

## A Critical Introduction to Sarah Butler's *Irish Tales*

### A Synopsis of the Novel

*Irish Tales* follows the unfortunate love affair between Murchoe; son of Bryan Boriámh<sup>1</sup>, a legendary Milesian hero, and Dooneslaith; daughter of Maolseachelvin, the King of Meath. It is set against the events leading up to the battle of Clontarf in 1014; when the invading Danes were finally overthrown and rule given back to the Milesian kings.

Their love is hindered by the tyrannical Danish monarch, Turgesius, who has Murchoe banished from the court out of jealousy. Murchoe returns however, disguised as a woman, which inspires Maolseachelvin's plot against the Tyrant; sending Dooneslaith to Turgesius along with fifteen 'maidens' who are actually armed soldiers.

As Turgesius goes to his chamber to bed the beautiful Dooneslaith, the Irish soldiers attack, leaving no Dane alive. Turgesius is put into chains and cast into a river.

Sadly the lovers still can not marry as Dooneslaith's father, who is now appointed monarch of all Ireland, will not give his consent.

The threat from the Danes is not over and Murchoe is called to combat alongside his father. They fight in twenty-five bloody battles and Bryan Boriámh's heroic deeds are rewarded with the title King of Ireland.

Some time afterwards, the provincial King of Leinster grows tired of taking orders from Boriámh and decides to side with the remaining Danes to bring him down. The two forces meet at Clontarf.

During the battle, Murchoe slays the Leinster king and two Danish princes, leading to a great Irish victory. However, both he and his father are killed. Dooneslaith and Murchoe are never able to marry and she dies of grief soon after hearing of his demise.

---

<sup>1</sup> Butler uses the Gaelic equivalents of the names, but Bryan Boriámh appears to be the anglicised 'Brian Boru;' identified in later English translations of the battle of Clontarf. See; Goedheer, A.J. *Irish and Norse traditions about the Battle of Clontarf* (TjeenWillink, 1938).

Maolseachelvin is then reinstated as King of Ireland and joins with the new King of Leinster to defeat the remainder of the Danish forces.

### **Sarah Butler: a brief biography**

Irish Tales is Butler's only known work and there is very little evidence to be found on her life. As a result of her obscurity, much of the information that can be found on her is speculative; pieced together from the limited documents available and guess work.

In the dedication to *Irish Tales* Charles Gildon specifies that Butler was deceased at the time of publication; 'The fair authress of the following sheets being dead.'<sup>2</sup> This would imply that she was not a published author during her life time, or at the very least not published under this name.

Much of the limited information on her assumes that she was connected to the Duke of Ormond, James Butler, a figure who was known for his 'loyalty in politics and toleration in religion.'<sup>3</sup> However he also led the royalist forces against the Catholic confederation of Kilkenny in 1641,<sup>4</sup> which seems to be in contrast to Sarah Butler's political support of the Irish Catholics. Although, as the Anglo-Irish family had 'both protestant and Roman Catholic branches,'<sup>5</sup> Sarah Butler may still have been a part of the Ormond Butler line.

This identification is not beyond the realms of possibility as she must have had some noble connections or wealth to have access to works only available in manuscript. In the preface she references 'Dr Keting',<sup>6</sup> author of *The feasa ar Eirinn* or *A basis of knowledge about Ireland*. According to Ian Campbell Ross this was not published until 1723<sup>7</sup>, seven years after *Irish Tales* was published and even longer before it was written.

---

<sup>2</sup> Charles Gildon, 'dedication to the Earl of Lincoln' in Sarah Butler, *Irish Tales: Or, instructive histories for the happy conduct of life* (London: Printed for E. Curll and J. Tooke, 1716), piii. In the original edition the preface and dedications have no page numbers. The reference I have given is the second page of the dedication itself, not page 1 of the whole work.

<sup>3</sup> Robert Welsh (ed.) *The Oxford Companion to Irish Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996.), p456.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> John Wilson Foster (ed.) *The Cambridge companion to the Irish novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p24.

<sup>6</sup> Sarah Butler, the preface to: *Irish Tales*, p6. In the original edition the preface has no page numbers. The reference I have given is the sixth page of the preface itself, not page 6 of the whole work.

<sup>7</sup> See; Ian Campbell Ross, "'One of the principle nations in Europe": The Representation of Ireland in Sarah Butler's *Irish Tales*,' *Eighteenth-Century Fiction*, 7.1, (October 1994) pp 1-16, p5.

Keting's original work was written in Irish so it is possible that Butler translated it herself. If this is the case it would mean that she was educated beyond what was usual for women, though there may well have been an unpublished translation available. Either way, she had possession of a work which an ordinary member of the public could not get hold of easily.

It would be very convenient to place the author within the Ormond Butlers, but in contemporary accounts of the family there is no mention of anyone called Sarah.<sup>8</sup> It is also possible that 'Butler' was her married name, so she may not necessarily have been of Irish birth.

There is another possible account of her, also mentioned in Ross's article, which suggests that she was the widow of a Captain James Butler who died in the 1691 battle of Aughrim.<sup>9</sup> The information is allegedly taken from two petitions that she wrote from Marshalsea debtor's Prison.

The petitions lament the death of her husband and children and the loss of her house to a group of Jacobite irregulars. However, as Ross points out, this possible identity doesn't account for her apparent Jacobite sympathies, or her acquisition of Keting's manuscripts.<sup>10</sup>

Because she received a pension from King William until his death in 1702,<sup>11</sup> it would appear that her husband fought on the side of the Williamites in the battle of Aughrim and thus that the family was Protestant. It seems doubtful that this Sarah Butler would have written something like *Irish Tales* which takes a strong Catholic and Jacobite stance.

Both these possible links are very tentative and lacking in supporting evidence. They also don't consider that the author's name may not have been Sarah Butler at all. As the work seems to be politically antagonistic, it is not unlikely that the author was writing under a pseudonym.

### **Some notes on the publishing history and physical book**

The first thing to consider when looking at an eighteenth-century novel is the title page. The publishers would usually post these on boards around town to advertise the novel, so its

---

<sup>8</sup> See Anon, *Some account of the family of the Butlers, but more particularly of the late Duke of Ormond, The Earl of Ossory his father, and James, Duke of Ormond his Grandfather* (London: Printed for John Morphew, 1716); cited in *ibid*, p5.

<sup>9</sup> 'The Representation of Ireland in Sarah Butler's *Irish Tales*', p5.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*.

contents are very important in accessing how a contemporary readership might have viewed *Irish Tales*.

The title page states that *Irish Tales* was published in 1716 for 'E. Curll at the *Dial and Bible*, and *J. Hooke*, at the *Flower-de-Luce*, both against St. *Dunstan's* Church in *Fleetstreet*.'<sup>12</sup>

The striking reference here is that of 'E. Curll', a publisher with a notorious reputation for publishing scandalous works. Curll, a well know figure in Grubstreet from 1706-1747,<sup>13</sup> was one of the figures whom Pope satirised in his *Dunciad*. This work criticised many publishers and 'hackney' writers of the time for their idiocy and lack of taste,<sup>14</sup> so the fact that Curll featured so prominently implies a lot about the nature of his career.

In a study of the Grub Street publishing business Pat Rodgers identifies him as a 'publisher of Dunces, but also of their enemies,'<sup>15</sup> which insinuates that he had no loyalties and was out to make money by whatever means necessary.

He seems to have sold whole editions to other book sellers when he became tired of stacking them in his shop, and he bought old sheets which were given no more than a fresh title page to become what on the face of it seemed to be entirely new books...He would publish old books as new, delightfully disguised in the advertisement.<sup>16</sup>

Curll also had no qualms about publishing works that would cause scandal. He was, in fact, arrested twice; once, 'in April 1716 when he and his printer, Daniel Bridge, were arrested for printing an unauthorized account of the recent trial of the earl of Wintoun,'<sup>17</sup> and again in November 1725 for publishing a translation of the *treatise on the use of flogging in venereal affairs*, a work which bordered on being pornographic.<sup>18</sup>

---

<sup>12</sup> See Appendix One for all further references to the title page.

<sup>13</sup> See 'Edmund Curll,' at *The British Book Trade Index*.

<<http://www.bbti.bham.ac.uk/Details.htm?TraderID=17945>> [Accessed 16<sup>th</sup> December 2008].

<sup>14</sup> See Raymond N. MacKenzie, 'Curll, Edmund (d. 1747)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, Sept 2004; online edn, Jan 2008 <<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/6948>> [accessed 3 Jan 2009], paragraph 21 of 22.

<sup>15</sup> Pat Rodgers, *Grub street: Studies in a subculture* (London: Methuen, 1972), p135.

<sup>16</sup> Ralph, Straus, *The unspeakable Curll: Being Some Account of Edmund Curll, Bookseller to which is added a full list of his books*, (London: Chapman and Hall, 1927), p201.

<sup>17</sup> 'Edmund Curll'; *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, paragraph 9.

<sup>18</sup> See Rodger Thompson, *Unfit for modest ears: A study of Pornographic, Obscene and Bawdy Works Written or Published in England in the Second Half of the Seventeenth Century*, (London: Macmillan Press, 1979), p166.

It is possible, and tempting, to suggest that Curll's appetite for scandal led him to publish *Irish Tales* which was, as Ross tells us; 'an Irish, Roman catholic and Jacobite work, published in Protestant, Hanoverian England, just four months after the execution of the leading Jacobite rebels for their part in the Rebellion of 1715.'<sup>19</sup> However Ross also suggests that at the time it may not have been seen as controversial; 'Sarah Butler's fusion of revisionist history and political polemic in a 'novel' was almost wholly inaccessible to her English contemporaries.'<sup>20</sup>

It is more likely that Curll, being the opportunist that he was, had somehow gotten hold of the work and seen it as an easy means of making money. As Sarah Butler wasn't alive at the time of publication he wouldn't have had to pay her anything.

Because the modern criticism on it is so scarce and because there are no contemporary reviews of the book available, *Irish Tales* doesn't appear to have been very highly regarded at the time. This may have had to do with the figures who were associated with it. The novel was published by the 'unspeakable' Curll and had a dedication written by Charles Gildon, a hack writer who was another of the so called 'Dunces'. Pope allegedly described Gildon as '[one] who is every way a scoundrel but that he has the luck to be born a gentleman.'<sup>21</sup> Readers may thus have seen *Irish Tales* as just another historical romance by a hackneyed writer.

This implication is also suggested by the list of 'books lately published' at the end of the novel.<sup>22</sup> Words like, 'Amours,' 'secret memoirs' and 'romance' feature prominently in the titles listed and though two of them do actually claim to be histories, this was a term which was sporadically used in eighteenth century novels to make claims to greater prestige.

The title which would seem to have the greatest parallel with *Irish Tales* is *Exilius: Or, the Banished Roman. A new and entertaining ROMANCE*. Visually the title, with its chaptered list of events, looks very similar to the title page of *Irish Tales* and it too uses a historical setting for instructive purpose. In the preface the author, Jane Barker, claims that; 'Besides

---

<sup>19</sup> 'The Representation of Ireland in Sarah Butler's *Irish Tales*', p4.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid*, p16

<sup>21</sup> Pope's correspondence 1, cited in; *Grub street: Studies in a subculture*, p210.

<sup>22</sup> See Appendix Two for all further references to the advertisements.

these love letters, the young readers may also reap many handfuls of good morality, and likewise gather some gleamings of history.'<sup>23</sup>

Nonetheless, she also says; 'as to the historical part, I suppose the reader does not expect much exactness, it being a romance, not a history.'<sup>24</sup> Being placed alongside novels such as these, it could be concluded that contemporary readers, or at the very least Edmund Curll, may have not have seen *Irish Tales* as the political work it is now regarded as.

Saying this however, Gildon himself seems to be understanding of the work as a historical account, though he makes no mention of a political agenda;

The preface will show your lordship that its foundation is laid on true history and the Lady has so artfully grafted the fiction upon it, that the whole bears the pleasing appearance of truth and reality.<sup>25</sup>

Therefore, it is not certain whether or not the work would have been regarded as political in its time.

In terms of speculating about its reception, the 'dial and bible' and 'flower-de-Luce' are also significant. These would have been the names of the signs that hung over the two publishing houses, found 'against St. *Dunstan's* Church in *Fleetstreet*,' where the novels would be available to buy.

According to Janine Barchas such exact descriptions of locations were common at the time and were useful equivalents to house numbers or addresses. Although she also suggests that it would have been quite easy for a potential buyer to find Curll's shop in Fleet Street, with the publishing business being so concentrated in one area of London. For Barchas, the other location details were more 'optional embellishments',<sup>26</sup> designed to identify the publishers as 'a cut above the rest'<sup>27</sup> and separate them from the hack writers usually associated with the district.

---

<sup>23</sup>Jane Barker, *Exilius: or, the banish'd Roman. A new entertaining romance. In two parts: written after the manner of Telemachus, for the instruction of some young ladies of quality.* (London, published for E. Curll, 1715), *Eighteenth Century Collections Online*, Gale Group, <<http://galenet.galegroup.com/servlet/ECCO>> [Accessed 18<sup>th</sup> Dec 2008] p6.

<sup>24</sup>*Ibid*, p9.

<sup>25</sup> Charles Gildon, 'dedication' in *Irish Tales*, pp x-ix.

<sup>26</sup> Janine Barchas, *Graphic Design, Print Culture, and the Eighteenth-Century Novel*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003). p66.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid*.

Grubstreet tended to gentrify its address whenever possible, usually with references to churches or other citadels of respectability.<sup>28</sup>

The mention of St Dunstan's church seems to be in keeping with this idea. The need to make reference to respectability implies that there may have been a public doubt to this in the first place.

The quality of the physical book also implies that the novel was not highly regarded, as well as making suggestions as to Curll's publishing methods. The book has a board front cover, which is covered with marbled paper. The pages are quite thick but very roughly cut, almost as if they have been sliced with a letter opener.<sup>29</sup> Priced at; '1s. 6d. Stitch'd, and 2s. Bound',<sup>30</sup> the volume seems to have been quite cheaply made.

This appears to be common for Curll as he published novels, 'usually in cheaply produced editions, almost always priced at 1s. or 2s.'<sup>31</sup> With the exception of *Exilius: Or, the Banish'd Roman*, which is 3s., the other books advertised at the back of the novel also follow this pattern. As, 'The cheapness of the books' production unfortunately ensured that relatively few survived',<sup>32</sup> it makes sense that *Irish Tales* is now so obscure.

It should also be briefly noted however that the binding of the books was not often down to the publisher: 'Most eighteenth-century readers had their purchases bound or re-bound in their own preferred style, often to match the rest of their library.'<sup>33</sup> Therefore the quality of the physical book may not be solely connected to its publishing history, but have some relation to the neglect of its owners.

### **'Instructive Histories for the happy conduct of life'<sup>34</sup> Sarah Butler's use of the romantic novel for political agenda**

Sarah Butler's *Irish Tales* is, allegedly, 'One of the earliest examples of Irish romantic fiction.'<sup>35</sup> The brief chapter outline on the title page would suggest to the reader that this is a romantic tale; the 'Banish'd prince', 'Distrest lovers' and 'The punishment of ungenerous

---

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid* p71.

<sup>29</sup> This information comes from the original edition, viewed at Chawton house library. See Appendix Three.

<sup>30</sup> See Appendix One, the title page.

<sup>31</sup> 'Edmund Curl'; *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Paragraph 13.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>33</sup> *Graphic Design, Print Culture, and the Eighteenth-Century Novel*, p14

<sup>34</sup> *Irish tales* title page. Appendix one.

<sup>35</sup> Robert Welch, (ed.) *The Oxford Companion to Irish Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996.) p74.

love,<sup>36</sup> are tropes that frequently occur in romantic fiction. However, in the preface Butler wastes no time in claiming that the events are strongly based on history; ‘although I have cloath’d it with the dress and title of a novel; yet (so far as I dare speak in my own behalf, that) I have err’d as little from the truth of history, as any perhaps who have undertaken anything of this nature.’<sup>37</sup>

The fact that she identifies her work as a novel and is yet so desperate to display its historical accuracy, is very interesting and brings up the novel debate that is so prominent in eighteenth-century literary criticism.

In *Making the novel: Fiction and society in Britain, 1660-1789*, Brean Hammond and Shaun Regan discuss Aphra Behn’s *Oroonoko, or The royal Slave* (1688), which has similarities to *Irish Tales*. Another so called novel, *Oroonoko* made claims to truth and reality as well as using elements of romantic fiction. Hammond and Regan also cite Richard Kroll, who asserts that *Oroonoko* was not a novel, but a piece of political propaganda.

*Oroonoko* is...not a novel...it is in fact Behn’s desperate attempt between 10 and 29<sup>th</sup> June 1688 to warn James II that if he continues on the path he has described since his assession, he risks suffering the same fate as his father [Charles I, who was executed by Parliament].<sup>38</sup>

As her novel was published in 1688, Aphra Behn may well have been a contemporary of Butler. Therefore it is feasible to draw conclusions about the nature of *Irish Tales* from its analysis. As Kroll seems to consider the definition of novel as an antonym for a work of political worth, it is necessary to consider the definition of novel as it was in the eighteenth century.

In *Making the novel* Hammond and Regan summarise J. Paul Hunter’s definition of the term ‘novel’, from *Before novels: the cultural contexts of eighteenth-century English fiction*. They identify a few of his main points: that novels are stories of the here and now and not set in a far away place and time; that they are credible and probable with characters of familiar social

---

<sup>36</sup> See Appendix One.

<sup>37</sup> Preface to *Irish Tales* p1 and 2.

<sup>38</sup> Richard kroll, ‘tales of love and gallantry’: The politics of *Oroonoko*’ *Huntington library quarterly*, 64: 7 (December, 2004) 573-605 (p578), cite; Brean Hammond, and Shaun Regan , *Making the novel: Fiction and society in Britian, 1660-1789*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), p37.

rank, rather than kings and heroes; that they reject traditional classical plots and that they concentrate on the subjective individual.<sup>39</sup>

This is in keeping with Ian Watt's viewpoint, which identifies the first 'novels' as being those of Richardson, Fielding and Defoe. Under this definition *Irish tales* is far from being a 'novel' and seems to be more in keeping with the conventions of romance.

However, Michael Mckeon talks of 'the inadequacy of our theoretical distinction between novel and romance,'<sup>40</sup> and states that it is only around the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century that 'the novel becomes the dominant and standard term.'<sup>41</sup>

Seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century writers often use the terms 'romance,' 'history' and 'novel' with an evident interchangeability that must bewilder and frustrate all modern expectations.<sup>42</sup>

It seems that in Butler's time the word 'novel' could refer to any work written for entertainment purposes, with no relation to its quality or function. If this is the case then Butler's historical justification of her work is her attempt to prove it to be one of higher standing.

As the story progresses, *Irish Tales* begins to read less and less like a romance novel and more like a précis of Irish history. By writing in this manner Butler draws parallels between romantic chivalry and the ancient Gaelic past and shows the English readership that the Irish have a rich and heroic history of their own.

Brian Boru's victory at Clontarf in A.D.1014 not only broke the power of the Scandinavians and their Leinster allies but made possible the flowering of a cultural renaissance.<sup>43</sup>

In her preface Butler tells us that; 'Ireland was once one of the principle nations in Europe for piety and learning,'<sup>44</sup> and the Irish were not 'rude and illiterate'<sup>45</sup> as was they were

---

<sup>39</sup>See *Making the novel*, p26, and J. Paul Hunter, *Before novels : the cultural contexts of eighteenth-century English fiction* (New York, Norton, 1990). p23-5.

<sup>40</sup> Michael Mckeon, *The origins of the English novel 1600-1740* (Maryland: The John Hopkins University Press, 1987), p3.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid*, p25.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>43</sup> Rodger Mchugh, and Maurice Harmon *Short history of Anglo-Irish literature: From it's origins to the present day* (New Jersey: Barnes and noble books, 1982), p43.

commonly painted by English historians. Her keenness to highlight this places Butler near the start of an Anglo-Irish literary tradition, which attempted to challenge the historical bias that presented the Irish as uncivilised.

This bias had been present since the twelfth-century when Giraldus Cambrensis, a Norman Welshman, tried to justify the invasions of the Norman knights.

Giraldus portrayed the Irish as an uncivilised and barbarous people. His remarks were picked up by all subsequent English commentators on Ireland and, by the seventeenth-century, many of them had become clichés repeated by almost every English writer on Irish affairs.<sup>46</sup>

In the seventeenth-century there began to be a stronger emphasis on Irish history and literature, especially in the works of those of a Catholic persuasion. One of the most important was Geoffrey Keating's *Foras Feasa Ar Eirinn*, or *A Basis of knowledge about Ireland*, which Butler cites as one of her sources along with Bede, Camden, Heylin, Spencer, Hammmor, Campion, Dr. Keting, Sir James Ware, Flahertus, and P. Walsh.<sup>47</sup>

In this century, Irish Catholics had suffered a great deal of oppression from the English Protestants. In 1649-1653 there was English invasion under Oliver Cromwell, in which brutal attempts were made to convert the Catholic population to the Protestant church. This also resulted in the confiscation of much of the land owned by the Catholic aristocracy.

After the Stuart monarchy was re-instated there was a brief attempt to return some of the land back to its original owners but following the glorious revolution of 1688, in which the Roman Catholic James II was overthrown, the threat to the Irish Catholics was renewed. In the subsequent Williamite wars that occurred between the forces of William of Orange, and James II, many fought on the side of the Jacobites. However, the battle ended in a Williamite victory.<sup>48</sup>

---

<sup>44</sup> Preface to *Irish Tales*, p3.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> Seamus Deane (ed.) *The field day anthology of Irish writing* volume 1 (Derry: Field day publications, 1991), p236.

<sup>47</sup> Preface to *Irish tales*, p6.

<sup>48</sup> See 'The Representation of Ireland in Sarah Butler's *Irish Tales*', p12 and Brendan Fitzpatrick, *Seventeenth-Century Ireland: The war of religions* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1988), for a more complete account of events.

In *Irish Tales* Dooneslaith refuses to marry the Danish King, Turgieus, exclaiming; ‘What wed a Tyrant! One whose wicked hands have ransack’d all our holy temples, demolish’d all our Altars! burnt all our Churches, and raz’d our monestries.’<sup>49</sup>

According to Ian Campbell Ross this outburst alludes to the Tudor and Cromwell military campaigns, in which the monasteries and catholic churches were destroyed, as well as to the more immediate reference of the post 1691 Penal laws, in which Catholic worship and education were banned.<sup>50</sup> However it could equally be a reminder that Ireland was the centre of Christianity during the Dark Ages.

In her preface Butler also carefully justifies every omission or element of the story that could possibly be contested, in order to strengthen her claim to historical truth.

I have, I must confess, omitted several remarkable passages, and twenty-four of the twenty-five battles which Bryan Boraimh fought in his reign and won; but yet I have not forfeited in anything that may be injurious to the truth, in their places, and have only made a compendium of things as though done in four or five years time.<sup>51</sup>

Despite her claims that this omission is insignificant, Ross suggests that it was actually very essential to her political agenda:

The reasons for Butler’s telescoping of her source are crucial to her purposes. What she omits – and what she similarly skates over in the omission of the twenty-five battles fought by Brian Boru – is the internecine strife which characterized Ireland during the tenth-century, when rival Irish chiefs fought each other. In Butler’s narrative, the Irish unite in resistance to foreign invasion and their ultimate victory over the Danes is essentially uncompromised by accounts of the Irish fighting among themselves.<sup>52</sup>

Butler is attempting to use accounts of the Danish invasions in the ninth and tenth-centuries to represent a time in which the Irish managed to ward off the invaders in their country in a courageous and victorious manner. The implication seems to be that they can do so once more and rectify the oppression of the Irish Catholics that had been going on for centuries.

---

<sup>49</sup> *Irish tales*, p52.

<sup>50</sup> See ‘The Representation of Ireland in Sarah Butler’s *Irish Tales*’, p13.

<sup>51</sup> Preface to *Irish tales*, p7.

<sup>52</sup> ‘The Representation of Ireland in Sarah Butler’s *Irish Tales*’, p8.

Similarly, throughout the narrative Butler consistently presents the Irish as heroic and the Danish as tyrannical. She describes the preceding wars between the ancient Irish and the ‘powerful’ Danes as ‘lasting and terrible’, leaving the natives ‘harass’d, tir’d’ and ‘tributaries to the Dane’.<sup>53</sup> Yet despite the odds that were against them, their strength and ingenuity led ‘that warlike and Ancient Kingdom [to] free itself from the Tyranny of its mortal enemy the *Danes*’.<sup>54</sup>

In the concluding part of her account, which documents the battle of Clontarf, Butler strongly defends the heroism of the Irish. She gives a detailed account of the deaths on both sides, as they imply a marvellous Irish victory. Despite the loss of Bryan Boriamh and the prince Murchoe, as well as; “seven petty kings, most of the nobility of the princes and Nobility of Munster and Conaught, and four thousand of meaner degree”; the loss on the Danish side is far greater. They morn the two Danish princes, the King of Leinster and all his nobility, three thousand common soldiers from Leinster and all their commanders, as well as ten thousand seven hundred of the Danish soldiers.<sup>55</sup>

The reactions to the losses are also presented in favour of the Irish. The deaths of the Danish commanders, “so disheartened the enemy, that they gave way, to an easy, though dear-bought victory.”<sup>56</sup> However, Murchoe’s demise only makes the Irish more determined;

Yet for all this, did not the resolute Irish loose one foot of ground, or one bit of their courage; but rather, spur’d on by revenge, made the Danes pay dear for his loss, and in a short time became the sole masters of the field.<sup>57</sup>

This biased presentation of events could be Butler’s attempt to show both the Protestants and English that the Irish Catholics will one day rise to the heroic greatness they displayed in the battle of Clontarf.

*Irish Tales* does seem to have been part of a new taste for Irish literature that was beginning to come about in the eighteenth century. In his article on Irish tales Ross cites Jacqueline R. Hill who states that;

---

<sup>53</sup> *Irish tales* p1 and 2.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid*, 130.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid* pp 127-128.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid* p125.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid*.

The wave of enthusiasm for ancient Gaelic civilisation which swept over England and Ireland in the first half of the eighteenth century...evidently owed much to a new development: the presentation of the Gaelic past, in a positive light, to an English speaking readership.<sup>58</sup>

This suggests that Irish writing was beginning to make itself known in England and that Butler was following a tradition which was already coming to light. However, Ross points out that *Irish Tales* seems to antedate all the works that Hill notes to support her claim.<sup>59</sup> It seems that the elusive Sarah Butler's novel was unique, underrated and ahead of its time.

---

<sup>58</sup> Jacqueline R. Hill, 'Popery and Protestantism, Civil and religious liberty: The disputed lessons of Irish history 1690-1812' *Past and Present* 118 (February, 1998), 96-129; Cite. 'The Representation of Ireland in Sarah Butler's *Irish Tales*', p4.

<sup>59</sup> See 'The Representation of Ireland in Sarah Butler's *Irish Tales*', p4.