Begrudgery & Brehon Law: A Literary Examination of the Roots of Resentment in Pre-Modern Ireland

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Abstract

This essay traces the published roots of the components of Irish begrudgery in early Irish literature (Táin Bó Cúailnge and other ancient Irish myths) and Brehon legal tracts (such as the Senchus Mór and The Book of Aicill). First, the power of language in a predominantly oral culture is explored through examples like cursing and the peculiarly Irish type of satirist. A brief explanation of the functioning and history of Brehon law is provided, and the connections between Brehon law, literature and begrudgery are considered. Begrudgery is then tied to Nietzsche's theory of ressentiment as both are distinguished primarily by a concern and involvement with power. While the elimination of Brehon law cannot be linked directly to the rise in begrudgery, the two events emerged from the same historical conditions. It was British colonialism that removed Brehon law from Irish society, just as the long colonial period offered a perfect environment for a sentiment like begrudgery to flourish as a widespread social phenomenon. So, while the apparatuses of begrudgery existed well before the English invasion, and although examples of early begrudgers can be found in ancient Irish literature, it was the colonial period that gave birth to modern Irish begrudgery.

Keywords

Irish, literature, myths, history, begrudgery, ressentiment, Nietzsche, colonialism, brehon

1. Introduction

Irish Historian and former Republic of Ireland senator Joseph Lee, in *Ireland 1912-1985: Politics and Society* (1989), asserts: "if begrudgery is rampant in contemporary Ireland, it is a *direct* inheritance from, not a perversion of, traditional Ireland […] Traditional Ireland was consumed with envy" (p. 647). In the essay "The Tradition of Vernacular Hatred" (1991), Nina Witoszek and Patrick Sheeran take Lee's assertion to task, asking: "how does he know? No substantiation for the traditional roots of begrudgery is offered apart from a brief review of its more recent manifestations. If there is a tradition of begrudgery, is it uniquely Irish? How far back does it stretch? What are its sustaining sources?" (p. 13). While many of these issues would be outside of the purview of a study focusing on the twentieth century like Lee's, they do bear examination. As the concept of begrudgery predates the term for it, it

becomes necessary to conduct an examination of the elements that comprise this syndrome. As a psychological/sociological manifestation, begrudgery is not the type of topic that would have been touched on explicitly by most pre-twentieth century historical documents or studies. However, ample examples of the components of begrudgery can be detected in early to pre-modern Irish literature. Furthermore, a perusal of the laws and customs of ancient Ireland demonstrate that the early Irish were quite aware of the effects of the sentiments that comprise begrudgery.

For anyone not raised in Ireland, the first question that may arise is what Lee means when he speaks of "begrudgery"? Irish sociologist and former president of University College Dublin Dr. Patrick Masterson, in his essay "The Concept of Resentment" (1979), defines *begrudgery* as a virulent combination of jealousy, spite, and festering resentment (pp. 157-158). As Witoszek and Sheeran correctly point out, these emotions are by no means unique to the Irish people. Every nation contains begrudging individuals, and many countries have sizable pockets of them. They tend to prevail in small, secluded communities. It is the feeling that arises when the smaller fish begin to resent the slightly larger fish that dominate their tiny pond. Lee clearly feels there is something characteristically Irish in this combination of sentiments, as he insists: "these qualities are now perceived to be so central to the Irish way of life that the Irish have devised their own word to describe the resultant personality type, the begrudger" (1989, pp. 645-646). If one were to look for the "uniquely Irish" aspect of begrudgery, it would have to be a combination of its intensity and its prevalence—in Ireland instances of begrudgery tend to be particularly acute, and it is a national, rather than local or isolated, phenomenon.

To be branded a begrudger is by no means a compliment, as Masterson notes: "in Ireland today one often hears people spoken of disparagingly as 'begrudgers'" (1979, p. 157). In fact, the stance twentieth-century Irish playwright Brendan Behan takes toward begrudgers in his 1959 memoir, *Borstal Boy*, may have been reflective of the opinions of the majority of the Irish people: "'the divil take the begrudgers', said I" (p. 268). What is uncertain is when and why it became so pervasive in Ireland. Examining the history of begrudgery in Ireland, and the sentiments that compose it, becomes important because, as Masterson notes: "before one can change one's situation one must understand it and how it has come about" (1979, p. 157). Therefore, one must look to the distant past to try to understand how and when the modern phenomenon of begrudgery came into being.

2. Discussion

The term "begrudger" as it is commonly accepted is relatively new according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*. The first printed use of "begrudger" that the editors of the *OED* could locate was in Englishman William Morris's 1876 epic poem *The Story of Sigurd the Volsung and the Fall of the Niblungs* in which the Norse god Loki is referred to as "the World's Begrudger, who maketh all labour vain" (p. 98). The first listing for "begrudge" is in *Piers Plowman* (written ca. 1360-1387), although the concept is so innate to the human character that it is essentially pre-lingual.

While the term "begrudgery" may not have existed as such in written form prior to the nineteenth

century, the sentiments that constitute it—envy, spite and resentment—have been around for eons. Begrudgery tends to manifest itself verbally—in the form of gossip, complaints, accusations and outright slander. The importance placed on language by oral cultures provides one rationale as to why the begrudgery expressed in traditional Ireland might have been worse, as Lee avers, than its better-documented twentieth-century version. If a country was already "consumed with envy", the potency of the begrudgery would be compounded by the fact that in pre-colonial Ireland, "The ancients held the practical use of words in much higher regard than we do, probably because they were much closer to the oral customs of the prehistoric village life" (Cahill, 1995, p. 47). If language was held in higher regard, then it follows that its ability to injure was amplified in such societies.

The greater potency of language and words in ancient Ireland is evinced in several manners. The term "satirist" appears in a number of ancient Irish texts; these characters typically possess a power through language that borders on the occult. Fred Norris Robinson, in his essay "Satirists and Enchanters in Early Irish Literature" asserts that the death of Niall of the Nine Hostages (Note 1), one of the principal leaders of the marauding Scots in fifth century Ireland, was "directly due, according to one account, to strife engendered by a satirist" (1912, p. 118). Satire, or the Irish term from which the English translation derives (*aer*) (Note 2), was not employed in ancient Irish strictly in the modern English sense of the word, according to Robinson. The victims of satirists "are not destroyed by the natural operation of literary art. The verses used are magic spells, and the whole procedure belongs in the realm of sorcery" (1912, p. 97). So, for the ancient Irish, satire did not consist solely of lampooning or ironic ridicule, it could also pack a supernatural wallop against its intended victim. This may be why the *Senchus Mór*, a written collection of the ancient laws of Ireland dating back to the fifth century A.D., set out on several occasions specific penalties for various types of satire (*Ancient Laws*, 1983, Vol. 1, p. 189, pp. 191-193) (Note 3).

In medieval Ireland's most famous literary work, the *Táin Bó Cúailnge* (Note 4), satire and satirists play a prominent role. In this epic tale, which has been compared to Homer's *Iliad*, the Ulster hero Cú Chulainn engages with the southern armies of King Ailill and Queen Mebd in single combat. After Cú Chulainn has inflicted heavy losses on them, "It was said at this time that Cúchulainn would be less troublesome if his javelin could be taken from him. So Ailill's satirist, Redg, was sent to get this javelin from him" (*Táin*, 1970, p. 126). Ailill and Mebd believed that the satirist, through sorcery or incantations, could disarm Cú Chulainn where the heroes of the South had failed martially. Unfortunately for the satirist, he receives the javelin from Cú Chulainn in much the same fashion as the warriors who preceded him, with the Ulster hero "flinging the javelin at him" so that it "shot through his head" (ibid.). Cú Chulainn, according to tales such as "The Birth of Cú Chulaind" (Note 5), was partially divine, much like Achilles in the *Iliad*, and as such would have been less susceptible to the spells of satirists (Note 6).

The reason Cú Chulainn is forced to singlehandedly hold off armies of Connaught is the men of Ulster are in their "pangs"—agonizing cramps similar to the pains of childbirth. They suffer these pains

because at some point in the past Crunniuc, mac Agnomain, a rich landlord from Ulster, boasted that his wife, Macha, could drive a chariot faster than the king's team. As a result of Crunniac's braggadocio Macha, who was nine months pregnant at the time, was forced to race the king's chariot on pain of her husband's death. As she was winning the race she gave birth to twins in the chariot, which caused her to cry out "that all who heard that scream would suffer from the same pangs for five days and four nights in their times of greatest difficulty" (*Táin*, 1970, p. 7). Macha's curse afflicts not only the Ulstermen who were present that day, but also "nine generations after them" (ibid., pp. 7-8). As only "three classes of people were free from the pangs of Ulster: the young boys of Ulster, the women, and Cúchulainn" (ibid., p. 8), Cú Chulainn has no choice but to engage Ailill and Mebd's armies alone until the men of Ulster would finally be able to rise from their pangs.

Further underscoring the power invested in language by the pre-modern Irish, the English word "curse" according to Patrick Power in *The Book of Irish Curses* (1974):

[A]ppears to have been borrowed from Gaelic, strange as that may seem. It derives from the word *cursachadh*, a word which is no longer found in the language. *Cursachadh* meant "abuse" in the ninth century. It then fell into disuse in Gaelic and found a permanent home in English (p. 10) (Note 7).

Glam dicenn (Note 8), a form of satire which appears with some frequency in ancient Irish literature, was a uniquely Irish type of curse (ibid.). Practiced by bards, but also supposed to have been a form of Druidic curse, it was believed that a well-aimed glam dicenn could, among other things, raise boils on the face of its target. Specifically proscribed by the *Senchus Mór*, the glam dicenn could also consist of "giving a bad name or nickname" (*Ancient Laws*, 1983, Vol. 1, p. 241).

Witoszek and Sheeran confirm the power of language throughout Ireland's history:

The destructive use of the word has a long lineage […] It persists because it is a constituent part of what we would like to call the tradition of vernacular hatred. In so far as the tradition is an oral one, hatred manifests itself as verbal aggression. The English nursery rhyme "sticks and stones will break my bones but names will never hurt me" has never carried any conviction in Ireland (1991, p. 15).

Contrary to the English nursery rhyme, the ancient Irish acknowledged the word's ability to injure. In fact, an entire section of the Brehon (Note 9) law is devoted to stipulating the type of penalty to be imposed for slander, verbal abuse and the use of spells or incantations. According to *The Book of Aicill*, the composition of which dates to the third and seventh centuries A.D.: "the five crimes of man [that] cause no happiness", include: "crime of foot, crime of hand, crime of eye, crime of mouth, crime of tongue" (1873, p. 95). "Satire, slander and false witness" fell under the category "crime of tongue" according to the *Senchus Mór* (*Ancient Laws*, 1983, Vol. 1, p. 239). These three forms of injury were considered to be equivalent to stealing cattle or violating another man's wife, as the ancient laws did not discriminate between civil and criminal offenses (*Ancient Laws*, 1901, Vol. 5, p. 168, p. 172).

The power of words is captured on many occasions in the *Táin Bó Cúailnge*. After King Ailill chastises Fergus mac Róich for sleeping with Ailill's wife, Queen Mebd, the two exchange cross words, causing Fergus to lament:

A pity friend

We hack each other

with sharp words

In the public gaze

right speech offends (*Tain*, 1970, p. 107).

Another example occurs later in the text when Queen Mebd endeavors to induce Ferdia to enter into single combat with Cú Chulainn. When Ferdia declines to accede to any form of bribery or blandishment:

Mebd sent poets and bards and satirists to bring the blushes to his cheek with mockery and insult and ridicule, so there would be nowhere in the world for him to lay his head in peace. In dread of being put to shame by these messengers he came back with them to Medb's and Ailill's tent (ibid., p. 168).

Ferdia is willing to risk near-certain death opposing Cú Chulainn rather than suffer the barbs of Mebd's poets, bards and satirists. The power to influence (ill-advised) action that words have over Ferdia (he is indeed slain by Cú Chulainn) is impressive.

One of the major facets of begrudgery is envy. Regarding jealousy, in his biography of James Joyce, Richard Ellmann notes that at the Trattoria Bonavia one day, Joyce "allocated the seven deadly sins among the European nations". The English sin was gluttony, the French—pride, "As for his own people, the Irish, their deadly sin was Envy, and he quoted the song of Brangane in *Tristan und Isolde* as a perfect example of Celtic envy" (1959, p. 393). Many incidents of envy can be detected in early Irish myths. For instance, a ninth-century Irish narrative from the Cycle of Kings, "the Destruction of Dinn Rig", tells of Cobthach the Meager who was "so envious of his brother that he wasted away" (Dillon, 1994, p. 4). In "The Exile of the Sons of Uisliu", a tale from the decline of the Ulster Cycle that resembles the legend of Paris and Helen of Troy, Cathub the Druid says of Derdriu while she is still in the womb: "high queens will envy her" (*Early Irish Myths*, 1981, p. 259). It is fear of Conchubur's jealousy over Derdriu's love for Noisiu that drives the pair into exile, and it is because of Conchubur's covetousness of Derdriu that he has Noisiu and his brothers murdered, causing Derdriu to take her own life.

The *Táin Bó Cúailnge* is also rife with instances of jealousy and resentment. Mebd's jealousy of Ailill's prize bull, Finnbennach, causes her to covet Dáire mac Fiachna's brown bull, Donn Cuailnge, and sets the entire saga in motion. Also, early in the tale, Queen Mebd, recalling when they were first wed, says to Ailill: "I asked a harder wedding gift than any woman ever asked before from a man in Ireland—the absence of meanness and jealousy and fear […] I got the kind of man I wanted: Rus Ruad's other son—yourself, Ailill, from Leinster. You aren't greedy or jealous or sluggish" (*Tain*, 1970, p. 53). Given the context, the jealousy Mebd refers to would be romantic jealousy and not the transcendental envy symptomatic of begrudgery. Yet the mere fact that she includes it as one of the three qualities that would be most difficult to find lacking in a man is telling.

One possible rationale for Lee's assertion that "traditional Ireland was consumed with envy" is that

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medieval Ireland—like most civilizations at that time—was what anthropologists term a "culture of limited good" (Witoszek & Sheeran, 1991, p. 14). Characteristic of peasant societies across the world, cultures of limited good believe that there is a finite amount of land and wealth existing in the world. Such cultures see life as a zero sum proposition. They do not believe that wealth can be created; therefore, when it comes to land, wealth, even happiness: "once you have your hands on some of it the important thing is to hold onto it, rather than develop it" (ibid.). The limited amount of prosperity that existed in ancient Irish society had to be guarded jealously; because if it were lost, the only way to regain it would be to take someone else's. This sentiment, as Masterson expresses it in describing modern Irish begrudgery, boils down to: "another man's gain is his loss" (1979, p. 160). It survived in Ireland until late in the twentieth century, and undoubtedly continues to survive to a certain extent even today.

Witoszek and Sheeran compare the modern Irish to the Dobu tribe of Eastern New Guinea, asserting: "the Dobu syndrome persists in Ireland to a degree unknown in other developed Western countries. It persists because it is a constituent part of what we would like to call *the tradition of vernacular hatred* [author's emphasis]" (1991, p. 15). The Dobu were presented as a particularly malevolent example of a culture of limited good by anthropologist Ruth Benedict in her *Patterns of Culture*. Much like the Irish, the Dobu live on an island where "[p]opulation presses hard upon the possible resources" (Benedict, 1934, p. 130). For the Dobu: "all existence is a cut-throat competition and every advantage gained is gained at the expense of a defeated rival" (ibid., p. 141). This leads to the unshakeable belief among the Dobu that "any man's gain is another's loss" (ibid., p. 146). Benedict's overall description of the Dobu character sounds strikingly familiar: "the Dobuan, therefore, is dour, prudish, and passionate, consumed with jealousy and suspicion and resentment. Every moment of prosperity he conceives himself to have wrung from a malicious world by a conflict in which he has worsted his opponent" (ibid., p. 168). Remove the "dour" aspect of the Dobuans and Benedict might also be describing the Irish.

In many cultures of limited good, as Benedict notes, "the usual forms of legality are absent [...] Anything that one can get away with is respected" (ibid., p. 169). The ancient Irish, though a culture of limited good, nevertheless possessed one of the oldest documented legal systems in all of Europe. Records demonstrate that "Long before the arrival of St. Patrick in Ireland in the year 432, and probably before the Christian era, the Brehon law was in force" (Gorman, 1913, p. 219). In a 1964 essay entitled "Law Reform in Ireland", Charles Haughey, who would go on to serve three terms as Taoiseach beginning in 1979, observes that the Brehon laws were "built up by professional jurists working on a basis of immemorial usage" (p. 1301). Therefore, ancient Irish law was "wholly a jurist-made law" (ibid.). Because Brehon law consisted of existing laws compiled by jurists "who claimed no legislative authority, the Brehon Tracts cannot rank as Codes, but must be considered merely as Digest" (O'Mahony & Richey, 1873, p. viii). Furthermore, since the Irish Brehon possessed no legislative power, he felt no compunction to improve the law, or to view the various statutes as a whole (ibid., p. xx). The ultimate result was that in the voluminous mass of Brehon law, constructed by

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generations of professional jurists, no exposition of, nor inquiry into the general principles of the law exists (ibid., p. xxi). In spite of its shortcomings, "the Irish clung […] tenaciously to their Brehon laws, because they found no protection under the English substitutes" (Gorman, 1913, p. 221). From the colonial Irish perspective, some protection under a flawed system beat no protection under a highly-developed and comprehensive system. Of course, simply having on the books Brehon laws that prohibited such misdeeds did not wholly prevent the various so-called "crime[s] of tongue" just as modern libel and slander laws do not preclude these misdemeanors from occurring today.

In the early era, in the absence of printed material and because handwritten books were quite scarce, Brehon jurisprudence was learned by "the commission to memory of short and pregnant paragraphs embodying the customs of the locality" (O'Mahony & Richey, 1887, p. xi). Particularly in its earliest form, when it had "not been yet reduced to writing", Brehon law "was rhymed and committed to memory, and thus handed down from one generation of Brehons to another" (Gorman, 1913, p. 219). Because they both emanated from the same oral tradition, in ancient Ireland the distinction between the literary and the legal was often blurred, so that in the Brehon "the functions of *file* and *breitheamh*, poet and judge, were one" (Kiberd, 1996, p. 318). Indeed, according to the *Senchus Mór* (Note 10), the judicature originally belonged to poets only (O'Mahony & Richey, 1887, p. xxx). The conflation of the poetic with the legal is illustrated in the *Senchus Mór* where it is recorded that in the fifth century A.D. Dubhthach Mac Ui Lugair, the legendary poet and lawyer, was ordered by Lóegaire mac Néill, high-king of Ireland, to "exhibit the judgments and all the poetry of Erin, and every law which prevailed among the men of Erin, through the law of nature, and the law of the seers, and in the judgments of the island of Erin and in the poets" (1983, pp. 15-17). No distinction seems to have been drawn between the judgments of poets and lawyers. The cross-pollination between the legal and the literary in Ireland is further demonstrated by the fact that Brehon law can be seen as underlying some of the great works of early Irish literature such as Táin Bó Flidhais and Táin Bó Cuailnge.

Brehon law inevitably fell into disfavor with English colonizers because, as ultra-nationalist Irish author Daniel Corkery posits in *Hidden Ireland* (originally published in 1924): "Feudalism was, moreover, right from the start, cut across by the Brehon laws—that law system so precise, so well-worn and firmly established […] Where else had feudalism to contend with a national law-system so strong and homogenous?" (1975, p. 65). The strength of Brehon law as a nationwide legal system—flawed as it was—threatened English feudal designs on Ireland. To counteract this, a famous ordinance was passed in 1331 proclaiming that there should be one and the same law for all (*una et eadam lex*), and that free Irishmen should follow English law. But, according to Irish historian James Lydon: "it was too late. The Irish lordships continued to function under brehon law and even in Anglo-Irish communities where there was a substantial Irish population, brehons were retained to administer their own law" (1998, p. 86). So, in 1366, English Parliament passed a statute intended to restrict Irish influence. A cessation of the use of the Brehon laws in any Irish court was ordered, and English residents of Ireland were prohibited, under pain of severe penalties, from adopting any of the Irish customs. The passing of

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this statute, according to Haughey, was "an admission of the failure to extend English jurisdiction, including English law, over the entire country" (1964, p. 1302). This legislation was only partially effective, leading the Irish Council to issue a general proclamation against the Brehon law in 1572 (Nicholls, 1972, p. 50). But enforcement was once again lax as demonstrated by Edmund Spenser's condemnation of the native Irish populace's "old customs and Brehon laws" in his 1596 essay "A View of the Present State of Ireland" (1991, p. 177) (Note 11). It was in the early seventeenth century, through the efforts of English parliamentarians like Sir John Davies, that "the common law of England […] finally supplanted the brehon laws" (Haughey, 1964, p. 1305). The Penal laws, imposed later in that century, only served to turn "the Irish natural love of justice into hatred and distrust of law", which, according to Irish historian Patrick Weston Joyce, writing in 1913, "in many ways continues to manifest itself to this day" (1980, p. 171). It was only after Independence that Irish attitudes toward the law began to shift back toward the positive.

As Brehon law waned in Ireland during the colonial period, begrudgery thrived. It wasn't because there was no legal recourse for the ancient "crime of tongue" under British common law (although there often, in fact, was none if the offense was committed by a British subject against a native Irishman). Modern libel and slander laws are originally descended from English defamation law. As far back as the reign of Edward I (1272-1307), civil actions for damages seem to have been relatively commonplace. It was during the reign of James I (1603-1625) that the first case was tried in which libel was affirmed to be punishable under common law. Since that case, both civil and criminal remedies have been in place in Great Britain and Ireland. This helps explain why a writer like Jonathan Swift (1667-1745) originally penned all of his works anonymously or under pseudonyms such as "Lemuel Gulliver", "M.B. Drapier" and "Isaac Bickerstaff". Of course, given the fact that the crown brought serious legal proceedings against the publisher of his *Drapier's Letters*, Swift was generally well-advised to conceal his identity as author (Note 12).

While the elimination of Brehon law cannot be tied directly to the rise in begrudgery in Ireland, the two events emerged from the same historical conditions. It was British colonialism that removed Brehon law from Irish society, just as the long colonial period offered a perfect environment for a sentiment like begrudgery to flourish as a widespread social phenomenon:

The inter-related combinations of economic, marital and mobility patterns meant that Ireland had more than her fair share of thwarted ambition, disappointed dreams, frustrated hopes, shattered ideals. The society was too static for the begrudgers to be able to diffuse their resentments on a wide circle of targets. Day after day, year after year, a stunted society obliged them to focus obsessively on the same individuals as the sources of their failure. The Irish begrudgers must return again and again to the same obsessive resentment (Lee, 1989, p. 647).

Of course, thwarted ambition and frustrated hopes existed in Ireland well before King Henry II landed his army at Waterford in 1171, and antecedents to the modern Irish begrudgers can be found in early Irish literature. In "The Voyage of Máel Dúin" a Christian tale written around the end of the first

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millennium, on one of the islands where they port, Máel Dúin and his crewmen encounter "a hideous miller, who tells them that he grinds half the corn of Ireland in his mill, all that is ever begrudged" (Dillon, 1948, p. 127). While the English word "begrudged" appearing in this excerpt is a modern translation from the original Old Irish, it nevertheless points to the fact that begrudging sentiments prevailed in Irish society in some form at that time. Dubthach Dóeltenga (Note 13), the cynical ally of Fergus mac Róich who almost never has a good word to say about anyone or anything in the *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, is an early permutation of the twentieth-century Irish begrudger. After he forecasts doom and destruction when the armies of Connaught are about to engage in combat with the forces of Ulster, Fergus insists:

> Get Dubthach with his black tongue
>
> back behind our army!
>
> Since the maiden-massacre
>
> he has done only harm […]
>
> Those he can't kill
>
> he sets at each other's throats (*Tain*, 1970, p. 160).

Setting co-workers and neighbors "at each other's throats" is characteristic of the begrudger. This passage also demonstrates that even in medieval Ireland begrudgers were, to borrow Masterson's phrase, "spoken of disparagingly" by non-begrudgers.

Another Dark Ages precursor to the modern begrudger is Bricriu. In "The Death of Aife's One Son", one of the pre-*Táin* stories in the Ulster Cycle, Bricriu is described as: "a sharp-tongued man" (ibid., p. 38). In "Bricriu's Feast" Bricriu invites Conchubur and the Ulaid to his palace for a lavish feast, an invitation Conchubur initially declines because, as Fergus explains: "if we go to his feast, he will incite us against each other, and our dead will out-number our living". The Ulaid ultimately agree to attend Bricriu's feast after Bricriu threatens: "I will set son against father and incite them to kill each other" (*Early Irish*, 1981, p. 222). While he does not instigate patricide, Bricriu does set the Ulaid's three great heroes—Cú Chulainn, Conall Cernach, and Lóegaire Búadach—and their wives, against each other over a "champion's portion".

The Dubthachs and Bricrius from ancient Irish culture did not decline in numbers in Irish society with the passing of time. Rather, the long years of colonial oppression under which the Irish suffered powerlessly served to exacerbate the conditions that spawned Irish begrudgery, acting like "a hot-house environment for the cultivation of the poisoned weed" (Lee, 1989, p. 647). This is because, as German philosopher Max Scheler observes in his 1913 study, *Ressentiment*: "revenge tends to be transformed into *ressentiment* (Note 14) the more it is directed against lasting situations which are felt to be 'injurious' but beyond one's control—in other words the injury is experienced as a destiny" (1994, p. 33). In a colonial situation, many injuries would typically occur beyond the individual's control. One minor example of the indignities foisted upon the Irish was the Penal Law that forced Catholics to sell their horse to any Englishman who wanted it for the cost of five pounds or less. When Art O'Leary, a

Roman Catholic officer in the Austrian army refused to part with his prize-winning horse, Englishman Abraham Morris murdered him over it on May 4, 1773. Morris was never charged with any crime. This is the topic of Eileen O' Connell's [Eibhlín Dubh Ní Chonaill's] famous Irish language poem "Lament for Art O'Leary" ["Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoghaire"]. The rage and frustration initially engendered by the original injury would only be compounded by the feeling of powerlessness to exact justice over the injury. From a historical perspective, then, modern begrudgery seems to have been a result of, or at least a response to, colonization.

According to Masterson, "a distinctive feature of 'the Begrudger' is the feature of resentment" (1979, p. 157). Masterson ties begrudgery to Nietzsche's concept of ressentiment. Like Irish begrudgery, Nietzsche's concept of ressentiment "is not the same as self-pity, with which it often shares the subjective stage; it is not merely awareness of one's misfortune but involves a kind of personal outrage and an outward projection or overwhelming sense of injustice" (Solomon, 1990, pp. 278-279). Begrudgery and ressentiment are both distinguished primarily by a concern and involvement with power. Nietzsche, commenting on ressentiment, notes, "powerlessness against men, *not* powerlessness against nature, is what engenders the most desperate bitterness against existence" (2003b, p. 119). Nietzsche was speaking about the earliest Christians in ancient Israel who, not unlike the Irish, had undergone centuries as an occupied territory under Roman rule (2003a, p. 17). Clearly, the Irish colonial situation—like Israel under the Romans, or *any* colonial situation, for that matter—involves powerlessness against other human beings (in this case the British colonizers), and not nature.

The preponderance of cursing, and the special potency that curses contain in Ireland, can be tied to the power aspect of the colonial situation. According to Power, curse-formulae were used to:

[R]elieve the frustration and to provide an outlet for rage which might express itself otherwise in physical violence. Compared to the people in the neighbouring island, Irishmen are notorious for the use of "curse-words", a characteristic which possibly has much to do with the long foreign domination of the country and the general national frustration to which it gave rise (1974, p. 114).

Irish clerics and even saints were not above uttering a curse, although "they are invariably reactions to some kind of military tyranny carried out by the English or their Irish agents" (ibid., pp. 69-71). An example of clerical cursing can be found in "The Madness of Sweeney", from the Cycle of Kings, the earliest forms of which date back to the first millennium. An unruly man with a terrible temper, King Sweeney [Suibhne], awakened by the Eucharistic bells of St. Ronan Finn, becomes enraged and charges out of his home unclothed. Accosting St. Ronan, the naked Sweeney hurls the holy man bodily into a lake. Following the assault, St. Ronan "gave thanks to God and cursed the king, wishing that he might wander naked through the world as he had come naked into his presence" (Dillon, 1994, p. 69). That is exactly what happens to Sweeney, with the twist that in his madness he thinks himself to be a bird. For the layperson who did not possess the power of a poet or a priest to cast effective curses, begrudgery offered one of the few avenues for Irishmen to vent their frustration over situations resulting from asymmetrical power relationships.

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The principal repressive forces of begrudgery are "feeling[s] of impotence, fear, anxiety and intimidation" (Masterson, 1979, p. 159). The rancorous sense of helplessness colonialism instilled in the Irish proved fertile breeding grounds for begrudgery. Irish historian Oliver MacDonagh, in his study of the motives underlying the Anglo-Irish conflict entitled *States of Mind* (1983), asserts that:

A past seen in terms of subjection and struggle, seen as a pageant or tournament of heroic defeat, is one of the roads towards fundamental distrust of or even disbelief in achievement […] None the less it is true that the characteristic Irish time-frame inclines Irishmen to a repetitive view of history and that such a view inclines them—perhaps in defensive wariness and from fear of failure—to prize the moral as against the actual, and the bearing of witness as against success (p. 13).

Prizing the moral over the actual is exactly the type of defensive reaction begrudgery performs.

Begrudgery is, in essence, a defensive mechanism employed to ameliorate perceived disparities. The manner in which this leveling process works, as sociologist Susan Hutson observed in her study of resentment in isolated mountain communities in France, is: "claims to superior status are rejected and annulled through the introduction of different ranking criteria by which the offending villager is brought down and, if possible, the status of the speaker raised" (1971, p. 47). The psychology driving this is, as Nietzsche observed of the ressentiment nature in *Human, All Too Human*:

The craving for equality can be expressed either by the wish to draw all others down to one's level (by belittling, excluding, tripping them up) or by the wish to draw oneself up with everyone else (by appreciating, helping, taking pleasure in others' success (1984, p. 177, p. 300).

Most begrudgers tend to employ Nietzsche's first leveling procedure exclusively. Viewed this way, begrudgery is not entirely negative in its implications as it also operates as a tool for maintaining some sort of social equity or balance.

The desire for social equity became acute during Ireland's colonial period. Colonialism accentuated Ireland's culture of limited good by further circumscribing the scant amount of good available to most Irish people. These restrictions were worse for Catholic Irish, particularly after the imposition of the Penal Laws. Not only were franchise and the right to hold political office restricted, Catholics were excluded from government service, practicing law, and local ordinances were passed to keep trade guilds a Protestant monopoly. Though the Catholic Irish comprised the vast majority of the island's population (exact percentages are uncertain as the ruling Protestant Ascendancy would not allow for a thorough census to be taken for fear that Catholics would become cognizant of how great their numerical advantage was), Catholics only "retained 14 percent of all of the land in Ireland" following the Williamite Wars of the late seventeenth century (James, 1973, p. 21). For the former Catholic ruling elite in Ireland, the consolidation of Protestant power following the Cromwellian campaigns in the mid-seventeenth century, and the defeat of the Catholic King James in the Williamite Wars left them with few viable options: "if they did not go into exile they had three alternatives: to repudiate their faith, to resort to deception, or to accept the almost certain decline of their social and economic position" (ibid., p. 25). The small percentage of the Catholic elite who remained in Ireland and continued to

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prosper were forced to shun "any display of public wealth, lest such display might excite the envy of their protestant neighbours, with the possibility of their ruin through being the object of a discovery suit under the property provisions of the penal laws" (Fagan, 1998, p. 172).

As Fagan above notes, Protestants in Ireland experienced resentment, as well. Members of the elite Ascendancy chafed at not being treated as equals by their English contemporaries, and objected to not being given a freer hand in ruling what they viewed as their country. Furthermore: "the presence of British troops in Ireland caused some resentment, not only among Catholics but among Protestants as well. Unpleasant incidents could not be avoided. In 1711 the city officials in Limerick petitioned the lord lieutenant to discipline the officers of the garrison there for causing a riot" (James, 1973, p. 180). While the Protestants were unhappy with the presence of a standing British army in Ireland because it undercut their authority, they nonetheless felt obliged to maintain it in case of Catholic uprising.

3. Conclusion

Ultimately, almost nobody was truly happy with the colonial situation in Ireland. As long years passed, and the situation festered, envy, spite, and resentment flourished. Where Americans claim—rightly or wrongly—that it was out of the "melting pot" of immigration that the American character was born, the Irish can point to the seething cauldron of nearly eight centuries of colonialism as the source of modern Irish begrudgery. As a small, isolated island nation that possessed a culture of limited good, some amount of begrudgery was inevitable. Aspects such as the power of satirists, Brehon laws that were written condemning "crimes of the tongue" recorded in the *Senchus Mór* and *Book of Aicill*, as well as the prevalence of cursing demonstrate that the seeds of begrudgery existed in Ireland at a very early stage. Characters from ancient Irish mythology like Dubthach Dóeltenga and Bricriu illustrate that the begrudger archetype was extant in Ireland well before the arrival of the English in the twelfth century. Was "traditional" Ireland "consumed with envy"? The answer to that question depends on what timeframe is being used to define "traditional Ireland", and how one interprets "consumed". Ancient Irish laws and literature demonstrate that the elements which comprise modern begrudgery were present in significant amounts in Ireland's earliest recorded history.

Despite this long and well-recognized history—at least, on the anecdotal and narrative levels—in Ireland, there is a surprising paucity of academic work on begrudgery. From both a sociological and a literary perspective, begrudgery is a fascinating concept that demands further study. For instance, at what exact point during the eight centuries of British colonization did begrudgery achieve the acuteness on a national scale that persisted well into the twentieth century? And why did independence not put an end to altogether to the "Irish national pastime of begrudgery" (Chambers, Fitzgibbon, & Jordan, 2001, p. x)? Even after the Celtic Tiger economic boom was under way in the 1990s, the general feeling of the Irish toward success was ambivalent at best. Indeed, The *Proceedings of the Academy of Entrepreneurship* (October 14-17, 1997) concluded that Ireland at that time did not offer a "hospitable climate toward entrepreneurship. Entrepreneurial venturing is not a prestigious or popular pursuit,

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neither financially nor socially rewarding. A successful venture invites 'begrudgery'—the unhappy situation of one's peers resenting one's success" (p. 25). This "unhappy situation" dates back to Ireland's earliest literary tracts. Based on its sheer persistence alone, begrudgery merits further investigation.

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Notes

Note 1. Niall No ǵ állach in Irish. Although generally considered to have been an actual historical personage, very little can confidently be said of Niall's life.

Note 2. According to the essay "Shapes of satire": "Ancient Irish poets could compose an 'aer' or satire that would blight crops, dry up milk, raise blotches on victims and ruin someone's character forever" (Germain, 1975). The modern Gaelic term for satire is "aoir".

Note 3. Most of the extant texts of the Senchus Mór appear to have been composed sometime between 650 and 750 A.D.

Note 4. Usually rendered in English as The Cattle Raid of Cooley. Set in the 1st century AD in a pre-Christian heroic age, the Tán is the central text of a group of tales known as the Ulster Cycle. Though composition of the texts that make up the Tán date to the 8th century A.D., existing manuscripts date to the late 11th and early 12th centuries.

Note 5. This tale exists in two very different versions, with one going back in written form to the now lost Book of Druimm Snechtai, the second version being composed somewhat later. The first version is referenced here.

Note 6. Cú Chulainn is said in this tale to be the son of Lug, a divine being whose father is Cian of the Tuatha Dé Danann and his mother is Ethniu, daughter of Balor, of the Fomorians, both mythical god-like races.

Note 7. The *Oxford English Dictionary*, it should be noted, differs with Power's etymology for "curse", asserting the word derives from the late Old English "curs, of unknown origin; no word of similar form and sense is known in Germanic, Romanic, or Celtic (Of connection with cross, which has been suggested, there is no trace). In its various uses the opposite of blessing".

Note 8. Also spelled "glamh dicenn".

Note 9. "Brehon" comes from the ancient Gaelic word *brethrem* meaning "a judge".

Note 10. Affirming its poetic nature, the original version of the *Senchus Mór*, according to P.W. Joyce, was written almost completely in verse (1980, p. 175).

Note 11. English poet best known for his epic "The Faerie Queene". In July 1580 Spenser went to Ireland in service of Arthur Grey, the newly appointed Lord Deputy. During the Second Desmond Rebellion, Spenser served with the English forces and, following the defeat of the native Irish, was awarded confiscated lands in County Cork. Though written in 1596, his pamphlet *A View of the Present State of Ireland* was kept out of print during the author's lifetime because of its inflammatory content, and did not see publication until the mid-17th century.

Note 12. The letters in question were written in protest of Englishman William Wood's patent to mint copper Irish coins.

Note 13. Literally "beetle-tongue" because beetles are proverbially black.

Note 14. "Ressentiment" is a powerful form of resentment or enmity. *Ressentiment* is literally the French language term for the English "resentment". Søren Kierkegaard first introduced *ressentiment* as a psychological/philosophical term. Friedrich Nietzsche later expanded the upon concept independent from Kierkegaard's earlier work. Walter Kaufmann asserts that Nietzsche adopted the term primarily because "the German language lacks any close equivalent to the French term" (2000, p. 441).