase quoted, however, derives from Francis Plowden and dates from the early 19th century. For Burke's early encouragement of Leland, and his subsequent disappointment in his History, see Walter D. Love, ‘Charles O’Conor of Belenagare, and Thomas Leland’s “philosophical” history of Ireland’, Irish Historical Studies, vol. 13 (1962), p. 23.

(36) Samuel Johnson A Dictionary of the English Language (London, 1755), vol. i (2G).

(37) op. cit.

(38) Westmorland to Dundas, 11 January 1792: Lecky, vol. iii, p. 43.


(40) op. cit.

(41) op. cit.

(42) Ibid.


(45) Ibid.


(47) Ibid.

(48) Ibid.

(49) Westmorland to Dundas, 14 January 1792.

(50) The Morning Post; or Dublin Courant, 24 January 1792.

(51) Dublin Chronicle, 21 January 1792; for the dissent of Bond and Binns see Dublin Chronicle, loc. cit., and Morning Post, 21 January 1792.

(52) For information etc. on Giffard see Appendix B.
(53) op. cit.

(54) *Irish Parliamentary Debates*, vol. xii, p. 133 (18 February 1792)

(55) Idem. Sheridan speech is printed at pp. 133–5.


(57) *Works*, vol. vi, p. 69.

(58) Burke, *Correspondence*, vol. vii, pp. 86–9;

(59) Ibid.


(61) *Works*, vol. vi, pp. 64–6

(62) Ibid.

(63) Ibid.

(64) Burke, *Correspondence*, vol. vii, pp. 70–1

(65) Ibid.

(66) *Irish Parliamentary Debates*, vol. xii, p. 110.

(67) Idem.

(68) Ibid.

(69) Ibid.

(70) dem.

(71) Ibid.

(72) Ibid.

(73) Ibid.

(75) Irish Parliamentary Debates, vol. xii, p. 114.

(76) Ibid.


(78) op. cit.


(80) Burke, Correspondence, vol. vii, pp. 282, 287.

(81) Ibid.

(82) Ibid.


(84) Drennan Letters, p. 91.

(85) Ibid.

(86) op. cit.

(87) Burke, Correspondence, vol. vii, p. 290.

(88) Morning Post.


(90) op. cit.


(92) Protestant Ascendancy and Catholic Emancipation Reconciled by a Legislative Union … (London: Wright, 1800), pp. 102–3. Earlier the author had inquired of the Catholics ‘will they trust the men, who, in 1792, pledged their lives and fortunes, at their county meetings, to support Protestant Ascendancy …?’ (p. 94). This echoes the wording of the September resolution by the Corporation of Dublin, and refers to the resulting agitation in the country.
(93) Burke, *Correspondence*, vol. vii, p. 292.

(94) *Works*, vol. vi, p. 69.


(96) Burke, *Correspondence*, vol. viii, p. 138.

(97) Burke, *Correspondence*, vol. x, p. 32.