

Bad Boys and Little Old Ladies

Youth and Old Age in two Ulster Villages

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Stories told about bad boys and little old ladies in the two Northern Irish villages of Long Stone and Killycannon typify the unacceptable extremes of rebelliousness and moral authority. These images, however, are ambiguous, for “old ladies” also exemplify a moral ideal of quiet respectability, while the bad behaviour identified with “the boys” is sometimes deemed to be a necessary evil. These flexible but contrasting images are useful partly because they encapsulate a wide range of social statuses including gender, social class and ethnicity. They are also available for use as a “shifty” rhetoric of approbation and condemnation in a wide variety of social situations.

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‘They were those whom the local populace always referred to as ‘the boys’ – Whiteboys, Oakboys, Steelboys, Rightboys, ... Peep o’ Day Boys, Orange Boys. To this day in Ireland a local reference to ‘the boys’ will generally be taken to mean the I.R.A., (or whatever terrorist group is supported in the area). The Irish meaning of ‘boy’ thus retained something of its Elizabethan connotation as a swaggerer, a warrior, an armed man’ (Stewart 1977, 116).

With their surrounding countryside, the Ulster villages of Killycannon and Long Stone constitute the mainly Protestant area of Listymore.¹ Killycannon is a seaside resort, whose ethos is determined by modestly well-off business and professional people; Long Stone is working-class; and the countryside is dominated by farmers. Long Stone is inclined to disparage Killycannon for being ‘snooty’. From Killycannon, Long Stone appears somewhat ‘rough’.

Throughout the two villages and countryside of Listymore, the characteristic image of youth is that of the ‘boy’, while the most typical rep-

resentative of old age is the ‘little old lady’. There are to be found in Listymore many stories about eccentric upper-class ‘old ladies’, but few about other categories of old person. There is also much stereotyped gossip about delinquent ‘bad boys’, but rarely are heard stories of ‘good boys’ or of ‘girls’, whether ‘good’, ‘bad’ or otherwise. The plural term ‘them boys’ in Listymore as elsewhere in Northern Ireland is somewhat ambiguous. While not always indicating paramilitary membership, nevertheless it refers to the ‘Elizabethan swagger’ mentioned by Stewart. It is a half-admiring term directed towards men whose activities are somewhat prickly, dangerous or difficult. And to be addressed as ‘boy’ is to be admitted, perhaps provisionally, into a specifically masculine and somewhat aggressive camaraderie. There is a comparable ambiguity towards ‘old ladies’. Curiously too, in stories about ‘bad boys’, their ‘badness’ is often attributed to their having ‘too much money’.

My concern, therefore, is why, in Listymore, old ladies and bad boys are ‘*bons à penser*’

(Lévi-Strauss 1969, 162). I suggest that these images are useful to the people of Listymore for two reasons. First they are prototypes, used simply to make social situations more intelligible. Second they usefully form part of a rhetoric of condemnation and justification.

The role of prototypes has been widely studied. Kuhn (1962) argued that 'normal science' proceeds by discovering in the world structures similar to those in the 'paradigmatic' work of a 'great scientist'. Berlin and Kay (1969) have suggested that semantic classification arises from the similarity of objects to prototypes. And Lakoff and Johnson (1980) have illustrated the role of metaphor in structuring knowledge (see also Ardener 1978; Barnes 1969; Buckley 1982, 1984, 1985; (ed) Ortony 1979; Willis 1967, 1972, 1978). All of this work suggests that when somebody tries to make some object intelligible, he generally does so by an act of translation (Crick 1976; Quine 1971) relating the object to an archetype. In Listymore, ideas about youth and old age understood primarily in relation to the archetypes of 'bad boy' and 'old lady'. Even more importantly, however, these archetypes also relate to other significant *gestalts* of society, among them the contrast between Listymore's two villages of Long Stone and Killicarnon as well as that of male/female, lowerclass/upper-class, and England/Ulster. *Gestalts* of location, age, status and ethnicity are, of course, distinct from each other, but because they stand in a metaphorical relationship one to another, they can each be rendered more intelligible. In addition, all of these ideal categories are translatable into, and therefore reflect, the complexities of social interaction actually present in Listymore.

Beyond this, these images evoke specific moral ideals which can be used either to legitimize or condemn the actions of oneself or others (Cohen 1975) usually in order to win support for specific or general purposes, or merely to gain what Goffman calls 'acceptance', and to avoid rejection (Goffman 1963, 19). The rhetoric attaching itself to old ladies and bad boys is somewhat flexible or 'shifty' (Beck 1978b; Fernandez 1974, 1975), for it varies according to circumstances. Cohen describes in a *Newfound-*

land town a competition between groups which has ossified legitimating ideals into a seeming 'clash of cultures' (Cohen 1975, 11-12). The broader 'Northern Ireland problem' provides a similar competition between social groups, whose rhetoric is well-known to speak of a 'clash between cultures' (Buckley forthcoming). In Listymore, where there are only a few Catholics, the most relevant conflicts are associated with social class. Despite this, people throughout Listymore will, upon occasion, adopt the sort of attitudes associated with 'old ladies', while they vigorously resist the attempts of others to use these same values when they imply criticism on themselves. Conversely, people of all genders, classes and ages will condemn 'bad boys' for their 'rough' behaviour; yet in the same breath they can justify their own aggressive, manipulative, rebellious or otherwise 'rough' behaviour which their conversation has indicated is typically manifest in the actions of the bad boys who are so much condemned.

Ambiguities in the images of old ladies and bad boys are related to the fact that these archetypes are not only derived from idealisations of other social statuses but also from practical inter-relationships, notably the continuing but often ill-defined conflict between the 'snooty' and the 'rough'. Above all, the ambiguity arises from a need for a flexible rhetoric through which, where appropriate, high ideals can be used to justify bad behaviour.

Killicarnon Village and the Old Lady Ideal

Old ladies came to my attention because of two locally well-known stories. They refer specifically to old ladies of the 'gentry' or upper middle-class (of Shanks 1982), and are related to the idea that, until recently, Killicarnon was a village for the wealthy and retired. One of the stories goes as follows:

Two old ladies arrived at the station in Londonderry just as the train was leaving. The man in the ticket office quickly handed them two tickets for Killicarnon. 'How did you know we were going to Killicarnon', demanded one of the old ladies. 'All the old ladies go to Killy-

carnon', said the man. 'That', explained my informant, 'is how Killycarnon used to be'.

The other story concerns the driver of a horse-drawn conveyance. He was driving one day past an evil-smelling flax dam. One of his elderly female passengers turned to the other and commented upon the stench. Her companion silenced her. 'I think it's the driver', she said in a whisper. This story was told to one of my informants by the bemused driver in question who had overheard the remark.

Killycarnon was established in the last century after the building of the railway. According to a well-known folk history, the landowner placed a lower limit upon the size of houses, severely restricting the village's social composition only to the wealthy.

There is an important ambiguity in the stories which refer to upper-class old ladies. On the one hand, they are told in a mildly disparaging way, for old ladies of this type represent in Listymore a 'stuck-up' snobbishness against which Listymore people are sometimes moved to rebel (Buckley 1983b). But on the other hand, the ideal of Killycarnon as a village where gentlefolk, and especially old ladies, end their days in serenity can be attractive to its inhabitants. Killycarnon, I was told, is 'a quiet place'.

The main reason why an image of old ladies is useful is that it encapsulates a wide range of the idealised statuses identified in Listymore with moral authority. One of these is, of course, old age itself. Another, however, is femininity. I have suggested elsewhere that typically in Ulster, women adopt a 'parental' role in their relationships with men (Buckley 1982, 1983a, 1983b, 1984). 'Old ladies' in Listymore are also typically 'English': they speak with a dialect close to that of the English upper-classes, a dialect still associated with wealth, education and 'culture'. In Listymore, people of high status (or high ambitions), and also women and old people tend to use phonological variables closer to 'Received Pronunciation' (they have a more 'English' accent) than people of low status, low ambition, men and the young (Douglas 1975). The image of the 'old lady' with an 'English' accent, therefore, being upper-class, female, cultured and old, and living

pre-eminently in the 'snooty' village of Killycarnon lies at an intersection of all of the major social categories which locally typify authority. The stereotype thus provides a means whereby a wide range of diverse social statuses may be translated into each other. Importantly, it also conjures up a widely shared vision of Killycarnon as a village from which a strict authority keeps out 'the rough element'.²

Bad boys and 'too much money'

If the clearest image of age in Listymore is that of the old lady, youth is most emphatically expressed in the stereotype of the 'bad boy'. Here are two of many examples.

A group of farmers sitting in the house of Jack Stewart complained to each other about a gang of 'bad boys'. The boys had recently broken a window at a youth club and had therefore been banned from the club by the minister of Killycarnon Presbyterian Church. The boys had gone on to break other windows on their way home to Long Stone. The boys, said Jack, were a gang of 'skinheads' who carry around an expensive portable television-cum-radio, a gift from a parent. 'They got that, when they should have got a kick up the arse'. The murmured consensus was 'too much money'.

A wealthy farmer has an adopted son who is widely reported to have 'gone wild'. His misdemeanours are attributed to his having 'too much money'. I was told on three wholly separate occasions that because the son was adopted his adoptive father gave him more money than was good for him.

In obvious ways, the image of the bad boy contrasts with that of the old lady. She is female while he is male; she is 'cultured' while he is 'rough'; she represents moral authority while he is 'bad'; her accent is that of upper-class England while his is of lower-class Ulster; she typically lives in the village of Killycarnon while he lives in Long Stone; and, of course, she is old while he is young.

Aside from winning support for one's social ideals, one effect of the gossip about these stereotyped individuals is to focus attention upon only a narrow range of human attributes. In the same way as the image of the old lady

stands at the intersection of those categories which locally typify authority, so does that of the 'bad boy' stand at a similar intersection. This intersection is between those categories of person, male, lower-class, Long Stone-living, 'rough' and young who are thought typically to be in rebellion against this authority. Real people, of course, seldom correspond precisely to stereotypes, but, even in idealisations, *gestalts* of ethnicity, gender or age are highly complex. An 'English person', even in the abstract has many and varied features; as also does 'a woman', or 'a young person'. By concentrating discussion upon 'bad boys' or 'old ladies', however, these complexities are distilled away. The residue provides a much more narrow focus upon the contrast between moral authority and rebelliousness, a contrast which all of these *gestalts* have in common.

The contrast between old ladies and bad boys, however, seems to break down when one considers why the youths are accused of having 'too much money'. Although young people in Listymore often have money, they are seldom describable as 'rich'. There are many people, including many 'old ladies' who are visibly better off than most of the teenagers described as 'bad'. We must therefore ask why, specifically, 'too much money' is the most readily available idiom of explanation for bad behaviour among the young. The answer to this may be found in the structure of the social classes in the area, for it is this which gives the contrast between age groups its clearest relevance.

Snooty People: Too Much Money

Few people in Listymore as a whole are either bad boys or upper-class old ladies. Moreover, although there are wide and important degrees of wealth, education and other indicators of prestige, few would admit to being either 'snooty' or 'rough'. 'Snootiness' and 'roughness' are rhetorical devices which point to the unacceptable extremes of the moral and social spectra. Poorer people may sense with dismay that they are perceived by the 'snooty' as 'rough'. But even people of the highest status can

sometimes look upon wealth, education and forthright 'English' old ladies with some suspicion. A manifestation of the common hostility to people of high prestige in present-day Listymore is to be found in some of the stories which people tell about the past.

Overlooking Listymore is the ruined castle which was, in living memory, the home of the local landowner, 'Sir Charlesworth Beck' (Buckley 1979–80). He above all others in the area was someone who had 'too much money'. The castle was sumptuous in size and furnishings. As well as their large estate in Listymore, the Becks had an estate elsewhere in Ulster and yet another in the English midlands to which the family would depart for six months each year 'like Royalty' in response to the different shooting seasons. 'Gentry' also came to the castle both for the game and for the consumption of food and drink. The castle to many local eyes was a place of extravagance, even debauchery. I was told of a butler who sought to elope with one of the Lady Becks, and who was murdered on the orders of Sir Charlesworth. The butler's ghost is said still to walk. Tales too are told of shooting 'accidents' and mysterious suicides.

In contrast to such goings-on, the lives of the poor, and especially the tenant farmers, were very hard. 'They (the Becks) kept us poor', said one aged farmer. 'We were like slaves'. A widow could be expelled from her farm if it had become inefficient and if Sir Charlesworth spied a thistle in a field, the tenant could find his field taken from him and let to a neighbour.

This view of Listymore's past is of a starkly stratified society in which the upper classes looked down on the poor. These, whether children caddying on the golf course for pennies for the household budget, farmers nervously digging thistles from their fields, or serving maids working long hours in the Kilycarnon boarding houses, describe their plight as 'slavery'.

This folk history reflects a more muted but nevertheless real conflict between the social classes in the Listymore of today. I have shown elsewhere that individuals will playfully challenge figures of authority in Listymore (Buckley 1983b). Beyond this, different professional people have independently told me that they

have felt themselves to have been systematically harassed by farmers and working-class people of all ages.

Here the assertion of a loyalist identity is often crucial. In one example (Buckley forthcoming), a Lambeg drum, ordinarily used to assert a Protestant identity, was employed to arouse and annoy the sleeping 'snooty' population of Killycarnon. More commonly, however, it takes the form of 'vandalism', the special prerogative of the young. Sometimes this 'vandalism' is mere destructiveness, but it also takes the form of painted political slogans. Mrs. Park, a Killycarnon boarding-house owner, and incidentally a Protestant, told me how her ordinarily immaculate garden walls have often been targets for painted slogans. She complained also that on the occasion of a Protestant Twelfth of July festival, some Catholics drove round and round the road where she lives, while Protestant youths stood in her garden pelting the car with the ornamental stones she had recently bought at great expense. As in many other cases, there was considerable ambiguity in these activities. The aim was indeed to assert a Protestant identity against Catholicism, but it simultaneously asserted the importance of the loyalist lower classes by tilting against the 'snooty' respectability alleged to exist pre-eminently among Killycarnon residents.

Killycarnon does not take such activities lying down. The Killycarnon Community Association is a voluntary body holding occasional meeting open to all the village. Its elected committee (of which Mrs. Park is a member) makes a substantial claim to speak on behalf of the village. This committee leads a campaign against vandalism. It has also concerned itself with related questions of caravans and amusement arcades. These, if developed in Listy-moore, would attract both lower-class people and the unsupervised young. Jamie McLiesh, long-standing Chairman of the association, told me how, some years ago, a man acquired land to sell to a caravan developer. The proposed development could have produced a continuous line of caravans encircling the village.

McLiesh explained to me that he had not joined in the controversy, but instead had pri-

vately found another buyer willing to build instead a housing estate. Thus Killycarnon was not enveloped by caravans. By a similar manoeuvre McLiesh resisted attempts to bring 'amusements' to the village. With a site available, and a developer willing to purchase, McLiesh organised a group to raise money to buy the ten year lease. The land would be used for a cricket club. People spent long hours levelling the ground, sometimes on winter evenings by the light of car headlights. The cricket club, was, however, a failure, since Killycarnon people, it turned out, were not interested in playing cricket. But the enterprise was successful in its main purpose, to keep away amusement arcades and the 'rough' people they might attract.

It will be noted that in defence of their 'quiet' way of life, the association is willing to resort to tactics scarcely consonant with the image of Killycarnon as a 'quiet' place inhabited by old ladies. Mrs. Park, for example, would have dealt very firmly with any vandal she found decorating her walls. In the local idiom, she would have been 'very rough'. And McLiesh is here describing quite complex manoeuvrings, manipulative rather than violent, but which undoubtedly have a dubious propriety. They strove, however, in conversation, to win my support, justifying their actions because they contributed to the actualisation of the image of Killycarnon as a 'quiet place'. There is here, indeed, a parallel with the people whose assaults upon the 'snooty' of Killycarnon takes the ostensible form of defending the high ideals of Protestantism. People of high and low status, male and female, young, old and middle-aged, thus employ 'rough' techniques to defend supposedly high moral ideals against their opponents (see Buckley 1984).

Conclusion

I have here postulated a 'binary opposition' between 'bad boys' and 'old ladies' in a manner reminiscent of Lévi-Strauss's early approach to myth (Lévi-Strauss 1955) and which is echoed notably in studies of humoral medicine (Cosminski 1977; Foster 1979; Harwood 1971; Logan 1973; Madson 1955; Mazes 1968; Nash

1967; Rubel 1960; see also Buckley 1985) and of the left and right hands (Beck 1978a; Littlejohn 1967; (ed) Needham 1973; Rigby 1966). There are indeed stories and images in Northern Irish culture which seem to 'resolve' or 'reconcile' or 'mediate' between the opposites of high ideals and bad behaviour which these images represent (Buckley 1984). Here, however, I have considered them primarily as a *resource*, which people employ in their social lives.

In Listymore, there are considerable ambiguities in social practice. Few people utterly reject the values locally associated with the image of the old lady. Yet all are willing to use or advocate 'rough' tactics more appropriate to 'bad boys' in defence of these or similar ideals. Many of the conflicts found in Listymore can be readily portrayed by the participants as resistance either to snooty or to rough behaviour (or indeed simultaneously to both). In reality, the boundary between these groups in society is not at all clearly drawn and many people at different times are willing to oppose themselves to the snooty or to the rough. The conflicts which arise here are rooted in differences of wealth and education, and hence in the quest for prestige and self respect. It is these which relate youth and old age to other levels of Listymore society.

There is an important sense in which the images of the 'old lady' and of the 'bad boy' typify the opposition between unacceptable extremes of moral authority and of rebelliousness. These two extremes, thus defined, have in principle, very little in common. The notion that rebellious lower-class youth has 'too much money', however, provides something of a bridge between them. Scarcely anybody in Listymore thinks *himself* to have 'too much money'. This expression, therefore, constitutes a useful rhetorical device which permits virtually any social category or any type of action to be condemned whenever the speaker wishes to win support for his immediate or more general social purposes.

These opposed archetypes, however, are united in a different sense. For one of the occasions where it is considered legitimate to break normal moral rules in a manner appropriate to 'bad boys' is when someone is perceived to be

acting in defence of the ideals represented by old ladies. Thus by a seeming paradox, is the 'quiet', 'peaceful' life of Killycarnon and of Listymore generally thought to be 'worth fighting for'. And thus when someone is referred to as one of 'them boys', or when he is even addressed as 'boy', he is unlikely to feel insulted. In Listymore, high ideals, associated with old ladies, and the rough, Elizabethan behaviour typical of 'them boys' each have their place in popular rhetoric, but they can each be set aside or condemned when they are not required.

Notes

1. This paper was first presented to S.I.E.F.'s 3rd Congress, April 1987, Zürich. I wish to acknowledge the help I received from the people of Listymore, and from Mrs. L. J. Buckley and Miss J. Harbison in the preparation of this paper. The names of most people and places here have been disguised (see also Buckley 1983b, 1984).
2. This image of Listymore is consonant with the so-called siege-mentality (Buckley 1984).

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