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Digital (and other) Lessons from the Past

I was introduced to the 1641 Depositions Project at another workshop earlier this year: one that commemorated the appearance 35 years ago to the month of Natalie Zemon Davis' famous article in *Past and Present*, published in June 1973, on 'The Rites of Violence'.* The excellent presentation of this project there was one of several reminders of the significance that Natalie Davis' article has had, not just in transforming our understanding of the sectarian violence of the French wars of religion but also (as we were told) religious and ethnic conflicts of the twentieth century, and not just in Europe but in central and south-east Asia as well. The presentations were all made with Natalie present in the audience, and her comments on each of them, and her résumé at the end, were a reminder of the importance of our imaginative engagement with historical evidence. Her article relied on second-hand, biased, fragmentary and concocted accounts of the massacres of the French civil wars; nothing remotely like the rich 'complementarity' of the 1641 depositions with their evident capacity to take us several steps closer to the witness experience, constructed or otherwise, constrained as it undoubtedly must be by the frameworks of reference in which deponents and clerks were operating. She had no recourse to the construction of a dataset to undertake her analysis, and I doubt if it would have made much difference to it if she had. It relied for its power to convince on giving us a language with which to think about religious violence: that of pollution and purification; a

cultural construction in which to understand it: ritual as a form of cultural representation; and a problem that engaged both the past and the present. At the workshop, she reminded us just how significant had been for her the anti-Vietnam riots on the Berkeley campus, in which she had played a part as Faculty, in the spring of 1972. That lay alongside the reading that she had been doing of the social anthropologist Victor Turner. (We tend to think of her writing this piece with Clifford Geertz at her bedside, but as she says in *L'histoire tout feu toute flamme* (2004), p. 68, she didn't catch up with his *Interpretation of Culture* until later). One of the digital lessons of the recent past is that none of our most significant paradigmatic breakthroughs has occurred simply by the creation of digital media to assist us in the analysis of our material. They come from stimulating our historical imaginations in ways that cannot be predetermined, captivated by our documentation but not imprisoned in it.

Last year the Centre for International Research and Studies at Sciences Po in Paris launched their Electronic Encyclopedia of Mass Violence. It is the result of a four-year project of the kind that is fashionable these days: lavishly funded by institutions and research foundations, a large collaborative endeavour, focusing on the creation of a resource: digitization 'tout feu toute flamme'. It has, perhaps, the potential to be a valuable research tool, but many of its users will not, perhaps, be aware of the assumptions that underline its creation. Outlining the project's 'scientific approach', the distinguished political scientist and genocidologist, Jacques Sémelin writes: 'the perception of the notion of violence, and its very definition, are closely linked to our modern sensitivity'. This is because violence is a cultural conception, historically rooted in chronological time. 'What is considered violent in the 21st Century may not have been [so] four centuries earlier'. Our perception of

violence is conditioned, subject to significant historical and cultural variations. Terms such as 'mass murder', 'mass crimes', 'collective trauma', or 'mass violence' only make their appearance in western lexica in around the mid-twentieth century. So (although there is almost nothing on the home-page to make this clear) this is an encyclopedia of Twentieth-Century Violence (to the extent that they have been completed) starting post-1900.* Go to Ireland, and you will find the statement: 'Presently, case studies on Ireland are not available or are still being written by our numerous specialized contributors'. Fascinating, revealing, bizarre, this raises the question: whether a project such as the 1641 Depositions should have a role (eventually) within such an online Encyclopedia of Violence, and what that role might be.

The Encyclopedia presumes that the twentieth-century experience of mass-violence is unique. In one sense, it has to be. The United Nations, meeting in Paris on 9 December 1948, agreed the 'Convention for the Prevention and Repression of the Crime of Genocide'. In just four years, 'genocide' passed from being an evocation of the Nazi attempt to exterminate European Jews, coined by the jurist Raphael Lemkin in 1944, to being a legal concept, applicable in international law. There is no precise equivalent in the sixteenth or seventeenth century *ius gentium*. Genocide was not a crime under international law. Yet, as we know, the application of this international law has been rare and contested in the later twentieth century. There is an inflation of claims that this or that barbarous set of events is 'genocide' (Bosnia, Burundi, Cambodia, Chechnya, Columbia – and we are only at the letter 'C'). But as the 1641 Deposition evidence makes very clear, we should be wary of attributing the uniqueness of the twentieth-century experience to its scale. 'What would be the threshold above which one can use the term "mass violence"?' asks

Jacques Sémelin at one point in his introduction to the website. Put like that, the question sounds inherently contentious, unhelpful and it leaves a nasty taste in the mouth. 'How big does the body count have to be to make it into the pantheon of mass violence?' I am reminded of an old Punch cartoon in which one horseman is depicted turning to another in the middle of the Steppes, with the caption: 'Come on, Genghis, one more to make a horde!' It is not on the grounds of scale that we should regard the twentieth-century experience as unique, even though the particularly lethal nature of twentieth-century mass violence certainly has something to tell us about the deployment of technologies of killing, the nature and power of post-industrial states, and the prevalence of ethnic and other conflicts in its globalising world.

So what can the 1641 Depositions tell us about mass violence? Asking the question that way is not to relativize the claims of the twentieth century to a monopoly on mass violence. It is to contextualize them. I have to say, though, that framing the question like that is not one that we early-modern historians generally feel very comfortable with. Our purpose is more often to put blue water between our period and the present, to 'other' its experience into something rich and rare. We have spent most of the twentieth century trying to unlearn the supposed liberal certainties of a historical patterning in which nation-states, advanced capitalism and European global dominance constitute the natural *terminus ad quem* of our understanding. The idea that we might have 'lessons', digital or otherwise, for the present is unsettling. Yet if we have nothing to say to the present, we are irrelevant. So I think we have some 'lessons' to offer, so long as we understand them in terms of the three 'p's: 'perspectives'; 'parallels', 'paradigms'. It is in providing perspectives on twentieth-century mass-violence, parallels to it, paradigms of enquiry into mass violence that the exercise may be useful.

I'll come back to the Depositions in a moment. Let me now move to three snapshots of violence that each take us outside the island of Ireland and its accompanying archipelago. They are all taken from the decade of the 1590s. We begin on 5 February 1597 in Nagasaki, Japan. Almost half a century before, Francis Xavier and two companions had arrived in Kagoshima and persuaded the local daimyo to let them proselytise the Christian religion. By the end of the century, the Christian population of Japan had become substantial – some estimates are around 300,000 strong – partly on the basis of a cosy relationship between the Japanese ruling elites and trading concessions to European merchants. The latter traded all sorts of things, including gunpowder to the shogunate in large quantities and, in return, Japanese girls as slave objects. Some modern Japanese historiography (with objectives of its own) claims that half a million girls were traded in that half-century – which is not just implausible but impossible. But the slavery issue was no doubt at the heart of the fierce reaction led by Toyotomi Hideyoshi which culminated in the arrest and crucifixion of 28 individuals (20 Japanese, 4 Spaniards, a Mexican and an Indian) on Nishizaka Hill. It was the beginning of an irregular, and eventually sustained campaign of mass violence against the Christian minority in Japan. In less than a generation, Japan's 'Christian Century' was over – that being the title of a famous book on the subject, published by Charles Boxer in 1951, the year commemorating both the four-hundredth anniversary of Xavier's death and also the three-hundredth anniversary of the final official effort from Europe to reopen foreign trade with Japan.

The second snapshot takes us to Chile in South America, Curalava on the banks of the Lumaco river on Christmas Eve, 1598. The Spanish conquest of southern Chile – the area around and to the south of the Biobío river, had begun in

1550 when Pedro de Valdivia and a group of followers built a fort and founded the town of Concepción on the northern banks of the river. From there, they moved south, inflicting defeats on the local population and dividing them into overlordships known as *encomienda*. Prospectors and miners from Santiago followed Valdivia in search of gold deposits and they struck rich. The native peoples were less impressed, however. The Indians of Tucapel contrived a trap for Valdivia and he was eventually killed and eaten, leading to an uprising which lasted, in its first phase, for four years, almost driving the Spaniards out of Chile. It was still going on in 1598, which was when the governor of Chile since 1592, Martín García Óñez de Loyola set out with a small contingent of soldiers to deal with the systemic insurgency in the south of the country. He was ambushed by the Indians of Arauco, captured and eaten. The incident was the prelude to a spontaneous rebellion of the subjugated Indians in southern Chile in which every Spanish town was wiped out. By 1600 it is not difficult to suppose that over half the Spanish population in Chile had been killed. That was the year when a Spanish captain, Alonso González de Nájera set out for Chile which is where, in due course, he was commissioned by Loyola's successor to write a report and deliver it to the royal council in Spain with the singularly downbeat title of the 'Disappointment and Problem of the War in Chile'. The document should have been required reading for Major General David Petraeus.

The third snapshot is back in Europe: 24 April 1596 in Calais. Calais was part of the French kingdom after its surrender as England's bridgehead to the continent in 1558. France's northern frontier bordered the Spanish Netherlands, that crucial and bitterly-contested part of the Spanish empire whose northern, mainly Dutch-speaking provinces had survived, by 1596, a quarter of a century of resistance to Spanish overlordship. For Calais, however, the experience was novel. France had barely

recovered from its own civil wars when its first Bourbon king, Henri IV, declared war on Spain in 1595. There were plenty of disaffected catholics, especially in northern France, who were willing to contemplate inviting the Spanish in. Amiens, most spectacularly, would pass to the Spanish in 1597. The year previously, it was Calais which, with a surprise attack and perhaps some covert support from within, fell to Spanish forces on 17-18 April. The French garrison of about 1,500 troops retired with some 2,000 of the inhabitants into the citadel overlooking the town, counting on a counter-attack, partly from French ships that they could see in the Channel. In reality, however, a sudden assault on the stronghold in the morning of 24 April led to its capitulation after about three quarters of an hour. 'They killed most of the soldiers there, & some Bourgeois, which in the fury of the entry had to suffer with the others. Many others were wounded because they threw themselves in the moat, and those that saved themselves our cavalry overcame, or took prisoner' says the account of the 'miraculous' capture of Calais published in Brussels that year. González de Nájera might well have been among the assault forces – he certainly saw service in Flanders and France in the 1590s. An Englishman from Yorkshire was certainly there, known at that time as Guido (Guy) Fawkes.

These three snapshots have been chosen more or less at random. We could easily have selected other incidents of mass violence. Beyond Gibbon's bleak register of the crimes, follies and misfortunes of mankind, they illustrate three points. Firstly, that sixteenth-century mass violence was not localised; it was globalised. To limit our considerations of the 1641 Depositions to a merely Irish, or English context would be a mistake. Secondly, it was generally related, as you might expect, to Europe's structures of power and domination. All three cases took place in the Spanish Habsburg empire, a dynastic conglomerate that was larger than anything Europe had

seen since Charlemagne. If it were not for the distances involved, it would have been perfectly possible for a soldier in the Spanish empire to have been witnessed all three events. We should start from the assumption that most pre-modern power structures were punctually violent, and that they experienced violence as a consequence. I doubt if there was much to choose on that score between the Tokugawa, the Tudors, or the Habsburgs. They depended on tiny elites whose exploitation of resources, human and material, required sustained justification by appeal to a higher power (typically religious) and occasional coercion. That coercion was sometimes mediated through law (which itself used the spectacle of suffering liberally to secure consent where necessary) and sometimes directly. Individual and mass violence was a means of rule, and it invited an equivalent response. Thirdly, it often reflected ethnic, racial and religious tensions. But it is a fourth general observation that is worth exploring more. It concerns how these incidents have been mediated to us. I suspect that many of us here today know about the Nagasaki martyrs. They already have a monument in the centre of the city to them, which is a World Heritage site, and their own website: '26martyrs.com'. They were beatified in 1627 and canonised in 1862. And, just a couple of weeks ago, 188 further Japanese martyrs were beatified in Nagasaki before a crowd estimated at over 30,000. Commemoration of mass violence works best when there is a simple story to tell, a plot that one can read without effort. Memorialisation needs a taxonomy in which testimony can be structured and orchestrated. Local communities can provide a basis for collective memorialisation, but they are more effective when networked by communities at a distance, or permutated into institutionalised memory of one kind or another. The story of the Nagasaki 26 is simple. It was readily mapped onto the martyrological conventions which had been reinvigorated by the reformation. The resources of the missionary

orders, not to mention the Habsburg state, were there to provide an institutional focus. And their killing was a 'foundational event', to use the term proposed by the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur; it broke with what went before and provided a new beginning – in this instance to a period of intense and ultimately final persecution. In the context of a city in which 80,000 people lost their lives to an atomic bomb in August 1945, there are densities of implied meaning to this memorialization process.

By contrast, I doubt if that many of us will have known about the massacre of the Spaniards in Chile. It is a more complex story, in which sympathies are ambivalent. Colonial insurgency is one thing; but eating people in authority is another. It was not a foundational event – the war with the Araucanians had begun back in the 1550s and it would continue through to the eighteenth century. This was one bloody incident along the way, worthy of no plaques, memorials or commemorative hardware. Although the institutional memory of the Habsburg empire ensured that it was not completely forgotten, in post-colonial Chile, with its own equally complex recent history of mass violence to come to terms with, the events of 1598 are uncomfortable. There are no depositions to record the atrocities of the Indians; and absolutely no accounts from the Indian side; a disturbing asymmetry in the record. And no one now remembers Calais, although back in April 1596 the trained bands of London were scrambled in readiness to assist the town and at least one ballad circulated in England in commemoration of it. It was just one further wartime incident, and hardly the most notable. 5,000 citizens of Liège are estimated to have been killed by the army of Charles the Bold for having allied with Louis XI in 1468. 4,000 citizens of Galera in Spain were killed by Spanish soldiers in February 1570 during the revolt of the Moriscos, former Muslims who had notionally converted to Christianity. It was such events that led Spanish jurists and theologians in the

sixteenth century, notably Francisco de Vitoria (1492-1546), an influential Dominican and professor at Valladolid and Samanca, and later the Jesuit Francisco Suarez (1548-1617) to argue that there were natural laws which determined the *ius in bello*, the conduct of war. It was only lawful to kill innocent people if their deaths were anticipated but not intended – as in the case of a besieged citadel which contained civilians as well as soldiers. Even in that eventuality, however, they argued that there was a law of proportionality. Their views had a determining impact early in the following century when the 'father of international law' Hugo Grotius (1583-1645) came to write his treatise *De Jure Belli ac Pacis* (1625), the moral concern of its opening lines a reflection on the experience of his generation: 'I observed a lack of restraint in relation to war such as even barbarous races should be ashamed of….it is as if, in accordance with a general decree, frenzy had openly been set loose for the committing of all crimes'.

Back, then, to the 1641 Depositions, and you see my point. They have to be studied in the context of the memorialization processes surrounding the events to which they relate. Those are essentially contested, politicized and always assymetrical in terms of the nature of the evidence upon which one relies. Charlene McCoy and Michael O Siuchru's rich case-study of the Fermanagh Depositions begins with the contested and politicised memorialization of the records which began before the dossiers were completed (with Henry Jones' *Remonstrance*), and continuing through John Temple's *History* and Thomas Waring's *Brief Narration* to the *Abstract* of 1652; and beyond. The purpose, form, and content of the dossiers is determined by it. To separate the Depositions off from this hinterland of contested memory has its superficial historical attractions. Here is a source which is so large that its very density of rich but unwieldy detail has hindered its exploitation. It

contains (and I am only going on the Fermanagh material which has been circulated: I know little more than that, and what an interested European historian would pick up) so much incidental but revealing detail on the goods and possessions of the deponents, their names, families, locations, neighbours and friends, that we are tempted, and should, extract from it all that we can, and use them with other material to triangulate onto what it can tell us about the protestant ascendancy on the eve of the Irish Rebellion. We have already extensively discussed the mark-up that has been devised by the project, and which we have been sent to work through. I did my homework, as we have all done, and came out impressed by the technical sophistication of the proposed mark-up. If there were technical lessons from the digital past, I think they have been largely absorbed. My technical comments, based on our experience in Sheffield with quite a wide range of humanities mark-up material, incline to four matters of detail, and the project will probably have thought about them all already. The mark-up makes a very sharp distinction between the semantic content, which is reserved uniquely to the headers, and the presentational content, which is deployed in the body. In Sheffield, we see advantages to including the semantic content in the body of the document, especially where the documents are lengthy, because they enable the reader to have the specific semantic element highlighted, and because it can assist in the summary presentation of a return on a search, contextualising the reference that has been found. Secondly, we have inclined to link transcriptions with facsimiles because the former can only record semantic information, not graphic layout. Deponents' marks would seem to me an important element to record that way; but so, too, changes of scribal hands, erasures, palimpsests, endorsements, marginalia, and overwriting. In a recent article, Andrew Prescott reminds us of the visual importance of these elements in understanding the legal examinations of those

involved in the Peasants' Uprising of 1381, reinforcing his point with reference to the surviving legal examinations of Chartists investigated for their part in the Newport Rising of 1839. Here we have the examination of just one of them, Morgan James, where the successive annotations reflect 'an iterative process of interrogation, with some key components of the examination being altered in pencil', underlining the point that 'digital images give us a new awareness of the physical character of the historical records which should be at the heart of our historical understanding'. Then, thirdly, I make a plea for enumerating the depositions in such a way that we can all refer to them by that enumeration, rather than by the more cumbersome volume and folio numbers. I draw a parallel with the extensive witch-trial material from Lorraine, edited and placed online by Robin Briggs. His simple annotation system enables the reader to link very easily from his recently-published book on the subject to the background material. In common with other specialists who have used this material, I find myself simply adopting the Briggs annotation, rather as musicologists use Koechel numbers or BMV references. It just simplifies matters. Finally, I would put in a plea for a good linguistic glossary for those not familiar with some of the terminologies deployed and also a good gazetteer, providing a look-up table linking the orthographies in the document to the modern place-names, and (through that) to well-founded locational information, indicating where there are measures of doubt in the place attribution.

No doubts, then. This will be a wonderful resource to have available. But we should not use its existence somehow to sanitise, objectivise or neutralise the historical issues which it raises. There is a danger, I think, of using digitisation as an unconscious way of overemphasising our distanciation from our material, making our tasks as historians the equivalent of mortuary clinicians, dissecting dead bodies on

slabs and writing history which is the equivalent of an autopsy report. I would have thought there was a strong historical case (and you are probably intending to do this) for linking the depositional material with the subsequent memorialization in as close a way as possible, rather than separating them out. How exactly that linkage might work I'm not sure, but it would expect something that was merely flat and contiguous, a relationship that dramatised the contrasts as well as drew out the continuities, especially through the first generation when memory is first transmuted into history.

That brings me back to Natalie Davis' famous article. Its impact was to convince us that religion provides a framework of explanation for the religious violence of that period. Natalie's explanation was in terms of religion equalling 'cultural meaning'. So she explained religious violence in terms of the 'religious meaning' of objects (buildings; texts; books; clothes; parts of the body; people…) and behaviour (ways of expressing approval and disapproval, laughing with and against, sacralising and desacralising…). There is plenty of conflict in terms of cultural meaning in these Depositions, too. We cannot fail to be struck by the role played by clothing (distinctive 'English' clothing, I suppose) and the stripping naked described by so many of the deponents; or the treatment meted out to protestant Bibles, as in Robert Ffrench's deposition: 'the said Magwyre and Neugent came to the Church at Newtowne and there tore & rent the Bible & threw the Leaves of it about'. But the difficulty highlighted by French historians with Natalie's argument is that it conflates the question whether the violence is being *manifested* in religious terms, or whether it is being *caused* by religion. It is a question of what kind of explanation we are being offered, and whether it is not, ultimately, a tautology, in which the manifestation becomes the cause. This is what led the French historian Denis Crouzet to examine an analysis of violence which looked at cultural structures rather than cultural

meanings. In 1990, he published his famous two-volume work called 'Warriors of God'. What Crouzet tried to do, essentially (and this is only an allusion to a work that that creates all sorts of parallel questions for studying this Depositional evidence) was to reconstruct 'l'imaginaire' of the French civil wars. 'L'imaginaire' is an untranslatable word. I have seen it rendered into English as 'the imaginary' (which turns it into a historical Never-Never Land), and as 'the imagination' (which has similar connotations of escapism from the real world). It means something closer to the 'mental universe', or the 'mental horizons' of people, their hopes and fears, anxieties and convictions. As I read the Fermanagh documentation yesterday in preparation for today, I tried to imagine how Crouzet would read it. It was not difficult, because the documentation is deafening on this subject, almost every page detonating cynosures of meaning in the historical synopses of the brain, each one bringing with it new points of interrogation and trains of thought. When John Coxsee deposes, for example that 'One Hugh O Ratty (late servant to Henry Manning Esquire' uttered these words: 'wee have been Slaves all this tyme now you shalbe ours or words to that purpose', we are surely at the threshold of the mental universe of the catholic uprising; 'threshold' because there are doubtless questions about the linguistic registers that are in use here, about what language this was all being expressed in; and what 'time' and 'slaves' in this context means. Crouzet would want to emphasise the role of rumour, mainly oral, in the transmission of the anxieties on both sides of the rebellion. Edward How deposes that 'moreover hee heard Con Mcon' [or variants of the same…] say that 'all papists ther or elsewhere in this kingdome, should all goe to church otherwise be hanged at their owne doores and thefore they would begin with us least we should begin with them here, as they did in England, for he sayd they had hanged a jesuite in London, which was the queens

chaplaine'. Surely the insistence, reported bemusedly by the deponents as though they could hardly believe their own lips, that the rebels confidently asserted that they were acting under royal warrant belong to 'l'imaginaire', and Crouzet's insistence that French religious crowds, protestant and catholic, believed that they were acting under authority, divine and human, when they carried out their atrocities. No cunning plot to save skins here, I think, for it occurs too often: 'The said Rebells saying as this deponent was credibly tould that they had the kings broad Sea;le to take the cattle of the English and to drive them out of their lands' (John Kershaw); 'wee have the kings broad seale for what we doe And for the reason of our Riseing it is because the Puritans preferred a petition against us & not lett vs Enjoy our Religion quietly, for wee stand for our lives' (Grace Lovett); 'they said they did it by the Kings authority & broad seale' (Ann Meere), etc.

The question remains, however: can computers assist us to recover this 'mental universe'? One of the more obvious lessons of the recent digital past is that computers are good at organisation, and very weak at knowledge. They make a very poor fist at mimicking the synaptic activity of the historically attuned intelligence, faced with this evidence. Despite the optimistic assertions of computer scientists, rebranding themselves as 'knowledge engineers', designing and building data-mining engines, please take it from me that the results are, for the purposes of this exercise, disappointing and inadequate. They are dependant upon defining 'data' in highly restricted ways, constructing ontologies that largely fail to provide knowledge as we would understand it on the areas that they do cover, and fatally restrict us if we were so misguided as to use them. All this dyspepsia results from my involvement in a data-mining project called 'Armadillo', which wasted a lot of my time, and which I would prefer to forget. Jacques Sémelin's Encyclopedia of Mass Violence is one

more example of how easy it is to be persuaded that computer-based information can be turned into computer-based knowledge, with all the dead-hand of utopian totality that is implied by the word ‘Encyclopedia’

So I leave you with a quotation from my favourite historian: Lucien Febvre.