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“800 Years We Have Been Down”*: Rebel Songs and the Retrospective Reach of the Irish Republican Narrative

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Abstract:

From the glamorous, cross-dressing “Rebel, Rebel” of David Bowie, to the righteous Trenchtown “Soul Rebel” of Bob Marley and The Wailers, both varied and various musical articulations of cultural and socio-political rebellion have long enjoyed a ubiquitous presence across multiple soundscapes. As a musicological delineator in Ireland, however, ‘rebel’ conveys a specifically political dynamic due to its consistent deployment as an all-encompassing descriptor for songs detailing events and personalities from the Irish national struggle. This paper sets out to examine the specific musical delineator of “rebel song” from both musicological and politico-ideological perspectives with a view to interrogating its appropriateness as a universal descriptor for such output and will further demonstrate how to the present day, the genre represents yet another contested ideological space within the politico-historical narrative of traditionalist Irish Republicanism.

Keywords: Historical Appropriation, Irish Republicanism, Rebel Songs, Republican Ballads

1. Introduction

Commentary on the song tradition of the Irish national struggle is notable for its diverse range of attendant terminologies, with descriptive prefixes such as “political”, “revolutionary”, “patriotic”, “violent”, “Republican”, “resistance”, “seditious”, “subversive”, “protest”, “Fenian”, and “Nationalist”, among others, all deployed interchangeably across multiple discourses. Despite such nomenclatural fluidity, however, one delineator displays a particular consistency above all others: that of “rebel song” (McCann 1985; Rollins 2018; Millar 2020a). While it

* Quotation taken from the ballad “Irish Ways and Irish Laws” (1981).

is unclear when the term first gained consistent usage in Ireland, it was sufficiently embedded in popular political consciousness by the early twentieth century to have been deployed by James Connolly in his 1903 ballad composition entitled simply, “A Rebel Song” (Millar 2020a, 52) and was also engaged by his fellow 1916 martyr Patrick Pearse in the title of his political songster, *Songs of the Irish Rebels* (1910). An indication of the term’s contemporary ubiquity can be gleaned from an examination of two recent monographs on the subject. Millar (2020a) deploys the descriptive prefix “rebel” a total of 307 out of 421 times in referring to both individual song texts and in wider commentary on the genre itself, as does Rollins (2018) in 204 out of 282 instances. Similarly, it was the predominant classification marker of McCann (1985), who utilised the term in 212 out of 287 references in her ground-breaking doctoral thesis on political song in Belfast¹. Indeed, as works that engage extensively with composers, performers and audience members, the consistent deployment of “rebel song” across such a notably diverse spectrum of analytical contexts is indicative of how deeply embedded the descriptor has become within the rebel music community itself, rather than simply reflecting a prescriptive classification approach taken by the individual authors.

2. “Rebel” and “Rebel Song” as Contested Ideological Markers

Despite such widespread agency as a musical delineator, the wider politico-historical deployment of “rebel” is notable for both its thematic opacity and subjectivity, often resulting in considerable difficulties in defining the attendant musical genre. Such elasticity of classification parameters is greatly accentuated by the binary, often highly contentious, narratives of rebel songs, which continue to provoke disputation up to the present (Pratt 2017). Vallyly notes how rebel songs are “by definition, ‘partial’”, further remarking that “[t]hose who empathise will warm to the themes like meeting old friends; those who disagree with the concepts expressed will bite back their distaste” (2017, 886). Similarly, while Zimmerman cites their “romantic appeal” (1967a, 205), he equally acknowledges how the narratives of rebel songs routinely project “intolerance, chauvinism, self-delusion and partisan misrepresentation of facts” (1967b, 88). Perhaps the most famous vocalisation of the term was ironically not from a noted performer of rebel songs but instead emanated from one of the genre’s most strident critics. Due to U2 lead singer Bono’s oft-repeated caveat before performing “Sunday, Bloody Sunday” that “[t]his song is not a rebel song” (*Under a Blood Red Sky*, 1983) the descriptor (as opposed to the actual song tradition that he was explicitly disassociating from) gained an international articulation otherwise unlikely via the contemporary ballad tradition. While the disclaimer primarily reflected U2’s anxieties at being branded “fellow travellers” of the IRA, particularly in the US (Lynskey 2010, 473), it also essentially sought to delineate what the song *was not*, as opposed to what it thematically *was*, or perhaps in this instance, what it was thought to be in danger of becoming. The band’s virulent opposition to the IRA’s armed struggle was well known, yet the fact that a song referencing the killing of fourteen unarmed civil rights demonstrators by British soldiers was, in their view, in danger of appropriation by supporters of violent Republicanism and thus reconstituted as a rebel song, clearly shows the subjectivity of the content matter and, by extension, the wider genre itself.

¹ Other descriptors utilised by the authors are McCann (1985): “political” [24], “resistance” [19], “Republican” [9], “protest” [8], “patriotic” [6], “Nationalist” [4], “rebellion” [4], “revolutionary” [1], Rollins (2018): “Republican” [62], “Republican rebel” [11], “political” [5], Millar (2020a): “Republican” [84], “revolutionary” [15], “political” [6], “Fenian” [3], “resistance” [3], “protest” [1], “seditious” [1], “subversive” [1]. Author citations of terminologies as quoted from other sources have been excluded from the above comparisons.

Such nomenclatural unease is not solely experienced within musical spheres and can be similarly observed throughout wider politico-historical discourse in Ireland, where the term under consideration can accommodate a multiplicity of diverse interpretations. The unresolved national question (and thus the contested ownership of the attendant historical narrative) has often resulted in several interconnected ideological descriptors such as “Republican”, “Nationalist”, “Fenian”, (or in the modern era, “Provo”, “Stickie”, “Dissident”², etc.) having similarly ambiguous political connotations, often deployed interchangeably as either complimentary or pejorative markers. In the case of the latter, such usage can often be embraced and inverted as terms of empowerment as expedient (Sanders 2011, 282). While “Fenian”, for example, will generally denote the nineteenth-century Republican movement of the same name (along with the significant canon of attendant ballads from the period), it is also regularly deployed by the extremes of northern Loyalism to the present as a derogatory reference to what are deemed non-compliant Nationalists, a convention that deliberately divests the term of any vestiges of nostalgic heroism³.

“Rebel” – and as will be observed, the attendant song tradition – similarly transmits an almost identical dichotomy. While for some, the trope has unquestionably noble attributes, reflecting what Quinn has termed “the concept of an Irish ‘hero’, extolled with superlatives like *bravest, fearless and dauntless*” (2020, 153), for others, the putative rebel is a manifestly nefarious persona of seditious intent who – similar to “Fenian” – continues to be associated with political subversion, particularly in the north of Ireland. The latter worldview was famously articulated by demagogic Unionist politician and Free Presbyterian preacher Ian Paisley in the aftermath of the Battle of The Bogside and the establishment of Free Derry in August 1969. Following the decision of British Home Secretary James Callaghan to visit Bogside residents and confer with Nationalist leaders, Paisley publicly lambasted Callaghan as “the ally of the Bogside rebels [and] a man who is prepared to give a charter of revolution and violence and a blank cheque to those who are out to destroy this province”⁴. Yet despite such invective deployment, leading Free Derry activist Eamon McCann displayed no discernible unease with the same term when describing how “for the most part we played rebel songs” (1974, 54) during his contribution to Radio Free Derry, a pirate station established in The Bogside during the insurrection. Thus, if one protagonist in a binary conflict can disparage his opposite number as a rebel, while the recipient of the barb is more than content to simultaneously self-reference as such, it is perhaps unsurprising that the attendant musical genre should resist convenient classification. Such musical dichotomy was noted by Millar in newspaper coverage of intercommunal rioting in Belfast’s Divis Street in 1964 following a contentious display of the Irish flag (2020a, 92-93), disturbances for which Paisley himself played a central role in fomenting. Where the Unionist *Belfast Telegraph* (30 October 1964) reported how the Nationalist crowd maintained their spirits via the communal singing of “rebel songs”, the Nationalist *Irish News* (1 October 1964)

² Supporters and/or members of the Provisional IRA, the Official IRA, and a collective pejorative for anti-Good Friday Agreement Republicans, respectively.

³ Such disparaging usage was famously inverted by then Sinn Féin President Gerry Adams while addressing an internment commemoration march in Belfast in 1995, where he stated: “Fellow Fenian bastards, you’re all very, very welcome here to our city centre, and outside our City Hall”. Adams’ opening remarks were largely overlooked due to his speech also containing his infamous “They haven’t gone away, you know” aside in relation to the IRA (*An Phoblacht/Republican News*, 17 August 1995). See also title of PhD thesis by 1981 hunger striker Laurence McKeown: *Unrepentant Fenian Bastards: The Social Construction of an Irish Republican Prisoner Community* (1998).

⁴ Paisley’s comments of 28 August 1969 can be viewed in the film “No Go: The Free Derry Story” (2006).

wrote of the “patriot songs” that were heard from the same crowd throughout the week’s events (1964). A comparable Unionist worldview was articulated by Foster in his review of Zimmerman (1967a), in which he juxtaposed “Catholic Nationalist songs of rebellion” against “Protestant Loyalist songs of affirmation” (Foster 1970, 210), thus adding the vexed question of religious affiliation to musical representations of the putative rebel.

Similar subjective interpretations have also periodically manifested themselves within musicological discourse. While he does not use the term “rebel” extensively in *Songs of Irish Rebellion*, Zimmerman nonetheless felt compelled to qualify its occasional appearance following a complaint by prolific Republican songwriter and 1916 veteran, Brian O’Higgins, in which the latter pointedly remarked that “patriotism [...] should not be confounded with rebellion” (1967b, 86)⁵. While Zimmerman did concede that certain aspects of rebellion elicited “a bad connotation for many people” (87), he rebuffed O’Higgins’ criticism by stating that within the specific context of Ireland, such ballads were not exclusively focussed on the national struggle, but also narrated opposition to injustice in much wider parameters. Indeed, his contention that for Irish people “[t]he word ‘rebellion’ might have no derogatory sense, quite the contrary, so long as it designated the struggle against *what they considered* to be injustice” (*ibidem*; author’s emphasis), provides something of an unintended insight, perhaps, into both the contemporaneousness and subjectivity involved in attempting to specifically delineate a rebel song.

Yet as noted, “rebel” had been utilised previously without any apparent difficulty by both Pearse (1910) and Connolly (1903) in their respective compositions. O’Higgins’ discomfort with the term would therefore appear to emanate from the hagiographical elevation of the 1916 martyrs in the immediate aftermath of their executions, a trope particularly evident during the state-sponsored 50th-anniversary celebrations of the Rising that had immediately preceded his exchange with Zimmerman. The subtle nuance attendant to such historical repositioning was to form the central narrative of Mick Hanly’s “The Terrorist or The Dreamer?”, a ballad that examines some of the ideological complications associated with the transitional dynamic from temporal “rebel” to eternal “patriot”. Written at the height of the modern Troubles, it juxtaposes contemporary condemnation of an anonymous Provisional IRA car bomber with the simultaneous lauding of a young, unnamed participant in the Easter Rising, stating of the latter that “[t]hey said he was a rebel then – but he’s a hero now”, further referencing the 1966 celebrations as a time when “[w]e didn’t call them ‘rebels’ then, we used ‘patriot’ instead”. In the context of such retrospective historical realignment, the narrative rhetorically questions as to who should now be considered as “[t]he terrorist or the dreamer, the savage or the brave?”, remarking acridly that “it depends whose vote you’re trying to catch, whose face you’re trying to save”, an unusually sharp commentary on the often expedient and cynical appropriation of historical figures from Ireland’s struggle for independence⁶.

⁵ Descriptive prefixes deployed by Zimmerman (1967a) include: “political” [36], “rebel” [16], “patriotic” [10], “nationalist” [5], “seditious” [2], “violent” [2], “inflammatory” [1], “national” [1], “revolutionary” [1]. Author citations of terminologies as quoted from other sources have been excluded.

⁶ Despite having never been recorded by Hanly himself and not appearing in any Republican songbooks to date, the song gained a certain notoriety when banners with a selection of the lyrics appeared alongside giant portraits of Bobby Sands and William Wallace at a UEFA Champions League game between Glasgow Celtic and AC Milan on 26 November 2013. Celtic was fined £42,000 for the “illicit banner” display by their fans (*Belfast Telegraph*, 13 December 2013). The song has been recorded by several performers, most notably by former H-Block prisoner and Blanketman, Brendan McFarlane.

Despite Zimmermann’s defence of the term, “rebel” unquestionably poses certain fundamental difficulties, particularly for those of a more puritanical Republican⁷ hue, given that “rebellion” may imply the usurpation of an established, legitimate political order, a worldview that Republicans would unambiguously refute as a description of British jurisdiction in Ireland. This is not to suggest, of course, that “rebel” is never used within popular Republican discourse, where terms such as “1916 rebels”, “Wexford Rebellion”, etc., are regularly encountered. Indeed, 1916 leader Constance Markievicz famously self-referenced as such during the Dáil Treaty debates of 1921, proclaiming that “while Ireland is not free, I remain a rebel, unconverted and unconvertible [...] I am pledged as a rebel, an unconvertible rebel, because I am pledged to the one thing – a free and independent Ireland” (McAuliffe 2018, 162), as did her fellow Anti-Treatyite, Mary MacSwiney who vowed to “be their first rebel under their so-called Free State” (*ibidem*). It should be noted, however, that such usage is more often than not expedient and imbued with a certain nostalgic affection, with those in question remaining first and foremost “Republicans” in pursuit of “The Republic”, an oft-times quasi-spiritual political terminus to which “rebel” does not accord sufficient ideological gravitas (Doyle 2008, 131; Ferriter 2019, 62).

Further politico-musicological sensitivity to the term was revealed in a 1981 interview of renowned Conamara *sean-nós* singer Seosamh Ó hÉanaigh, conducted by traditional musician and academic Mick Moloney:

(Moloney): “In the context of the last five years or so, [North American] people of Irish extraction in particular, are expecting all people who are involved in traditional music and song to sing ‘rebel songs’, and to sing songs in particular that are very anti-English. How do you deal with that?”

(Ó hÉanaigh): “A couple of times someone asked me, ‘Why do you never sing a ‘rebel song?’”, and I said: ‘To my mind, we never had many rebels; we had patriots. A rebel is someone who stands out against a government elected by his own people. I have ‘patriotic songs’ ”. (Mac Con Iomaire 2007, 362)

Blankenhorn similarly notes Ó hÉanaigh’s reluctance to perform works of an overtly militant hue during this period:

In later life, Joe [Seosamh] would give a nuanced reply to people who asked him to sing ‘rebel songs’, referring to himself as a ‘patriot’ rather than a ‘rebel’. While his performance of songs like Skibbereen, John Mitchel, and The Glen of Aherlow left no doubt how he felt about the unjust treatment of Irish people at the hands of imperial authorities, his awareness of the ongoing Troubles made him reluctant to throw petrol on fires that were burning hot enough already, and he purposely avoided singing the rabble-rousers that many – particularly in America – requested. (2021, 9)

It should be noted that Ó hÉanaigh’s comments reflect the somewhat predictable difficulties encountered by an Irish singer performing to an Irish-American audience during the 1970s, rather than being an explicit assertion of doctrinaire Republican principles on his part. Navigating audience expectations of an incendiary ballad from “back home” would appear

⁷ Even in the current era of relative peace in Ireland, the term “Republican” remains a deeply divisive and contentious political descriptor. Due to the armed thematic common to each of the songs under review, the term is used exclusively within the current research as a necessarily broad reference to those who support and/or engage in armed struggle towards the ending of British jurisdiction in Ireland. For a wider discussion on the varying definitions and interpretations of Irish Republicanism, see McGarry (2003), Jones (2005), Honohan (2008).

to have been the primary motivation for such sentiment, and in doing so, seeking to avoid being unfairly pigeon-holed as an overtly Republican singer, a common anxiety of many Irish traditional musicians from the late 1960s onwards (Ferriter 2012, 270).

That the deployment of such a highly subjective marker as a musicological prefix should result in a multiplicity of fluid analytical metrics is perhaps unsurprising, with what both musically and historically constitutes a rebel song being largely impossible to delineate as a consequence (Millar 2020a, 5). Such obstacles to concise song classification have long preoccupied scholars and are not unique to the genre under consideration (Atkinson 2013, 123-124). Regarding rebel songs, however, the difficulty is not exclusively musicological but is also of specifically ideological concern, a difficulty continually reinforced by the cyclical metamorphosis of Irish Republicans from armed to constitutional methods. Indeed, given the consequential contestation surrounding Republican legitimacy, political song in Ireland is notably resistant to such efforts (Wallis, Wilson 2001, 117). The analytical difficulties provoked by such ideological disputation were highlighted as far back as 1969 by Wilgus who noted how in Ireland, “the distinction between ‘folk’ and ‘national’ song is difficult to apply” due to the unavoidable fact that “the protest has been more on national than on class or even political grounds, and because the struggle not only lasted so long but in essence is continuing” (1969, 566), an astute and prescient observation to make in September 1969 at the outset of the Northern conflagration.

3. *Republicans, Renegades and Rogues: The Difficulties in Defining Rebel Song*

When attempts at musicological classification of rebel songs are made, the results are necessarily vague and open-ended. Rollins has highlighted such inherent difficulties within her own research by conceding that the analytical parameters used were “not intended as classifications with finite perimeters”, as “[m]any rebel songs [...] can fit comfortably into two or more categories” (2018, 122), further acknowledging the porosity of the genre by conceding that several rebel songs fall into an analytical “grey area” (136). From her fieldwork with contemporary musicians, she delineates three distinct subcategories of popularly performed rebel songs, namely those “of the folk genre; rebel songs that could also be classified as historical songs [...]; and ‘modern’ rebel songs”, restricting the latter to output from the post-1968 period (135)⁸. Millar notes similarly broad interpretations by musicians, thus pointing not alone to the inherent flexibility of the genre boundaries themselves, but also to the issues of performers’ individual tastes and audience expectations which must also be duly considered (2020b, 12). He further highlights the subjectivity of such works by conceding that while some can be “identified by their subject matter”, others can “*become* rebel songs because of how they are used and understood, or how their lyrics or meaning are manipulated” (*ibidem*; author’s emphasis). McCann identifies a comparable internal classification structure within the putative audience, claiming that “[t]hese songs are categorised as ‘rebel songs’ *by those for whom they have social meaning*” (1985, 83; author’s emphasis).

While the output of the rebel song tradition is predominated with events and personalities from the Irish national struggle, scholarly interpretations vary considerably as to both their

⁸ In addition to such musicological heterogeneity, the absence of any definitive demarcation lines for rebel songs can often result in individual works having the ability to ideologically span markedly diverse viewpoints on the Irish national question. For a discussion on the simultaneous appropriation of the nineteenth-century ballad “A Nation Once Again” by both supporters of physical-force republicanism and constitutional nationalist politicians south of the border in the 1970s, see Parfitt (2019, 406; 411).

musical and historical remit. The underlying anti-colonial thematic has been articulated with varying degrees of intensity, from the hyperbole of Galvin who describes how such works reflect “the unimaginable and unending brutalities of reprisals inflicted on the Irish [i]n almost every generation from 1169 to 1923, their lot [being] murder, torture, eviction, starvation, forced labour or exile” (1955, 9), to Morgenstern’s observation that rebel songs narrate “the struggle for Irish independence from the *longue durée* of British colonial rule” (2021, 352, n.1), to the considerably less incendiary tone struck by Millar who posits the tradition as one “that largely stems from, and focuses on, the island’s awkward and complicated relationship with its largest neighbour, Great Britain” (2020a, 11). Similarly, while Zimmerman acknowledges a passive dynamic within the tradition, describing rebel songs as “ballads that helped the Irish to voice their opposition to British rule” (1967b, 86), Morgenstern notes their violent undercurrent as works with the capability of “actively encouraging young men to partake in a ‘glorious’ fight for freedom” (2021, 352-353, n. 1), as does Quinn who contends that “Irish ‘rebel songs’ express tropes and motifs like the ‘cult of death’, the search for liberty, the understanding that Ireland’s destiny is unfinished, and the realisation that the ‘call’ to participate may arise at any time” (2020, 169). While the trope of anti-colonial resistance casts a necessarily wide analytical net, more recent scholarship has sought to present the rebel genre as one specifically dominated by physical-force Irish Republicanism, a political philosophy that first emerged in the late eighteenth century (Smith 1995, 6; English 2006, 95-96). McCann is quite specific in this regard, stating that “rebel songs were those of the Republican song tradition” (1985, 199), while Millar revisits the significance of audience and performance space by noting how such works are not simply *about* Republicans, but rather are “those [songs] written and performed *by* Irish Republicans” (2020b, 130; author’s emphasis). Rollins houses rebel songs firmly within the wider Republican spectrum by specifically delineating such output as “republican songs” (2018, 14-15) composed of “music and lyrics [that] illustrate republican narratives and promote the ideologies of republicanism” (11), further noting how “[t]he majority of rebel songs relate to the Republican struggle” (122).

Despite the noted predominance of Republican content, however, the specific delineator of “Republican” is seldom used as a descriptive prefix, with Millar noting how “rebel” remains very much the accepted term of reference among Irish republicans themselves (2020b, 130). However, the arbitrary use of what can often prove to be a markedly non-political marker to describe what is a manifestly political (read Republican) genre, runs the significant risk of facilitating an unavoidably depoliticised thematic within the song canon. For while “Republican” – and to a lesser degree “Fenian” and “Nationalist” – all clearly convey an anti-colonial dynamic (albeit unarmed in the case of the latter), only the former presents a clear trajectory towards a definitive, long-term political dispensation, an attribute largely absent in the term under consideration. Therefore, by not specifying the context of the post-revolutionary scenario (and thus focussing explicitly on the revolutionary moment itself), “rebel” effectively denies the song canon the notably more solid political agency attendant to markers such as “Republican”, and others. Indeed, “rebel” only essentially delineates what a particular song is ideologically *opposed to*, rather than giving any semblance of the new political reality that its narrative seeks to advocate. The wider deployment of “rebel” can create yet further ambiguity in that it can also denote anti-establishment activity in general, as opposed to the more definitive historical parameters of the Irish struggle. Zimmerman has noted this interpretive diversity, claiming that many rebel songs are simply “songs of spontaneous protest or complaint by those who had no clear political consciousness” (1967a, 12) and therefore exude no discernible anti-colonial thematic as a consequence, further distinguishing such non-political output from the “[s]treet ballads more closely connected with the national movement” (*ibidem*).

While the expedient musical cohabitation of the non-political rebel and the avowedly political Republican under the single classification marker of “rebel song” is doubtlessly convenient, it frequently abbreviates a multiplicity of characters, events and worldviews, many of whom are both socially and ideologically antagonistic and, in the case of Republicanism, are often explicitly repugnant. Both Millar (2020a, 25-34; 48) and Zimmerman (1967a, 44-45) have identified several nineteenth-century rebel songsters containing texts that cross the blurred line between pro-Catholicism and anti-Protestantism, thus exuding a sectarianism at which Republicans would – in theory, at least – ideologically balk. While such works may well be “rebel songs” in the very broad sense of being anti-established order, they are a far cry from even the loosest articulation of egalitarian Republican worldview. Zimmerman further highlights the incongruity of the overtly Catholic Nationalism of Daniel O’Connell appearing in numerous song collections “side-by-side” (1967a, 46) with the physical-force Republicanism of the United Irishmen, a musical collocation which would, no doubt, have caused considerable anxieties for the former due to his preferred political tactic of remaining “law abiding [and] loyal to the Queen” (*ibidem*). It may be safely assumed, of course, that Republicans would have felt similarly ill at ease in O’Connell’s company, yet such is the unlikely ideological cohabitations often accommodated by the mercurial parameters of rebel song. Interestingly, Zimmermann proceeded to do likewise in his own collection, a *faux pas* for which he was excoriated by Ó Lochlainn who described “The Glorious Repeal Meeting at Tara Hill” (Zimmermann 1967a, 81) as a “truly toady production showing how un-Irish O’Connell had become” (Ó Lochlainn 1967, 334). Citing such obsequious lyrics as “God bless our Queen, long may she reign / What foe will dare offend her?” (*ibidem*) and “Three cheers were given for the Queen” (*ibidem*) – hardly the incendiary rhetoric of heady revolution – Ó Lochlainn remarked how “[i]t was well that nine-tenths of [O’Connell’s] audience were Irish speakers knowing no English, or these sentiments would have been decidedly unpopular” (1967, 334)⁹.

As well as Quinn’s observation that the putative musical rebel can be readily conflated with the mythological trope of the pre-Christian Irish hero, she further expands the genre parameters by noting the regularity with which “*fighting* [is] used as a synonym for *rebel*” (2020, 153) in popular discourse, a worldview that pushes the canon further into non-political territory. Zimmerman refers to one such “fighting rebel” in his discussion of “The Pursuit of Farmer Michael Hayes” (1967a, 258), a ballad that demonstrates how a “hateful character could become a gallant hero in the eyes of the oppressed peasants” (*ibidem*). Hayes was a much-despised bailiff for a Tipperary landlord and had expelled upwards of one thousand local tenants from their homes during his career, a fate he too was ironically to suffer in his final years¹⁰. Following his own eviction in 1862, he proceeded to shoot his former employer dead in a local hotel, before spending the remaining years of his life on the run from authorities in Ireland – or at leisure having ultimately escaped to America, should the song narrative be believed. Thus, despite his previous activities for which he gained considerable local opprobrium, the killing of an unpopular landlord would appear to have been sufficient grounds to warrant Hayes’ immortalisation in song and his subsequent elevation into a heroic local rebel, albeit not one motivated by particularly altruistic or political intentions¹¹.

⁹ Both the political and cultural divisiveness of O’Connell are also evident throughout wider folkloric narrative where he is alternatively celebrated as a messianic saviour of the Irish nation or roundly condemned as a treacherous collaborator with British interests in Ireland. For further discussion, see Ó hÓgáin (1983).

¹⁰ *The Nation*, 9 August 1862. Quoted in Zimmermann (1967a, 258).

¹¹ Zimmerman notes how “The Pursuit of Farmer Michael Hayes” was an expedient lyrical appropriation of the broadside ballad, “The General Fox Chase”, a text assumed to be an allegorical account of the pursuit of Republican

A comparable “fighting rebel” from several centuries previous – and one of equally non-political persuasion – was Count Redmond O’Hanlon, a similarly dubious character whose narrative largely mirrors that of Hayes, save for the former’s lineage as a member of the Gaelic aristocracy. In the aftermath of the Cromwellian confiscations, the O’Hanlon family had been dispossessed of their historical lands near Tandragee, Co. Armagh. Following a brief spell in the service of the French Army, Redmond returned to Ireland in 1671, whereupon without property or title, retreated to the hills surrounding his old South Armagh-North Louth bailiwick as an outlaw. Throughout much of the 1670s, he led a marauding campaign of attacks and raids on local landholders, as well as operating a primitive form of protection racket against English and Scottish planters in the locality, activities that only ended with his assassination in 1681 (Casey 1975, 11; Manganiello 2004, 397). O’Hanlon’s extra-legal exploits would in time be the subject of numerous rebel songs, the best known of which came from the pen of renowned Dublin songwriter P.J. McCall¹². The narrative of Redmond O’Hanlon presents an unlikely depiction of romantic stand-and-deliver highway robbery from a putative “man of the people” who “won’t let the rich Saxons alone” (McCall 1899, 24), and although couched in notably mild language throughout, the ballad speaks freely of O’Hanlon’s use of brute violence and preparedness to kill if necessary: “ ‘Take your own choice to be lodging / Right over, or under the ground!’ ”; “Mind, if the heart is dark in your body / ‘Tis Redmond will let in the light!” (*ibidem*)¹³. Yet the markedly non-political thematic was seemingly no obstacle to the ballad’s inclusion in several political songsters (Faolain 1983, 158; O’Hanlon 1930, 29; and others), an inconsistency that is particularly notable in the instance of *Ballads from the Jails and Streets of Ireland* (Shannon 1966), where it is casually housed alongside several explicitly Republican narratives, such as “Cathal Brugha”, “Seán Sabhat”, “James Connolly”, “Seán McDermott” and “Brave Tom Williams”, among others. O’Hanlon’s appearance among such hagiographic texts is ideologically inconsistent, and the apparent ease with which his criminal violence – similar to Hayes’ nefarious career as a landlord’s bailiff – could be so easily dissembled and elided in popular ballad, again points to the porosity of the “rebel” construct and the innate ability of the wider song genre to accommodate such markedly non-political players.

4. *Telescoping the Past: The Inconsistent Historical Timelines of Rebel Song*

Yet regardless of the blurred musical demarcations between political and non-political “rebels”, the one lacuna that effectively prohibits a coherent definition of rebel song is the absence of any universally agreed analytical timeframe. While, as noted, several scholars emphasise the predominance of Republican narratives – thus dating the tradition’s genesis to the late eighteenth century (McCann 1985, 206; Quinn 2020, 169; Morgenstern 2021, 352)¹⁴ – others deliberately

fugitives, for which a singer was once reputedly arrested for performing in Dublin’s George’s Street (1967a, 258). While the song’s origins may well have been in the realm of political rebellion, its manifestation in the form of Hayes was very far removed from such consideration.

¹² As well as composing such muscular Republican output as “Kelly, the Boy from Killane” and “Boolvogue” from the 1798 period, McCall also gained a considerable reputation as a collector and preserver of traditional song in the Carlow and Wexford areas during the late-nineteenth century.

¹³ Armagh folksinger Tommy Makem also penned a work of the same name, with particular emphasis on the trope of “the gallant rapparee” who – unsurprisingly – only ever robbed the rich. In a footnote to his ballad, he describes O’Hanlon as “[a] seventeenth-century Irish Robin Hood who had been forced from his lands, and who always invited his victims to ‘Come out and be robbed by the handsomest man in Ireland’ ” (Makem 1988, 28).

¹⁴ Zimmerman posits a slightly earlier date by including works from the volunteer period of the 1780s (1967a, 36-37).

sidestep this putative date by commencing their analysis in historical periods considerably before the emergence of Republicanism, and often before any discernible national consciousness was in evidence. Valley (2017, 886) traces the roots of modern rebel songs to the Irish language *aisling* poetry of the seventeenth century, a form of radical political expression that went into terminal decline alongside the suppression of the language and the wider Gaelic order, while Faolain positions the tradition's origins over a century earlier, claiming that “[t]he rebel song emerged first in Tudor Ireland in the form of the *ros g catha*, ‘bardic haranguing’, on the eve of battle” (1983, 4)¹⁵.

The Anglo-Norman invasion of 1169, an event that marked the genesis of British jurisdiction in Ireland, remains to this day a major psychological touchstone for Irish Republicanism and consequently, for its attendant song tradition¹⁶. Yet even this seminal date does not meet with any broad consensus as an analytical parameter. Galvin begins his examination of the canon with an account of Brian Boru’s reputed address to his forces before the Battle of Clontarf in 1014 (1955, 10). Not content with either Norman or Viking invasions as historical markers, some scholars retreat wholesale into mythological prehistory. Faolain insists on solidifying the “rich, evocative tapestry of Irish songs of resistance” (1983, 3) into an unbroken politico-musical narrative that reaches far beyond even the putative “Year Zero” of 1169, by welding this period seamlessly onto the previous “fifteen centuries of Gaelic tradition” (*ibidem*), thus creating a wholly improbable timeframe of some two and a half millennia. He further expands the parameters by insisting that

[e]ven today, it is not unusual for the rebel songwriter to invoke the ghosts of the legendary Gaelic world of a millennium and more ago. To attempt comprehension of the rebel tradition is to begin in prehistory and follow the march of the Gael from the time Cú Chulainn’s successors met St. Patrick and listen as the classic formalised poetry of the Druid evolved into the exuberant, defiant verse of the street balladeer. (xii)

Such telescoping of the rebel musical tradition should not be entirely unexpected, given the tendency of Republicans to similarly posit their own political narrative as an unbroken 800-year continuum, a timeframe that retreats considerably beyond the emergence of Republicanism in the late-eighteenth century (Hepworth 2021, 1). Irish Republicans have rarely, if ever, been content to commence either their political or cultural narratives at this point and to the present, regularly appropriate previous historical periods so as to deliberately “Republicanise” their own prehistory (Smith 1995, 6)¹⁷. The contemporary centrality of such historical repositioning by physical-force Republicans can be gleaned from the opening sections of the IRA’s training manual which states that

¹⁵ Faolain further emphasises the ancient poetic roots of what he terms “rebel balladry”, by describing the modern song genre as a “process evolving from a Celtic culture that has always accorded an honoured place to the poet, the bard and the storyteller” (1983, 4). Similarly, Quinn reaches considerably beyond the Tudor conquest to the “bardic tradition of old when the inclination was to ‘laud the deeds of outlaws and rebels’ (Cooper 2009, 35)” (Quinn 2020, 152).

¹⁶ Millar has highlighted how “[the] Anglo-Norman invasion and centuries of resistance to foreign rule produced a raft of material that could meaningfully be described as rebel songs” (2020a, 47).

¹⁷ In more recent times, Republicans have been accused of attempting to historically appropriate the northern civil rights movement of the late 1960s, following the publication of an article by leading Sinn Féin strategist Declan Kearney (2018). Kearney’s opinion piece sought to credit Sinn Féin and IRA members with playing a central role in the movement’s formation in 1968, a view condemned by leading civil rights activists Bernadette Devlin and Eamon McCann as “the delusional silliness of individual ramblings” and an instance of Sinn Féin “attempting to colonise history”, respectively (“The View”, BBC NI, Broadcast 8 February 2018).

[f]or the past 800 years, the British ruling class have attempted to smash down the resistance of the Irish people. Campaign after campaign, decade after decade, century after century, armies of resistance have fought [...] to cast off the chains of foreign occupation. [...] Today, the Irish Republican Army carries on that self-same war which was fought by all previous generations of Irish people”. (Qtd. in O’Brien 1995, 350)¹⁸

While the apparent seamlessness with which Republicans can historically abbreviate eight centuries has been questioned by some commentators (Patterson 1997, 12; English 2006, 37), Morgenstern has noted how the rich cultural propaganda value of such historical retreat was deduced very early on by Irish revolutionary leaders Theobald Wolfe Tone and Thomas Davis – both themselves noted songwriters – and that by deliberately linking the Republican present to the distant Gaelic past, traditional Irish music and song have displayed a “remarkable power to underscore the strive towards Irish autonomy from centuries of British colonial rule” (Morgenstern 2021, 347-348). Millar has referred to such musical convention as “collapsing the past and the present so as to force audiences to experience Ireland’s invasion synchronically” (2020a, 143), citing the example of “The H-Block Song”, with its choral invocation of contemporary Republican resistance to the labelling of Ireland’s struggle as “800 years of crime” (*ibidem*)¹⁹.

But it is not simply the narrative invocation of linear (if extremely broad) historical timelines as ideological signposts to the present that is evident throughout Irish rebel songs. Numerous high-profile works expediently lurch between events several centuries apart, with scant regard for any semblance of coherent chronology. Such deliberate historical truncation is particularly evident in “For What Died the Sons of Róisín?”, a text written by renowned Dublin ballad singer Luke Kelly. In Verse 2, Kelly invokes the Viking era as his chosen historical commencement, asking: “For what flowed Ireland’s blood in rivers / That began when Brian [Boru] chased the Dane[?]” (*Songs of Resistance 1968-2001* 2001, 113), before catapulting the narrative forward some 900 years in the following line with the assertion that such sacrifice “did not cease, nor has not ceased / With the brave sons of [19]16” (*ibidem*). In Verse 3, historical chronology is effectively abandoned when the narrative retreats over 200 years to the martyrdom of Theobald Wolfe Tone in 1798, then forwards momentarily to that of Robert Emmet in 1803, before accelerating beyond even the previously cited marker of 1916 to ask of the contemporary struggle: “To whom do we owe our allegiance today? / For what suffer our patriots today?” (*ibidem*). “Irish Ways and Irish Laws”²⁰ supersedes even Kelly’s questionable timeline by opening with an idyllic description of a pre-invasion Gaelic utopia of peaceful coexistence – itself a highly dubious historical trope – with “villages of Irish blood waking to the morning”, in an era before “the Vikings came around, / [t]urned us up and turned us down” (Moore 2000, 66). The song was first recorded in 1981 by Moving Hearts, a folk-rock ensemble fronted by renowned folksinger Christy Moore. Moving Hearts were a highly politicised and overtly Republican outfit and coupled with Moore’s high-profile involvement with the H-Block campaign at the

¹⁸ Lest such worldview be considered an exclusively Republican phenomenon, it is worth noting Noam Chomsky’s review of a recent monograph on the subject of decolonisation in which he refers to Ireland’s “800 year history of harsh and often murderous foreign domination” by Britain (McVeigh, Rolston 2021).

¹⁹ The ideological cohesion provided by such approach has been similarly highlighted by Pratt, who cites 1981 hunger striker Bobby Sands’ composition “Back Home in Derry” as having the ability to bridge “the temporal distance” (2017, 106) between the protesting prisoners in Long Kesh in the late 1970s and the revolutionaries of 1803. Such retrospective ideological positioning was also manifest in much of Sands’ writings where past Republican martyrs were consistently referenced, particularly in the latter entries of his hunger strike diary (Sands 1982).

²⁰ “Irish Ways and Irish Laws” was written by songwriter John Gibbs (Moore 2000, 66).

time, brought a notably sharper edge to contemporary rebel song during the turbulent period of the 1980 and 1981 hunger strikes (McLaughlin, McLoone 2012, 74-76). Yet despite the left-leaning, politically progressive worldview of much of their output, they too were equally content to perform a work that manages to successfully telescope almost a millennium of anti-colonial struggle into the space of just two verses, where the lyric accelerates from “800 years we have been down”, to the early 1980s when “[t]oday the struggle carries on” (66), all the while presenting the Irish people as a unified and unimpaired collective of centuries-old continuous resistance:

Cromwell and his soldiers came,
 Started centuries of shame,
 But they could not make us turn,
 We are a river flowing,
 We are a river flowing. (*Ibidem*)

5. *800 Years of Republican Resistance?*

While the above works deploy significantly abbreviated timelines *within* the confines of individual narratives, some commentators insist on the collation of entire suites of texts from across a comparably truncated timeframe in order to deliberately project a concomitant politico-musical symbiosis. The chronological compilation of such works seeks to contrive a complementary soundscape to mirror what Shanahan has dubbed “the standard Republican narrative” (2009, 12) of 800 years of resistance, a pseudo-historical approach that has been questioned by Zimmerman (1967b, 88), among others. Such porosity of historical timeline is evident in the introduction to *Songs of Resistance 1968-2001*, a Republican songbook whose preamble states that while “[m]ost of the songs in this collection belong to the period since 1968 [...] songs of national resistance from previous times are also included”, all of which collectively narrate “the indomitable and unconquerable spirit of resistance to foreign rule and injustice which has sustained the Irish people for centuries” (2001, vi), thus impairing its own stated terms of reference in its very introduction²¹. Galvin (1955) and Faolain (1983) are considerably more direct in their respective analytical approaches and are unapologetic in their construction of an 800-year politico-musical timeline for rebel song. The latter notes how “[e]ight hundred years of Anglo-Hibernian history” (1983, 3) have been catalogued by “those inspired poets who have given us the lyric [...] of Irish resistance since 1169” (ix), while reminding us that it is “this emotional tie to the Irish past that is the basis of rebel song” (*ibidem*). Galvin is more explicit still, stating bluntly that “[t]he history of Ireland is largely that of some 800 years of resistance to invasion, annexation, absorption, settlement, enclosure, oppression and exploitation by England” (1955, 2) and that consequently, “Ireland’s songs sound a continual note of resistance on many levels” (*ibidem*). Vallely strikes a more moderate tone in his rationale, but the sentiment essentially remains the same: “When one considers the history of resistance to British domination of Ireland over some 830 years, it would be surprising if a large number of songs did not reflect this” (1999, 365). Other researchers are more circumspect, with Moylan

²¹ *Songs of Resistance 1968-2001* was published by Provisional Sinn Féin twice in 1975 and again in 1982. The fourth edition was issued in 2001 by Republican Sinn Féin, an organisation that split from the mainstream Republican Movement in 1986.

in particular keen to reject the 800-year thesis in his anthology of rebel songs, condemning such contention as “a facile construction” representative of largely outdated cultural conventions that were specifically “the fashion among nineteenth century anthropologists” (2016, x). Such misgivings are infrequent, however, and the propensity to reach back over eight centuries – both musically and politically – retains considerable ideological currency to the present, particularly among more doctrinaire adherents of traditional Republican orthodoxy.

But while the attendant historical galvanisation facilitated by both the longevity and diversity of the rebel song tradition is clearly useful to more doctrinaire Republicans in promoting the narrative of a centuries’ long continuum of unbroken resistance, it does nonetheless place them in an additional ideological predicament to that emanating from the previously highlighted subjectivity of “rebel” as a putative genre descriptor. By retrospectively inserting themselves both historically and musically into a timeframe that preceded their own existence by some 600 years, Republicans must equally embrace a notably opaque trope of “rebellion” that let alone can often display no discernible thematic of national separatism, but as noted, can also be markedly non-political in trajectory. Thus, in the specific case of rebel songs, the Republican convention of appropriating an 800-year struggle in its entirety frequently necessitates a certain amount of musical (if not, in fact, ideological) cognitive dissonance.

A notable work that engages in such retrospective repositioning is “Follow Me Up To Carlow”, a rebel song of considerable ubiquity throughout Republican songbooks, recordings and academic commentary (*The Soldiers’ Songbook* n.d., 6; Galvin 1955, 90; *Songs from the Barricades* 1974, 9; Faolain 1983, 80; McCann 1985, 493; *Songs of Resistance 1968-2001* 2001, 25; Millar 2020a, 100, and others). Written in 1899, the ballad is another McCall composition and one that narrates a military victory by Wicklow chieftain Fiach McHugh O’Byrne over British forces at the Battle of Glenmalure in 1580. Despite relating events some 200 years before any nascent Republican trajectory, the song was pointedly grafted onto contemporary world-view by Christy Moore, one of its more noted performers, when he claimed that the narrative “contain[ed] an atmosphere and a mood which survives in the subconscious memory of many Irish people”, further describing O’Byrne’s English protagonists as those who “came from over the sea and took the land, raped and pillaged and murdered” (2000, 127)²². While “Follow Me Up To Carlow” clearly conveys a thematic of rebellion, it is something of stretch to consider it a text of national separatist hue, given that McHugh O’Byrne was a leader well-practiced in ingratiating himself with crown authorities when it advanced his own political ends (Morgan 1993, 185). Indeed, he was not unique in this regard, and Shanahan notes the regularity and relative ease with which “Irish chieftains gladly align[ed] themselves with the invaders when it suited their purpose” (2009, 70)²³. It could perhaps be suggested, therefore, that similar to Redmond O’Hanlon and Farmer Michael Hayes, if McHugh O’Byrne ever really was a “rebel with a cause”, it was very much largely his own. Thus, the ubiquitous classification of “Follow Me Up To Carlow” as a rebel song would appear to be solely on the rather tenuous basis that McHugh O’Byrne militarily engaged British forces, with his political side-dealings with same casually omitted. Such deliberate obfuscation greatly facilitates the retrospective attribution of modern Republican credentials to a specifically non-Republican historical event, a trope also evident in “Redmond O’Hanlon”. In the opening verse, McCall simultaneously decriminalises

²² Moore recorded “Follow Me Up To Carlow” in 1973 while a member of the folk group Planxty.

²³ Casey notes how the family of the aforementioned Redmond O’Hanlon similarly engaged in such duplicity when “[i]n 1595, Oghie O’Hanlon opposed Hugh O’Neill against [Queen] Elizabeth and, for his support, received from the Crown a grant of seven townlands, embracing *clan* lands in Orior” (1975, 11), a political strategy that does not appear to have stood the family in particularly good stead with the British in the long run.

and politicises the banditry of O’Hanlon by claiming that “a native” will be let pass unmolested, “a Scotchman [...] will pay him a guinea a year” – both highly unlikely outcomes – yet by demanding “your life or your gold” of the English, “[b]y stages Count Redmond O’Hanlon / Gets back what they plundered of old” (1899, 24).

But while such expedient embracing of the distant Gaelic past can often successfully galvanise contemporary and past struggles, it can also lay some unexpected ideological tripwires for the Republican constituency to navigate. It has been noted previously how such casual abbreviation of history has regularly admitted some questionable, non-political narratives into the wider rebel song tradition. Yet several Republican songwriters have accentuated this ideological irregularity by deliberately fusing the contemporary (political) Republican martyr with the (pointedly non-political) rebel of several centuries past *within* individual song texts. One such work is “Fergal Óg O’Hanlon”, a narrative that relates a posthumous apparition by the eponymous IRA volunteer at Clones, Co. Monaghan²⁴. In his brief interaction with the anonymous narrator – who appears suitably unperturbed to be conversing with a Republican revenant – O’Hanlon refers to his death alongside his fellow IRA martyr Seán South, and how they both now reside in the ethereal realm of the Republican otherworld. While vivid articulations of an eternal warriors’ paradise into which contemporary Republican martyrs are duly welcomed by previous generations of heroes are a standard trope of the genre (Ó Cadhla, 2017a), the celestial cast who await the two IRA volunteers in this instance is somewhat less orthodox:

At Brookborough, we fought and died.
 Seán South and I fell side by side,
 And now we’ve joined with joy and pride
 The hosts of Count O’Hanlon.
 (*The Easter Lily: Songs and Recitations of Ireland*, vol. III, 1964, 23)

The appearance of career criminal Redmond O’Hanlon and his fellow-travellers in such an avowedly Republican martyr-ballad makes for an interesting conflation. While both O’Hanlons may well fit under a (very) loose definition of “rebel”, the suggestion that Fergal O’Hanlon would contentedly reside in Republican Valhalla with his outlaw namesake (or that the latter would ever reach such a lofty plain) is ideologically inconsistent, to say the very least, and further demonstrates how such casual relocation of a contemporary Republican hero within a multifarious 800-year narrative is a decidedly risky literary convention and one that creates something of an ideological high-wire act for Republicans. Thus, due to the blunt insertion of a medieval extortionist into a modern narrative of an idealistic boy-martyr, the composer, in attempting to “Republicanise” the “rebel” past, unintentionally criminalises the Republican present, an irony of some note given the intense prison struggles for political status engaged in by Republicans throughout the twentieth century²⁵.

It is this same dogmatic essentialism, for which physical-force Irish Republicanism is so widely noted, that further complicates the ubiquitous deployment of “rebel” as a universal musical marker. From the mid-nineteenth century onwards, what Spencer has termed “the myth of self-sacrifice and the glorification of loss” (2015, 20) assumed totemic importance

²⁴ Volunteers Fergal O’Hanlon and Seán South were killed during an IRA attack on an RUC station in Brookborough, Co. Fermanagh on New Year’s Eve, 1956.

²⁵ The trope of revenance forms the central narrative of yet another Redmond O’Hanlon text, “The Ballad of Douglas Bridge”, in which an anonymous member of his troop appears posthumously outside of Strabane, Co. Tyrone (Colum 1922, 50). Both the thematic and structural similarities with “Fergal Óg O’Hanlon” are particularly obvious.

within Republican ideology, creating a quasi-theological adherence to the tenets of martyrdom that pertains to the present (Smith 1995, 13; Shanahan 2009, 40; Beiner 2014, 199). This philosophical shift was similarly reflected in the attendant song tradition whereby the “idealistic rebel” (Zimmerman 1967a, 66) of old was in turn elevated into what McCann famously styled the Republican “hero-martyr” (1985, 204). With the increasingly hagiographic extolment of Republican sacrifice within the physical-force tradition, it was clearly no longer sufficient for artistic articulations of the putative rebel to solely project generic thematics of heroism and bravery. Instead, such output was now obliged to accommodate heavily essentialised representations of glorious martyrdom and altruistic self-sacrifice, an ideological repositioning that created some significant literary challenges for composers of Republican song to navigate (Ó Cadhla 2017b, 276). Little wonder, therefore, at the previously highlighted rejection by O’Higgins of even the mildest conflation of patriotism with rebellion within the song tradition.

Yet O’Higgins’ dogmatism is neither exceptional, nor particularly unreasonable, should even the most cursory comparison be drawn between the diverse suite of rebel songs under consideration and those of an explicitly Republican hue. Indeed, that the largely expedient musical collocation of such iconic Republican martyrs as hunger striker Terence MacSwiney or executed IRA teenager Kevin Barry, alongside the cynical opportunism of Farmer Michael Hayes, the territorial self-interest of Fiach McHugh O’Byrne, the banditry of Redmond O’Hanlon, or the uber-Catholic Nationalism of Daniel O’Connell, should provoke sharp contention from many quarters is perhaps unsurprising. Yet by simple virtue of the largely undefinable and hazy parameters of rebel song, such generic classification is the unavoidable (and often unpalatable) reality for Republicans. Therefore, the above collective of malcontents – all “rebels” of varying persuasion – may quite legitimately be accommodated alongside the putative Republican hero-martyr (musically, at least, if not ideologically), despite being widely at odds with traditional Republican dogma.

Regardless of such ideological anxieties, however, where the delineator of “rebel” does manifestly succeed is in its comprehensive galvanisation of the genre in parallel with “the standard Republican narrative” (Shanahan 2009, 12) of eight centuries of unbroken resistance, stretching from the armed separatism of the modern era to the earliest Gaelic insurrections. Such consolidation successfully creates a singular robustness for the song tradition that less commonly deployed terminologies such as “patriotic”, “resistance”, “political”, “Nationalist”, “revolutionary”, “Fenian” and perhaps most crucially, “Republican”, all singularly fail to achieve. As demonstrated, however, this cohesion is often achieved at a certain ideological cost, with the casual musical absorption of some highly questionable *dramatis personae* unintentionally puncturing the 800-year trope of Republican continuity in the process. Thus, if Republicans insist on both musically and politically appropriating their prehistory in its entirety, they must do so at considerable risk of ideological cross-contamination.

Yet as noted by Millar (2020b, 130), “rebel” remains the most consistently utilised musical term of reference among the contemporary Republican constituency, despite the numerous inconsistencies highlighted in the current research. Indeed, it is somewhat ironic that the descriptor of “rebel” facilitates the preferred Republican politico-ideological timeline in a way that “Republican”, as a putative musical delineator, simply cannot. Furthermore, the popular acceptance by Republicans of the ideologically hazy “rebel” also represents a unique form of *pax musica* within the minutely contested arena of intra-Republican legitimacy, a circumstance largely impossible to arrive at due to the ideological wrangling that continues to be associated with the wider politico-historical deployment of “Republican”. What is perhaps more ironic still, is that while physical-force Irish Republicanism remains to the present a rigidly dogmatic

ideology, its adherents very much *require* a term as suitably vague and subjective as “rebel” should they wish to simultaneously project the essentialist narrative of 800-years of unbroken resistance – six centuries of which, it must be remembered, Republicans did not actually inhabit – within a parallel musical continuum. Indeed, given the hagiographic elevation of martyrs within the wider ideological framework of Republicanism, it can surely be posited that Republicans are more readily engaged with *who* is commemorated within their song tradition, much less *what* their song genre stands to be classified as or named. While the current research has highlighted the propensity of Republicans to variously utilise rebel songs as ideological conduits to retrospectively “Republicanise” past events, such philosophical fluidity can also facilitate a diametrically opposite dynamic, that is, to “deRepublicanise” an individual, event, organisation, or even an entire period of history. Since the early twentieth century, such contestation has regularly manifested itself in public, often bitter, disputations over the legitimate “ownership” of individual works within the wider rebel song tradition and are a consequence of the ubiquitous fissures and ideological ruptures within physical-force Irish Republicanism, a theme that will be returned to in a further paper on the inherent classification difficulties associated with political song in Ireland.

6. *Concluding Remarks*

This paper has noted the multiplicity of descriptive terminologies for musical output attendant to the Irish national struggle, with the delineator of “rebel song” displaying a popularity not evidenced with any other comparable term. While some occasional unease at the descriptor’s potential to unintentionally conflate patriotism with sedition has been noted, “rebel song” continues to retain a notably solid agency among performers, songwriters and audiences, as well as throughout academic commentary. Despite such ubiquity, however, the current research has also highlighted the marked absence of any agreed definition as to what constitutes an Irish rebel song, a lacuna that has often encouraged a necessarily broad categorisation approach. Thus, agreement as to what musicological – and crucially, as a genre of political song, ideological – parameters are appropriate to deploy in any analysis is largely impossible to establish. Such opacity is greatly accentuated by the specific political context of Ireland, in which the term “rebel” is, itself, a highly subjective construct, both inside and outside of musicological discourse. While thematically underpinned by an evident anti-colonial trajectory, it has been demonstrated how the ideological vagueness of “rebel” has often unintentionally allowed for a diversity of non-political *dramatis personae* to be accommodated within what is ostensibly a political song canon. While such individuals may well be collectivised as “rebels” in the loosest possible articulation, their motivations are singularly at odds with the altruism of the Republican martyrs often incongruously housed alongside them in songbooks and on popular recordings.

Along with such thematic opacity, the lack of an agreed analytical timeframe for rebel songs also casts an unavoidably wide classification net that further inhibits coherent definition of the genre. It has been noted how some commentators commence their analysis in the late eighteenth century, coinciding with the first appearance of Republicanism on the Irish political landscape, others with the Anglo-Norman invasion of 1169, while some insist on retreating into the hazy realms of mythological prehistory for their putative starting date. It has been argued that such flexibility of timeline – and consequently, narrative content – is not without design, and reflects the concomitant ideological tendency of Irish Republicans to variously locate themselves retrospectively within an 800-year continuum of anti-colonial struggle, thus reaching considerably beyond their actual 200-year existence. While the established vagueness of “rebel”

greatly facilitates such expedient historical blurring, it has also been demonstrated how such convention is undertaken at the considerable risk of ideological cross-contamination. Several works examined have demonstrated how the casual historical abbreviation evident throughout the rebel song canon can prove highly problematic within the refined philosophical parameters of traditionalist Irish Republicanism, an ideology from which the rebel genre draws the majority of its content. Thus, the all-embracing nature of the song canon represents something of an ideological Catch-22 for Republicans. By appropriating a putative 800-year timeline of anti-colonial resistance in its entirety, Republicans must musically associate themselves with elements often explicitly repugnant to their own core tenets; yet to refute the broad parameters of rebel song also necessitates Republicans eschewing the opportunity to retrospectively insert themselves within an 800-year musicological soundscape that dovetails seamlessly with their own preferred (and largely self-referenced) historical narrative. It has been argued, therefore, that traditionalist Republicans very much *require* a term as ideologically open-ended as “rebel song” should they wish to engage in such historical reconfiguration, a convention that is, ironically, not possible with the more specific political signifier of “Republican”.

Thus, despite the absence of any agreed definition, the failure to establish a coherent analytical timeframe, its noted subjectivity, its attendant politico-historical (and consequential musicological) vagueness, and the convoluted ideological gymnastics of orthodox Republicans, it is clear that the musical descriptor of “rebel song” is very much embedded as a classification marker within the popular Irish soundscape and looks set to remain so for as long as the genre itself continues to exist. Finally, it has been argued that the historical selectiveness that permits the “Republicanising” of past events can also facilitate a reciprocal “deRepublicanising” of history, whereby yesterday’s “patriots” can expediently become today’s “irregulars” or “dissidents”. Such ideological metamorphosis is greatly accentuated by what McGlinchey has termed the “unfinished business” (2019) of the Irish national struggle and, coupled with the cyclical transition of Republicans from physical force to constitutional approaches, represents a further arena of contestation within Irish Republicanism often manifested in public disputations surrounding the “ownership” of specific works from within the wider canon of rebel song.

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