

Preface

Shortly before daybreak on Monday 20 June 1631 a joint force consisting of 230 elite troops of the Turkish Ottoman Empire and pirates from the Barbary coast of North Africa stormed ashore at the little port of Baltimore, West Cork, and spirited almost all the villagers away to a life of slavery in Algiers. The victims were mostly women and children: altogether fifty youngsters ‘even those in the cradle’ were abducted, along with thirty-four women and nearly two dozen men.

Today the ‘Sack of Baltimore’ has been virtually forgotten by the world.

Yet it is extraordinary in all sorts of ways.

It would go down in history as the most devastating invasion ever carried out by the forces of the Islamist *jihad* on Britain or Ireland.

In an era when it was commonplace for white traders from England to land on the African coast and to seize black people as slaves, this was one of the comparatively rare occasions when the boot was on the other foot: a slaving mission from Africa landing on English-held territory and seizing *white* slaves.

The invasion was recognised at the time as an unprecedented act of aggression by the Islamist empire. It left King Charles I incandescent with rage and provoked him into a reaction extreme enough to help create a revolution in England.

Yet nothing about this crucial episode in history was quite what it seemed.

Baltimore may have been a remote harbour town in the southwest of Ireland, but its population was made up almost entirely of new English settlers from Cornwall, Somerset and Devon.

And although the attack was part of the endless *jihad* or holy war waged against the Christian nations of northern Europe, the man who led it was not some Turkish general from Constantinople, but a fanatical Dutch renegade with an agenda all of his own.

The story of the raid on Baltimore is a tale of plotting and intrigue, of conspiracy and betrayal, and it involves allegations of corruption in the highest ranks of the King's Navy.

And perhaps most fascinating of all is the theory that the raid may have not been a chance event, but a mission of revenge: a pre-planned act of ethnic cleansing aimed at removing the English newcomers and restoring the village to its original Irish owners.

I first heard about the Sack of Baltimore in the mid-1990s, on a Sunday afternoon radio programme. It was a mere mention in passing, a casual aside to the main topic under discussion. The reference left me intrigued and hungry for more information. But a quick skim through the bookshops and libraries failed to find any books about the invasion, and I was too busy preparing my first novel for

publication to embark on any detailed research.

Years passed, but I could not forget the Baltimore episode. It stayed at the back of my mind, niggling me, constantly demanding my attention. Eventually I stopped resisting and decided to find out more.



A few weeks later I was sitting under the magnificent domed ceiling of the National Library of Ireland, feeling awestruck and decidedly uneasy. Placed on the desk in front of me was a stack of aged books and documents which, I'd been informed, were essential reading for anyone who wanted to understand the Baltimore saga. I flicked through them despondently. Some sections were in old Irish script. Others were in Latin.

My spirits slumped. What on earth was I doing here? I was a journalist by trade, not an academic and certainly not a professional historian.

But I persevered. Lifting another weighty tome, I gingerly turned the pages to a document headed *A List Of Baltimore People Who Were Carried Away By The Turk, The 20 Of June 1631*.

Within seconds, I was engrossed. At first glance, it was nothing special: just a dull catalogue of over a hundred names. But viewed in context, it transformed into a roll-call of personal tragedy on an almost unimaginable scale. Down through the centuries, every single line, every single name, cried out its own tale of heartbreak and loss.

A Mr William Gunter had been left devastated by the abduction of his wife and all seven sons. John Harris had lost his wife, his mother and three children. Robert Chimor – his wife and four children were torn away from him. Stephen

Broadbrook had lost his pregnant wife Joane, his two children and, of course, his unborn third baby.

Entire families had vanished into the gaping maw of the Barbary slave machine: John Ryder and Tom Paine, each with his wife and two children; Corent Croffine with his wife, daughter and three male servants; Richard Lorye with his wife, his sister, and four children. Bessie Flood was captured along with her son; Bessie Peeter escaped, but lost her daughter.

Altogether a total of 107 slaves were stuffed into the hold of the pirate vessel and shipped off to Africa for sale like so many cattle.

The Baltimore List fascinated me. It showed me that these were not dry statistics from a history book. These had been living, breathing human beings – people with good and bad relationships and everyday anxieties, people with hopes and frustrated dreams. These were families very much like my own family. They were ordinary folk who'd been quietly getting by as best they could when, in the calm of a midsummer night, their lives had been shattered forever.

From that moment, I knew there could be no turning back.

I had to tell their story.



First of all, I want to make a hands-up, full disclosure about the limitations of this book. It is the true story of an entire village – well, almost an entire village – that disappeared. Only two or three Baltimore people ever made it home; the remaining survivors of the raid simply made the best of their lot and merged quietly into the fabric of their new African homeland. Some married and had children. Some prospered

financially. They became used to life by the Mediterranean, and they seem to have had no great urge to return home, even when the opportunity was offered to them. I found this concept fascinating. However, it does send the narrative plunging off a cliff, stylistically speaking.

As a writer, I faced a dilemma. This is a true-life book. Nothing in it has been made up. I did not want to use fiction or novelisation to complete the Baltimore story.

However, as I carried on my research to greater and greater depths, I began to realise that there really wasn't a problem. The *individual* tales of these stolen villagers may be unknown, but that does not mean that their story is *unknowable*. I could still tell what happened to them without resorting to fiction. I could tell it through the parallel experiences of the other Irish, English and European captives who were sold as slaves in Barbary at around the same time. Through their written recollections, we can get an exceptionally accurate picture of what life must have been like for the Baltimore captives who ended up in the slave galleys, the harems, the souks and the chain gangs.

These accounts fill the gap in the Baltimore saga, but much more than that – their stories are fascinating in their own right. You will read about the enslaved clergyman Rev. Devereux Spratt, who turned down his chance of freedom to remain with his slave congregation in Algiers, and helped mastermind one of the most audacious escapes from Barbary under cover of his prayer meetings. You will read about Irish captive Richard Joyce, who picked up the design for his world-famous Claddagh ring while enslaved to a jeweller in Algiers. You will read about the American war hero James Cathcart from Westmeath in Ireland, who was reduced to stealing meat from the lions while working as a slave in the

royal zoo of Algiers, but who rose through the ranks of slaves to become one of the highest ranking civil servants in Barbary. You will also read about another Irish slave who became so well-in with his slavemasters that he lived like a lord, ate like a prince and had slaves of his own.

But most of all, I hope, this is still the story of how the ordinary men, women and children of Baltimore adjusted to an extraordinary situation and forged new lives for themselves under the burning African sun.

They are the real heroes, and this book is dedicated to their memory.

D.E.

A note on the text:

I have modernised spellings for greater accessibility. Anything in quote marks is a faithful quotation from the source. Where I use quotation dashes, it signifies indirect speech: that is, an accurate reflection of what was said, but not a direct quote.