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Rhythms of Revolt: European Traditions and Memories of Social Conflict in Oral Culture

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12 Lost voices?

Memories of early modern peasant revolts in post-emancipation Estonia

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Some historians believe that oral traditions may present alternative visions to established historical narratives. In an endeavour to recover 'voices from below', folklore can be used to gain access to the freely-uttered opinions of the illiterate masses. Recently, Guy Beiner offered an excellent and inspiring case study of social remembrance in Ireland on the basis of 'an extremely rich and voluminous body of available sources for the folk history of 1798'.¹ The wealth of the oral tradition corresponds with the folklorists' informants' perception of the 1798 rebellion as 'a central episode in their historical identity' and 'a major landmark in their relatively recent past'. However, it does not follow that because in some cases oral traditions prove rich historical sources, that they should do so in all locations. We must consider the availability and quality of such sources in other localities, as well as which historical events, where and how, are preserved in oral tradition, and what conditions favour or disfavour the perpetuation of 'vernacular historical discourses' in communities, in the face of the power and symbolic violence exercised by the dominant. Lack of folkloric evidence may be the 'fault' of the collectors of oral traditions, who, due to their social background, training and ideological and aesthetic preferences failed to consider such pieces worth collecting, applied irrelevant methodological principles, or did not attempt any systematic collection of folk memory. But it is also possible that this absence may also be explained by an array of political, economic, social, and cultural constraints imposed on ordinary people.

In this chapter I will examine folklore sources concerning peasant unrest in Estonia. In this case the absence of clear statements of social conflict stands in sharp contrast to the memory of popular uprisings analysed in some other contributions to this volume. However, Estonia is not unique: the evidence in the folklore archive from Latvia is also thin. It will be left for the reader to decide whether the example of Estonia is a rather atypical case from the fringes of the European cultural area, or whether it might

¹ Guy Beiner, *Remembering the Year of the French. Irish Folk History and Social Memory* (Madison, WI, 2006), p. 10.

offer a model for understanding in what historical circumstances revolts are retained in folk memory as memorable events and such memories are transmitted over several generations.

Liberation from lordly oppression: from above or below?

The incessant struggle between landlords and serfs keeps feeding the flame that threatens, upon the slightest provocation, to set ablaze the whole empire ... When fighting is carried abroad at the beginning of a war, the enemy tries to stir up trouble in the lands of the ruler he is waging war with; and in such lands where serfdom still exists, this aim is most readily achieved if he promises, through his emissaries, to emancipate all the serfs. When an enemy, however, invades our country, he finds the most ardent champions of his cause from amongst the subjects of the selfsame Empire he has invaded. These reasons alone should prove that Russia's policy must be one of leading the serfs, by preparatory steps, towards personal freedom, in order that the enemy may have no opportunities for inciting rebellion, which he otherwise might use ...²

This is how Duke George of Oldenburg, Governor of Estonia, justified to Tsar Alexander I of Russia the compelling need to emancipate local serfs in 1809. Even earlier, a similar argument had been put forth by Georg Friedrich Parrot, Rector of Tartu University, in his memorandum of 27 December 1806, where he argued against the idea of forming a peasant militia for defence against Napoleon's armies: 'The peasants say, and in quite a loud voice, too, that they are waiting for Bonaparte as their liberator'.³ It is clear that, at the time of the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars the ruling elite in the Baltics feared that the serfs might turn against landed aristocracy and was further dismayed by the local enlightened literati warning of the threat of rebellion. Contemporary documents include a few official reports of the serfs themselves expecting emancipation from the French troops, though perhaps not as many as the Governor's statement might have led one to believe.⁴ In any case, this was not how this period was remembered decades later by the Estonian and Latvian people themselves in their tales and songs. Instead, they chose to recall that for fear of the soldiers, people took their cattle and household goods and sought refuge in the woods and boglands. No doubt

² Juhan Kahk, *Rahutused ja reformid* (Tallinn, 1961), p. 541.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 221.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 220–221; Tõnu Tannberg, *Maakaitseväekohustus Balti kubermangudes 19. sajandi 1. poolel (1806–1856)* (Tartu, 1996), p. 93. Archival sources indicate very little 'French impact' on the Estonian peasant movement, but the Kauguri unrest in South Livonia in 1802 was somewhat French-inspired. An investigation of this incident showed that the more literate peasant leaders had been reading newspaper accounts of the French Revolution.

the admonitions and descriptions of imminent pillage that the clergy were directed by the authorities to read out to their congregations during the wars of 1806 and 1812, could hardly have failed to kindle latent fears in the populace. In general, folk songs and oral traditions reflect later moods, celebrating victorious Russian arms and gloating over a defeated Bonaparte. Yet that does not mean that one can claim with any certainty that the Estonian serfs had no hopes of emancipation at the time of Napoleonic Wars, nor that they felt no urge to turn their arms against the local landlords.

Napoleon and the French are not the only foreign invaders to provoke the expectations of peasants about their liberation from the German lords, according to official records. For example, during the Russo–Swedish War of 1788–1790, the coastal peasants in North Estonia are supposed to have waited impatiently for the Swedes to liberate them.⁵ Again, during the Crimean War (1853–1855), several official reports presented the peasants' attitudes to governmental authority as hostile. Had the British landed on the shore, locals could have gone over to their side in order to relieve themselves of manorial dues.⁶ These accounts of peasants' disloyalty to their rulers were probably an exaggeration of noble politicians and over-eager officials. In fact, Couronian peasants' loyalty to the throne (although not yet directly to the Russian Tsar, since Courland was formally incorporated into the Russian empire only in 1795) had already been put to the test in 1794 when Polish insurgents invaded the duchy during the Kościuszko uprising. However, only a small part of the local peasantry became involved, and their revolts were of a local nature. In general Latvian peasants did not actively support the Polish insurgents, although the latter's proclamations produced rumours about the abolition of serfdom in Courland.⁷

Manorialism in Estonia and Latvia at that time was both a mode of production and a form of social domination. It meant strict control and regulation of peasant activities on the estate and had resulted in a gradual reduction of the land available to the serfs for their own use. Thus, the abolition of serfdom would have entailed transforming the rural economy as well as challenging lordly predominance.

Militant rioters or humble peasants?

The rest of this chapter draws on oral narratives concerning the revolts in Rāpina, Karula (both in 1784), Vastseliina (1803), Pühajärve (uncertain date) and Kose-Uuemõisa (1805), which were recorded between 1875 and 1939.⁸

5 Mati Laur (ed.), *Eesti ajalugu*. IV (Tartu, 2003), p. 141.

6 Toomas Karjahärm and Tiit Rosenberg (eds), *Eesti ajalugu*, V (Tartu, 2010), p. 89.

7 Enija Rubina, 'Kostjuško sacelšanās Kurzemes hercogistē', *Latvijas Arhīvi* 3 (2011): 235–265.

8 Jakob Jaagumann 1876; Johannes Raudsepp 1935; Adam Zernask 1935, *Rāpina puuaitasõda* (Rāpina, 2009); Eesti Kultuurilooline Arhiiv (EKLA), f. 38, m. 2, 344/46a < Võnnu 1898

Memories of the unrest in Kose-Uuemõisa were effectively swallowed up and absorbed by the memories of the Mahtra War of 1858 (see map, Figure 12.1). These stories were partly written by informants in the communities concerned, and partly collected by folklore collectors who were themselves of peasant origin.⁹ Four of these five incidents took place in south Estonia, which together with the northern part of Latvia made up the Imperial province of Livonia. The stories had presumably become shorter and more fragmentary over time, but the main pattern remained the same. The storytellers had few resources to draw on because the memories of these events were not transmitted by other literary or visual means.¹⁰ For comparison's sake and in order to clarify the interaction between oral and written records, I have also made use of other elements of Estonian oral tradition, such as folksongs and tales about the French march on Moscow and concerning Russian emperors, as well as some printed works. Soviet historians went to a great deal of effort to reconstruct the above-mentioned events on the basis of archival sources, but they neglected the oral tradition.¹¹ Neither have these stories attracted the interest of more recent folklorists, who tend to focus on life stories from the twentieth century. If contemporary researchers do look to earlier oral culture, it is mainly for evidence of religious attitudes, or popular medicine. They avoid the overtly political.

During, and as a consequence of, the 'national awakenings' of the second half of the nineteenth century, systematic collecting of Estonian and

Jaan Narusk; EKLA, f. 38, m. 3, ff. 217a–221a < Rāpina 1890 Peeter Jaagumann; Eesti Rahvaluule Arhiiv (= ERA), H III 31, 283/4 < Rāpina 1905 Vold. Songi; H I 9, 699/701 (125) < Viljandi 1898 Anton Suurkask; H II 3, 492/505 < Vastseliina 1888 Hindrik Prants; H 549/92 < Otepää 1843 Peter Eichenfeld, published in 'Esimene Pühajärve sõda', *Päevaleht*, 14 November 1909, p. 5; EKLA, f. 199, m. 50 (Kose 1931). Rāpina has produced the greatest number of such stories (see appendix).

⁹ For a discussion of the role of the intermediaries with regard to the value of folklore records, see Maureen Perrie, 'Folklore as Evidence of Peasant Mentalité: Social Attitudes and Values in Russian Popular Culture,' *Russian Review*, 48 (1989): 120–121; David Hopkin, *Voices of the People in Nineteenth-Century France* (Cambridge, 2012), pp. 19–25. The social background of the four most important informants on the revolts is revealing. Except for Peter Eichenfeldt (1800–1887), they were prominent folklore collectors. Eichenfeldt was barn-keeper at Pühajärve manor. Jakob Jagomann (1844–1910) was a peasant farmer and author of the chronicle of Rāpina parish. Hindrik Prants (1858–1932) was peasant farmer's son and a journalist and had, in his own words, inherited his interest in history from his ancestors. See *Minu elukäik, Mälestusi ja pärimusi* (Tartu, 1937). Anton Suurkask (1873–1965) was the son of an overseer at Uue-Kariste manor, national activist, and journalist. He did not live in the place he reported about.

¹⁰ A file on the investigation into the Kauguri uprising includes a water-colour by an unknown author, an officer: www.letonika.lv/groups/openImage.aspx?entryTitle=050090_1.gif&title=Letonika.lv%20-%20atbildes,%20kuras%20tu%20meklē, accessed 1 Oct 2014. The image depicts the two parties standing against each other, and the scene is dominated by a military unit drawn up in several lines.

¹¹ Kahk, *Rahutused ja reformid*; Jānis Zutis, *Latvija klaušu saimniecības sairšanas periodā un Kauguru nemieri 1802. gadā* (Rīga, 1953).

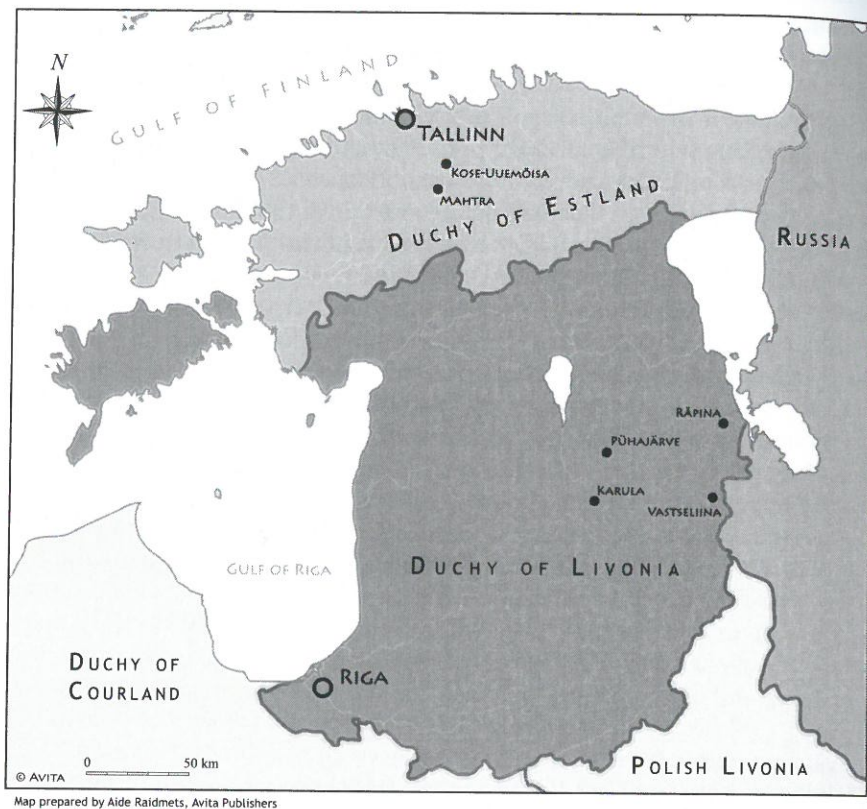


Figure 12.1 Peasant revolts in Estonia discussed in the chapter, 1784–1805.

Latvian folklore was encouraged and the populations were told by leading activists that oral tradition had preserved the real history of the Estonian and Latvian people – a history that was apparently expected to contradict the old elite's perspective.¹² However, most of the historical narratives collected concern either 'ancient times' or wars. Only a very small proportion of the folkloric texts written down in the period from the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century refer to specific and dateable historical events, in part because the organisers of the collecting campaigns included no questions about more recent times, and probably did not regard such stories as

12 As in many other countries, folklore was put in use for political objectives. The bourgeois would-be elite made common political cause with the lower rural and urban strata through a common culture and a common language forged through folklore to challenge the old elites, who were ethnically and linguistically 'other' (Hopkin, *Voices of the People*, pp. 20–21). In Estonia and Latvia folklore editions played an important role in nation-building and state-formation.

genuine folklore at all. Nonetheless, some material did make its way into the Estonian and Latvian folklore archives. These stories portray the rebels' aspirations, the course of events and the outcome of revolts.

The Estonian and Latvian peasant revolts are very hard to compare with the great Russian peasant uprisings. Unlike the four massive uprisings that 'shook' and 'rocked' the Russian state in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (led by Ivan Bolotnikov, 1606–1607; Stepan Razin, 1667–1671; Kondrat Bulavin, 1707–1708; and Emel'jan Pugachev, 1773–1775), the Estonian and Latvian revolts in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were of local nature, and were of modest scale and short length, characterised by an anarchic spontaneity and little or no organisation. In the four great Russian 'peasant wars' that figured prominently in Russian folklore the key initiative was actually taken by Cossacks, and the rank and file included soldiers, free peasants and serfs (not just an agricultural population but including serfs who laboured in the manufactories of the Urals), as well as ethnic and religious minorities. In Estonia and Latvia, by contrast, the revolts were solely serf events.¹³ However, I make references to Russian peasants' views and beliefs in order to elucidate differences and similarities between the two regions. Estonia and Latvia were parts – although very distinctive – of the Russian Empire and the Russian as well as the Baltic countryside was marked by manorialism and rural servitude.

For most of the eighteenth century, the resistance of Estonian and Livonian peasants to growing obligations, taxes and mistreatment by landlords remained largely low-profile. However, there was a notable upsurge of peasant disorder and complaints during the last two decades of the eighteenth and first six decades of the nineteenth century. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, resistance to the manorial system found its most vivid expression in the poll tax revolts in Rāpina manor (1784), unrest in Kauguri (1802) and in Kose-Uuemõisa manor (1805). In all these cases, hundreds or even thousands of peasants confronted tsarist troops and were

13 The revolts under consideration were often joint ventures of farmheads and corvée labourers. The peasants were divided into landed and landless but due to the landlords' arbitrary control over their serfs, members of both groups could easily experience upward and downward social mobility. The legal rights of the two groups differed only to a limited extent in relation to corporal punishment, recruiting into the military, sale of serfs, etc. There are folk songs and tales which make clear distinctions between farmheads and farmhands, but there are also many others that speak generally of 'peasants' (*talupoeg*) and more often of 'country folk' (*maamees*). The discrepancies within the peasantry did not rule out a clear-cut opposition with all other social groups. In the public sphere, the increased respect for peasants as hardworking people, the creators of the national wealth, and the nourishers of the nation can be found during the spread of the Enlightenment, largely due to the impact of cameralist thought. Tsar Alexander I saw them as 'the real power of the nation'. See: Alexander von Tobien, *Die Agrargesetzgebung Livlands im 19. Jahrhundert*, vol. 1 (Berlin, 1899), pp. 163–165. It was characteristic of the works of the enlightened literati to refer to the fact that 'these' live off of the land...

brutally crushed by them. In 1783–1784, poll tax revolts broke out in as many as sixty-three manors in southern Estonia; and in 1797–1807, a total of sixty-seven revolts took place all over the territory of Estonia.¹⁴ Generally the disorders were limited to one manor; in the five incidents considered here, however, participants from several other localities were also engaged.

The stories follow the same general pattern. Groaning under the landlords' yoke, peasants either go to seek help and relief from their intolerable predicament on their own initiative; or they had heard rumours of the crown's intentions to relieve their situation with some new law or ruling. Occasionally relief was expected to come directly from the monarch, but more frequently from representatives of the crown, such as the governor, some aide of the Emperor/Empress, or a specially sent 'emancipator', sometimes on the assumption that the Emperor/Empress wished the peasants well but had been unaware of their predicament. The stories from Vastseliina and Pühajärve involve no direct address to the crown; instead, the conflict unfolds between a higher court magistrate and the peasants. All the stories portray the peasants as oppressed, exploited and helpless. While many Estonian folksongs collected in the nineteenth century followed the unrhymed metre of Elias Lönnrot's national epic *The Kalevala*, one of the most widespread folk songs which followed an end-rhyming scheme explicitly states that Estonians were 'the lowest of all the olden peoples'.¹⁵

In the stories, protesters are said to have demanded freedom, rights and deliverance from their burdens. Contemporary official reports also inform us about such demands. In 1805, the men of Sangaste reportedly said that 'in the Governorate of Tallinn, there's disobedience and all those who resist mightily will be set free'.¹⁶ In Kauguri, Janis of Viteļu shouted: 'We are now free people and belong to no-one but his majesty the Emperor'.¹⁷ It was widely believed that emancipation would liberate the peasants from the hateful forced labour on the manor. The rebels' motives can be identified as being oriented towards the reestablishment of the 'old law' or archaic original freedom but also towards 'the new order' – emancipation. It remains unclear which orientation actually dominated at the time of revolts, but in the stories collected by folklorists, the activities were directed at achieving modern freedoms and rights.

The students who collected historical traditions in the villages in the late 1920s and early 1930s were told that cases of direct resistance were few and far between. Some bolder men, it was said, dared to answer back, but generally they came to grief.¹⁸ Usually people told the collectors: 'who would have

14 Kahk, *Rahutused ja reformid*, p. 552.

15 Eesti mees ja tema sugu, in ERA I 5, 252/63 (44) < Rõuge 1935.

16 The leaders' words are cited by S. I. Pushtshin, Chair of Tartu Land Revision Commission, in his report to the Minister of Interior (Kahk, *Rahutused ja reformid*, p. 395).

17 Kahk, *Rahutused ja reformid*, p. 370.

18 EKLA, f. 199, m. 50 (Kose 1931), f. 35.

dared to resist?'¹⁹ Nor did the informants remember many specific details about serfdom, but described the various obligations, lack of rights and cruel punishments in very general terms. It is difficult to determine exactly when and how the memories of early modern revolts faded.

Oral tradition also reveals how the narrators assessed the uprisings after several intervening decades. Leaders are often mentioned by name, although it is not always possible to speak about the 'focus on a leading person' that is a common feature of oral traditions. These leaders are not represented as heroes, and the incidents are viewed through the dismal prism of defeat. The peasants' struggle is seen as hopeless rather than glorious.

The crowds were dropping dead like flies. The enslaved people had nothing to protect themselves with. In the end, a thick staff came flying over the high wooden fence, it was the only tool they had. Then the tricked serfs managed to cudgel the guard at the gate to death and get out. Wounded and bleeding those who still had the strength ran from their executioners' arrows. This is how the serfs were oppressed, until real freedom came at long last.²⁰

The belittling attitude towards the struggles displayed in oral tradition fits very ill with the huge acclaim won by the historical novel *Mahtra War*, which related the story of the 1858 peasant uprising on Mahtra manor, and was published as a serial in 1902 in the daily paper *Teataja*. The book is a vibrant exhortation to struggle, dominated by the idea that the peasants can rely only on their own resources for help. So, too, the discussions of early modern revolts published during the years of independence (1918–1940) represent the Estonians' ancestors as belligerently standing up for their rights, not subservient or submissive. During the tsarist period, however, Eduard Vilde's *Mahtra War* remained an exceptional treatment of early modern and modern unrest among printed publications. The few newspaper stories dealing with revolts that actually made it through the censor's office proffered very different kinds of statements: 'it never occurred to people to revolt and shed blood', and any resistance 'of course brought grief and calamity upon the people themselves'.²¹

While Estonian oral tradition is dominated by a sense that few would dare stand up to the German landlords, official documents written by higher officials in the governorate make the popular sentiment appear more mutinous and the instances of resistance more threatening. Thus, Governor Adam von Richter of Livonia complained to the interior minister in July 1805 that without more troops, a general rebellion would break out, as the

19 EKLA, f. 200, m. 15:2 (Rapla 1930), f. 85.

20 ERA, H III 31, 283/4 < Rõpina 1905 Vold. Songi.

21 G. E. Luiga, 'Kose-Uuemõisa mäss', *Eesti Kodu* 4 (1908): 84–88. 'Kose-Uuemõisa mäss aastal 1805', *Eesti Postimehe Teaduste eralisa* 31 (1904): 59–60.

peasants 'have already, at their secret counsels, indicated that unless their hopes – which by now go beyond emancipation to include complete deliverance from the *corvée* – be granted to them, they intend to obtain them by force'.²² During the Russo–Swedish War in 1788–1790, the St. Petersburg government was told that the landing of Swedish troops might ignite a 'general rebellion'.²³ Manor lords and others also magnified the rebels' goals. In 1805 the Bailiff of Kuimetsa, Zabel, argued that peasants rallied to 'fight and if they win, they will first slaughter baron von Tiesenhausen and after him mercilessly all the other Germans'.²⁴ One of the rebel leaders, Evart from Ojasoo, was said to embody the soul of Pugachev.²⁵

Local enlightened authors, mostly originating from Germany, depicted peasant unrest in an even more threatening light than the reports by government officials and landlords. The most eminent enlightened author at work in the Baltic provinces, the author Garlieb Merkel, wrote (no doubt with exaggeration) about the year 1784: 'Already in this unrest, the nobility would have been cut down, had there not happened to be enough troops in the province.'²⁶ Another contemporary observer commented on foreign examples:

Surely mankind will gain its full rights in this land [Estonia] only if, contrary to our dearest wishes, a revolution should break out or if the ruling classes were warned of their doom, either by the example of neighbouring peoples or through wise, liberally minded and respected men belonging to their own ranks, teaching them to see even the poor Estonians as their brothers.²⁷

Transnational representations and cross-border comparisons of revolts in Europe, in 'an overlapping communicational space', accentuated the gravity of local peasant revolts at home.²⁸ Foreign examples fed the upper classes' fear of peasant rebellions at least as much as the actual burgeoning threat on their Baltic manors.

In contrast to this elite sense of the potential power of the populace, in all the stories written down from the oral tradition – except for one clear

22 Kahk, *Rahutused ja reformid*, p. 394.

23 Laur (ed.), *Eesti ajalugu*, IV, p. 141.

24 Juhan Kahk and Artur Vassar (eds), *Eesti NSV ajaloo lugemik: I osa. Valitud dokumente ja materjale Eesti ajaloost kõige vanemast ajast kuni XIX sajandi keskpaigani* (Tallinn, 1960), p. 338.

25 Baron Rosen to Governor of Estonia, 5 October 1805, *ibid.*, p. 338.

26 Garlieb Merkel, *Die Letten vorzüglich in Liefland am Ende des philosophischen Jahrhunderts* (Leipzig, 1797), p. 229.

27 *Briefe über Reval nebst Nachrichten von Esth- und Liefland* (Deutschland [sic], 1800), p. 27. The work has been attributed to Johann Christoph Petri, but, in fact, the author is unknown and could be German.

28 Malte Griesse, 'Introduction', in Malte Griesse (ed.), *From Mutual Observation to Propaganda War: Premodern Revolts in their Transnational Representations* (Bielefeld, 2014), p. 10.

fabrication – early modern revolts generally end with failure, the protesters being punished (by flogging) or simply scattering.²⁹ The nobility is remembered as radically opposed to the abolition of serfdom. One fragment collected in 1934 even laments that it was because of the emancipation of the peasantry that the Tsar was assassinated.³⁰

It is worth stressing that oral tradition consistently regarded the Tsar as the emancipator and saw emancipation as an act of grace rather than an inevitable concession to his subjects or, even less, the fruit of their own struggle. The folk songs that we have from the second half of the century likewise depict the abolition of serfdom as a great act of kindness by the Emperor and dedicate several strophes to extolling him: 'Let's give thanks to the Emperor/for his kindness to us, poor;' 'Let us praise our Emperor,/let us honour Alexander/who has kindly looked upon us,/mercifully on humble people'.³¹ The Tsar, such songs relate, had set the Estonian peasantry free because he saw their suffering and had mercy on them. Belief in the good monarch is of course a fairly familiar trope among the various European peasantries. Estonian peasants articulated the view that the Emperor of Russia was simply unaware of their predicament and help would be forthcoming, if only he could be informed of it via complaints, petitions, or some other way. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, emphatic loyalty to the ruler was the politically correct thing, and especially during the Russification period (1880s–1905), when glorification of the Emperor grew out of all proportion. *The Sounds of Freedom*, a story devoid of any connection with real events, but set in Tarvastu parish in 1810, and sent by Jaak Unger-son (1865–1903) from Pataste to the mastermind of Russification in Estonia, newspaper editor Ado Grenzstein, in 1898, admonished peasants not to clamour for freedom but to wait patiently until the Emperor chooses, as an act of benevolence, to bestow it on them. What is exceptional about the story is the episode where a peasant denies his desire for freedom to the interrogators at court in Riga and says, 'All I want is to serve the manor'.³² This is also the only one of the stories examined here that recognisably echoes biblical texts – the arrest of the leader of the freedom-seekers, Jaan from Mõrra farmstead, in the manor bears some resemblance to the arrest of Jesus.

A typical tradition from Otepää states: 'It's said that the Russian Emperor loved Estonians very much.' He was, however, unaware of how miserable

29 See also a folk tale about the baron of Kuusiku, according to which he had ordered the protesters' leader, the bricklayer Jüri, to be immured alive: ERA II 225, 237/9 (11) < Rapla 1939.

30 ERA II 86, 323/5 < Kullamaa 1934.

31 'Tänu meil keisrile olgu./et ta vaestel näitnu armu' in Ülo Tedre, *Eesti mees ja tema sugu* (Tartu, 2003), p. 48 (see also E 55486–55520). 'Kiitkem oma keiserida./austagem Aleksanderida./kes on vaatnud vaeste peale./halastanud halbade peale', in Eduard Laugaste (ed.), *Saaksin ma saksa sundijaks*, vol. 1 (Tallinn, 1976), p. 26; see also E 56034/35 (61) < Sangaste 1925.

32 EKLA, f. 38, m. 3:1, ff. 242–245v < Maarja-Magdaleena 1898. The narrator was born in Tarvastu.

their life was, as the Germans had lied to him, telling him that everything was all right. It was also believed that the Tsar told the landlords to set Estonians free from serfdom.³³ Since this latter fragment of tradition comes from the year 1929, well after not only emancipation but also the successful conclusion of Estonia's struggle for independence from Russia, it reveals that some peasants retained deep convictions concerning the Tsar which were not easily eradicated even though the political backdrop had changed radically.

This general picture of passive peasants and benevolent Tsars is contradicted by one exceptional story about the Karula revolt, which was written down in 1898 by Anton Suurkask, a national activist from Viljandi and a participant in the revolution of 1905. Except for the episodes describing the punishment meted out to the leaders near the church and the spirited participation of women in the clash with the soldiers, the story is fictitious, but it is nevertheless telling, as it reflects the rising confidence of Estonians in the second half of the century.

Even before rumours began to be heard of the coming freedom, several men had already undertaken to work for that cause, in good time. Among the men of Karula, Märt from Apja farmstead is said to have taken some others with him and travelled to St. Petersburg many times, to demand freedom.³⁴

Both the protagonist and the other peasants are portrayed as resolute men equally unaffected by the landlord's cajolery and his threats. 'The people of the neighbourhood had great respect for Märt's efforts in seeking freedom and therefore would not let their freedom-seekers be taken away.' [...]

The squires called in two companies to Karula, who were to capture Märt and make him run the gauntlet at the church for the trouble he had stirred up. But then people from all around the countryside rushed up to the church and began to pummel the soldiers who in their turn used their bayonets, so that soon there was a real bloody battle going on.

Although many had lost their lives in the skirmish with the soldiers, the latter were forced to leave Karula without laying their hands on Märt of Apja. Unlike other stories, the subsequent emancipation is here associated with the resistance and seen as a fruit of the people's own struggle. The peasants are shown as resolute, whereas usually they were said to have quickly lost their spirits or run away. Finally, the story does not end with the triumph of the almighty landlords and the humiliating flogging of the rebels. Rather

33 EKLA, f. 199, m. 42 (Otepää 1929), ff. 42–43.

34 ERA, H I 9, 699/701 < Viljandi 1898. The narrator is anonymous.

the landlords themselves are punished, the protagonist is set free and universal freedom is soon to follow. There is just one other scrap of related tradition, collected from Kasaritsa in 1927, which notes that 'soon after the revolt freedom indeed came', without simultaneously praising the Emperor for it.³⁵ However, such radical statements are notably rare in the Estonian folklore archive.

Resistance and revenge in popular imagination

It seems appropriate at this stage to differentiate between two levels in the views of the historic Baltic peasantry. The utilitarian everyday level functioned to help them conform to the social environment. The other, more hidden, rebellious level was oriented towards changing the existing order according to their own interests, and broke out into concrete acts during periods of unrest. Fear of negative sanctions from the powerful may have been one reason why only a few of the stories about overt protest that circulated orally have been written down, but the general tone of the stories allows us to think that even in autonomous social space, it was not the peasants' collective open resistance that was emphasised, but rather the 'weapons of the weak', acts such as beating up or even killing overseers and stewards, shabby work, and defiance.³⁶ Fury and a craving for retaliation also found expression in songs wishing that the lords would groan like oxen or parts of the plough, that they should do hard and humiliating work or go begging: the people dreamt of turning the tables on the landlord. The theme of a world turned upside down can be found in nearly every major cultural tradition in which inequities of power, wealth, and status have been pronounced.³⁷ In Latvian folklore, too, it was through fantasies, such as cursing or malediction or through actual personal violence, perhaps with the help of supernatural beings, that peasants could counter the landlords, injustice could be punished or lords could be brought under the peasants' sway.³⁸ In Russian tales, similarly, social justice 'does not involve the abolition of overlordship as such, but simply the punishment of the unjust individual and, in some instances, his demonition and replacement by his antagonist'.³⁹

Another 'achievement of popular imagination', according to James C. Scott, is to negate the existing social order.⁴⁰ Folk songs in which we hear

35 www.folklore.ee/pubte/ajaloolist/rouge/ (accessed 1 October 2014).

36 James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven, CT, 1990).

37 *Ibid.*, pp. 80–81. For Russia in particular see Perrie, 'Folklore as Evidence', pp. 131–142.

38 In an introduction to Alma Ancelāne (ed.), *Latviešu tautas teikas: vēsturiskās teikas: izlase* (Rīga, 1990), pp. 11–17. It applies also to Russia (Perrie, 'Folklore as Evidence', p. 131).

39 Perrie, 'Folklore as Evidence', p. 131. See also John Keep, 'Emancipation by the Axe? Peasant Revolts in Russian Thought and Literature', *Cahiers du monde russe et soviétique* 23 (1982): 47–48.

40 Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, pp. 80–81.

protagonists sighing for a life without the lord have been recorded in Estonia too, but they are few and far between, and seldom do we find in them a more detailed picture of what this life should be like. 'To live without the lords,/That would be a good life,/No need to fear the masters,/No fear of the taskmasters.'⁴¹

The political and social folk songs that began to spread during the national awakening, however, did threaten the landlords with overt rebellion. 'People pluck up courage,/they watch you./When the time is ripe and coming/And all people rise up struggling/The heads of all those foreigners/Will roll like merry cabbages.'⁴²

Lost in folklore and rediscovered in the archives?

Even if the small number of oral sources on revolts can be mainly ascribed to the ignorance of folklore collectors, their content (except for cases of fabrication) usually cannot, and a set of interrelated factors might be cited as having influenced the way such incidents were remembered.

The rather imprecise folkloric representations of the revolts in Estonia and Latvia, one might argue, merely reflect the insignificance of the events. This assumption, however, needs to be set alongside the official records where the contemporaries, from the manor lords and lower officials up to the Tsar, constantly refer to the menace of rebellion. Official reports often note the fierceness, audacity, recalcitrance, and even initiative of the resistant peasants. The revolts convinced the ruling elite of the need to reform agrarian relationships in the early nineteenth century. In particular, the Kauguri unrest (1802) had a major impact on the birth of the Livland Peasant Law of 1804. This law put so many restrictions on the landlords that when the tsarist government attempted to force the nobility (*Ritterschaften*) in Estonia and Courland to follow Livland's example and adopt a similar law, lords preferred to abolish serfdom itself as potentially less damaging to their economic position.

Repeated revolts over several decades might give us an idea of what unrest and the social memories of it could mean for the peasants because the memory of one event informed another.⁴³ Yet only a few places in Estonia, for example some manors in Harjumaa and Pühajärve, saw repeated revolts.

41 'Isandata ilma olla, siis on hea elu meil/ ei ole meil karta herrasid/ ei isandaid ei kubjaseid', in ERA, H II 11, 292 (58) < Väike-Maarja (1889). See also H II 4, 625/7 (103) < Kodavere (1887), EÜS VII 1654/5 (204) (1910), H II 11, 771/2 (59) < Väike-Maarja (1890), H II 50, 739/40 (10) < Äksi (1894).

42 'Rahvas häste julgust võtva/Ja teid häste perra pasva./Kui see aig saap kätte jõudma/Ja kik rahvas üles tõusma/Sis neil võera maade hulkjil/Jooksvad päänäid kui kapstad maha,' in ERA, H II, 787/9 Kambja sõbra nutu laul (1894); published in Tedre, *Eesti mees*, p. 32.

43 Peter Burke has referred to social memories as explaining the geography of dissent and protest, in Peter Burke, 'History as Social Memory', in *Varieties of Cultural History* (Ithaca, NY, 1997), pp. 43–59.

Generally, these incidents were not repeated and probably remained one-offs, spontaneous reactions to an intolerable situation inspired rather by the example of neighbouring manors than by memories of other revolts long past.

Latvian and Estonian peasantries certainly were agents in the reform process which would eventually lead to emancipation; however, knowledge of their role was developed not through oral tradition but mainly through the historical and literary works of national activists, writers and historians during the inter-war and Soviet periods. Relying on government and court papers in the archives, they helped the people to rediscover the early modern revolts, and reinterpreted these events as significant and heroic episodes in the struggle against oppression.⁴⁴ It is unclear to what extent, if any, they took up the oral tradition to create new narratives. In the process, the meaning of (early modern) revolts has been thoroughly reinterpreted: during the tsarist period Baltic German historians downplayed the significance of the revolts which the Baltic Germans officials, lords, and literati alike at the time of the events considered threatening to their overlordship.⁴⁵ On the other hand, the peasant revolts which were almost non-existent in folklore accounts were seriously reappraised by Estonian and Latvian authors: they saw peasant protest as the engine of several innovations. Again, post-Soviet Estonian and Latvian historiography allocates very little space to peasant revolts and emphasises the reform-mindedness of the Baltic-German nobles instead. The latter shift in historiography does not rest upon any new research results but is explained by the general rejection of 'national' and 'Soviet' concepts of the Baltic past.

Why have the voices of rebellious serfs been lost?

First, the folkloric representations of the revolts of Baltic peasants most probably reflect the people's low self-confidence and their severe material and social deprivation under the extreme exploitation and oppression characteristic of the manorial system (*Gutsherrschaft*), as well as the power-political relations of the time. In Russia, major events of rural-based protest were initiated by non-serfs. The Cossacks, for example, mostly did not practise agriculture and were highly mobile. Thus, in opposition to the current trends

44 O. Urlovska, 'Zemnieku nemieri Bērzaunē, Dikļos un Rūjienā 1784. gadā', *Latvijas vēstures institūta žurnāls* (1938): 363–372; Ādolfs Kāpostiņš, *Vidzemes zemnieku nemieri Kaugurmuižā 1802. g.* (Rīga, 1924); P. Bērziņš, 'Zemnieku nemieri Kauguros. 1802. g.', *Latvijas vēstures institūta žurnāls*, 4 (1937); Zutis, *Latvija klaušu saimniecības sairšanas periodā*; Mihkel Aitsam, *Eestimaa kuningas: sõda Kose-Uuemõisas* (Tallinn, 1938); Kahk, *Rahutused ja reformid*.

45 As a striking example one might refer to Seraphim's description of Couronian peasants in 1794, in August Seraphim, *Geschichte des Herzogtums Kurland* (1561–1795) (Reval, 1904), pp. 343f.

in historical writing, I refer to economic and social factors as shaping human behaviour and views.⁴⁶ It was neither defeat nor the trauma of their experiences that made the Estonian and Latvian peasants forget and undervalue revolts.⁴⁷ There was nothing exceptional about their brutal crushing; similar popular uprisings in many European countries also resulted in suppression. Indeed, the consequences in Estonia and Latvia were much less painful than in many other places – the punishments as well as the scale of the bloodshed were relatively modest here. In many places violent suppression and mass casualties have not prevented the perpetuation of several such events in folklore as heroic struggles for one's rights. Therefore, the conformist behaviour of Estonian and Latvian peasantry can be explained through Bourdieu's concept of habitus: they accepted their social environment preconsciously, and regarded their subordinate status and their exploitation as natural, due to the conjuncture of objective social structures with the sensory categories of their habitus.⁴⁸ The environmental structures and sensory categories of the habitus coincided because the latter had been shaped by the former.

Researchers in the fields of folk memory and social remembrance and forgetting should perhaps pay more attention to the vast terrains in East and Central Europe where the manorial system and rural servitude persisted well into the mid-nineteenth century.⁴⁹ This is not to say that there were no mass rebellions on Russian and Polish soil from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries. However, rather than focusing on the well-studied large-scale uprisings that were not so much 'popular' as either political, noble, foreign, or nationalist undertakings, in which serf peasants participated but did not lead, one should take a closer look at minor peasant revolts.⁵⁰ There were no peasant rebellions in Russia that rose to the scale of wars after Pugachev's uprising. What needs further study is what peasants sang and narrated in the places where uprisings were strongly localised and restricted to peasants.

Second, the importance and the meaning of the revolts, both in objective and subjective terms, seem to be influenced by such factors as whether the 'oppressed groups' collaborated and forged alliances with other, more influential social groups that at least participated in print culture. Estonian

46 For the discussion of current trends see Griesse's 'Introduction', in Griesse (ed.), *From Mutual Observation*.

47 In folk representations of the Mahtra War, however, there is a clear tendency to downgrade the event by locals, and to re-evaluate it by those that had no direct relationship with the event.

48 For a critique of various 'thick' and 'thin' theories of ideological domination see Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, pp. 70–87.

49 For manorialism see more in David Eltis, Keith Bradley and Stanley L. Engerman (eds), *The Cambridge World History of Slavery*, vol. 3: AD 1420–AD 1804 (Cambridge, 2011), chs 11–12.

50 Even the Pugachev rebellion was primarily a 'frontier' and Cossack affair, and its leadership never understood the possibilities offered by the serf uprising. See Marc Raeff, 'Pugachev's Rebellion', in Robert Forster and Jack P. Greene (eds), *Preconditions of Revolution in Early Modern Europe* (Baltimore, MD, 1970), pp. 192–194.

and Latvian peasant rebels lacked supporters among other segments of the society. Peasants were socially and politically isolated; peasantry was synonymous with Estonianness (and Latvianness). There was a huge communication gap between rural and urban populations, since migration to towns was legally very restricted.

Information about revolts was spread by rumours, and also by government orders which presented an official version of events, aimed at thoroughly discrediting the rebels and at cautioning others to remain obedient under threat of punishment. These orders were to be read out to church congregations. Stories and songs were also mobile, but it could be that 'local' events had less potential to be remembered over generations than those in which several communities participated and therefore communities of memory were larger.

Published texts also substantially contributed to the survival of folk memories and influenced the representation of historical figures and events.⁵¹ Unlike the Russians, who had prominent literary figures like Alexander Pushkin devoting their attention to popular uprisings, Estonians and Latvians lacked educated people of renown who might treat the topic in the vernacular. The first generation of indigenous intellectuals turned their eyes onto 'ancient times' rather than these more immediate events.

The spontaneous and unorganised nature of the Estonian and Latvian peasant revolts, as well as their rapid suppression, inevitably meant that no leaders, heroes or martyrs – such as, for example, Sten'ka Razin and Emel'jan Pugachev, in Russia – could arise, around whose figures historical narratives might accrue and whose appearance, personal characteristics and deeds could form the focus of legends and songs. Oral cultural genres usually describe confrontations between individuals rather than social groups.⁵² The struggle between good and evil is typically portrayed through persons. It was as characters that they made their appearance on the literary scene too. Pushkin, for example, took up the oral tradition about Pugachev to show that 'the people', not just their rulers, made the country's history, but his goals were primarily aesthetic, not political: he liked Romantic figures and exceptional individuals.⁵³

Popular monarchism characterised Estonian and Latvian peasants' views and their unrest relied on the concept of 'bad lords, good monarch'. However, they did not rebel in the name of the Tsar, and neither glorified the autocratic power nor believed in the divine nature of the Tsar's power.⁵⁴ The revolts rather hinged on the issue of the 'good law'. Estonian and Latvian

51 Perrie, 'Folklore as Evidence', p. 121.

52 Ibid., p. 142.

53 Keep, 'Emancipation by the Axe?', pp. 52–53.

54 For Russia, see Daniel Field, *Rebels in the Name of the Tsar* (Boston, 1976); Maureen Perrie, *Pretenders and Popular Monarchism in Early Modern Russia. The False Tsars of the Time of Troubles* (Cambridge, 1995).

peasants neither exhibited 'a slave mentality' nor 'a sense of absolute submissiveness before authority', let alone enjoyed their sufferings, but on their part there was a certain amount of accommodation and confirmity to the values of the dominant classes ('self-colonisation').⁵⁵ Whereas in Russia, it has been argued, 'the intensity of the peasants' hostility to the lords derived from the fact that the traditional culture could not tolerate the dominant culture' and the lords were seen as 'renegades', the rejection of landlords in the Baltics was mainly social.⁵⁶ The relationship between the Baltic German colonists and Estonians and Latvians was not one of pure opposition, but an ambivalent and complex interrelation based at once on opposition and attraction. It is worth noting that the heyday of folklore collecting in Estonia and Latvia fell into a period characterised, on the one hand, by nationalist and anti-manorial agitation and, on the other, by an at least equally active adoption and imitation of the Baltic German colonisers' Eurocentric cultural model in order to elaborate, under the guidance of an evolving national intelligentsia, a native-tongue high culture.

One reason why the revolts were not very highly esteemed in folk tradition may have been that peasants were generally unenthusiastic about disorder. However, this cannot be the entire answer, as peasants also belittled their own agency in the transition to monetary rent and in buying out their farmsteads in the second half of the nineteenth century – both of which developments were remembered as changes enforced by the manor. Yet these events came to be regarded as very positive by the peasantry if not during their actual course then at least shortly afterwards, and were depicted as such from the very beginning in printed matter.

In the cases this chapter has studied, folk representations of revolts do not provide an alternative narrative to the government's interpretation imposed on the subordinates by oral admonition, printed word and force. Opposition was presented as unreasonable and as the cause of unnecessary suffering. Once the Tsar becomes aware of the peasants' predicament he will alleviate it through his laws and regulations. The folklore archives contain no hint of any hopes for Napoleon to come and liberate the serfs: adopting the existing narrative template available in folklore concerning other conflicts, his campaign was remembered as having brought woe and calamities upon the peasants, or was associated with miraculous happenings, such as the appearance or disappearance of landmarks.

This anaemic reflection of early modern revolts in popular memory results from the negligence of the folklorists as well as from the socio-economic and political suppression of the Estonian and Latvian peasantry. The former factor should not, however, be over-emphasised. Even if the leaders of the

55 For Russia, see Daniel Rancour-Laferrriere, *The Slave Soul of Russia: Moral Masochism and the Cult of Suffering* (New York, 1996).

56 Leonid Heretz, *Russia on the Eve of Modernity: Popular Religion and Traditional Culture under the Last Tsars* (Cambridge, 2008), pp. 133–134.

folklore collecting campaigns were single-mindedly focused on the remoter past and on mythology, there nevertheless were men among the collectors who did not disdain narratives of later historical events, and even complained of the scarcity of 'historical events' in folklore. The manorialism in Estonia and Latvia limited the serfs' autonomous social space so severely that their social and collective struggle for their own rights in the early modern period found no place in their own oral culture. At the same time, they lacked allies and even sympathisers among other social groups and abroad, whereas elsewhere in East and Central Europe there were a variety of sometimes allied social forces and a native cultural elite who either mobilised the peasantry to fight for their causes, or described their resistance in the public sphere via the written word. In order to hear the voices of the subordinates in Estonia and Latvia, we must study their words as well as look for traces of their deeds in the archival record, using as diverse types of sources as possible – memory as well as written documentation, sources generated by the elite as well as those created by the subordinates; folklore as well as fiction and contemporary publications on public and political issues.

Appendix: The Räpina Revolt⁵⁷

The following Estonian peasant uprising legend is translated below by Jonathan Roper.

Parun Lövenwolde ajal olid kolm ärksamat talupoega Riiga sõitnud kuberneri käest teoorjuse kergendust ja priiust paluma. Kui nad aga Riias peaaegu sama targalt tagasi tulnud, nagu nad sinna läinud, hakanud nad rahva seas mõisnikkude ülekohtust rääkima ja õhutanud sellega rahvast mässule. Parun Lövenwolde saanud Riias käimisest teada, ning kartes suuremat talupoegade vastuhakkamist lasknud ratsasõdurite salga Räpina tulla, et siis vastuhakkajaid ja Riias-käijaid karistada. Parun lasknud kogu valla rahva kokku kutsuda ja nõudnud, et Riias-käijad välja antaks, kuid keegi ei ole neid üles andnud. Aetud siis kõik talumehed Alamõisa puuaeda, kuni mintud nõu pidama, mis mässajatega teha. Nõupidamisel olnud ka kõster, kes olnud rahva sõber. Ta ütelnud rahvale: 'Kui ma välja tulen ja kõrvatagust kratsin, siis on asi halvasti, kui ma aga pääd silitan, siis on asi hästi ja teil ei pruugi karta.' Kõster tulnud aga välja ja kratsinud kõrvatagust. Rahvas saanud aru, et asi halvasti, lõhkunud aia maha ja tunginud välja. Sõjavägi tulnud siis rahvast taga ajama ja lasknud, kes ees juhtus olema. Tol ajal saanud siis 5 talupoega surma, ka haavatuid olnud. Tol ajal kui sõjavägi mässajaid taga ajanud, olnud naised kirikus, sest olnud pühapäeva hommikupoolik. Üks mees jooksnud sisse ja öelnud: 'Inimesed kõnnivad soolikad

57 Estonian oral narrative collected from Johannes Raudsepp (62 years old) by Miralda Ehrlich in 1935, Eesti Kultuurilooline Arhiiv (EKLA), f. 200, m 8:5: www.folklore.ee/pubte/ajaloolist/rapina.

süles, teie veel vahite kirikus.' Suure hirmuga pistnud siis kõik naised koju jooksmas. See olnud suurem räpinlaste vastuhakkamine.

The Rāpina Revolt

In Baron Lövenwolde's time there were three enterprising peasants who went to Riga to ask the governor for relief from the *corvée* (obligatory labour duties) and to ask to be set free. But when they came back no wiser than when they left, as when they were in Riga they started to speak of the oppressions of the manor-owners, and with that caused the people there to riot. The Baron got to know about the trip to Riga, and fearing a larger uprising had soldiers sent to Rāpina, thinking to punish the rebels and those who had gone to Riga. The Baron got the whole community together and demanded that those who went to Riga should be given up, but no-one gave them up. All the peasants were then taken to the Alamõisa courtyard, while a meeting was held about what to do with the rebels. At the meeting was the parish clerk, who was a friend of the people. He told the people: 'If when I come out, I am scratching the back of my ear, then things have gone badly, but if I am stroking my head, then things have gone well, and you won't need to fear.' But when he came out, he was scratching the back of his ear. The people understood that things had gone badly, they knocked down the fence, and sprang out. The military then came to gather them up, shooting anyone who got in their way. During this, five peasants were killed; there were also some wounded. At the time when the soldiers were chasing the peasantry, there were women in church, as it was a Sunday morning. One man ran in, and said: 'People are walking about holding their intestines in with their arms while you are wasting your time in church.' In great fear, all the women ran home. This was the greatest uprising of the Rāpina folk.

13 The enigma of *Roddy McCorley Goes to Die*

Forgetting and remembering
a local rebel hero in Ulster¹

Guy Beiner

One of the great young heroes of Irish history was a young man that would have remained, his name would have remained in oblivion, but for a song that kept his memory well and alive, and blossoming, all down through the years.

—Tommy Makem ('The Bard of Armagh'),
live performance of *Roddy McCorley*²

The ballad *Roddy McCorley* is widely recognised as one of the most popular Irish rebel songs, a traditional genre for which Ireland is particularly renowned.³ It has been recorded and reproduced in print hundreds of times and performed on countless occasions.⁴ Yet, little is known of the man behind the song. The quandary of a perplexed amateur scholar, who found that he could not write with certainty on the subject, or even determine conclusively whether he was a hero or a villain, is indicative:

I started out therefore with some relish to research the famous ballad, which just exudes rebel spirit and is one of the most effective and evocative in the entire rebel repertoire. However I was to be greatly disappointed, for the name of Roddy McCorley didn't appear in any of the dozens of general histories that I checked ... Gradually I began to come across fleeting references ... In a sense these references only increased

1 The research for this chapter was undertaken over the course of a Marie Curie fellowship at the University of Oxford, sponsored by the Gerda Henkel Stiftung.

2 'Tommy Makem and Friends in Concert' (WMHT Educational Telecommunications, 1992; VHS).

3 The name here is standardised. It has appeared in several variants: Roddy has also been spelt as Rody and McCorley has been spelt McCorly and MacCorley (sometimes abbreviated to M'Corley).

4 The catalogue of the Irish Traditional Music Archive [ITMA], which is not definitive, lists 303 entries for the song, including 155 recordings on commercial albums, 29 non-commercial sound recordings, 7 video recordings and 112 different printed publications. See www.itma.ie (accessed 26 September 2014).