

# The Revolts of the Rural Working Class before The Famine

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Irish labour history extends backwards in time well beyond the totemic events and figures of 1913. The Irish working class, historically, was firstly a rural rather than an urban group, and it had a history of militancy that lasted for almost a hundred years before the Famine (1845-49).

From the 1760s until the 1840s, Irish farm labourers and cottiers engaged in a series of violent social movements to protect their interests against large farmers, against the Christian churches, and against the forces of law and order. While most of their demands and actions focused on winning tangible, practical changes to their social and economic conditions, their movements also had an ideological component and they wished to change the nature of society as a whole. These groups were known, variously, as Whiteboys, Rightboys, Ribbonmen, and Rockites, with the term Whiteboy often applied as a general description; all were secret societies binding their members by oaths of loyalty, and engaging in attacks on property or the person. Among their demands were reductions in their rents, the control or abolition of the Catholic dues and the Protestant tithes imposed upon them, and price controls on food. 'Most of these outbreaks were at least comparable in intensity and duration to the formidable uprising of 'Captain Swing' in England from 1830 to 1832, wrote James Donnelly, referring to English farm workers attacks on new agricultural machinery which threatened to put many of them out of work.'<sup>1</sup>

Serious left-wing analyses of the revolts of the agricultural workers before The

Famine began with James Connolly, who wrote in general terms of the peasant rebellions in *Labour in Irish History*, published in 1910. Earlier, Friedrich Engels had written about the Irish labourers in *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, published in Germany in 1845, although chiefly in terms of how migrant Irish workers impinged on the lives and conditions of English workers. Marx's and Engels' analysis of Irish conditions did not begin in earnest until well after The Famine. Peter Beresford Ellis' *History of the Irish Working Class*, published in 1972, included a significant treatment of The Whiteboys.

General historical interest in the phenomenon began during the 1970s. The following account is based upon a survey of some of the historical literature on these movements; not all the modern historians of these events saw them primarily as social movements based on class conflict, but that is the analysis advanced here.

## Background

The over-riding factor which encouraged militancy among Irish labourers and cottiers (holders of less than five acres of land) was the rising pressure of population compared to the lesser availability of cultivatable land. The population of Ireland in 1753 was 2.5 million; by 1821 it was 6.8 million, and by 1841 it was almost 8.2 million. At the very top of the pyramidal structure of this society were the largest owners of land, the landlords of vast estates. That section of society was overwhelmingly Protestant, Anglo-Irish, or En-

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<sup>1</sup>James S. Donnelly Jnr., 'The Rightboy Movement 1785-8', in *Studia Hibernica* No. 17/18 (1977/1978), p.121.

lish in religion and ethnicity, in contrast to the vast majority of the population as a whole. As a result of the Cromwellian conquest of Ireland in the 17 century, a huge transfer of land ownership had taken place, so that whereas before the conquest Irish Catholics had owned 60 per cent of the land of Ireland, by the end of the century they owned only 20 per cent of it. Both the new and older landlord families were often absentees, preferring to spend their time in Dublin or London and had little or no link to the wider communities in which their assets were situated. They rented out their lands disinterestedly in the first instance to one or a series of middlemen, who in turn rented farmsteads to large and small farmers. These in turn rented land to those at the very bottom of the social scale, the cottiers, and the labourers (who had an average holding of one acre); some labourers held no land whatsoever, but had to rent 'conacre, a patch of ground large enough to grow potatoes for a season.

Social mobility within this society was problematic. On the one hand, stronger farmers could afford to increase their holdings by renting from a landlord or a middleman the farm of an evicted tenant farmer. On the other hand, those evicted men risked falling down the social and economic scale and becoming cottiers or labourers themselves, while those who were already in the latter groups risked not finding enough paid employment as farm workers and faced the real prospect of semi-starvation: these men often took to the roads and became migrant workers, nicknamed spalpeens, a despised and distrusted group, while their wives turned to begging. (The term spalpeen was later taken up by James Connolly as one of his pen-names).

Accordingly there was persistent anxiety among the poorest elements of society about gaining access to some land,

securing regular employment, being able to pay rents for their smallholdings, or paying off charges levied on them by the Catholic church (dues) and the Anglican church in Ireland (tithes). Correspondingly, they were antagonistic towards the strong farmers who could afford to increase their lands, particularly towards any farmers who took over the rent of a farmstead from which previous occupants had been evicted. There was therefore a marked class antagonism between the labourers and cottiers, who together formed a kind of proletariat, and the stronger farmers, who represented a middle class.

The fears and the hostilities engendered by the steeply unequal nature of Irish society, as well as temporary changes to wider economic conditions, led to various social movements among agricultural workers and their peers in poverty, which flourished in different forms and under different names before the Famine.

## The Whiteboys



The first of these were called The Whiteboys, after their custom of wearing white shirts so that they could identify each other when they met at night. The movement seems to have begun in County Tipperary at the end of 1761, initially in protest at the enclosure of commonage, wherein the poor had had free grazing rights for their animals. Groups of men

gathered and proceeded to level the ditches and stone walls erected by large cattle farmers. Thus at first they were described as 'Levellers', a term which linked them to older agrarian radicals in Britain, and which showed that commentators understood that they were social rebels, rather than nationalists engaging in a rising over the sovereignty of Ireland. (Nevertheless, some of their rhetoric, and that of later groups was informed by a sense of grievance over the historical transfers of land ownership, and loss of fortune and position suffered by Irish Catholics, and by a sense of a national Irish identity and solidarity against alien overlords and their ties to Britain.) The first actions were against recent enclosures of common land by Catholic nobleman, Lord Cahir. They were followed by events in County Limerick, when a Protestant attorney, William Fant, gathered people near Kilmallock and encouraged them to oppose local enclosures.

The movement continued by widening its demands. As Maureen Wall described in a pioneering essay on the phenomenon:

they sought to enforce a whole series of regulations governing, among other things, tithes, land occupancy, landlord-tenant relations, wages, hearth-money [a property tax], the cost and disposal of provisions in time of scarcity, roads, tolls and the right to work [...] the Whiteboys did not include in their programme the abolition of rents and tithes, but rather they wished to regulate these and other payments in a manner they considered equitable.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Maureen Wall, 'The Whiteboys', in T Desmond Greaves, *Secret Societies in Ireland* (Gill and Macmillan, Dublin, 1973), p.16.

<sup>3</sup>Wall, p.20.

The movement spread throughout parts of the south of Ireland and waxed and waned as wider economic conditions improved or declined. Their methods involved violence and the posting of intimidatory notices in public places. They gathered and moved about the countryside at night, but were also confident enough to meet during the day, often in their hundreds. The response of the ruling class was to deny that the movement had a social and economic basis and to insist that it was all a Popish conspiracy. They denominated the death penalty for various Whiteboy activities and despatched soldiers to affected regions. Several activists were executed. From the beginning, the Catholic church condemned Whiteboyism and excommunicated those involved; 'The tone of these denunciations was savage in the extreme', noted Wall.<sup>3</sup> This had the effect of encouraging Whiteboy hostility towards priests and bishops.

## The Rightboys

A revival of the movement took place on the borders of Cork and Kerry in 1785, this time under the name The Rightboys and with the aim of reducing charges imposed by the Christian churches. Tithes - a money or harvest-share levy upon all tillage farmers - was payable to the Anglican church, for the upkeep of their clergy, even by the members of other faiths, and even by the poorest of society. Land for grazing cattle was exempt from this charge, so that strong cattle farmers escaped the levy; the latter thus had an incentive to divert more of their land away from tillage, and this in turn led to a corresponding fall in their requirement for hiring agricultural workers. At the

same time, the Rightboys began ‘an all-out strike against excessive church dues’<sup>4</sup>, often posting notices upon the doors of Catholic churches, setting out the maximum fees that were to be paid to priests for performing the ceremonies of marriage, baptism and so on. Some Catholic congregations even removed themselves en masse from their churches and temporarily joined Protestant chapels. Catholic bishops in Munster admitted there had been abuses, removed two unpopular priests and fixed maximum payments for clerical services. As for tithes, it appeared at one point that the Irish parliament was going to address the issue favourably, but in the end no changes were made.

## The Caravats

The agrarian rebels of east Munster were known as The Caravats. They were active between 1806 and 1811, appearing as a result of the agricultural boom fueled by the French revolutionary and Napoleonic wars, which led to higher food prices and higher rents for land, ‘while population growth insured that there was little increase in real wages or employment.’<sup>5</sup> They were the most class-conscious of the pre-Famine agrarian activists. Again, their enemies were the middle class farmers, publicans and shopkeepers. ‘These were the main employers, traders in food, and monopolizers of land’, wrote Paul Roberts. ‘For most laborers and small farmers they were also their immediate landlords as a result of various forms of subletting.’<sup>6</sup> In response, the strong farmers formed themselves into an opposing organisation, The Shanavests, who engaged in fights with

The Caravats at fairs and public gatherings, and informed against them to the authorities. Tellingly, they espoused a contrary philosophy to the agrarian social radicals: nationalism; ‘Irish nationalism in this period was primarily a middle-class ideology [...] and it obviously lent itself to condemnation of Whiteboys as enemies of national unity.’<sup>7</sup>

In Tipperary and Waterford The Caravats not only comprised rural labourers, but also industrial workers who worked in collieries, quarries and the textile industry. These workers were comparatively better paid, and accordingly the motivation for their participation is harder to comprehend; it may be that socially their family origins lay in the communities of agricultural labourers or small farmers with whom they had a natural sympathy.

If The Caravats were the most class-conscious of pre-Famine agrarian activists, they were also the most developed ideologically. Paul Roberts wrote:

The Caravats attempted to reduce food prices as well as the rents of the poor and sometimes sought to raise wages by compelling obedience to stipulated rates. They opposed inflationary market practices by attacking farmers and retailers who hoarded food to force up prices, bought it to resell at a profit, or exported it from the local area. Occasionally, they simply compelled farmers to give food to needy neighbours...

This all-embracing regulation

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<sup>4</sup>Wall, p.20.

<sup>5</sup>Paul E W Roberts, ‘Caravats and Shanavests: Whiteboyism and Faction Fighting in East Munster, 1802-11’, in *Irish Peasants: Violence and Political Unrest 1780-1914*. Ed. Samuel Clark and James S Donnelly Jnr, (Manchester University Press, 1983), p.67.

<sup>6</sup>Roberts, p.64.

<sup>7</sup>Roberts, p.67.

amounted to an alternative economic system and was in fact seen as a coherent system of ‘laws, a term frequently on Caravat lips. Against the free market in land, labor, and goods it asserted the principle that economic life should be rigorously controlled in accordance with wider social objectives, specifically, to guarantee land and food to the poor.’<sup>8</sup>

The forces of law and order were slow to react to The Caravats; it seems that the former were unable to acknowledge that they were rebels against the economic system. When repression came, however, it was effective: in 1811 forty men were tried, twenty of whom were sentenced to be executed and 17 to be imprisoned, transported or flogged.

## The Rockites

The Rockite movement began in County Limerick and flourished in Munster during the early 1820s. They were named after their mythical figurehead, Captain Rock. In contrast to earlier movements, the membership of labourers, artisans and cottiers included some strong tillage farmers (or their sons) and some members of the Catholic gentry as a result of those groups opposition to paying the Protestant tithes, and as a result of the severe economic downturn which began in 1819, and harvest failure and famine following, which affected even the higher placed members of rural Catholic society.

The Rockites were different from earlier movements ideologically, leaning partly towards a sectarian outlook. They seized upon a book commonly nicknamed ‘Pastorinis Prophecies’, which purported to show that the rule of the Protestant and Anglo-Irish elite was due to come to an end. In part this was a response to an increasingly overtly sectarian society, following the appearance of Protestant sectarian gangs elsewhere, and the establishment of the Orange Order.

Nevertheless, some purely social ideology remained: a schoolmaster named Hall, for example, ‘declared that the king would never be crowned, and all degrees of respectability should be levelled, and equality universally established in titles and estates’.<sup>9</sup> The authorities were quicker this time to realise that the Rockite movement was one dedicated to what a contemporary characterised as ‘the total upset of the established order of things.’<sup>10</sup> In Kerry, tenants of landlord Daniel O’Connells estate flocked to the Rockite movement, and O’Connell’s brother warned him in 1821 that ‘every peasant in the barony of Iveragh is a Whiteboy and, as such, are determined neither to pay rent, tithes, or taxes.’<sup>11</sup> James O’Connell took steps to suppress the local movement, arresting a handful whom he described as ‘infatuated [i.e. deluded] wretches.’<sup>12</sup>

The movement reached a pinnacle of strength in County Cork in 1822, when up to 5,000 peasants took to the field to engage with the military. In the event, the massed peasants were scattered by much smaller parties of troops. This episode has been described as an attempted rebellion;

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<sup>8</sup>Roberts pp 82-83.

<sup>9</sup>Quoted in James S Donnelly, Jnr., *Captain Rock: The Irish Agrarian Rebellion of 1821-1824* (Collins Press, Cork, 2009), p.44.

<sup>10</sup>Quoted in James S Donnelly, Jnr., *Captain Rock* p.52.

<sup>11</sup>Quoted in James S Donnelly, Jnr., *Captain Rock* p.61.

<sup>12</sup>Quoted in James S Donnelly, Jnr., *Captain Rock* p.62.

but what was it a rebellion against? It was not a nationalist rising like that of 1798. On the contrary, it seemed much more like a kind of class war. In the words of historian James Donnelly, the landed elite had ‘anticipated a massacre of the propertied’.<sup>13</sup>



Monument commemorating ‘local whiteboys’ in Co. Cork

## The Decline of Class Conflict

Significant episodes of proletarian violence continued to be a feature of Irish life until The Famine, but from the 1830s, campaigns led by the Irish middle classes took centre stage. Daniel O’Connell’s campaign for Catholic Emancipation - the removal of various prohibitions against Irish Catholics - represented a shift from agitation based upon class conflict to agitation based upon an over-riding Catholic-Irish identity. Thereby there was what Maura Cronin called the ‘pacifying effect of O’Connellism on agrarian unrest’.<sup>14</sup> Notwithstanding O’Connell’s regular flattering of his audiences that they were ‘the finest peasantry in the world’, that same group were being led away from violence

(which O’Connell detested) and agrarian conspiracy (which he condemned) and subsumed into the new campaigns which were far less likely to address their economic circumstances. Maura Cronin pointed out:

a new template for popular action was forged, in which the public meeting acted as an instrument of controlled protest [...] Moreover, the political meeting was a carefully staged event [...] It was arranged well in advance by a committee representative of the emerging political leadership of Irish society - businessmen, professionals, manufacturers, clergy and upwardly mobile farmers [...] A new order was also evident in the careful organisation of the meetings agenda. Individual notables were delegated to make speeches, the rota of their appearance mirroring the social and political hierarchy of the movement.<sup>15</sup>

The campaign for Catholic Emancipation introduced all classes of Irish society to the monster meeting and peaceful protest. The campaign was successful, but labourers were still wise enough to complain in 1831:

What good did emancipation do us? Are we better clothed or fed? ... Are we not as naked as we were, and eating dry potatoes when we can get them? Let us notice the farmers to give us better food, and

<sup>13</sup>James S Donnelly, Jnr., *Captain Rock* p.72.

<sup>14</sup>Maura Cronin, *Agrarian Protest in Ireland 1750-1960*, Studies in Irish Economic and Social History Nr. 11 (Economic and Social History Society of Ireland, 2012) p.20.

<sup>15</sup>Cronin, p.20.

<sup>16</sup>Joseph Lee, ‘The Ribbonmen’, in T Desmond Greaves, *Secret Societies in Ireland* (Gill and Macmillan, Dublin, 1973) p.29

better wages, and not give so much to the landlords.<sup>16</sup>

## The Disappearance of the Irish Agricultural Labourer

The eclipse of rural proletarian revolt happened with The Famine. Indeed with it came what was later termed 'The disappearance of the Irish agricultural labourer'.<sup>17</sup> Most of those who died, and to a lesser extent emigrated, during that catastrophe came from the lower strata of society. Before the Famine there had been more labourers and cottiers than farmers; after it, that position was reversed. Between 1841 and 1901, the number of rural labourers declined by 73 per cent. Joseph Lee commented, 'The small farmers, and especially the labourers - the real rural proletariat - were decimated by the famine. The rural proletariat was not so much transformed as buried'.<sup>18</sup> After the Famine, farmsteads were consolidated, to the benefit of large farmers, while the

agricultural labourer became 'the forgotten man of Irish history'.<sup>19</sup>

In the later 1800s, the grievances of the poorest sections of society were incorporated into the broader concerns of a flourishing nationalist movement. Michael Davitt, for example, used the Irish National Land League to agitate for land reform and the rights of tenant farmers. At a meeting in Kerry in 1880, an organiser with the League told his audience, 'They had pledged the people to take no farm from which a tenant had been evicted; they had pledged them to give no aid in saving the crops on such a farm. If the landlord wished to save the crops he would bend his back himself and do one honest days work'.<sup>20</sup>

A frontline for specifically working class agitation would not reappear until 1913, and by then it would be in an urban context, with the Dublin Lockout. The rural proletariat would not rise again until the establishment of the several workers soviets and factory occupations between 1919 and 1923.

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<sup>17</sup> David Fitzpatrick, 'The disappearance of the Irish agricultural labourer, 1841-1912', in *Irish Economic and Social History* 7 (1980) pp. 66-92.

<sup>18</sup> Quoted in John W. Boyle, 'A Marginal Figure: The Irish Rural Laborer' in *Irish Peasants: Violence and Political Unrest 1780-1914* ed. Samuel Clark and James S Donnelly Jnr (Manchester University Press, 1983) p.312.

<sup>19</sup> Joseph Lee, 'The Ribbonmen', in *Irish Peasants: Violence and Political Unrest 1780-1914*. Ed. Samuel Clark and James S Donnelly Jnr., (Manchester University Press, 1983), p.34.

<sup>20</sup> 'The Land Agitation. Meeting in Killorglin.', *Kerry Sentinel*, Aug 13, 1880.