

## **What happened to the peasants? Material for a history of an alternative tradition of resistance in Ireland<sup>1</sup>**

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### **Abstract**

*As often in postcolonial contexts, the traditional nationalist account of resistance to English imperialism in Ireland involved repeated armed, national uprisings. However, the record of these risings is not impressive compared to that of resistance by agrarian movements. Such movements were grounded in material concerns: contention over land was equally or more important than contention over “nation”. Between at least the 1760s and the 1920s, a fluctuating war over land mobilised a range of classes from landless labourers to large tenant farmers, and continued after independence in the southern 26 counties.*

*This article offers a historical overview of these agrarian movements in Ireland, providing a skeleton outline of rural unrest over three centuries, as well as a bibliography of recent secondary literature on the subject. It explores the writing of Irish history in the post-colonial period and why discussion of agrarian agitation has been little and late. A chronological section provides short histories of agrarian movements and rural unrest, followed by a section discussing this contention thematically.*

### **I Introduction**

The traditional nationalist version of resistance to English imperialism in Ireland involved repeated armed, national uprisings leading up to the 1916 rising and the war of independence yet the record of these risings is not impressive: Emmet’s rising of 1803 was dismissed as ‘a dispute on Thomas street’, 1848 was laughed at as the ‘battle of Widow McCormack’s potato patch’, ‘the Fenian rising, like the Young Ireland rising of 1848, was no more than a gesture’ (Moody 2001:232), while among the possible descriptions of 1798 advanced by Thomas Bartlett (2000:182) is that of a peasant uprising (see also Rudé 1978:40).

Compared with this, the record of resistance by agrarian movements is impressive. Clarke and Donnelly (p.420) note ‘The Rockites and Terry Alts, for example, were vastly larger movements than the rebellion of 1848 or the Fenian rising of 1867, yet are much less well known to students of Irish history’. Earlier

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<sup>1</sup> Thanks are due to Pauline Conroy, Laurence Cox and Terry Dunne for comments and encouragement, and to Laurence Cox, Fleachta Phelan, Nicola Yeates and staff at many county libraries for help in accessing material. Particular thanks are due to the staff at Ballinamore Library, Co. Leitrim.

Donnelly (1977/1978:121) himself noted, while providing a useful foreign comparison: 'Every decade between 1760 and 1840 was punctuated by at least one major outbreak of organised protest. 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, though most were smaller than Swing in geographical extent'. For eighteenth-century Kilkenny, Cullen (1990:XX) writes 'it is hardly surprising that there should be evidence of a virtual class war in the countryside'. Reflecting on agrarian agitation between 1800 and 1850 Pomfret (1930:25) concluded 'it is clear that in the main there existed a class war'. John Stuart Mill described the agitation as a 'defensive civil war' (ibid). McCarthy (1954-55) described the existence of agrarian warfare in Tipperary. Broeker (1970:6) noted that 'from 1800 to 1823, there were altogether only about five years free from serious agrarian disturbances in various sections of the country.' O'Farrell (quoted in Townshend 1983:5) writes 'in the 1850s Irish agrarian relations were at a level resembling guerrilla warfare. Landlords and tenants carried arms as a matter of course: the peasants killed them when they could'. MacDonagh (2003:30) observes 'in general Irish landlords and agents behaved and were treated as if they were at war with their dependants.' Furthermore, '[d]uring the first half-century of the union, as J.L. Hammond pointed out, Ireland was governed under 'ordinary' English law for only five years.' (Townshend 1983:55). There also occurred what appear to have been examples of dual power over significant areas of the country, even if (admittedly) for short periods only. 'Between 1813 and 1816, and between 1819 and 1823, considerable portions of the south and west were under the domination of peasant 'armies'.' (Broeker 1970:10).

The significance of this is that it supplements, and in some readings supplants, accounts of nationalist opposition to English imperialism as the motor force of resistance during the eighteenth and nineteenth century with class-based resistance. These movements grew in response to material concerns of those active in them i.e. they were class-based. And, in a variety of different ways, and at a variety of different scales, they were successful. On the immediate front they often brought relief to the hard-pressed peasantry. In the case of the Steelboys, Magennis (1998:183) reports 'cess collection slowed down or ceased in the immediate aftermath of the disturbances [of July 1763] ...in the case of Oneillland West...some were reportedly still paying no cess as late as 1769'. A more homely example is evident in Cavan where 'a Mr. Kenny, a Catholic, who refused to reduce his rackrents was riddled with slugs in his own hallway. He pulled through, however, and his first act on returning home was to reduce all rents by 20%' (Barron 1979:37). Similarly, unrest which resulted in the provision of conacre<sup>2</sup> for potato ground for landless labourers and cottiers

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<sup>2</sup> Beames (1983:6-7) describes conacre as 'a form of holding, from half a rood to two acres in size, taken from farmer or landlord to grow potatoes, or less commonly oats, for one season...Where a farmer let conacre to one of his own labourers, the rent would generally be paid in labour rather than money. Otherwise, a money rent was the norm except in situations where the labourer was so impoverished that some part of the rent could only be met by labour

immediately relieved the fear of starvation. But longer-term effects also resulted. In general, after 1880 ‘the tenants’ psychological, political and other intimidatory weapons induced most of them [landlords] to opt for a quiet life [i.e. not evict tenants en masse]’ (MacDonagh 2003: 46). As Terry Dunne has argued these ‘peasant movements in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century had a profound impact on the course of economic development’. ‘Emboldened by the myth of Captain Rock relatively powerless groups, with scant resources and little or no formal organisation, wore down attempts to dramatically re-shape Irish agriculture in a long process of ‘slow-moving and low-intensity guerrilla warfare.’ This is part of the reason why there was, into the twentieth century, a continued prevalence of petty commodity production and a relatively restricted sector of wage-labour-based agrarian capitalism’ (Dunne forthcoming). Similar struggles were carried out in such rural industries as mining. (Dunne n.d.)

This essay then argues that contention over land was as – if not more – important than contention over ‘nation’. While the term ‘land war’ is used in Irish historiography primarily to designate the short and intense period of contention during the existence of the Land League and the Ladies’ Land League (i.e. 1879-1882) this essay argues that a land war, varying regionally and in strength, varying also in social composition and repertoire of contention, existed in Ireland from at least the 1760s until the 1920s, mobilising a variety of different classes from landless labourers to large tenant farmers at different stages and over different issues. Contention over land continued after independence for the southern 26 counties, with perhaps the last gasp of traditional agrarian contention occurring in the 1950s. Contention over land continued however with new issues arising following the late industrialisation of Ireland.

This article attempts to set out a historical overview of these agrarian movements in Ireland, providing a skeleton outline of rural unrest over three centuries, as well as bringing together a bibliography of recent secondary literature on the subject. The reader should be aware that this is a report on work in progress and that, in particular, coverage of county studies is unbalanced, and dependant on the availability of local history journals online and the number of county libraries the author has so far visited.

The essay is structured as follows. The next section (Part II) argues for the importance of attending to this contention, both in Ireland and due to its transnational aspects. The following section (Part III) looks at the writing of Irish history in the post-colonial period, noting tensions around ‘top-down’ and ‘bottom-up’ approaches to writing history, the rise of various revisionisms in response to both traditional nationalist historiography and the return of the national struggle in the six counties, as well as issues of national versus local approaches. This discussion illuminates why it was so late that historians in Ireland turned to writing about agrarian agitation and why the vanguard in

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services for the landholder. Conacre... ensured a supply of food throughout the year for landless labourers.’

writing about this area consists of historians from outside Ireland. The core of the essay –which provides an introduction to the literature on rural unrest– follows, and is divided in two. The first chronological section (Part IV) provides short histories of the various agrarian movements and incidents of rural unrest and contention in Ireland under British rule and in the post-colonial state. The second section (Part V) details work which deals with rural contention from a thematic rather than a chronological approach. This is followed by a short conclusion and a long bibliography.

## **II Why pay attention to these movements?**

One reason to pay attention is summed up in the title of a recent article in the *International New York Times* reporting from Dublin: “Europe’s landlord: Wall Street: as many face eviction, U.S. investment firms are the object of anger” (Alderman 2016). Ireland still suffers from absentee landlords and the question of whether people have a home or are thrust out onto the streets still confronts Irish people a century after the land question was supposedly solved. More recently the Jesuit campaigner on homelessness Peter McVerry compared recent evictions with those during the Great Famine: ‘It should be made illegal to evict people into homelessness, particularly families. That’s what we did during the famine years and we’re still doing it today in 2017’. (Fegan 2017).

This resistance represents a different tradition of resistance to English imperialism, the local elite and church authorities, a tradition worth recovering and recounting (for a variety of different reasons).<sup>3</sup> One of these reasons is the class nature of this resistance, especially its ideological underpinnings, the ‘unwritten law’ that the right to access land for subsistence purposes overrules property rights. It allows examination of the development of the state’s machinery of repression and social control (police and courts, but also national schools and newspaper censorship). It provides a number of examples of betrayals of the poorest classes (landless labourers and cottiers) by middle class leadership in cross-class alliances, a lesson/warning that is always worth recounting. Related to this is a critique of national liberation movements, shown by the nationalist movement piggy-backing on land demands, which it then betrayed when it obtained power. There are also a (small) number of interesting transnational manifestations of the tradition, primarily in labour disputes in the US and elsewhere among Irish migrant workers.

A further reason is provided by the role Ireland played as a test-bed for various imperial measures and as a labour provider for English and other imperialisms. Here we must confront the ambivalent role of the Irish under English colonialism: “During the early modern period, segments of the Irish population, especially the disempowered and dispossessed Catholics, can be viewed as victims of English imperialism... Yet, other Irishmen, including Catholics, often

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<sup>3</sup> Credit where credit is due: leaving aside Marx, Connolly and O’Neill (1933) the first recognition of the radical nature of these movements is in Anon. For a more recent anarchist interpretation see Dwyer. For a Marxist perspective see Moraghan.

proved effective and enterprising colonizers at home and abroad, where they contributed not only to the development of an English empire but to the growth of the Portuguese, Spanish, Austrian, and French global empires' (Ohlmeyer 2004:57) In a later period, the same analyst argues 'Ireland was a crucial sub-imperial centre for the British Empire in South Asia that provided a significant amount of the manpower, intellectual and financial capital that fuelled Britain's drive into Asia from the 1750s onwards' (Ohlmeyer 2015:171)

Just as previously Ireland was a testing ground for British colonial ventures so Ireland after the union with England in 1800 became a place where British administrators experimented with various measures, some of which were later extended to England and English colonies. The result was that government services in Ireland were more centralised, uniform, professional and inspected than the equivalent in England. (MacDonagh 2003). One relevant example is provided by the differences between these two offshore islands in policing. 'Whereas Britain has never achieved a national police force, and did not even possess county forces everywhere before the 1850s, Ireland began the nineteenth century with baronial forces and rapidly built up a national body to keep order and execute state policy uniformly throughout the island. By 1825 a single force for the entire country was well on the way to being realised... Thus Ireland possessed a coherent, stratified, paramilitary police at a time when the lonely, untrained village constable was still the instrument of law enforcement across most of rural England'. (MacDonagh 2003:29).

The rediscovery of this history has some relevance outside the island of Ireland, in particular in relation to other countries whose misfortune it was to be colonised by the English. It is in policing and repression that Ireland's role in the British empire is most obvious. As Broeker (1970:241) notes 'the Irish Constabulary exerted a major influence upon the development of the colonial police forces of the British Empire'. Sinclair (2008:173-174) concurs: 'Colonial policing was Irish in origin, stemming from the Irish Constabulary's original role as an imposer of force on the people, a constant reminder that Ireland could only be governed by force'. Silvestri (2000:477) reports 'the reorganization of the Indian police in the aftermath of the Indian Rebellion of 1857 replicated the centralized control and semimilitary aspects of the Irish Constabulary'. Its influence on colonial police forces meant it was not only a model: it provided training and personnel for these forces. 'Until the 1930s Ireland (and then Northern Ireland) was *the* official and unofficial training ground for colonial police officers. Similarly, senior-ranking officers with a background in 'Irish' policing were dispatched the length and breadth of the empire to provide advice and assistance to imperial police forces facing bloody challenges during the long era of decolonisation' (Sinclair 2008:174). They provided similar services during the bloody periods of colonisation. 'British rule in Africa in the last quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was extended in great part through through the establishment of armed police forces' (Palmer 1988:544). Similarly Sinclair notes 'The Indian Police was certainly the first and largest colonial-style police force to be shaped by the RIC [Royal Irish Constabulary]' before quoting Hawkins to the effect that the police system set up by the Indian Police Act of 1861 was 'the dominant

influence on police development in the far east and British Africa' (Sinclair 2008:182). The recent struggle in Northern Ireland has reinvigorated the reputation of the RUC [Royal Ulster Constabulary], ex-officers of which have found a happy hunting ground in working on 'police reform' in 'post-conflict' situations. Sinclair cites the example of assistant chief constable Stephen White, 'dispatched to Basra in 2003 to command a 10,000 strong Iraqi police force, having previously been loaned out to Mongolia, Indonesia, Bulgaria, South Africa and Serbia'. (Sinclair 2008:186).

Nor was the influence confined to policing. Army personnel also brought their Irish experience to India: for example 'Gerard Lake's dubious fame for burning the villages of refractory peasantries followed him from Wexford to Jat north India.' (Bayly 2000:385). Other dubious English exports from Ireland to India include a model of governance, an administrative template, a system of elementary education and an ideology of 'improvement', accompanied by and partly accomplished by, systems of knowledge including land surveying. (Ohlmeyer 2015). Silvestri (2000:476-477), noting Ireland was a fertile source of precedents in land tenure and law and order for the British Empire, details how 'Indian land legislation provided the precedent for the Land Act of 1870 in Ireland, while the Irish Land Act of 1881 in turn provided the basis for the Bengal Tenancy Act of 1885.' Howlin (2013) notes that 'legislation passed in India to combat nationalist movements was based on similar measures enacted in Ireland. Rosenkrantz (2005) reports 'Government treatment of the press in India followed a pattern of surveillance, suppression and prosecution previously established in Ireland.'

The history of rural contention in Ireland also discommodes any notion of the peasantry as a unified class (facing a unified class of landlords). Class differences in rural areas were more complicated than that and rural conflicts more complex. The traditional nationalist version of the land war –unified peasants fighting foreign, and often absentee, rack-renting landlords- is a delusion. Often the war was a class war between landless labourers and cottiers and their employers, the farmers, who were mainly of the same nationality and religion, but who did not let that stand in the way of abusing, exploiting and – when it suited- evicting their workers and sub-tenants. Sometimes the rural unrest involved attacks on large farmers and graziers, many of whom were merchants, professionals and other members of the rising indigenous middle class, with the aim being land redistribution.

Without succumbing to Fitzpatrick's (1982) vision of rural Ireland (in the example of Cloon, Co. Leitrim) as a war of all against all, the Irish countryside was the location of a complex class structure –from landless labourers living on a half-acre of potato ground on conacre through a variety of farmers and middlemen to the landlords who owned vast amounts of Irish land. While there are major difficulties over statistics from this period in Ireland, the following table, using figures provided to Donnelly (1985:152) by Cormac Ó Gráda, gives an indication of class structure in rural Ireland in 1841:

**Table 1 Class structure of rural Ireland 1841**

Class	Landholding	Numbers
Rich farmers	80 acres	50,000
Snug farmers	50 acres	100,000
Family farmers	20 acres	250,000
Cottiers	5 acres	300,000
Labourers	1 acre	1,000,000

Clarke (1982:16) identifies at least five classes in pre-famine rural Ireland, 'landless labourers, labourer-landholders, small independent landholders (small farmers), large independent landholders (large farmers) and landowners'. Of course the class composition varied by region and often by county. For Leinster in 1841 O'Donoghue (1965:18) estimates 37% of farms were 1-5 acres, 34% were 5-15 acres, 16% were 15-30 acres and 13% over 309 acres. For one Leinster county, Edwards (1966:103) reports 'landless people constituted half of the rural population of Louth in the 1830's and 1840's.' This class structure changed over time, with one major influence being the Great Famine, with Joseph Lee commenting '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' (quoted in Boyle 1983:312). The return of landholders for 1876 reported 110 owners held upwards of 20,000 acres each, with a total of some 4,151,142 acres, out of a total acreage of 20,247,849 in the country. Thus one-fifth of the country's land was held by little over a hundred people. (Collins 1974:2). The situation of desperate inequality continued into the twentieth century: Lee (1973:100) states 'as late as 1911 the 6,000 largest farmers in Connacht held roughly the same amount of land as the 70,000 smallest holders.'

The land struggle that arose from this material reality was complex and uneven, in some cases mobilising only some strata, in other cases (mainly those of widespread economic crisis) mobilising the majority of rural classes. One major and continuing cause of unrest grew from the need of landless labourers (and town labourers as well) for conacre ground on which to sow potatoes, the one guarantee of food for the labourer and his family. Another was the struggle between tenant farmers and their landlords (and sometimes middlemen) over the level of rents extracted. There is reasonably general agreement that these struggles arose from and responded to the economic situation, not just nationally but internationally, as when the market for agricultural products received impetus from imperial wars or when it was depressed by the opening of markets to foreign competition. According to Rude (1978:38) 'the high points in the various phases of this peasant rebellion coincided with economic crises affecting wages, employment, rent, the imposition of tithe, and the rise and fall in the price of potatoes'. Thus the reaction involved was in part to the globalisation of agricultural production, distribution and supply and in part to

the development of capitalist agriculture in Ireland, which Vanhaute, Paper and Ó Gráda (2006) characterised as a long-distance food exporter at the time of the Great famine (1845-1852). The struggles varied from local responses to the activities of individual landlords, entrepreneurs and agents (such as the disturbances related to John Marum in Galmoy, Co. Kilkenny from 1819-1824 (Ó Macháin 2004)) to the land war of 1789-81 which was a transnational social movement financed by the Irish diaspora in the USA, and which in Ireland originated with the smallholders of the west before being extended to mobilise the snug and rich farmers of the south and east.

Rural unrest cannot be seen in isolation from the urban. The most obvious example is the Land League whose 'challenging collectivity', according to Clark (1979), included shopkeepers, merchants and others. We need also to consider the material conditions of town labourers. As early as 1822 trade unions in the city of Kilkenny 'used violence in a way that bore a strong resemblance to the tactics of rural agrarian rebels' (Donnelly 2009: 76). Donnelly (1983:214) also reports 'combinations of urban workers, especially those of journeyman weavers in the larger towns, also made use of oaths, regulations, forced contributions, charivaris and carefully directed violence for economic ends, all indicating patterns of thought and behaviour congruent with those of Whiteboys. Since journeymen regularly switched to agricultural work at harvest time, Whiteboys could recruit them easily for attacks on spailpini [migrant workers], who competed with them for the high wages of that season. Town workers also commonly hired gardens for the cultivation of potatoes in outlying fields and thus became liable for the payment of the customary tithe on that crop, a tax which they resented as bitterly as tillage farmers detested the tithes of corn.'

There were also a variety of other causes of agitation, including opposition to the expansion of the state and its extraction of taxes (Dickson 1983, Watt 2015), which included opposition to the activities of revenue officers against illegal distilling and smuggling. Parts of the local elite, at least in the eighteenth century, shared similar suspicions regarding state expansion and centralisation of power.

Another battle between the state and the peasant population occurred over illicit distillation or poitin-making, against which the state mounted raids by the army, private bounty hunters and eventually a specialist police force. (Dawson 1977). In the 1850s some £45,000 a year was spent on the revenue police, a body of one thousand men dedicated to restricting poitin production. In 1833 and 1834 they seized 16,000 stills and until the 1870s seized from two to three thousand stills annually. The peasant producers did not give up their production equipment easily: between 1808 and 1814 for example, the *Londonderry Journal* reported six deaths in encounters between the military and poitin makers. The industry was concentrated in the north and the west, generally in mountainous areas and on islands, in the following counties (in descending order of production in 1823): Donegal, Cavan, Leitrim, Mayo, Clare, Sligo, Monaghan and Tyrone. For many peasants 'poteen-making was the alternative to eviction, a condition of retaining the status of land-holder... On occasions the



landlord's demands were met...for some...only if they made poteen'. (Connell 1968:26).

Some of these movements, particularly those waged by cottiers, those subsisting on conacre and landless labourers, also represented a struggle between a vision of the land as providing subsistence and one of untrammelled profit-oriented agriculture. (Struggles waged by larger tenant farmers differed in that they were over the extraction of rent by landlords and tithes by the Anglican clergy from commercially-oriented tenant farmers). As Townsend (1983:2-3) notes 'Irish agrarian society resisted the incursion of laissez-faire economics. Irish violence and disorder were basically a reaction against English law –above all the law of property which governed the holding of land'. Furthermore, he notes 'the resistance was not merely negative. It was rather the upholding of a different system of law or social control' (p.5). Solow, noting on mature reflection that she had actually written 'a case study of Marx's theory of primitive accumulation', states that 'the Irish land question ... [was] a struggle between two conceptions of property' (Solow 2013:73,77). Here was one possible difference between protest in Ireland and England: English protest claimed English landlords were resiling from the law, a law accepted and recognised by both sides; Irish protest involved a law held by the peasants, an alternative law. That an alternative law was being proclaimed in agrarian notices was often made explicit as in the following Rockite notice:

'We also *enact* that rents in general be reduced so as to render the tenant solvent, and that the tithe system be utterly abolished. We also *enact* that all rackrents and backrents be forgiven, and that any person or persons driving or distraining for any of the aforesaid charges, or processing or executing decrees for tithe or any illegal charge whatsoever within our jurisdiction, shall suffer capital punishment. We also *enact* that any person or persons invited to the standard of liberty and refusing to comply therewith shall suffer such punishment as is attached to that offence. We also *enact* that all bidders at auctions for rent or tithe shall suffer accordingly. We also *enact* that any person or persons proposing or agreeing for any farm or farms of land until the same be three years unoccupied shall suffer death. It is further *enacted* that any individual attempting to take down or in any way disfigure this advertisement or any other [of] the like tendency shall, without regard to age, sex or function, suffer capitally.' (Donnelly 2009: 85, emphasis added).

As can be seen here, Rockite notices also imitated state laws in the number of offences drawing capital punishment. (Analysts commonly noted that such notices often copied and mocked official state vocabulary.) This system was expressed not only in 'midnight legislation' but also in a variety of institutional forms, many of which functioned as courts –'Repeal Association arbitration courts, Ribbon Association courts, Land League courts, National League courts,

United Irish League courts and Dail courts' (Laird 2005: 13).<sup>4</sup> As Laird (2005: 13) summarises '[l]aw in Ireland was not only a medium for the implementation of English rule: it was also a fundamental component of anti-colonial resistance, with the concept of an alternative system of control capable of supplanting a despised official law, functioning as one of the most sustained threats to colonial administration'. It may be speculated that this law found part of its material basis in the existence of the rundale system of communal landholding and the associated clustering of dwellings in clachans. Kenny (1998: 34) argues 'the rundale system suggests a fundamentally different conception of property from the rationalized conceptualisation typical of agrarian capitalism'.<sup>5</sup>

More generally an argument has been made that Irish exploitation was essential to the Industrial Revolution in England. Kiernan (1987: 23) suggests 'by the 1830s Ireland was subsidizing the Industrial Revolution by feeding two million of the British population', while also providing a constant supply of cheap labour, which not only provided a major proportion of those who built England's canals and railways, but also undercut wages in England, Scotland and Wales: 'it may be questioned whether the Industrial Revolution would have been possible without this supply of hungry hands' (Kiernan 1987: 23). The constant production of population also provided recruits for the British military: 'it may be questioned whether the empire accumulated by the incessant colonial wars of the nineteenth century would have been attainable without the army's flow of recruits from Ireland' (Kiernan 1987: 23). Irish soldiers, for example, were crucial to the East India Company: '500 Irish recruits were sent to India in 1777 and within a few years a third to a half of the company's European soldiers were Irish by birth or extraction' (Murtagh 1996: 306). Some 50 years later Irish soldiers represented a major portion of the English army: according to Spiers (1996: 337) Irishmen represented 42.2% of the British army in 1830, 37.2% in 1840 and 30.8% in 1868, dropping from the 1870s to some one-fifth of the army, and below that from the late 1880s.

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<sup>4</sup> This was not simply a southern custom and it stretches from the late eighteenth to the early twentieth century. In March 1772 the Presbetry in Dromore, Co. Down, protested that the local Hearts of Steel assumed 'to themselves the power of courts of justice, consulting and decreeing in all causes referred to them and putting their determinations in force by the most violent means' (Donnelly 1981:41). Donnelly (2009:51) reports the existence of a Rockite court in County Limerick in 1821. Another southern example can be cited from 1832 during the tithes war: 'In parts of County Cork the Catholic clergy set up minor courts to deal with matters in dispute between the local population and issued summonses to appear before them' (O'Donoghue 1972:94). Bull (2003:420) notes in 1843 'the Repeal Arbitration Court was declared to be for the purpose of Irish people "taking the administration of justice into their own hands"'. Curtis (2014:154, note 68) cites RIC (Royal Irish Constabulary) evidence that in 1885 215 land league courts held sessions in eight counties in the midlands and the southeast, while in 1886 221 sessions were held. Campbell (2013:150) reports that United Irish 'League branches constituted themselves as land courts that decided who had the right to occupy land (usually evicted farms and grazing farms).'

<sup>5</sup> For a useful introduction to rundale see Slater and Flaherty (2009).

These rural movements have been condemned as being sectarian and/or reactionary, depending on the ideology of the objector. We need to defang the charge that the impetus for this agitation was essentially sectarian, consisting of Catholic peasants attacking Protestant landowners simply because they were Protestant. For the early period, how could it be anything than that, given that under the penal laws Catholics could not hold land by fee simple, a state sectarianism that worries some analysts much less than a popular sectarianism. The predominantly protestant ownership of land was a structural feature, resulting from British occupation and colonialism. This state-sanctioned, state-supported sectarianism can be clearly seen in the system of tithes, payments extracted by the state Church of Ireland from tillage farmers, while landlords and graziers did not pay tithes as grassland had been exempted from payment in 1735. Thus a large part of the burden of keeping the Anglican clergy in the style to which they were accustomed in Ireland fell, not on those to whom they provided religious services but on Catholics, Presbyterians and other Protestant farmers and cottiers. (The extraction of tithes from cottiers and those holding conacre land depended on the local or regional situation: in some places the Anglican clergy did not extract a tithe on potatoe ground). Finally, the position of Anglican clerics as landlords, as well as their often acting as magistrates and sometimes as middlemen, left them open to attack for a number of reasons unconnected with religion.<sup>6</sup> Indeed when sectarianism manifested itself in land struggles, it often came from over-zealous Protestant landlords who either attempted to proselytize their tenants or to replace their Catholic tenants with Protestants.

Aside from this, there were undoubtedly occasions –such as the influence of the Pastorini prophecies in the 1820s – where religious sectarianism and millenarianism mixed with economic and subsistence interest (Donnelly 1983b). Agrarian secret societies were mainly resolutely non-sectarian, being as happy to attack Catholic as Protestant landlords, including members of the catholic clergy. Two examples among many possible will suffice. During the Rightboys disturbances in the 1780s ‘many priests were insulted, reviled and even physically assaulted’ (Donnelly 1977/1978:174). In 1841 Father Francis Clery of Ikerrin, Co. Tipperary was warned, after letting two acres of potatoe ground to speculators rather than to poor people, that ‘Captain Rock thinks as little about a priest when he turns a land jobber as he does of any common man’ (Grace 2009: 53). The campaign against tithes has also been portrayed as sectarian: however, the record shows the agrarians were as happy to attack, limit and regulate the various charges the catholic clergy imposed on their flocks while opposition to tithes was also manifested by Protestants who were not members of the established church and by some who were.

Land reform movements later in the nineteenth century also attempted to be non-sectarian, despite the strong involvement of catholic clergy: as Moffitt (2011b:96) notes ‘nationalist leaders sought (often successfully) to include

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<sup>6</sup> Similarly in 1641 Anglican clergy were attacked because of their money lending activities. (Smyth 2013:79; Walter 2013:139)

Protestant farmers in land agitation movements.’ As one example, the Land League was non-sectarian. The first person affected by the revived land war in Mayo was a Catholic clergyman, Canon Bourke. A more entertaining example is provided by the unopposed election (of a candidate who only appeared in the county the week before the election) in Mayo to Parliament in 1880 of the Reverend Isaac Nelson, ‘a 71-year-old Belfast Presbyterian minister who had been an outspoken critic of the slave trade and had enthusiastically supported home rule and the Land League’ (Moran 1994:199). Moran notes this as evidence of the loss of electoral power by the Catholic church: ‘in the pre-1874 period it would have been inconceivable for a non-catholic clergyman to secure a seat in Mayo’ (Moran 1994:199)<sup>7</sup>. Furthermore the Catholic church’s cadre increasingly also became farmers and landholders and were a significant part of the emerging catholic middle classes; thus they became heavily involved in agrarian activities only after the 1850s and in the Land League. Yet, while the clergy was eventually strongly involved, they did not direct the movement. Moran (1994:193) argues that clerical involvement in the Land League was due to fear ‘of the diminution of their control over the people’.

Indeed these movements were notable for how their aims were primarily material. We also need to remember here that the objectives of many early European rural social movements were expressed in religious terms, at least in part because religion was the dominant understanding of society available to peasants. However, Irish peasants were nothing if not pragmatic and were happy to add to their existing frames ‘the rights of man’, the liberty tree, and nationalism.

Agrarian unrest has also been commonly described –and in part condemned- as being essentially reactionary and conservative: many analysts believe that these movements did not query the existence of the landlord-tenant relationship, but only wished for this relationship to be ‘fair’ and just. Revealingly, this reactionary charge is common to both vulgar Marxist and modernization analysts. Leaving aside the question of how many of these analysts would have actually welcomed a full revolutionary programme, we might note three things: first, this conservative peasant position represented a block on the ‘progressive’ (i.e. capitalist) development of agriculture in Ireland and its place in the British imperialist project, with its demand that local land and food production on it should be devoted first to local subsistence rather than exported to sustain the expansion of British capitalism and economic and political imperialism; second, this position involved an assertion of popular law as against the law of the imperialists; finally that position was one that responded to the immediate economic interests of the peasants and the other wretched of the earth: it was a demand to control everyday life.

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<sup>7</sup> In fairness, the rest of the story needs to be told. Nelson was reported to have made anti-Catholic comments in Belfast, due to which he fell out of favour in Mayo and never again appeared in the county.

We have already mentioned Dunne's argument that these movements impeded capitalist development and proletarianisation. Huggins (2007:124) noted in response to one author's conclusions that Irish agrarian agitation was a reactionary response to changing European capitalism 'to term such demands reactionary is to say no more than they impeded the accumulation of capital and the re-organization of production in non-traditional ways.' The same charge is levelled at the Molly Maguires, who are seen as a primitive, defensive response to capital (and as a stage towards a more organised response through open combinations such as trade unions) but their demands (particularly at the height of their strength) were not far off demands for workers' control. (Bulik 2015)

If left analysts/historians in retrospect dismissed peasant demands as reactionary, the elite at the time recognised they represented a threat to 'the very existence of property' (Beames 1983:210 citing a contribution to the 1836 Royal Commission to Inquire into the Condition of the Poorer Classes in Ireland) while as early as 1811 Lord Norbury, Special Commission judge, noted the objectives of the Caravats and Shanavests 'overthrew the principle of laissez-faire economics' (Beames 1983:138).

Ireland is a small country so it is possible to summarise three centuries of rural unrest. Looking at these movements over this long period allows us to see how they differ from each other, grow in complexity and sophistication, change composition, aims, tactics and strategies, operate locally, nationally and transnationally. While episodes of unrest generally began with a specific cause or complaint, they normally grew to add other grievances as the movements sought further support outside their immediate base. If the dominant form of agrarian organisation before the famine was the secret society<sup>8</sup>, towards the end of the nineteenth century with the long land war nationally organised combinations were the dominant form, though the repertoire of the secret societies continued to accompany the new repertoire of open defiance and civil disobedience characteristic of the new national organisations. We can also see similarities between recent transnational movements and those of the nineteenth century, with similar problems regarding foreign funding, pressure from foreign funders and use of new communications and transport technologies to facilitate transnational organising. They also allow us to see that

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<sup>8</sup> Some analysts have problems with the concept of secret societies as a description of Irish agrarian groups. Parts of this problem can perhaps be traced to Williams (1973), an anthology of academic articles on secret societies in Ireland, which includes extremely different groups, from the freemasons and the Orange Order to the Irish Republican Brotherhood and the Communist Party of Ireland,<sup>1</sup> while its first two chapters on the Whiteboys (Wall 1973) and the Ribbon societies (Lee 1973) are seen as seminal contributions to the literature on agrarian agitation. Williams justifies the wide range of organisations and groups gathered together by using a somewhat maximal definition of secret societies, which term 'here mainly denotes organised groups which have pursued political, ideological or economic objectives by secret means and very often through violent actions' (Williams 1973:1). While there are objections to the analytical validity of such a wide category, nevertheless the ascription of the term secret society to a wide range of agrarian groups can be argued for on the basis that they indeed operated in secrecy and were commonly bound together by an oath. For a critique of this use see Huggins (2017).

land struggles are not simply anti-colonial struggles but continue after the achievement of so-called ‘national liberation’.

Before we can turn to our main subject in detail, we need to make a few comments about the writing of history in a post-colonial society, as the literature this essay brings together was strongly influenced by the post-colonial conditions in which it was produced.

### **III Who writes what history? Historiographical and political problems**

The writing of history is inherently political, all the more so when history deals with insurgencies, rebellions and unrest. To begin with we need to note that the writing of Irish history is not an activity confined to the island of Ireland: as Boyce (1996:6) notes, the majority of historians of Ireland are located outside Ireland. A further complication is added however with Ireland’s position as an ex-colony, whose national revolution/liberation was incomplete and which still operates in the various shadows of its old colonizer. For the former the settler community in the northeast is still integrated with the colonizer, despite recent attempts by parts of the minority community there. For the latter, a significant amount of academic work – both teaching and publication – is undertaken by the academic headquarters of the colonizer, with – in particular – the university presses of Oxford and Cambridge publishing a stream of works on Irish history, while the former publishes the most prestigious and closest thing to an official history of Ireland in multiple volumes. Furthermore the teaching of Irish history has been strongly influenced by the English historical tradition. This may be seen as another example of the global division of knowledge production previously pointed out in this journal. (MacSheoin 2016).

The orientation towards ‘high politics’ that Irish historians imbibed from their mentors in England may be seen as one of the reasons for the late development of history writing on agrarian agitation in Ireland and why the major contributions to the literature came from writers outside Ireland, initially the US and, more recently, England (from writers who inherited a different orientation in writing history – from Thompson, Hobsbawm and the like; see footnote 8). The same high politics orientation may be seen in the concentration of the literature that did come from Ireland on the Land League and state responses to it. Similarly some basic work remains to be done on agrarian agitation, while Irish historians continue to re-rake the coals on certain areas. Jim Smyth, the historian who both noted the tendency of Irish historians of the 1990s to concentrate on the more patrician United Irishmen and ignore the more agrarian Defenders, noted in 1992 that ‘the basic narrative history of the Defenders has still to be written’ (Smyth 1992:100). A quarter of a century later, it still remains unwritten.

One problem with treating Irish history as British history is immediately obvious. Townshend (1983:vii) begins his volume by noting he will be dealing with ‘a vital element of modern British history’: the problem with this is not only

political, but also historiographical, as seeing this as a part of British history means a large amount of time is spent on the actions and attitudes of the British elite. This tendency is not confined to English authors. The American Broeker declares that his intention is twofold: 'to investigate organised peasant opposition to the existing economic and religious systems in Ireland between 1812 and 1836, and to examine the methods developed by the authorities to deal with the violence used by the peasants to make this opposition known' (Broeker 1970:vii). However the first of these subjects is treated minimally while most of Broeker's efforts go on his declared second objective. Partly this is due to the availability of material on high politics in both Ireland and England related to this repression, which makes the writing of such history easy. Another part must surely relate to the traditional historian's preference for the powerful over the powerless.<sup>9</sup> This *modus operandi* continues in use: see Rozman's recent examination of the use of Irish outrages in struggles between English whigs and Tories. (Rozman 2017)

Nor is this problem unknown among Irish historians. Because of an orientation that sees history as the record of the activities of the rich and powerful, and because of the availability of state archives, there are a plethora of studies of the English state's deliberations on how to deal with the Irish problem, the various investigatory commissions, the changing land acts introduced at various stages and the parliamentary manoeuvrings by Irish politicians and parties. As Beiner (1999) notes the archival historical sources of Ireland are documented primarily from the view of colonial establishment and hierarchical elites.<sup>10</sup> These state reports need to be approached with caution, if not suspicion. Kiernan (1987:31) is the most outspoken critic, noting of constabulary reports of evictions 'the figures recorded were what the constabulary thought proper to record, taking into account the susceptibilities of the landlords who controlled local affairs, and who were conscious of the obloquy that evictions were bringing on them in England' before widening his attack to suggest 'in general, nineteenth century Irish statistics should probably be treated with much the same caution as Spanish'. Griffin (2005:62-67) also recommends caution in approaching and using official crime statistics.

A further problem, particularly in relation to the eighteenth century, is many historians' failure to use sources in the Irish language. A surprising number of historians –possibly the majority- of eighteenth century Ireland do not have the ability to read Irish, thus cutting themselves off from native sources. Morley is one exception in that he can not only read but also write Irish (see, for example Morley 1994). A further issue arises, of course, due to the nature of these Irish-

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<sup>9</sup> Needless to say, not all English historians' work on Ireland follows this line: both Gibbons (2004) and Huggins (2007) have made major contributions, while Featherstone (2005) attempted to rescue the Whiteboys from the 'litany of theoretical condescension' they have been subjected to. The most explicitly political interpretation I've seen is provided by the Scot Armstrong (2010) in his analysis of Davitt's 'internationalism from below'.

<sup>10</sup> O'Callaghan (2004:55) notes 'Dublin Castle produced a stunningly vast archive. The structure of the archive bore remarkable similarities to the archives of India and other imperial locations'.

language sources, most of which were produced by members of the colonized elites, in particular professional poets and historians. (Of course the sources in English also tend to be products of the elite but this does not appear to be considered a problem).

Another important limitation is the professional niches or specialisations of many academic authors. Thus undoubtedly one reason for the lack of a chronological history of agrarian agitation is this division by period – one author does the eighteenth century, another pre-famine Ireland, another the land war and never the twain shall meet. McBride (2009:319) notes the failure to compare Whiteboys in Munster in the 1860s with the Hearts of Oak/Steel in Ulster at the same time. ('No-one has attempted anything like a sustained comparison of these northern and southern protests, despite the fact that they were often linked at the time' (McBride 2009:319)). Indeed, what is noticeable about this literature is the failure in most cases to move beyond case studies of individual movements. Thus comparison of movements within Ireland is minimal, without considering comparisons with English or other European peasant movements. There have been some comparisons between Ireland and Scotland (Devine 1988) and one recent effort (Howell 2013) to compare experiences in 'these Atlantic islands' but otherwise we must be satisfied with the occasional genuflection towards Scott, Thompson or Tilly. Indeed the main comparisons are normally with England, often using Thompson's moral economy frame, which represents a problem given the structural differences between the two countries. More useful comparisons with other European countries are missing.<sup>11</sup> Whelehan's comparative work with Italy is a welcome but lonely exception (Whelehan 2014; 2015).

We also need to consider for a moment the issue of the moral economy and the question of whether this frame – developed for the analysis of movements in England – is fully applicable to movements in Ireland, another variation of the question raised by the export of metropolitan frames for social movements to peripheral nations. (Mac Sheoin 2016) Eighteenth century land agitation was seen as operating within the accepted limits of a moral economy. In Bartlett's formulation '“Moral economy” as experienced in Ireland had been to a certain extent dependant on easygoing farming practices (long leases, low rents, tolerance of arrears), practices which while productive of a certain amount of harmony were generally not profitable. From the 1760s on, however, these relatively relaxed practices had tended to be displaced by more profit-oriented ones such as short leases, enclosure of commons, and regular “drives” to bring in arrears. In a real sense the precepts of the “moral economy” were yielding to the forces of the “market economy”.' (Bartlett 1987:216-217) Bartlett argues that the 1793 militia agitation represented the end of this moral economy. Patterson also makes that point when he notes that after 1798 Munster agrarian movements were more ready to use capitally violent methods than previously. His argument that this change 'can be directly attributed to the government's creation of an environment in which capital force was increasingly the norm'

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<sup>11</sup> I owe this point to Terry Dunne.



(Patterson 2008:190) seems convincing. It is worth noting that this presentation of quiescent peasant-landlord relations is based purely on English-language sources, and a different view is presented by the Irish language sources. Indeed the unquestioned acceptance of the presentation of the peasantry as happily accepting and acknowledging the paternalism of the landlords always seemed to involve a failure to critically assess the sources, particularly in the light of research on peasant silence and cunning in the international literature on peasant-landlord relations. However Wells (1996) applies the moral economy frame to responses to the famine at the turn of the century and at least some events from the nineteenth century, including during the great famine, appear to fit the frame of the moral economy.

Some analysts have characterised the difference between Irish and British rural unrest as the preparedness of Irish peasants to embrace violence as a tactic: Rudé (1978:32), for example, notes 'a number of violent crimes against property, such as robbery of arms, forcible possession of property, armed assembly and attacks on houses and lands, which play no part in the English records, are conspicuously present in the Irish'.<sup>12</sup> While this is indeed true another major difference needs also to be emphasised which may weaken the case for the use of the moral economy frame in Ireland. While British rural unrest claimed to appeal to a moral economy shared both by the downtrodden and the elite, the law acclaimed by those involved in Irish rural unrest was an alternative rather than a shared law, a law which prioritised landholding over land ownership, as previously noted.

## Revisionism

The late development of critical work on Irish rural and peasant unrest may be partly attributable to the dominance of a narrow national history of Ireland which was unsympathetic to issues of class and preferred to present Irish history as a vision of a unified national community opposing foreign occupation and domination. This nationalist mystification was inevitably challenged and the historiography of Ireland almost since the foundation of the 26-county state has been accompanied by controversy regarding revisionism. The first wave of revisionism came with a new wave of historians who wished to establish a more accurate history, partly out of a desire to introduce professional standards into

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<sup>12</sup> While these movements have been condemned for their embrace of violent methods, these need to be seen in the context of state violence. Maureen Wall (1973:17) notes 'the frontier-type law should, perhaps, be viewed against the background of the law of the land, which for countless minor offences decreed the pillory, whipping or transportation and, for more serious offences, hanging, drawing and quartering. Corpses of criminals were left suspended from gibbets and heads were left on spikes for months, even years. Such exhibitions were meant as a deterrent; they can hardly have inspired the Whiteboys to grant humane treatment to those who offended against their code'. Similarly while it must be acknowledged that these movements increasingly utilised serious and often fatal violence against men and beast, this violence pales against the structural violence inherent in the land system and the accompanying colonial governance, most viciously exposed during the Great Famine. (Nally 2011).

the writing of history in Ireland. Here an English influence was decisive. Many of these scholars were trained in the 1930s in London's Institute of Historical Research, including T.W. Moody and R. Dudley Edwards, who co-founded the dominant journal *Irish Historical Studies* in 1938.<sup>13</sup> A further connection was forged in the 1940s between the chair of modern history at University College, Dublin (UCD), Desmond Williams, and Hubert Butterfield of Peterhouse, Cambridge. 'Williams and Butterfield provided a bridge between a society with scant resources for advanced historical research and the riches Peterhouse offered. A procession of gifted UCD graduates crossed to Peterhouse: Oliver McDonagh, F.X. Martin, K.B. Nowlan, J.J. Lee, Patrick Cosgrove, Dermot Fenlon, Ronan Fanning, Joe Bergin, Denis Smith, Tom Dunne, among others' (Regan 2013:230). Others associated with Peterhouse included Donal Cruise O'Brien, Ian d'Alton, Gearoid Ó Tuathaigh, Gerard O'Brien, Eamonn O'Flaherty, A.T.Q. Stewart and Patrick Lynch. (Regan 2013:250, note 29).

A more recent wave of revisionism began with the reconsideration of the nationalist revolutionary tradition, beginning with the commemoration of the 1916 rising in 1966, and involved at least in part a revulsion against the armed struggle which resulted in the six counties (which had remained part of the United Kingdom after the war of independence) when the repression of the civil rights movement of the 1960s exposed that state's failure to reform its gerrymandered and sectarian nature. This struggle raised questions about the nature of the 26 county state and mobilised strong support from large segments of the population of that state with the result that the state found itself under threat both practically and ideologically.<sup>14</sup> Thus the southern state needed to defend itself ideologically against the threat of a resurgent republicanism and the intelligentsia, called to answer the standard, was not slow to respond to its paymasters.

Partly involved here was a revulsion against the reappearance of popular systems of social control and 'justice' in areas of the six counties where the state 'justice' and legal systems were unacceptable (Monaghan 2002). At least some of the rural actions undertaken by the Provisional IRA represented the return of the rural with a vengeance: the assassination of Protestant members of the various 'security forces' at home in front of their families recalled the agrarian assassinations of the nineteenth century, while in some readings the IRA's rural campaign involved a policy of ethnic cleansing intended to drive Protestants off their land, particularly in border areas. The IRA campaign also drew on the long memory of humiliation and injustice suffered under the hands of the various

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<sup>13</sup> A peculiarity of *Irish Historical Studies* that's worth noting was 'the provision in the journal's constitution which provided that no articles could be published which had reference to Irish politics after 1900' (Fanning, quoted in Regan 2013:240).

<sup>14</sup> The standard references for the revisionist controversy are Boyce and O'Day (1996) and Brady (1994). To these I'd add Reagan's unjustly neglected *Myth and the Irish state* (2013), not only for its close engagements with the empirical arguments, but for its intriguing suggestion regarding the formation of a 26 county nationalist ideology.

'security forces' at the foundation of the Orange state and since.<sup>15</sup> The response to these tactics on the part of the southern intellegensia was not a principled, pacifist response to violence per se, but a partisan one: similar disgust was not expressed at the activities of the 'security forces' including the B Specials, UDR (Ulster Defence Regiment) and murder gangs operated by the English counter-insurgency forces. (Punch 2012).

We might also note other ways in which prejudice can appear in even the most sympathetic authors through the use of disease metaphors and animal images to describe these movements. The depiction of the spread of agrarian agitation as a communicable disease is widespread in the literature. An example is provided by Bartlett (1983:374): 'The spread of the Defenders can to some extent be attributed to the 'contagion' effect of popular disturbances. It sometimes happens that areas adjoining the original protest areas become 'infected' with similar-type disturbances even though the objective conditions which gave rise to the original protest are absent from the newly-infected areas'. The differences in tone can be seen in two different versions of an attempted rescue in July 1793 of two men, arrested for oath-taking or threatening notices, from Wexford jail. According to Nelson (2003:379) Colonel 'Valleton tried to reason with the mob, but was attacked and fatally wounded'. According to Bartlett (1987: 204) Valleton was 'mortally wounded while negotiating with (or rather attempting to bully) the rescue party'.<sup>16</sup> HigginsMcHugh (2011:88) describes peasants stoning police and yeomanry at the Newtownbarry tithe affray in June 1831 as a 'menacing mob'; similarly Lucey (2011:56) describes peasants resisting an eviction from the Horenc estate in County Kerry as a 'mob'. Murray (1986:71-72) dismisses Westmeath Ribbonmen as 'rural gangsters' enforcing a 'customary agrarian code', without noting that Ribbonmen might have considered the 'security forces' themselves as state-sanctioned gangsters enforcing a foreign code of justice. Fitzpatrick's lack of sympathy with his subject is bracingly blatant in his description of one James Maguire as "an independent-minded man who had the misfortune to be caught in the treacherous bogs of Leitrim" (Fitzpatrick 1982:62). This encapsulates the metropolitan's disdain for the rural dweller or bog trotter and also reflects an over-emphasis generally in the historical literature on Ireland on the national at the expense of the local and the metropolitan or urban at the expense of the rural.

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<sup>15</sup> Townshend (1983: 386, n.2) reports 'by 1922 Tallents [government official] reported 'the feeling against the Specials and the "B" in particular is more bitter than against the Black and Tans'; even prominent Unionists were telling him 'that this purely partisan and insufferably disciplined force was sowing feuds in the countryside which would not be eradicated for generations'. The "specials" were the Ulster Special Constabulary, an armed force set up in 1920 to provide support for the security forces. Almost totally Protestant, the specials were renowned for their sectarianism. The Black and Tans were an auxiliary armed force mobilised by the British during the war of independence, who were noted for their cruelty and indiscipline.

<sup>16</sup> Nelson's position can be further seen in his suggestion that the Militia Act provided another excuse to foment trouble: it may be suggested that Nelson is writing from a conservative position on the 1790s where those challenging existing social relations are to be condemned.

## **Local and citizen historians**

One major contribution to the growth of the study of agrarian agitation has been the contribution of amateur, citizen and local historians. Much of the local history material has been published in the various county historical and archaeological journals, at least some of which were founded by members of the landed elite. While originally these were confined to antiquarian pursuits, in more recent times they have shown themselves happier to face at least some of the more controversial aspects of recent Irish history, while newer local history journals –such as those in Clare, Roscommon and Tipperary- have had no problems in embracing, examining and researching the contentious history of their counties. These newer sources have been augmented by the growth in publications of parish and district histories, some of which have been spurred by the growth of heritage and genealogical tourism and others by community development programmes funded by the European Union.

One significant contribution these historians make is that they provide portraits of the actual local campaigns and agitations to balance the volumes that concentrate only on the national level. In the conclusion of his paper on the contribution James Daly made to the development of the Land League in the west, Moran (1994: 206) notes: ‘During this period nearly every part of the country produced its own local leaders whose role and influence was as important as those at a national level. It was this local Land League leadership which taught the tenant farmers that through combinations and agitation they constituted a force which the landlords and the government would have difficulty in controlling’; he further argues ‘a study of other local Land League figures must not be addressed from the confines of the movement at a national level, but rather by their contributions to the locality in which they served. Only then can the significance of the Land League as a truly national organisation can be assessed’ (Moran 1994:207), a strong reassertion of the importance of the local over the national.

The arrival of the local both in local and academic publications can be seen in Tables 2 to 6 below.

Most local and parish histories now include a section on at least the Land League, quite often the tithe war and sometimes the secret societies. This, combined with articles appearing regularly in local history journals, means the local history of at least some of these movements is being slowly written, article by article.

A further welcome development has been the academic training of local historians, whose subsequent publications have enriched the literature on agrarian movements. For local historians the work of those trained at Maynooth, where a MA course in local history began in 1992, can be seen in the publication every year since 1995 of pamphlets in the Maynooth Studies in Local History series. These publications have produced a flowering of case studies relevant to our subject. A congratulatory review can be found in James Kelly (2014). Fergus Campbell (2000) has produced an illuminating guide to the

available local sources that can be used to investigate the involvement of rank and file members of the Land League, showing their use in the production of such a history for Craughwell, Co. Galway and providing a model for such local investigations of the experience of the movement's rank and file.

We need also to mention the production of historical accounts by citizen historians, which often differed from official productions in their enthusiastic support for the movements they chronicled. These were normally local productions, often printed or published by the local newspaper. A fine example is Ó Gallchobhair (1962)'s history of landlordism in Donegal, while another example would be provided by the fictionalised account of the hanging of John Twiss (Lynch 1982).

### **Silence of the subaltern?**

The old adage no archives, no history seems to imply that the story of agrarian agitation, in particular that of the secret societies, cannot be told or can only be told using the available sources, ie those created by their enemies, the landed elite and their varied police forces, but there are texts aplenty: most well-known are their threatening letters and notices (Gibbons 2004, Grace 2009) but some groups also produced proclamations. Another source of voices from below can be found in the various commissions of inquiry set up by the English state where in some cases the lower orders were allowed to speak<sup>17</sup>. Furthermore the possibilities of utilising oral history to supplement the history of the archives exists, though oral history is not accepted in mainstream Irish historiography. (Beiner 1999; see also Daly 2010). These sources can be very useful for a view from below, though they may suffer from historical inaccuracy and the tendency of a story to grow over many tellings. One example may be cited in relation to public opinion regarding those who facilitated the escape of Pat Dolan, who assassinated the magistrate George Bell Booth in June 1845. According to the account by James Brady of Bailieborough 'For the saving of Dolan the woman was respected in the fairs and markets in all the towns around' while in the case of a servant girl to a man who informed on Dolan, 'the girl was sacked immediately but the people of Laragh treated her like a queen'. Alas, the treatment of the informer was not regal: 'The informer lived only three years after that, dying brokenhearted. On the night of his wake, twenty young men marched into the house took the corpse off the bed and kicked it into the river' (Barron 1979: 41-42).

### **Sympathy for the landlord**

One entertaining strand of the literature –partly impelled by revisionism - has involved a reconsideration of the traditional image of the rack-renting landlord. A nostalgia for the imagined life of the big house and the Ascendancy can be

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<sup>17</sup> I owe this point to Terry Dunne.

found in certain quarters (and publications). The local history journals are of course replete with (often uncritical) work detailing the experiences of individual landed families and their estates. Even landlords as reviled as Lord Leitrim (Dolan 1978) have been the subject of almost hagiographical volumes. (Malcolmson 2008)<sup>18</sup> One welcome result of revisionism was some work concentrated on non-landlord Protestant experiences of agrarian agitation, mainly relating to the land war. (Moffitt 2011a, 2011b) .

One of the issues facing analysts here is a political one: whether they approve or not of the existence of landlords and landlordism. In the Irish case the question includes a further political judgement, given that many landlords were landlords because of conquest, colonisation and confiscation. However, given the truism that behind every great fortune is a great crime, the question boils down to whether or not the analyst considers capitalism acceptable: eventually what is left is a moral or political decision. We can see this problem in Moran's work on the Gore-Booth estate in Co Sligo. Gore-Booth was a 'good' landlord, but also one who believed in consolidation and who promoted emigration as a 'solution' to his estate's 'problems'. Within the worldview of landlordism Gore-Booth's actions were both understandable and necessary, even praiseworthy. But the fundamental question here is who was Gore-Booth to be in the position to decide where people should live – in Sligo or North America – on the basis of his estate's economic situation? (Moran 2006).

### **The tie between the national movement and the land movement**

Much of the historical literature on rural unrest shares a major concern with the colonial authorities: what connection, if any, did these movements share with the nationalist movement? While landlords scattered throughout the country reported to Dublin Castle (the colonial headquarters) that these movements had French and other foreign leaders and included wild plans for insurrections that would kill all Protestants in a single night, the Castle authorities were more realistic in their assessments. The importance of agrarian agitation to the nationalist movement is pointed out by a number of historians, many of whom suggest that the land question was more important than the national question to the rural population. Townshend (1983:339) writes 'It may indeed be that the real dynamism that underlay the national movement remained the pressure of population on the land. Land hunger, exacerbated by the cessation of emigration, seems to have remained the only force which generated large-scale popular action.' Fitzpatrick (1987:410) noted 'my own study of the conduct of

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<sup>18</sup> Those wanting a more balanced view of Lord Leitrim are directed to Ó Gráda's review of this book, in which the following can be found: 'Leitrim was fond of money... He took over an encumbered estate and debts of about £55,000. At his death his gross rental income was about £30,000, fifty percent higher than when he took over, and he had accumulated capital of £180,000 in bonds and cash. In today's terms that is roughly Euro 20 to Euro 25 million. Most of this fortune he had extracted from an impoverished tenantry.' (Ó Gráda n.d.). Those interested in Leitrim's representation in folklore should consult Wilgus and Long-Wilgus (2005).

the revolution in county Clare ... suggests that 'IRA [Irish Republican Army] engagements' were in many cases thinly disguised land seizures which Dublin headquarters had neither the ability nor, perhaps, the intention to prevent',<sup>19</sup> while O'Riordan (2015:9) reports 'in many areas the desire for land was stronger than the appeal of an independent nation'; Dooley (2004:177) writes 'it was arguably land issues that had provided the momentum to political movements rather than vice versa. For the majority of people living in rural Ireland, access to land continued to be a possibly more desirable commodity than independence'. It's also worth noting that during the war of independence the nationalists used part of the agrarian repertoire, including boycotting the judicial and courts system, the police and the military, with the boycotts being reinforced by threatening letters, public posters and physical assaults. (Borgonovo 2017).

Despite the centrality of the land issue to their mobilisation of the population, the leaders of the nationalist movement often expressed disdain for the land movement. Sinn Fein leader Arthur Griffith dismissed the United Irish League (UIL) 'with classical Fenian contempt as 'a squalid class movement'' (Townshend 1983:233). According to Lee (1973:72) the IRB (Irish Republican Brotherhood) supreme council 'feared that a solution to the land problem would divert public opinion from political goals, and were prepared to sacrifice the last Mayo peasant to the separatist ideal'. Foner (1980:163) quotes another Fenian 'It is not a thing to be wished, by those who love Ireland, that class feuds should arise and increase in intensity, so as to dis sever those who should be united, and to withdraw to class-disputes the interest which should be concentrated on the National Question'. During the 1920s and early 1930s Peadar O'Donnell made heroic efforts to convince the IRA to take up the cause of small farmers (and form an alliance with the urban working class). The failure of the former was shown in the IRA's behaviour in the case of Jimmy Gralton, the only Irish citizen to be deported by a native government (Feely 1986, Guckian 1988, Gibbons 1989, Ryan 2011). (The case has recently become the subject of a rather romanticised film by Ken Loach).

What is interesting is how little nationalistic sentiment can be found in threatening letters and notices. Of Gibbons's collection of 526 notices and letters he observes 'There are 30 or so references to the sovereign, with some protestations of loyalty and, conversely, some protestations in the opposite direction. There is no significant preponderance on either side' (Gibbons 2004:36), while Grace (2009:55) reports 'only eleven of more than a thousand notices posted in County Tipperary between 1836 and 1843 had a political motive, some of which were tinged with a sectarian hue'.

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<sup>19</sup> In this Fitzpatrick's conclusion is wrong. Sinn Fein put serious effort into controlling agrarian movements after its (curiously enough, pre-election) involvement in 1918 in land struggles in the west: agrarian agitation was a cause of major concern to Sinn Fein whose 'underground government was early engaged in attempts to control land disturbance through the Dail courts' (Townshend 1983: 370).

For the late nineteenth century land wars, a change in rhetoric can be seen as a result of both exconstitutional and some physical force nationalists embracing the land movement as a means of waging the national struggle. Kane (2011) provides an excellent, if excessively jargonised, account of the construction of an Irish national identity through speeches at various land meetings, editorials and letters to the editor and similar texts, which identified the Irish national interest with that of tenant farmers, concluding ‘the emergence of a strong Irish national identity, wrought through the struggle against landlords and the British, must be seen as a major outcome [of the Land War] that would influence the drive for Irish national autonomy achieved in 1922, and the subsequent process of nation building’ (Kane 2011: 2). Leaving aside the question of whether national autonomy was achieved in 1922, Kane shows the construction of this national identity to be the product of action and discourse by tenant farmers, nationalists and the Catholic church.





#### **IV Materials towards a history**

A full literature review is not possible as it would strain the patience of both editors and readers, so the core of the literature is summarised in Tables 1 to 7. The first table is accompanied by a chronological account of the various agrarian movements. There is only one existing guide to this literature, Cronin (2012), which is very useful, but neglects most of the work of local historians; its main interest is looking at the variety of explanations historians have advanced for these movements, rather than giving details of the movements' activities and results. This introduction tends to the latter trend, with the main section being a chronological narrative of these movements.

The vanguard in the agrarian literature are American. The first thesis I can trace is from an American hand (Jennings 1915). The first academic consideration of Whiteboys is also from an American (Calkin, 1943). The 1930s saw the arrival of no less than three monographs from the US on the land struggle (Hooker 1938, Palmer 1940, Pomfret 1930) no doubt in part due to the then current land struggles in the US (Pratt 1988). Indeed one volume explicitly notes in its preface 'At the Congressional hearings on farm tenancy bills in 1935 and 1937, for example, reference was made to Ireland again and again, and questions were asked regarding tenure experiments there, with the evident hope that light might thus be thrown on pending legislation in this country' (Hooker 1938:v). American academics have continued to contribute to the literature, with Donnelly as the Stakhanovite in the pack, having produced studies of the Carders and Caravats, Hearts of Oak and Hearts of Steel, Rightboys, Rockites and Whiteboys.

The cultural turn has also impacted the literature, with a large amount on the presentation of rural struggles in cultural products, especially that Irish speciality, literature (O'Connell 2000, Hanson and Murphy 2014, which also contains a bibliography of novels from 1879 to 1916). Some attention has also been paid to visual issues (Curtis 2011; O'Sullivan 2004). There has been some work on the commemoration of agrarian struggles, with Owens (2014) providing a superb case study of the remembering of the Carrickshock massacre over the course of a century. Attention to gender issues has focussed almost totally on the land war and the Ladies' Land League.

**TABLE 1: Main studies**

<b>DATE</b>	<b>GROUP</b>	<b>Geographical Extent</b>	<b>Source</b>
<b>1711-1713</b>	Houghers	Connacht –started Galway, then Mayo, Sligo, Leitrim, Roscommon, Fermanagh	Connolly 1985, 1987
<b>1714-1740</b>	Tax riots		Watt 2015
<b>1761-1765</b>	Whiteboys	Started Tipperary, then Kilkenny, Waterford, Cork	Wall 1973, Bartlett 1991, Donnelly 1978, 1983b
<b>1763</b>	Oakboys (Hearts of Oak)		Donnelly 1981, Magennis 1998b
<b>1770-1773</b>	Hearts of Steel	Antrim, Armagh, Derry, Down (Ulster land war of 1770)	Donnelly 1981, Maguire 1979
<b>1785-1788</b>	Rightboys	Started Cork, then all Munster, Kilkenny, Laois, Offaly	Bric 1987, Donnelly 1977/78, Wall 1973
<b>1780s, 1790s</b>	Steelboys, Peep O’ Day Boys		Powell 2005
<b>1790s</b>	Defenders	Armagh, Louth, Meath, Cavan. Monaghan	Garvin 1987, Smyth 1992
<b>1793</b>	Anti-militia	Carlow, Kilkenny, Laois, Meath, Wexford, Kerry, Limerick, Sligo, Leitrim, Roscommon, Down, Mayo, Cavan, Fermanagh	Bartlett 1987, Nelson 2003
<b>1798-99</b>	Agrarian agitation	Western Connacht	Patterson 2008
<b>1806-1807</b>	Threshers	Mayo, Sligo, Leitrim, Longford, Roscommon	McCartney 1987
<b>1806-1811</b>	Caravats & Shanavests	Tipperary, Waterford (parts of) Cork	Roberts 1983
<b>1813</b>	Carders		Donnelly 1985

<b>1813-1816</b>	Threshers & Caravats	Clare, Limerick, Tipperary, Kilkenny, Offaly	McCartney 1987
<b>1819-1820</b>	Ribbonmen	Connacht	Lenahan 2003
<b>1821-1824</b>	Rockites	Limerick, Cork, Kerry, Tipperary, (parts of) Clare	McCartney 1987, Donnelly 1983a, 2009; O'Neill 1982
<b>1831</b>	Terry Alts	Clare, Galway, Limerick, Tipperary	McCartney 1987 Enright 2008
<b>1831-1834</b>	Whitefeet	Kilkenny, Laois	McCartney 1987, Dunne n.d. Dunne (forthcoming)
<b>1830s</b>	Anti-tithes		O'Donoghue 1965, 1966, 1972 Higgins-McHugh 2011
<b>1829-1847</b>	Tommy Downshire's Boys	Mid-Ulster (Down, Armagh)	Blackstock 2007
<b>1840s</b>	Molly Maguires	Cavan, Donegal, Leitrim, Roscommon	Kelly 1998, Bulik 2015
<b>1848-57</b>	Tenants' rights movement	West of Ireland	Shields 2011
<b>1848-87</b>	Agrarian opposition	Ulster	Bew and Wright 1983
<b>1868-1886</b>	Land agitation	Ulster	Thompson 2001
<b>1870s-1903</b>	Land war	Biography	Warwick-Haller 1990
<b>1879-1882</b>	Land War		Palmer (1940); Pomfret 1930; Clark 1971,1979; Bew 1978; Orridge 1981; Kane 1997, 2011 Vaughan
<b>1879-85</b>	Land War	Mid-Ulster	Kirkpatrick 1976, 1980
<b>1879-82</b>	Land War -biography	West of Ireland	Moran 1994
	Ladies Land League		O'Neill 1982, Parnell 1986, TeBrake 1992,

			Hunt 2002, Mulligan 2009, Ward 2000
<b>1881-1882</b>	Stopping the hunt		Curtis 1987
<b>1880-1881</b>	Land League	Ulster	Thompson 1987
<b>1882-1890</b>	Irish National League		Jordan 1998
<b>1886-1891</b>	Plan of Campaign		Geary 1986
<b>1886-1888</b>	Plan of Campaign	Catholic church	Larkin 1978
<b>1890-1910</b>	Land war -graziers		Jones 1983, 1995
<b>1895-1900</b>	Land war -graziers		Higgins& Gibbons 1982
<b>1898-1900</b>	United Irish League		Bull 2003
<b>1898-1912</b>	United Irish League	Nth Galway, west Mayo	Thomas 1999a, Thomas 1999b
<b>1901-1903</b>	Compulsory land purchase campaign	Ulster	Cosgrove 2010
<b>1904-1908</b>	Ranch war		Jones 1995
<b>1918-1923</b>	Labourers/land redistribution campaign		Campbell 2005, O'Connell 1988
<b>1930</b>	Working Farmers' Conference	Clare, Galway, Leitrim, Limerick, Longford, Roscommon, Tirconnail	O'Neill 1933
<b>1957-1960</b>	Lia Fáil	Offaly, spread to 11 counties	Murphy, Murphy 1998
<b>1960s</b>	Fish-ins, opposition to foreign land ownership		Cullinane 2010, O'Driscoll,2016 Hanley and Millar 2010
<b>1970-date</b>	Locally unwanted land uses –factories, mining, waste dumps, telephone masts		Allen and Jones 1990, Allen 2004 Mac Sheoin 1999
	Turfeutters/contractors	Galway, Roscommon	O'Flynn 2012

## **A quick history**

The following brief history of rural unrest is necessarily incomplete, due to some movements being unresearched in any depth. It's also important to note that, at various stages, agrarian unrest resulted from, and was often highly interconnected with, other political developments in Ireland, which lie beyond the scope of this essay. The most obvious of these is the connection with the nationalist movement. However one particular example needs to be cited, the movements spearheaded by Daniel O'Connell. The early nineteenth century saw a number of campaigns which mobilised vast numbers of rural and urban dwellers nationally, first for Catholic emancipation (by repeal of the Penal laws) in the 1820s and then for repeal (of the Act of Union) in the 1830s and 1840s. These massive popular campaigns were characterised on the one hand by monster meetings and on the other by organisation and fund-raising on a parish basis. While O'Connell consistently denounced violent methods and agrarian outrages the mobilisation of vast numbers undoubtedly represented a threat: failure to negotiate with O'Connell would have consequences. However the middle-class leadership were occasionally worried when these supporters began to mobilise independently from orders from above (Owens 1997). This represented the initial appearance of the cross-class alliance that was basic to the nationalist movement, an alliance which, while it mobilised the lower orders, provided no benefits to them.

As always, problems of nomenclature exist. The Whiteboys were a movement in the 1860s in the counties of Munster, but the designation was widely used for agrarian movements in other areas and at other times. Similarly Ribbonism was a term widely used in the nineteenth century to describe various local groups. Broeker (1970) deals with this problem by using the generic term *banditti*. The problem is inherent in the type of movement we're dealing with and whether the movements involved supralocal organisation or local efforts by different groups, which were conveniently classed together as a movement. Lady Moira is reported to have believed that the Hearts of Steel movement was not a single entity, but consisted of local units often operating under different names, with examples being Hearts of Gold, Hearts of Thunder, Hearts of Flint and Regulators. (Magennis 1998:180). Powell develops this point further when he observes that 'The Oakboy case is useful in looking at the way an umbrella term for a popular protest movement could cover not only different religious affiliations but also aims that would have been anathema to sections of its support. Thus the Oakboys could contain a core leadership of Presbyterians espousing anti-Catholic rhetoric while in, say, Monaghan and Cavan it was highly likely that the Oakboys were predominantly Catholic. Similarly, both Protestant Steelboys in Ulster and Catholic Defenders in Meath chose not to use the generic name for their protest group, but instead called themselves 'Regulators'. (Powell 2005:264-265).

## **Houghers**

The first agrarian unrest appeared in Iar Connacht in the west of Co. Galway in October 1711. By January 1712 the unrest reached Co Mayo and by the end of February 1812 Hougher outrages were reported in counties Sligo, Leitrim, Roscommon, Fermanagh and Clare. The cause of the unrest was the removal of small occupiers from lands converted to pasture for sheep and cattle. The outrages consisted of attacks on the livestock that had taken the place of the evicted, either by killing them outright or by cutting their hamstrings (houghing them). These attacks backed up demands by Hougher proclamations which detailed how much land farmers or gentlemen were allowed to hold, as well as permitted stock numbers on these holdings, with the rest of their lands to be let 'to poor people, according to the former rates' (quoted in Connolly 1985:52).

Thus the first example of agrarian unrest showed what was to be a characteristic of most such episodes in being regulatory in nature, specifying acceptable levels of landholdings, etc. Government response in November 1711 proclaimed maiming of sheep, cattle or horses to be a felony punishable by death, with levels of monetary rewards offered for discovery of those responsible increasing as the unrest spread. The disturbances apparently subsided by July 1812 and 'certainly by the end of the year', though Connolly (1985:58) notes 'there is nothing to indicate why this happened'. To back up local elites' attempts at repression, military units were dispatched to Ballintobe, Castlebar, Tuam, Carrick-on-Shannon, Jamestown and two locations in Roscommon. Connolly reports this to be a cross-class movement: 'the involvement of members of the landed class both as protectors of the Houghers and as actual participants in attacks on livestock was one of the most distinctive features of the movement, setting it clearly apart from the later agitations of the Whiteboys and similar groups' (Connolly 1985:60). Four prisoners were tried in Galway in April 1712 and two more in June 1712: the former four were sentenced to hang and one is known to have been hung and quartered, a fate that also befell the latter pair.

## **Whiteboys**

While 18<sup>th</sup> century agrarian agitation is generally seen as beginning with the isolated case of the Houghers in 1711-1713 and then disappearing until the appearance of the Whiteboys in the 1760s, it seems unlikely that that half-century was bereft of rural unrest and that the Whiteboys emerged fully formed from nothing. For Ulster, for example, Magennis (1998:173) reports the Hearts of Oak were preceded by 'combinations and the intimidation of tithe farmers in the 1750s'. Powell (2011) reports on the houghing of soldiers in towns and cities, while Watt (2015) reports on opposition to tax collection, and Dickson reports on opposition to enclosures on the Kildare/Meath border in 1753 (Dickson 2016: 64-65). Whiteboy activity from 1769 to 1776 stretched from Tipperary to Kilkenny, Carlow, Waterford, Wexford, Kildare and Queen's County (Laois).

The Whiteboys first appeared in late 1761 in the area between Clogheen and Ballyporeen in Co Tipperary in response to tithe-farming and the enclosure of

commonage, resulting in the levelling of fences and those involved becoming known as Levellers. The movement spread to Co. Limerick early in 1762, when large groups mobilised at night, demolishing fences and administering oaths. The movement then spread to Waterford and Cork; in the latter county groups mobilising in large numbers at night called themselves fairies, 'enclosures were the principal grievance, and again ditches were levelled, walls were knocked down, and some cattle killed' (Donnelly 1978:24). The state's repressive response led to the disturbances abating, with Limerick quiet and only occasional activity in Cork and Waterford. In March 1763 Whiteboys became active in Kilkenny, but were quickly repressed with eighteen being jailed. In late 1764 and 1765 the movement bloomed again in Kilkenny, with the motive being not enclosure but tithes of corn and potatoes. Only in Tipperary did the movement maintain its strength between 1763 and 1765, with some 14,000 insurgents estimated to be involved in March 1763.

Donnelly (1978:33) argued that the opposition to enclosure was not related to commonage: 'it was an expression of intense popular resentment against the keeping of land from tillage', with deerparks, orchards and demesnes being the object of attacks due to being 'seen as eminently suitable for the cultivation of potatoes', often after the landlords had either refused to let such lands for conacre or demanded exorbitant rent for them. These lower class demands were a reflection of the composition of the movement, members of which were predominantly cottiers and labourers, though many town labourers and craftsmen were also involved. State repression in March 1762 involved elite troops sweeping through the towns and countryside of the four disturbed counties, with some five hundred suspected Levellers jailed by May 1762. However repression was tempered by acquittals and judicial and jury lenience: over all the period only twenty-six were capitally convicted, twelve by the 1762 special commission, three in Clonmel in 1763 and eleven in Kilkenny in 1765. What ended the first wave of the Whiteboy movement was not repression but a subsistence crisis, with conditions in early 1766 'bordering on mass starvation'. (Donnelly 1978:52).

The second wave of the Whiteboy movement began in 1769, grew slowly in the years to 1771, increasing in intensity to a climax in 1775 before retreating in disarray the following year in response to military repression, formation of vigilante groups (volunteer companies) by local gentry and a large number of executions. The second wave was strongest again in Kilkenny and Tipperary, but its geographical expansion went in a different direction, to Laois, Carlow, Wexford and even Kildare. While this expansion related to economic factors 'the rebels themselves widened the frontiers of revolted. They frequently travelled considerable distances to seize arms and ammunition, to requisition horses, to punish transgressors of their regulations and to extract contributions... the rebels of different areas often collaborated in supralocal operations and their leaders were adept at manipulating extensive networks of mobilisation' (Donnelly 1983a:295-296). Another change was the expansion of grievances to tithes of corn, exorbitant rents and evictions, leading to the addition to their traditional base of cottiers, labourers and tradesmen of farmers and their sons,

while labourer grievances included antipathy against migrant workers. Opposition to tithes resulted in assaults on proctors, while opposition to evictions and land-grabbing involved opposition to distraint for non-payment of rent and intimidation and violence against incoming tenants.

The repressive response was unsuccessful, with only thirteen sentenced to death between 1770 and 1774, with many acquitted or found guilty on lesser charges, while charges often failed due to lack of informers and witnesses. This failure of repression changed in 1775, when the arrival of additional military forces encouraged local magistrates and gentry to act, including the recruitment and arming of vigilantes (counter-gangs), while the murder of the well-connected magistrate Ambrose Power near Fethard, Co. Tipperary in November 1775 galvanised the ruling class into action, with an offer of £4600 for information leading to convictions, which jurypacking assisted. The first four months of 1776 saw thirty condemned to death, six in Tipperary, six in Carlow, six in Kilkenny and twelve in Laois: of these only two were convicted of murder, while up to ten were sentenced to die for robbing arms. Donnelly (1983a: 331) concludes 'A combination of naked military force and judicial terror thus enabled the governing elite to surmount the crisis of authority produced by the greatly increased scale, scope and violence of the Whiteboys' challenge in 1775'.

## **Oakboys**

The protests by the Hearts of Oak (or Oakboys) in mid- and south Ulster which resembled a veritable popular uprising in July 1763 began in north Armagh and spread to the counties of Down, Tyrone, Derry, Fermanagh, Monaghan and Cavan. In the words of Donnelly (1981:21) : 'The Oakboy upheaval was a mass movement drawing support (in varying degrees) from all social groups below the landed, professional and commercial elites'. While some have described it as a Presbyterian movement, it also found support among lower-class Catholics and Protestants. The movement's tactics involved the assembly of large, intimidating crowds which visited the houses of local landlords and Anglican clergy and demanding that the former lower the county cess (local taxes or rates) while the latter were to abandon their demands for 'small dues', and later the calling of these worthies before large crowds in nearby towns. The movement was spread from its original centres by means of marches through the countryside and into the towns, resulting in similar marches in these new counties to swear their gentlemen and clergy in a similar manner. Crowds assembled were reported in some cases to be 8,000, 12,000 and even 20,000 strong. The objections to increased local taxes (cess) for road-building was not unconnected to suspicions the local elite were voting public money to build roads in their estates and demesnes. The small dues –for christenings, marriages and funerals- were collected by Anglican clergy from those to whom they did not provide these services –dissenting Protestants and Catholics.

The popular enthusiasm for these activities dissipated rapidly however when in response the state dispatched military reinforcements to the affected areas.



Generally the appearance of troops led to crowds dispersing, though in an encounter at Watte Bridge in Co. Fermanagh Oakboys retreating from Cavan were involved in a skirmish that left nine dead and many injured. On 25 July when some 5000 Oakboys stoned three military companies near Newtownstewart the troops fired, killing four and taking 77 prisoners. In the trials that followed the state overreached itself by charging Oakboys with treason. 'At Armagh, Omagh and Monaghan not a single capital conviction could be secured by the crown lawyers. In every case juries acquitted the alleged Oakboys brought to trial'. (Donnelly 1981: 20; Magennis 1998).

### **Steelboys**

The Steelboy agitation, which began in 1770, was longer lasting, perhaps because the causes being contested involved access to land and rent and involved a response to 'a general tendency in the 1760s for landowners in Ulster to replace poor tenants by solvent ones and to raise rents by letting to the highest bidder' (Maguire 1979: 356). This pressure was exemplified in the case of Lord Donegall's estate, where a wholesale expiry of leases had given him the opportunity to increase his unsatisfactory return from his rentals, a return now urgently needed to pay for Capability Browne's improvements on the Lord's estate near Lichfield in England. The trouble began in response to the first middlemen on Lord Donegall's estates who pressed for higher rent. In 1769 three farmers' houses were burnt and disturbances spread to neighbouring estates in 1770, with cattle houghed on land held by middlemen ['the nature of the reprisals against them suggests they may have placed their cattle on the lands of tenants whom they had dispossessed' (Donnelly 1981: 37)].

Steelboys now began to operate by day, their greatest manifestation being at Belfast on the 23<sup>rd</sup> December when 500 to 600 of them marched armed into Belfast to demand the release of a captured comrade, burning down a middleman's house and losing three Steelboys in a fire-fight with soldiers before heading home with the released man. Things went reasonably quiet then, though protests spread to Co. Down in 1771 and later that year reached Armagh, Derry and Tyrone. Great was the alarm among the gentry: 'large bands of Steelboys, occasionally numbering in the thousands, completely overrun the northern tip' (Donnelly 1981:40) of Co. Derry in 1772. Judicious exertions by magistrates and military quietened the area, but renewed protests broke out in Co. Down. In March 1772 after a magistrate took four Steelboy leaders into custody in Gilford, Co. Armagh, his premises was assaulted by a large group of Steelboys – some 2000 – and in the subsequent 'Battle of Gilford' he was forced to flee for his life and swim the river Bann to escape his pursuers.

Donnelly (1981:44) describes the Steelboys' grievances as 'excessive rents, eviction, exorbitant food prices, heavy county cess.' Their rank and file were weavers and small farmers, but some larger farmers became Steelboy captains. The main tactic involved threatening letters, with violence often following if warnings were ignored. The violence was normally against the property of

canting<sup>20</sup> or evicting landlords and tenants who collaborated with them, killing or maiming the cattle of the former and burning the sheds and houses of the latter. Maguire (1979:354) reports the movement 'consisted of locally organized groups which, though they proclaimed similar aims and expressed their protest in similar ways- had no common leadership or direction and did not appear to concert their activities'.

The state responded in early 1772 with a special crimes bill rushed through parliament and substantial military numbers sent north. The Steelboys lost four in encounters with troops at Coleraine, nine at Clady and seven at Grange, despite Steelboys vastly outnumbering their military opponents. One result of the government repression was an increase in emigration by those on the run, though in the event the state was unimpressed with the results of its efforts. With failures to convict in the local assizes (court sessions) eleven men were brought from Down and Armagh to Dublin for trial in August: alas for the government, the jury took 'only 17 minutes to find all the charged not guilty'; they were helped in this decision by the state's incompetence, with crown witnesses proffering only circumstantial evidence and failing to positively identify the defendants. The crown was more successful in Antrim in April 1772, when judicious jury packing resulted in nine death sentences, at least seven of which were executed in Carrickfergus in May 1772. Depressed by their failures in court, the government issued a limited pardon in November 1772.

### **Rightboys**

The Rightboy movement first appeared around Mallow, Co. Cork in August 1785 with the appearance of notices opposing the customary system of payment of tithes: from here it spread south and southeast. Later that year and early in the next, disturbances appeared in north Kerry with armed men requisitioning horses, administering oaths and destroying hay and corn such that 'by March 1786 reports circulated of a general rising affecting the whole upper portion of north Kerry' (Donnelly 1977/1978: 130) from where it spread into west Limerick. In December 1785 Laois, Tipperary and Kilkenny saw major mobilisation by Rightboys, with greater violence than in the cases of Cork, Kerry and Limerick. In 1786 a new tactic appeared whereby unarmed crowds marched from parish to parish administering oaths. 'By June the Rightboys were employing [this tactic] systematically throughout Cork and Limerick' (Donnelly 1977/1978: 132). These musters involved significant numbers with some five to six thousand assembling near Killarney, Co. Kerry on July 30<sup>th</sup> and between six and seven thousand meeting in Milltown, Co. Cork in August. Similar mobilisations occurred in Limerick, Tipperary, Laois and Kilkenny, with some mobilisation occurring in Co. Waterford in September and October 1786. In September the Rightboys appeared in Co. Clare, from where they spread to Co. Galway.

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<sup>20</sup> Canting involved auctioning off a landholding to the highest bidder.

While cottiers and day labourers formed the majority of the Rightboys, there was also involvement by larger farmers and, in Co. Cork, by some anti-clerical gentry; the urban poor, including textile workers and labourers on outlying farms, were heavily involved in some areas and a disproportionate number of Rightboy leaders lived in towns. The success of the Rightboys in expanding their movement beyond the ranks of cottiers and labourer resulted from their target –tithes- which grievously affected their own members: pasture land was exempt from tithes but potato land was not, with the result that in the south the main burden of supporting Protestant ministers fell on the poorest section of society, a burden increased by the exactions of tithe farmers, proctors and cantors. A wholesale change of land use to grain production in the late 1780s brought many larger farmers under the tithe system, which explains the wider support the Rightboys received. The Rightboys used traditional methods to inconvenience tithe collection by large numbers of parishioners setting out their tithes for collection on the same day and added a new method by creating tables of tithe payments acceptable to the Rightboys, backed up by intimidation and violence against both clergy and their agents, including the destruction of their records, valuation books and bonds; this was an attempt to remove all middlemen from the tithes system. The Rightboys also opposed the high exaction of dues by Catholic clergymen, who denounced the movement from the altars but eventually agreed to accept lower payments for their spiritual services.

What was surprising about the Rightboys was the minimal amount of actual violence that accompanied their massive mobilisation. While they occasionally indulged in ‘carefully staged rituals of violence’ (Donnelly 1977/1978: 182) they were few in number and only six murders were attributed to them. The reaction by local magistrates to the movement was minimal though in certain areas the gentry mobilised effectively against the movement. During the autumn of 1786 a show of military power in the disturbed areas led to a decline in Rightboy activity with little conflict, but a revival of Rightboy activity in Cork and Galway in the following winter led to major coercion acts the the following spring, with an increase in convictions and death sentences for Rightboys at the 1787 assizes, though the latter were low, with only nineteen capitally convicted and many others given mild punishment, with intimidation of witnesses strongly evident in many cases. Still increased repression, and the increased resistance of a previously supine gentry, sapped the movement’s vitality and the movement slowly dissipated.

### **Peep o’ Day Boys**

Miller argues ‘that the Peep o’ Day Boys originated before the 1780s, not as a sectarian movement but as a group of insurgents which Arthur Young classified with the Steelboys and Oakboys’ (Powell 2005:264). Powell (2005) has traced the first appearance of the Peep o’ Day Boys to Co. Meath in November 1776 where they consisted of a Catholic faction centred in Athboy and, for the first half of 1777, reports Peep o’ Day Boys in Kerry, Mayo and Roscommon, which he suggests were offshoots of the Whiteboys. The most famous group of Peep o’

Day Boys arose in Co. Armagh in the 1780s in response to a number of grievances, one of which was agrarian: that landlords' changing attitudes to Catholics as tenants meant Protestants –until then favoured as tenants- faced competition from Catholics for land, while another cause was upset caused to the traditional social order by improving landlords. At the same time changes in the linen industry were proletarianising the previously independent rural weavers.

The Armagh Peep o' Day Boys grew from previous factions (for details see McEvoy 1986) which in 1784 began raiding Catholic homes to search for arms, possession of which by Catholics was illegal under the Penal laws. In response Catholic groups calling themselves Defenders arose and after 1788 conflict between these two groups changed from traditional arranged fights at markets and other occasions to confrontations at large demonstrations, while the conflict itself became more deadly: prior to 1788 there were only two deaths and no executions, while 1788 to 1791 saw nine deaths and seven executions. In 1795 the defining fight which explains the long-term importance of the Peep o' Day Boys occurred at the Diamond, a cross-roads at Loughgall, Co. Armagh, with estimates of Defenders' deaths between 16 and 48. 'Protestants followed up their victory with a series of raids on Catholic homes over the next few months, which had the purpose of driving Catholics out of the county. Meanwhile, Protestants who had fought at the Diamond organised the society which came to be known as the Loyal Orange Order' (Miller 1983:180). As Kelly (1986:341) notes, after this '[m]any Catholics fled from Ulster to counties Leitrim, Sligo, Mayo and Roscommon and Defenderism moved south with them'

### **Defenders/ Anti-militia**

Kelly (1986) reports two intense periods of Defenderism in Leitrim, first in opposition to the Militia Act in 1793 and again in the spring of 1795 over agrarian concerns with tithes and rents. While Defenders have been presented as mainly sectarian and political, Defenders in Roscommon also forced graziers to lower rents and raise wages. (Powell 2015:260). Though the Defenders were strongly involved in resistance to the raising of a militia in 1793 the opposition to the militia was not confined to areas where the Defenders were strong. The opposition to the militia, while important in itself<sup>21</sup>, is significant also due to Bartlett's interpretation of it as the end of the 'moral economy' in Ireland. In Leinster Bartlett (1987) reports opposition in Carlow, Kilkenny (where the colliers threatened to flood the mines), Laois, Meath (where there had been clashes previously between Defenders and Orangemen) and Wexford. In Carlow in May seven *banditti* were killed when a large group attacked the Sheriff and 22 dragoons; the same month in Athboy, Co. Meath, two soldiers were killed when a crowd they had attacked returned fire; in July in Wexford an attempt to

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<sup>21</sup> Opposition to conscription was also important in the case of the Molly Maguires in Pennsylvania (Bulik 2015: 172-182. 193-202) while other campaigns against conscription in Ireland were also waged (Drumm n.d.) including, of course, during the war of independence.

release prisoners led troops to fire on a crowd, killing anything between nine and one hundred, depending on which source you believe. In Munster Kerry and Limerick were strongest in their opposition, with troops shooting twelve among a crowd of some five thousand which attacked a militia ballot session in Dingle, Co. Kerry in June; in July Limerick was reported to be in 'a state of complete insurrection' ; later that month troops were fired on in Bruff, houses were burned in Kilfinan, but the county was quietened by the arrival of more troops with a threat to burn and raze to the ground any town from which shots were fired at troops.

In Ulster things were generally quiet but for a riot in Castlereagh. In Connaught it was a different story. In Leitrim, disturbances began with arms raids on big houses; a traditional attempt by a large group of Defenders to free prisoners in Carrick-on-Shannon led to a clash with dragoons in which nine or ten Defenders were killed and the only injury to the dragoons was the death of a horse; in May five or six were killed in Manorhamilton during a clash with troops, following by an over-zealous mopping up operation in which the military brought the death toll to between twenty and thirty. (Kelly 1986). In Boyle, Co Roscommon, nineteen rioters were killed and, in a clash in Erris, Co. Mayo, between badly-armed locals and troops, some thirty-six rioters were killed. Bartlett (1987:212) comments 'In just over eight weeks, as many as 230 lives had been lost throughout Ireland in violent protests against the embodiment of a militia. This was over five times the number of casualties sustained in the previous thirty years of agrarian disturbances in Ireland'.

Bartlett notes that anti-Militia rioters also raised traditional agrarian slogans related to tithes and rents. In the spring of 1795 it was these complaints that remobilised Defenders in Leitrim, with arms raids on houses, marches at night and attacks on cattle and crops. An encounter in April 1795 near Keshcarrigan when revenue policeman searching for illegal stills shot a man who'd complained of their shooting his dog (which had bitten one of the police) led to the death of eleven police officers when a large crowd of locals burned the house in which the police had taken refuge on Drumcollop hill. Following this troops saturated south Leitrim: 'Houses were raided in the night and some were set on fire, people were arrested, some tortured, some hanged. This policy of terrorizing the area had the desired effect' (Kelly 1986:352). In May this quiet was reinforced when the military 'rounded up a large number of men from Roscommon, Leitrim and Sligo and had them sent to sea to boost the English fleet in their war with France' (Kelly 1986: 353). After this Defenderism declined in Leitrim and elsewhere and was then subsumed into the revolutionary movement known as the United Irishmen.

## **Threshers**

In 1806-1807 the Threshers were active in five counties in Connacht: Mayo, Sligo, Leitrim, Roscommon and Longford. Originally regulating tithes and priests' dues, they extended their concern to local wage rates for agricultural

and industrial labourers. Beginning in Co. Mayo, groups of Threshers attacked houses for arms and swore rural dwellers to pay only those rates set by Captain Thresher, threatening to card<sup>22</sup> those who ignored instructions. In September, disturbances spread to Sligo and the same month alleged Threshers were arrested on the word of an informer, who was murdered in a public house in November by Threshers, seven of whom were hung after a Special Commission held hearings in the five affected counties. A number of other Threshers were sentenced to death, others to transportation, others to prison and public whippings. (McCartney 1987)

### **Caravats and Shanavests**

According to Roberts (1983:66) 'Between 1806 and 1811 the Caravat-Shanavest conflict seriously disturbed large areas of Tipperary, Waterford, Kilkenny, Limerick and Cork, began to spread into Laois, Carlow and Wexford and briefly touched Clare, Kerry and Kildare –eleven counties in all.' Originally dismissed as another example of faction fighting (a popular type of recreational violence), research has shown this to be an example of rural class struggle. Roberts describes the Caravats as 'a kind of primitive syndicalist movement whose aim was apparently to absorb as many of the poor as possible into a network of autonomous local groups, each exercising thoroughgoing control over its local economy, and the whole adding up to a generalised alternative system' (Roberts 1983:66) while the Shanavests was a middle-class anti-Whiteboy movement formed to respond to the Caravats using vigilantism and informing. The Shanavest and Caravat conflict was an extension of a previous conflict in southeast Tipperary between 1802 and 1805 when a Whiteboy campaign by a group of labourers and small farmers who came to be known as the Moyle Rangers against land-grabbing by comfortable Catholic farmers involved twelve murders and six or seven attempted murders, which came to an end when the Rangers' leaders was hanged in Clonmel, Co. Tipperary in 1805.

The Caravat movement was strongest in Tipperary and Waterford, the area of Munster with the most commercially developed agriculture, with groups based, on the one hand, in towns and villages where they drew on agricultural day labourers and industrial workers, and, on the other hand, on remote hill districts with clachan settlements and widespread collective tenure. The movement appears to have consisted of locally-based groups with no formal organisation but a common oath of solidarity. The main aims were to restrain landgrabbing, reduce rents and regulate wages and the price of food. Their preferred tactic was a night raid in disguise, armed and on 'borrowed' horses: three warnings were given before physical attacks, normally beatings. They also expanded much energy expanding their movement into new districts, with large groups travelling impressive distances before splitting up into smaller raiding parties. They also paraded in large numbers at fairs and markets, where they

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<sup>22</sup> According to Huggins (2007:7) 'carding involved the tearing of flesh with a comb used for carding wool'.

often fought with Shanavest contingents. The latter was based on middle-class remnants of the United Irishmen, with a nationalist ideology, an oath and elaborate passwords and were mainly drawn from the farming class: their exploits took place during the day, mainly assaults –occasionally fatal- against prominent Caravats, and occurred in the winter of 1808-1809, after which their main activity was informing. By 1810 when the Caravats had spread into Kilkenny, west Tipperary, east Limerick and north Cork the government responded by flooding the Caravat strongholds with soldiers and opening a special commission in February 1811 which sentenced twenty to death and seventeen to be transported, imprisoned or flogged, devastating the movement: the prisoners hailed from Tipperary, Waterford and Kilkenny. Roberts suggests the movements continued at least up to the famine, with groups operating in the 1820s in west Tipperary, east Limerick, east Cork, south Laois, north and west Kilkenny and with some presence in Carlow, Wexford and Offaly. (Roberts 1983)

### **Rockites**

Donnelly traces the origin of the Rockite movement to the replacement in 1818 of a previously indulgent land agent on the estates of Viscount Courtenay near Newcastle West in Co. Limerick with an oppressive new agent who went about the collection of arrears and the increasing of rents in a manner guaranteed to create resistance. In the ensuing disturbances the agent's son was shot dead and a number of the agent's workers were shot, while some of the agent's informers were murdered. This successful example of resistance –the agent was removed and demanded rent reductions granted- inspired further action, which was also propelled by an economic crisis beginning in 1819. By the end of October 1821 much of west Limerick was in uproar, with arms robberies, swearing of oaths and threatening notices being accompanied by serious violence, including the assassination of Major Richard Going, previously head of the Co. Limerick police. Rockism began to appear in Co. Kerry in October 1821, with one of the estates being affected that of Daniel O'Connell.

The movement in Cork was even more successful with, in January 1822, something close to open insurrection with bands of hundreds of men attacking homes while searching for arms in various parts of the county. Large numbers of men then took to the hills with groups of 5,000 gathering near Millstreet, while clashes with the army took place near Macroom, Newmarket and Kanturk. The large, badly-armed Rockite crowds were no match for the trained and well-armed military and the movement collapsed after they were routed in these encounters. The movement spread to Tipperary in November 1821 with areas around Cashel, Clare and Clonmel demanding reductions in tithes and rents, and then to Kilkenny, with much of south Kilkenny 'almost under the Whiteboy dominion' by April 1822. In its heartland of west Limerick the movement reached new heights in the spring of 1822, with at least ten murders attributed to the Rockites and some thirty to forty houses belonging to land stewards or landgrabbers burned from February to April 1822. By April however the

movement was in retreat as the 1822 subsistence crisis 'by turning human energies to the immediate and urgent task of finding sufficient food to preserve the lives and health of one's family and kin, dissolved the broader bonds of collective action' (Donnelly 2009:81).

### **Terry Alts**

The Terry Alts were a movement that grew out of sectarian struggle in Dysart, near Corofin, Co. Clare, where a landlord's agent, a fundamentalist Christian, introduced bible schools for the children of his tenants. During the winter of 1829 the Terry Alts transformed into an 'aggressive guarantor of the food supply of the poor... during 1830 the main emphasis was on controlling the price of potatoes and maintaining a supply for the poorest classes' (Enright 2008: 221). In June 1830 large crowds, estimated at between 500 and 3000, toured the county laying down a price for potatoes. The movement increased and at its peak in 1831 'it extended into almost all of Clare's nine baronies, as well as into south Galway, large parts of Limerick and a much smaller portion of Tipperary' (Donnelly 1994:34) The Terry Alts used the full gamut of agrarian tactics, levelling ditches and walls at night and driving off cattle, raiding for arms, attacking persons and houses and meeting en masse during the day to dig up pasture land, when crowds of hundreds and sometimes over a thousand marched in military order to musical accompaniment to the fields to be dug up. Some 591 cases of these 'illegal meetings' were recorded from January to May in Clare: 'this mass popular mobilization, the largest of its kind in the pre-famine period, was a giant food-riot Irish style' (Donnelly 1994:34). In May the authorities counter-attacked, bringing large forces of police and military to confront the crowds, arresting hundreds and committing many for trial; eventually some 18 Terry Alts were hanged, 58 transported and 40 jailed.

### **Tithe war**

While tithes had been a constant complaint among many agrarian movements, the opposition developed during the 1830s into a regional tithe war. This war involved a change in aim as well: Gibbons' analysis of threatening letters and notices found that while some threatening letters up to 1827 or 1828 seek to regulate rather than abolish tithes 'by 1831, the letters reflect widespread resistance to any payment' (Gibbons 2004:30). Beginning in Graiguenamanagh, Co. Kilkenny, in a dispute between a parish priest and the local rector, which led to a request to the rector for a reduction in tithes, which, being refused, led to refusal to pay any tithe at all. In December 1830 a large anti-tithe meeting was held at Bennetsbridge, Co. Kilkenny, and the tithe movement spread to adjoining counties, often under the cover of hurling matches when the tithe meetings were declared illegal. In January 1831 hurling matches were declared illegal, but legally constituted meetings were permitted. 'As passive resistance spread like wildfire through Munster and South Leinster in 1831-2, tithe collection became "utterly impossible"' (HigginsMcHugh 2011: 87).



The resistance did not stay passive for long, with a tithe riot erupting in Newtownbarry (now Bunclody), Co. Wexford, with the yeomanry (a Protestant militia) shooting fourteen people dead after they and the police were stoned. (de Val 1972). Other riots followed at Athboy, Co. Tyrone, Carrigeen in Co. Kilkenny, near Carrickmacross, Co. Cavan, Desert, Co. Cork, Keady, Co. Armagh and elsewhere, which gives some indication of the spread of the movement. 'About eighty country people were killed and nearly two hundred wounded in these affrays' (HigginsMcHugh 2011: 80). In Carrickshock, Co. Kilkenny in December 1831 an affray resulted in twelve police deaths, the death of the process-server and three locals. Following another massacre at Rathcormac, Co. Cork, (HigginsMcHugh 2011: 87) where soldiers killed twelve and wounded forty-two, the new under-secretary restricted the use of security force escorts for tithe collection in October 1835. In 1838 a Tithe Commutation Act was introduced which reduced tithes by a quarter, while transferring payments to rent payments. Tithes were eventually abolished in 1869.

### **Tommy Downshires**

While northeast Ulster is generally seen as barren ground in the nineteenth century for agrarian protest 'between 1829 and 1847 waves of Tommy Downshire protest, sometimes involving both Catholics and Protestants, erupted against landlord and capitalist linen manufacturers' (Blackstock 2007:125). In 1829 these protests opposed the export of potatoes, in 1830 opposed high rents, tithes, cess and evictions, in 1831-35 agrarian issues and in 1842 threats to reduce weavers' wages. The protests drew on local protest traditions from the 18<sup>th</sup> century and showed great tactical and strategic sophistication, taking advantage of factional differences among the local elite: 'the appropriation of the traditional mobilization rituals of both Oakboys and Orangemen were paralleled by distinctly modern protest methods like the organizational sophistication of committees and using the newspaper press for propaganda. At the same time as bonfires blazed on Shane Hill, threatening letters arrived by penny post and notices calling meetings were professionally printed' (Blackstock 2007:168-169). Through these methods and the judicious use of the threat of violence, these movements succeeded in wresting concessions from the local elite, both landed and manufacturing.

### **Ribbonism**

While Ribbonism has been used as a general designation for agrarian activists in the pre-famine era by both the state and some recent academic historians, the Ribbon Societies seem to have been a lower-class nationalist movement, mainly urban in orientation and membership, which descended from the Defenders and the United Irishmen, with a complicated hierarchy and an extensive use of passwords, a strong tendency to factionalism and a lack of any considerable achievements: as McCartney (1987:87) notes 'no secret society was more ineffective in its practical achievements'. Between 1822 and 1840 two Ribbon

networks existed, one centred on Dublin, the other on Ulster: the Dublin one was smashed by the police in 1839 and in 1840 its grand secretary was sentenced to seven years transportation. (Beames 1987a). While in some cases Ribbon Societies undertook agrarian activities, its mainly urban orientation and nationalist nature leaves it outside our scope. In some cases, such as Sligo, it has been interpreted as a variety of protection racket (Kelly 2008) though the same author's presentation of Ribbonism in Co. Leitrim in 1841 has the organisation operating as an agrarian one. (Kelly 2003). Ribbonism also extended to Irish communities in England. (Belchem 1994).

### **Molly Maguires**

The Molly Maguires, seen by some as an outgrowth of Ribbonism, appeared in late 1844 in Leitrim and west Cavan, with the usual night-time arms raids, oath-taking and assaults, resulting in a special magistrate, John MacLeod, being despatched from Fermanagh to deal with the threat, along with police reinforcements and a military detachment. Captain MacLeod was assassinated on January 29, 1845; in May a land agent was assassinated at Ballyconnell, Co. Cavan and in June another magistrate, George Booth Bell, was assassinated at Crossdoney, Co. Cavan. The activities of the Molly Maguires spread into the neighbouring counties of Roscommon, Longford, Sligo and Donegal. As Bulik (2015) notes 'for 1846, the overwhelming majority of Molly Maguire incidents concerned access to land and food'. In Roscommon, for example, the Mollies' activities accompanied a major campaign to force graziers to let conacre, with large groups assembling to dig up some of the county's best grassland, accompanied by the usual intimidation, with occasional murders such as that of Major Mahon (Coleman 1999; Duffy 2007, Vesey 2008). The Mollies campaign continued into the early years of the famine before dying out as the people's capacity for resistance was weakened by hunger, devastation and death. (Food riots and other responses to famine and subsistence crises are dealt with below and summarised in Table 5.) The Molly Maguires reappeared in the 1870s in the mining districts of Pennsylvania in the US. (Broehl 1983, Kenny 1998, Bulik 2015).

### **Tenants' associations/leagues**

The 1850s saw the setting up of various associations to fight for the rights of tenant farmers, with the first such association established in Callan, Co. Kilkenny in October 1849 and some twenty-eight similar societies being established by 1850, mainly in the provinces of Munster and Leinster. These groups, mainly composed of relatively prosperous tenant farmers, called for the lowering of rents and fixity of tenure. At the same time in Ulster, a movement arose to defend the 'Ulster custom' (informal rights of tenants in Ulster, including security of tenure and the right to sell one's interest to a new tenant with landlord's approval). Both these groups came together at a national meeting in May 1850, attended by some 200 delegates, which led to the

formation of a national organisation, the Tenant League. The local organisations that formed the base for the League largely disappeared in the mid-1850s due to improvements in agricultural prices. While the period between the famine and the Land War which began in 1879 is generally seen as quiet, Howell (2013:93) notes outrages 'were especially perpetrated during 1849-52, 1862-64 and 1868-70, periods of economic difficulty'.

## **The Land War**

The long land war was a war with three phases which stretched from 1879 to at least 1910; each phase had its own organisation: the land war, which stretched from 1879 to 1882, involved the Land League, originally a local Mayo organisation which was quickly organised nationally and then transnationally; this was followed from 1886 to 1891 by the Plan of Campaign, where the organisation involved was the Irish National League; the third phase, involving the United Irish League (UIL), began in 1898 and continued for most of the first decade of the twentieth century. The origins of the first phase can be found in two sources: on the one hand, in the resurgence of smallholder grievances in the west, impelled by a local subsistence crisis that threatened famine; on the other hand, by a partial and temporary alliance between physical force nationalists (the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB), popularly known as the Fenians) and those following the parliamentary road.

On 16 August 1879 the National Land League of Mayo was formed, followed by the formation of the Irish National Land League in Dublin on October 21<sup>st</sup>. The deradicalization of the movement can be seen in the change from the Mayo organisation's demand of 'The land for the people' to the more reformist demand for rent reduction prioritised by the national organisation. If the Land League began to answer the grievances of western smallholders, its extension nationwide changed both its base and the demands it advanced. 'By the middle of 1880 the emphasis was geared increasingly towards the graziers of the east and the south in what Matthew Harris described as "the union of the shark with its prey".' (Moran 1994:200). The policy used to attract support for the Land League from larger farmers, who had both more to gain if their rent was reduced but also more to lose if they were evicted, was called 'rent at the point of a bayonet'. Keyes (2011:131) describes it thus: "The new policy asked only that tenants delay paying the rent, not refuse to pay it. When the legal process ran its course and eviction loomed, the farmer could then pay the rent 'at the point of a bayonet', and the league would pay the legal costs. It was a win-win situation for the tenant: they could seek a rent reduction, and, if this succeeded, they would be better off; if it did not they still managed to avoid eviction and did not have to pay legal costs. The Land League found it easier to get tenants to support this almost painless form of resistance, and the league itself was seen as the knight in shining armour when it intervened at the last moment to save a man's farm and stock by bidding against the 'emergency men' at sheriffs' sales.' As Keyes point out this policy was only possible as long as money kept flowing from America and the main proceedings of the Land League became the parcelling

out of this money. Keyes (2011:132-3) reports 'the correspondence from 150 branches, mostly from mid-1980 to September 1881, relates invariably to money, and in virtually every case the direction of the flow is from the centre to the branches'. The expense was such that eventually the Land League ended the policy at the end of June 1881.

League tactics included large demonstrations (from October 1879 to December 1880 the RIC reported an average of forty-six land meetings a month (Clark 1979:309)), boycotting and legal and financial assistance to tenants. These legal tactics were backed up by the traditional methods of agrarian agitation, intimidation, threatening notices and violence, with the traditional violence of the secret societies now augmented by Fenian involvement. (Michael Kelly (2014:35) reports: 'By the end of the year [1880] it was clear that the Land League organisation in the west of Ireland was being directed by Fenians'. Rynne (2009) details Fenian involvement in west Cork). Much of this activity involved public protests against evictions, with large crowds attempting to prevent process serving and evictions. One spectacular instance involved Carraroe in Co. Galway in January 1880 with confrontation between large crowds of locals and the security forces, including the locals digging up the road to make access difficult for the army and the RIC. (Finnegan 2014:31).

The state responded to the League with coercion and concessions, coercion involving the banning of the League, with the concessions involving the Land Act of 1881 granting the three F's – fixity of tenure, fair rent and free sale – though these concessions excluded freeholders and those in arrears, thus splitting the Land League coalition. The exclusion of those with arrears was significant as 'in 1881 more than 100,000 tenants, one third of tenants in the country, were in arrears of up to three years' (Finnegan 2014:104). For the details of coercion, in March 1881 the Protection of Person and Property Act suspended habeas corpus, allowing internment of 'agitators' resulting in 568 arrests, with 420 still in jail at the end of 1881, including Parnell and most national leaders. The Land Act allowed tenants to apply to have their rents adjudicated either in the county courts or before the Land Commission. Both measures undermined the League: in response to the Land Act the League proposed test cases should be taken in each area. Parnell was arrested in October, with other prominent national leaders following him into Kilmainham Jail, from which a No Rent manifesto was issued. On October 22<sup>nd</sup> the state responded by proclaiming the Land League an illegal organisation.

The movement was maintained by the Ladies' Land League, set up in January 1881. However when the Land Commission began hearings in October there were a large number of applications from tenants for rent adjudication. One sign of the success of the Land Act was shown by how its land court was embraced in its first year of operation by 1130 Mayo tenants who believed themselves abandoned by the League's national leadership. Moran (1994:202) explains 'The Act gained acceptance in Mayo because of the small farmers' deteriorating economic situation and the perception that the league executive was indifferent to their plight.' Nationally the tenants also embraced the

provisions of the Land Act and the No Rent Manifesto was a failure. In a compromise, the Kilmainham Treaty between Parnell and Gladstone involved, on one side, the passing of the Arrears Act of 1882, which allowed the Land Commission to cancel arrears of up to £30, and, on the other, Parnell withdrawing from land agitation, which included withdrawing the No Rent Manifesto and crushing the Ladies' Land League.

Curtis (2003) provides an excellent account of landlord response to the land war, detailing formation of eight national associations between 1879 and 1887, including the Property Defence Association, a physical force organisation. Jones (2008) presents the view of the land war taken by southern unionist newspapers (see also Maume 2011), while Mulvagh (2012) reports on the series of pamphlets published by a landlords' association, the Irish Land Committee.

### **The Plan of Campaign**

In 1882 Parnell set up the Irish National League. While he intended the League to be purely a support organisation for the Irish Parliamentary Party when economic conditions deteriorated again in 1885 tenants began using the local branches of the League as a base for agitation, with boycotting reviving and some organisation of rent strikes and land courts (for the operation of the courts see Jordan 1998: 161-164). In response to these developments, prominent members of the League announced the Plan of Campaign in October 1886. This began the second phase of the land war, which lasted to 1891, and affected 203 estates, mainly in south and west: 75 in Munster, 71 in Connaught, 33 in Leinster and 24 in Ulster. County-wise, 32 estates in Galway, 24 in Cork, 20 in Mayo and 18 in Clare were targeted, with Donegal having nearly half the Ulster total with ten cases. The basic tactic of the Plan was for tenants on targeted estates to offer landlords what they considered a fair rent and, if the landlords refused this, to pool the withheld rents in a fund, generally administered by the Catholic clergy, to support the tenants' struggle. This was intended to ensure the campaign was self-funding as little financial assistance was flowing from the USA at this stage. The Plan was not official National League policy however and Parnell refused to support it as renewed land agitation would detract from his efforts to obtain home rule. However many National League M.P.s supported the Plan and received the attention of the police and criminal charges for doing so.

In April 1888 the Pope condemned the Plan and its associated tactic of boycotting, but his condemnation received a cold welcome, including from the Irish Catholic clergy. Funding the campaign was a consistent problem, along with government repression which saw many of the Plan's advocates jailed on and off. The landlords also organised in response to the Plan, setting up different organisations to support financially imperilled landlords, while other sources of funds were the Orange Order and financial syndicates such as that which bought the Ponsonby estate, a major target of the plan. The financial difficulties involved in supporting those evicted under the Plan weakened the campaign, which collapsed after the Kitty O'Shea divorce case when the

National League split into Parnellite and anti-Parnellite factions. (Lee (1973:114) summarises the record of the campaign: 'By 1890 agreement by negotiation had been reached on 60 of the 116 estates affected by the Plan, tenant victory secured through confrontation on 24, defeat suffered on 15 while the struggle continued on 18 others.'

### **United Irish League (UIL)/Ranch war**

In January 1898 the UIL was set up in Co. Mayo and for the first nine months of its existence was confined to the west of that county where it campaigned against both land grabbers and graziers, agitation which had been developing locally since 1895, using the usual methods and assisted in its growth by repression by the RIC. By June the UIL began to expand into south and north Mayo, and during October and November spread into Co. Galway and by early 1900 had expanded its organisation throughout the country. (Bull 2003). The Wyndham land act of 1903 is generally seen as solving the Irish land question yet one of its consequences was increased struggle against graziers and ranchers. Motivated by land hunger and the realisation of tenants that ownership of their holdings would be meaningless unless those holdings were economic, the agitation against large grazing farms and ranches resulted in a ranch war from 1906 to 1908.

The campaign began with a public meeting in October 1906 in Co. Westmeath described as 'a demonstration of all who wished to smash and finish ranching and to recover the land for the people'. The methods used were those of previous campaigns including large public meetings, resolutions at district and county councils, boycotting, some intimidation and violence and the most important tactic –cattle driving, where a grazer's cattle were driven off the grazer's land at night and relocated to other farms or left to wander the long acre, the grass verges of country roads. 'During 1907 and 1908 cattle driving became rampant in numerous parts of north Leinster, north Munster and Connacht... it reached a peak in the second quarter of 1908, when 297 cattle drives occurred'. (Jones 1983:383). For the whole of 1907 and the first three quarters of 1908 the RIC recorded 897 cattle drives: the counties with the highest number of drives were Galway (234), Meath (137) Clare (104), Westmeath (88) and Roscommon (87). A similar rise occurred in boycotting, jumping from 174 persons boycotted in December 1905 to 889 in February 1909. (Jones 1983:383). These methods were supported by the full repertoire of agrarian agitation, with agrarian crimes increasing from 234 in 1906 to 576 in 1908, leading one official to write: 'Although cattle driving thus became the most fashionable method of operating, it is not to be assumed that other methods of terrorism and destruction were neglected. Arson, the burning of haystacks, firing into dwelling houses, spiking meadows, the mutilation of horses and cows, the destruction of turf, the damaging of machinery and various other forms of lawless violence began to increase and multiply' (Jones 1983:384).

As McNamara (2010:158) notes 'the rural wing [of the UIL] tended to co-operate with violent local secret societies in powerful alliances against large

farmers', thus representing 'a clear juncture of the rural tradition of mass agitation and the threat of violence with semi-constitutional campaigns against the dominant land tenure system'. (McNamara 2010:157). The campaign was strongly supported by some elements in the UIL and League policy stressed the importance of grazing in land reform, though others in the League were unhappy with driving. The rural labour movement also supported the campaign, particularly in Meath and Westmeath. In 1909 the campaign gradually ran out of steam.

### **Agitation during and after the 'Irish revolution'**

As noted above, while the 1903 Wyndham Land Act was seen by many as the final solution to the Irish land issue, it was a solution only for certain classes. As Ó Tuathaigh (1982) notes the various land acts which had created a peasant proprietorship 'did nothing to solve the problems of those smallholders and landless men whose main grievance had not been their status as tenants but rather the size of their holding or its poor quality, or both. In the case of landless men it was, of course, their inability to secure a holding at all.' Thus for the landless in 1917 who seized estates in Roscommon 'the old cry of 'land for the people' had the same impetus as those who broke up estates in Roscommon in 1844: 'it meant access to conacre land for survival' (Ó Tuathaigh 1982:169) Similar issues were raised by O'Neill (1933) for the 1930s, who also cited cases of death by starvation.

During the war of independence there was a resurgence in land occupations, mainly in the west. While some have suggested the IRA was strongly involved, in the words of Peadar O'Donnell (quoted in Townshend 1983:371, note 1) 'in many cases volunteers were actually used to control the rural masses who would identify the national struggle with their own struggle for land' (see also Varley 1988). The reasons here were clearcut: the urban leaders of SF had no desire to threaten the respectable, middle class support the nationalist movement had received for the sake of landless labourers in the west. Indeed the continued failure of the Dublin government regarding the west was to be a constant cause of complaint and some action during the new state's existence.

There is some disagreement over exactly how revolutionary the period of the "Irish revolution" (1917-1923) actually was. Given the work of O'Connell and Kostick, especially O'Connor's stunning study of the spread of syndicalism, there can be no doubt that it was a period of intense class struggle. Some indication of this can be seen in the Labour Party's congress in 1920 which 'unanimously affirmed workers' rights to control food production, distribution and pricing, and called for the abolition of the wages system' (O'Connor 1988: 49). The most militant direct action was taken in rural areas, especially by farm labourers who combined traditional agrarian methods –threatening letters<sup>23</sup>,

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<sup>23</sup> As one example, when road workers in County Cavan destroyed six culverts to protest against redundancies in April 1923, they accompanied the action with a letter from 'Captain Moonlight' threatening anyone repairing the damage. (O'Connor 1988:113)

violent intimidation and boycotting- with sympathetic action by organised dock, transport and other labour. Kostick (2009:221) summarises: 'it was rural Ireland that witnessed some of the most intense examples of class struggle in the period, with labourers forming red armies, taking over landlords' estates and coming into conflict with white guards of farmers.' Rural conflict escalated from action at farm or parish level in 1917 to county level by 1919, while county towns saw many strikes, with militancy increasing: 'it was mainly among small town and rural workers that violence took root. Riot, assault, and physical damage were the weapons most frequently employed' (O'Connor 1988: 32). In the Meath agricultural labourers' strike of 1919 pickets patrolled roads and train stations, auctions were disrupted, crops damaged and cattle were driven. The sabotage campaign reached its climax on August 16<sup>th</sup> when a cattle special train to Belfast organised by Meath farmers was derailed and 41 wagons were damaged after fifteen feet of track was torn up.

This period also saw the introduction of workplace occupations or soviets, mainly in pursuit of wage demands. The post-war slump saw some eighty workplace occupations in 1922, as well as eight farm strikes involving over one thousand labourers each in 1922 and 1923 as workers fought against an employers' campaign to cut wages and jobs. With victory in the civil war, the Free State government organised to regain social control, mobilising the army against labour unrest, the strongest example of which occurred in the Waterford farm labourers' strike: 'By late June, 600 Special Infantrymen were billeted in a chain of posts throughout the affected area. They guarded property, protected scabs, and conducted arms and ammunition searches. On 4 July, a curfew was imposed in east Waterford and martial law declared. Union officials and pickets were interned, union offices raided and records confiscated.' (O'Connor 1988: 32). State repression was combined with vigilante action by farmers, with farmers' units in Kildare and Waterford styling themselves White Guards.

Agrarian agitation continued to be a problem for the Free State government. In February 1923 a Special Infantry Corps was set up by the Minister for Defence, on advice from the Minister for Agriculture, to deal with agrarian agitation, while in May 1923 a new land bill was introduced into the Dail giving the Land Commission power to compulsorily acquire and redistribute land. Dooley stresses the importance of the Land Commission by providing statistics, while noting the failure of standard Irish history text-books to make more than cursory reference to it: 'By the time it published its final report in 1987 over 1.5 million acres had been acquired and redistributed under the various land acts since 1923, while another 840,000 acres acquired under previous land acts (for which the Land Commission became responsible after 1923) were also divided. This gives a total of 2.34 million acres ... this represents a very significant twenty per cent of farmland affected by acquisition and division' (Dooley 2004: 183). He also makes no bones about political involvement in that redistribution: 'From 1923 to 1948 very few received land unless they were members of Fianna



Fáil<sup>24</sup> cumainn [local branches] or Cumann na nGaedhael/Fine Gael<sup>25</sup> clubs.’ (Dooley 2004:185), while also noting that Fianna Fáil acquired and redistributed more land than did Cumann na nGaedhael: indeed he suggests that ‘one of the main reasons for the decline of Cumann na nGaedhael in the early 1930s was its commitment to the large farming class in its perceived attempt to maintain Ireland “as an agricultural appendage of the UK economy”’ (Dooley 2004:190). Fianna Fáil’s coming to power in the January 1933 election can also be reasonably attributed to the promise of a ‘revolutionary programme of land acquisition and division’. (Dooley 2004:191, see also Bew 1988).

Dooley makes an intriguing connection between Fianna Fáil’s 1933 Land Act and the growth of the Blueshirts, the Irish fascist movement (Dooley 2004:192), while Cumann na nGaedhael condemned Fianna Fáil’s policy as tantamount to ‘the purest of communism’ (Dooley 2004:193).<sup>26</sup> Dooley’s associating the growth of the Blueshirts with agrarian agitation is confirmed by other research (Cronin 1997, Montgomery 2014), with Cronin describing the economic war between Ireland and England as the movement’s *raison d’être*. The economic war began in June 1932 when the Fianna Fáil government ceased payment of the land annuities, repayments by (mainly larger) tenant purchasers of money advanced under the land Purchase Act to the British, in response to which the British government imposed a 20% levy on Irish agricultural exports to England. The Irish government continued to collect the annuity payments, however, resulting in a major campaign of non-payment, mainly by larger farmers and graziers in the cattle and butter producing counties of Munster, accompanied by a grass-roots direct action campaign to prevent collection of annuities and the sale of cattle distrained by the state when annuities were not paid. The non-payment campaign resulted in 36% of annuities being uncollected by the end of 1933-1934, with 55% uncollected in Tipperary and over 40% uncollected in Carlow, Clare, Limerick, Kilkenny, Waterford, Westmeath and Wexford. (Cronin 1997:143).

The response of the state echoes that of the British government in previous agrarian campaigns: writs were issued, cattle were seized and sold, security forces were mobilised to protect cattle sales, the military tribunal was reconvened in August 1933 specifically to deal with Blueshirt criminality and the Annuities Defence League was proscribed. The campaign saw major increases in criminal incidents, with riots and unlawful assembly rising from six incidents in 1932 to eighteen in 1933 and sixty-five in 1934, while malicious damage to property increased from 424 in 1932 to 538 in 1933 and 903 in 1934, with 76% of the incidents in 1934 occurring in four Munster counties – Cork, Kilkenny, Limerick and Waterford. (Montgomery 2014: 26). Much of the direct action

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<sup>24</sup> Fianna Fáil was the party used by some republicans who lost the civil war as their instrument for electoral politics.

<sup>25</sup> Cumann na nGaedhael was the party of those who were victorious in the civil war; Fine Gael was a later iteration of the same politics.

<sup>26</sup> Fianna Fáil had no qualms when it came to dealing with actual communists: in 1933 it deported Jimmy Gralton to the US.

focussed on interfering with telegraph and telephone communications and blocking roads and rail lines to impede police involvement in cattle seizures and sales. Between July 1934 and January 1935 there were 197 attacks on lines of communication by the League of Youth, the Blueshirts' youth organisation, in Cork, 145 in Waterford-Kilkenny and 109 in Meath. (Cronin 1997:149). The campaign resulted in the only killing of an agrarian protester by Irish state forces, when an attack on the sale of six cows in Marsh's Yard in Cork led to the shooting dead of young Blueshirt Michael Lynch. When the economic war ended in December 1934 with the signing of the Coal-Cattle Pact, Blueshirt activity dissipated.

Fianna Fáil support among western smallholders was affected by the failure of its land redistribution policy as well as by its 1946 Land Act which gave the Land Commission power to take back land from those previously allotted it: 'Fianna Fáil, by threatening to take back forcibly lands that it had allotted, was acting in a way that was tantamount to evicting tenants during the land war of the 1880s' (Dooley 2004: 1925). Jones notes that periodically new associations or movements appeared to raise the issue of land reform, though their support rarely reached beyond three or four counties. 'The main ones were the Back to the Land Association, the rival Evicted Tenants and Land Settlement Association both in the 1920s, the United Farmers Association and the Land Settlement Committee in the 1930s, the Land Division League in the 1940s and early 1950s, Lia Fáil at the end of the 1950s and the National Land League in the 1970s.' (Jones 2013:137).

### **Lia Fáil**

Lia Fáil involved a late revival of smallholder agitation, a last gasp by a class fraction increasingly marginal to the economy, if not yet to the population as 'the balance between small and large holdings decisively shifted against small holdings over the first four decades of independence' (Murphy 1998:198). Founded at a parish meeting in Lusmagh, Co. Offaly in November 1957 by Fr. John Fahy, a radical republican priest who had been involved in agrarian agitation with Peadar O'Donnell at the end of the 1920s, it quickly became an umbrella organisation for smallholder groups from 11 other counties, setting up its own newspaper in August 1958, and in May 1959 began agitating in Lusmagh against Land Commission activities. Lia Fáil's aims included preventing foreign ownership of land or other sources of wealth in Ireland and capping land ownership at 100 acres.

While Lia Fáil's ideology embraced xenophobia and extreme conspiracy theories, its grievances were those of the smallholding class that was being abandoned by both the state and Fianna Fáil, whose modernising representatives such as Seán Lemass were abandoning the party's support for smallholders and land division. Lia Fáil's actions, though few in number, lay squarely in the agrarian agitation tradition: cattle driving, reallocation of a field to a landless widow and rescuing from the local barracks three people arrested for the cattle drive. A couple of cattle driving incidents in Co. Galway followed,

but then Lia Fáil disintegrated in response to state repression, lack of popular support and ecclesiastical action which resulted in Fr Fahy resigning from both Lia Fáil and Lusmagh parish. While Lia Fáil was the last gasp of the smallholder agrarian agitation tradition, other such small groups continued to appear, with a National Land League formed in Mullingar in 1970, while another group, the Small Farmers' Defence League, operated in Donegal and Mayo.

### **1960s and after**

In the 1960s there was strong involvement by the IRA in social agitation, including fish-ins, strikes, squatting and other direct action, as well as campaigns against ground rent and foreign acquisition of land (Cullinane 2010, Hanley and Miller 2010). This social agitation disappeared with the revival of armed struggle in the six counties.

With the late industrialisation of Ireland, traditional agrarian agitation all but disappeared but that industrialisation resulted in a new upsurge in rural agitation. After the 1960s a change came to rural unrest in the 26 counties with the arrival of environmental and locally unwanted land use (LULU) campaigns, many of which have been framed by some academic analysts as opposition to modernisation. Allan and Jones (1990) present an uncritical account of rural community opposition to chemical and mining developments by transnational corporations during the 1980s, while Allen (2004) has produced an updated version which presents these struggles as anti-globalisation struggles. Mac Sheoin (1999) provides statistical evidence on rural opposition to LULUs from 1990 to 1999, involving 429 local environmental campaigns over the period January 1990 to July 1999, showing the extension of local opposition campaigns to a much wider range of activities, with 176 campaigns against telecommunications facilities (mainly mobile phone masts), 79 campaigns against waste disposal (mainly municipal waste landfills), 52 campaigns against agribusiness and the remaining campaigns involving transport and power, tourism and leisure and extraction (mainly quarrying). Phyne (1999), while concentrating on conflicts involving salmon farming in the period from 1987 to 1995, gives details also of a variety of other conflicts involving fishing resources, including the fish-ins of the 1960s and the rod licence dispute from 1987 to 1990 (subject also to book length treatment by Buckley 1992), and reports that 'conflicts over marine rights and inland water rights date back to the nineteenth century.' (Phyne 1999:6).<sup>27</sup> One particular campaign –that against Shell in Co. Mayo has been the subject of two books, one from a community activist (Corduff 2007) and another from a sympathetic journalist (Siggins 2010). More recently turfcutters and farmers are defending their traditional fuel extraction practices (O'Flynn 2012) while opposition to LULUs continues to be widespread.

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<sup>27</sup> The neglect of marine disputes in this essay is a reflection of the general neglect of the maritime aspect of Irish history by Irish historians (see MacLoughlin 2010).

**V: Thematic approaches****County, area and estate studies**

For county studies there have been a number of monographs which take a long-term glance at land issues, while many others have produced studies of unrest over short periods in specific counties. The choice of counties for the former indicate major areas of unrest especially in Tipperary, Cork and Mayo. County studies include general studies including but not limited to rural unrest, such as Donnelly (1975) who examines the rural economy in County Cork during the nineteenth century, Power (1993) who examines eighteenth century Tipperary, the same county Marnane (1985) treats of, and Jordan (1994) who considers land issues in Co. Mayo from the plantation to the land war. We also have book-length treatments of shorter periods of intense unrest in Limerick, Kilkenny, including studies of specific areas such as Craughwell, Co. Galway and Galmoy, Co. Kilkenny. There has also been a growth in case studies of particular landed estates. A useful guide to the developing literature on landed estates is available in Dooley (2000).

**TABLE 2: County studies**

1760-80	Whiteboys	Tipperary	Bric 1997
1790s	Defenders	Leitrim	Kelly 1986
1790-1828	Agrarian violence	Meath	Mooney 1987
1798-99	Tithes	Cork	Patterson 2004
1800-1842	Whiteboyism	Roscommon	Huggins 2007
1815-1831	Ribbonism	Clare	MacMahon 2002
1819-1820	Ribbonmen	Galway	Ryan 2000
1820-1845		Limerick	Curtin 2008
1820s	Rockites	Cork	Katsuta 2003
18XX	Rockites	Laois	Givens 1999
1821	Rockites	Limerick	Feely 1987
1828-1835	Agrarian violence	Meath	Mooney 1988/1989
1830s	Collective biography Connerys	Waterford	Kiely 1994; Reece 1992
1830-1845	Rural conflict	Waterford	Kiely and Nolan 1992
1830-1834	Tithe war	Kilkenny	O'Hanrahan (1990)

1830-1838	Tithe war	Tipperary	Higgins 2002, Farrell 2005
1831-1860		Tipperary	Hurst 1974
1835-1844	Agrarian violence	Meath	Mooney 1990/1991
1840s	Molly Maguires	Roscommon	Coleman 1999
1841	Ribbonism	Leitrim	Kelly 2003
1842	Ribbonism	Sligo	Kelly 2008
1849-1885	Land struggle	Clare	Reid 1976
1850-1882	Land struggle	Kilkenny	Walsh 2008
1870-1871	Ribbonism	Westmeath	Murray 1986
1872-1886	Land struggle	Co Kerry	Lucey 2011
1879-1882	Land War	Laois	Carter 1994, 1999
1879-1882	Land War	Kildare	Nelson 1985
1879-1882	Land War	Waterford	Ó Ceilleachain 1997
1879-1882	Land war	King's County	Doherty 1997
1879-1882	Land war	Clare	Murphy 1999
1879-1883	Land League	Leitrim	Mac an Ghalloglaigh 1983-1984
1879-1883	Land war	Roscommon	Ganly 2003
1880s	Land war -priests	Clare	Murphy 1979
1880-1881	Land war	Fermanagh	Thompson 2004
1881-1882	Agrarian unrest	Roscommon	Lane (n.d.)
1881-1882	Ladies Land League	Mayo	Quinn 1997
1880-1889	Land agitation	Waterford	Power 1998
1882-1916	Land struggle	Laois	Carter 2013
1903-1907	Ranch war/UIIL	Roscommon	Clarke 1994
1911-12	Ranch war	Mayo	Murphy 1995, 1996
1917-1923	Agrarian unrest	Waterford	O'Connor 1980

**TABLE 3: Area studies**

1800-1903	Land agitation	Tullyhunco, Co. Cavan	O'Raghallaigh 2016
1819-1824	Rural unrest	Galmoy, Co Kilkenny	Ó Macháin 2004
1820-1850	Whiteboys	Limerick liberties	Toomey 2002
1823	Rockite	North Cork	Forde 2001
1831-1838	Tithe war	Northeast Carlow	Shannon 2012
1833-1903	Land struggle	Logboy, Co. Mayo	Kelly 2014
1834-1838	Rockites	Garrycastle, Co. Offaly	Murphy 2007
1835-1839	Land struggles	Ballinamuck, Co. Longford	O'Farrell 1983
1838	Tithes	Clonmany, Co. Donegal	Duffy 2005
1840-1869	Land war	Derryveagh, Co. Donegal	Dolan 1980
Pre-Famine	Agrarian unrest	Cloone, Co. Leitrim	Fitzpatrick 1982
October 1849	Affray at Killoughy barracks	Rahan, Co. Offaly	Smith 2007
1850s	Tenant League	West of Ireland	Shields 2011
1856	Sheep war	Gaoth Dhobhair, Co Donegal	Vaughan 1983
1865-1881, 1900-1903	Land reform, labour	Mid-Cork	Galvin(n.d.), (n.d.)
1876-1880	Tenants defence association	Ballinasloe, Co. Galway	Moran 2011
1876-1882	Land war -biographical	West of Ireland	Casey 2014
1879-1882	Land war	Hackettstown, Co. Carlow	Shannon 2008
1879-1883	Land war	Loughrea, Co. Galway	Manzor 2003a
1879-1883	Land war	West Cork	Rynne 2009
1879-1916	Land War	Belcarra, Co Mayo	O'Connor and O'Connor 2013
1879-1882	Land War	Loughrea, Co. Galway	Finnegan 2012, 2014

1879-1882	Land War	Drumlish, Co. Longford	Dooley 2010
1879-1891	Land War	Tallaroan, Co. Kilkenny	Kennedy 2004
1879-1927	Agrarian agitation	Lugacurran, Co. Laois	Coffey 2006
1881	Land League/Poor law election	Tralee, Co. Kerry	Feingold 1983
April 1881		Ballaghdaheen, Co. Roscommon	Ganly 2009
1881-1886	Land war	Knocktartan, Co. Wexford	Urwin 2002
1881-1891	Land war -biography	North Cork	Keane 2012
1885-1886	Land agitation	Termonmagurk. Co. Tyrone	Kerr 1987
1885-1892	Irish National League	Dingle, Co. Kerry	Lucey 2003
1885-1892	Irish National League	Arklow, Co. Wicklow	Rees 2012
1886	Plan of Campaign	Southeast Galway	Shiel and Roche 1986
1886-1916	Land agitation	Galway	Moffitt 2011a
1893-1916	Land war	Loughrea, Co. Galway	Manzor 2003b
1907-1910	UIL & Protestant tenant farmers	Aughavas, Co. Leitrim; Riverstown & Roscrib, Co. Sligo	Moffitt 2011b
1908	Ranch war	Riverstown, Co. Sligo	Cosgrove 2012
June 1916	Cattle drive	Moore, CO. Roscommon	Egan n.d.
1998-date	Shell refinery	Erris, Co. Mayo	Siggins 2010

**TABLE 4: Estate studies**

1763-1826	Bellew estate	Mount Bellew, Co. Galway	Clarke 2003
1790-1800	Devonshire estate/Defenders	Edenderry, Co. Offaly	Reilly 2007
1820-1870	Gerrard estate	Kilian, Co. Galway	Crehan 2013
1833-1903	Nolan estate	Logboy, Co. Mayo	Kelly 2014
1858-1863	Plunket estate	Partry, CO. Mayo	Lane 1994, Moran 1986
1859-1861	Adair estate	Derryveagh, Co. Donegal	Vaughan 1983
1879-1882	Digby estate	Offaly	Pilkington 2008
1879-1888	Kingston estate	Mitchelstown, Co. Cork	Power
1879-1910	Gardiner/Pringle estate	Belcarra, Co. Mayo	O'Connor and O'Connor 2013
1886-1892	O'Grady estate	Herbertstown, Co. Limerick	Ó hIarlaithe 2013
1888	Drumbanagher estate	Poyntzpass, Co. Armagh	Canning 2012
1899-	Estate of RH Johnstone; UIL	Aughrim, Williamstown, Co. Galway	Keaveney 2007
1922	Land agitation; house burning	Ballydugan, Co. Galway	O'Riordan 2015

### **Food riots and other responses to famine**

There is a misperception that the Irish don't do food riots (Wells 1996: 179) though this is being undermined by recent research. (Kelly, forthcoming). In her work on popular protest in Ireland from 1570 to 1640, Tait reports that from late 1628 to early 1629 serious disturbances over food shortages shook the midlands and the north, while in May 1641 women in Belfast were involved in food riots (Tait 2011: 26, 38).

The majority of publications have been on popular responses to the great famine of the 1840s. Moran (2015) has identified 55 riots and incidents of major subversion in Irish workhouses from 1848 to 1850, some 33 in Munster, ten in Leinster, eight in Connaught and four in Ulster, with the majority occurring in 1848 to 1850, thirteen in 1848, eleven in 1948 and thirteen in 1850. Eiriksson (1997) details food riots and other lower class protests during the 1830s and 1840s in Clare and Limerick. He notes the occurrence of food riots in these two



counties and elsewhere in southwest Ireland in 1817, 1822, 1830-1831 and in the late 1830s and early 1840s 'even if that particular period did not witness anything which could be described as famine or fatal scarcity' (Eiriksson 1997: 72). (Details of one such riot can be found in Stack 2012). He notes four types of riots during the Great Famine: to secure employment and to protect wages on public works from the summer of 1846 to January 1847; attacks to prevent export of grain from the autumn of 1846 to January 1847; violent resistance in the spring of 1847 to the closure of public works and food riots in May and June 1847 regarding the operations of food kitchens. Ó Súilleabháin (2015) provides detailed descriptions of various agitations during the famine in Limerick. Bohstedt (2015) provides a transnational context to the Famine food riots.

Finally to lay to rest the nationalist notion that the laissez faire attitude of the English elite to the effects of famine was confined to countries like Ireland and India, we should note that the English elite was also happy to sacrifice its own lower orders on the altar of its principles of political economy. During famine in the 1790s Wells (2011) reports 'a massive sector of the population was unable, unaided, to command the most basic of subsistence levels; wretched faces became a reality; destitution stalked the land; families were unable to clothe themselves; children literally cried for bread; begging assumed unheard of levels. The famines caused serious malnutrition, disease and ultimately demographic distortions with increased death rates, decreased birth rates, and delayed marriages'. This strongly supports the contention that what was involved was a class issue rather than a nationalist/imperialist issue.

**Table 5 Food riots**

1756-1757	Famine	Food riots	Magennis 2000
1799-1801		Response to famine/Captain Slasher	Wells 1996
1817-1845			Cunningham 2010
1830	Limerick	Food riot	Stack 2012
1845-1847	Famine	Food riots, etc	Lowe 2003
1846-1847	Co. Waterford	Food riots	Cowman 1995
1846-1849	Dungarvan, Co. Waterford	Food and workhouse riots	Fraher 1995
1847-	Famine	Food riots, etc.	KInealy 2002
1848-1854	Workhouses	Riots and other incidents	Moran 2015

## Rural labour

Given the previously mentioned elite orientation of Irish historians, it is no surprise to discover that the history of the working class has not been a priority of mainstream historians, with such work as has been done until recently mainly coming from the ideologically committed. I suspect (and hope) that the table below is simply scraping the surface, but am not cheered by the following statement from F. Lane (2005: 113) who complains ‘the dedicated historiography of the rural labourer still comprises a handful of articles, several of which were written over twenty years ago, and, regrettably, not a single book-length study has been published. In recent years Pádraig Lane, in a series of articles based on his 1980 doctoral thesis, has been almost alone in pursuing the subject’. A decent examination must await further work.

Just two further notes will be added, one relating to a transnational organising attempt and the other on the use of the repertoire of agrarian agitation in strikes during the twentieth century by agricultural labourers. Horn details an abortive attempt by the British National Agricultural Labourers’ Union to organise in Ireland in 1873 and the activities of the union thus founded as continued under Irish auspices –and under the name Irish Agricultural Labourers’ Union- until 1879. Details of IALU activities can also be found in Fintan Lane (2002). As Bradley (1986) notes of the north Kildare farm labourers’ strike of 1946 ‘the agrarian crime, threats of eviction and boycotts associated with that dispute were more appropriate to the nineteenth century than the mid-twentieth’. Similarly many of the agricultural workers’ actions on which Kostick (2009) reports made full use of the repertoire of agrarian agitators. Indeed the decisive action of dock and other urban workers in blacking cattle may be seen as an adaptation of the traditional agrarian tactic of boycotting.

**TABLE 6: Rural labour**

19 <sup>th</sup> century	Ireland	Agricultural labourers	Boyle 1983
19 <sup>th</sup> century	West of Ireland	Agricultural labourers	Lane 2011
1825-1845	Tipperary	Colliers	Cowman 2001
1800-1950	Thomastown, Co. Kilkenny	Rural and urban labour	Silverman 2006
1830s	Castlecomer, Co. Kilkenny	Colliery workers/Whitefeet	Dunne n.d.
1841-1912			Fitzpatrick 1980
Pre-Famine	Clare	Shannon/Newmarket	Enright 1981
1850-1870	Midlands		Whelehan 2012
1850-1910	Mayo		Lane 2011

1850-1914			Lane 1973
1869-1889	Meath/Westmeath		Lane 2015a
1869-1882		P.F.Johnston	Lane 2002
Early 1880s	Offaly		Lane 2015b
1880s	Breifne		Lane 2014
1880s	Mallow, Co. Cork	Agricultural labourers	Lane 2010
1880s	Roscommon, Galway	Herds	Cunningham 2011
1880-1890	Roscommon	Agricultural labourers	Lane 2009
Land war	Roscommon	Shepherds' Association	Lane 2003
1890-1914	West of Ireland	Urban and rural labour	Cunningham 1995
1894-1914		Land and Labour Association	Lane 1993
Late 19 <sup>th</sup> century	Loughrea, Co. Galway	Herdsman	Cunningham 2003
1900-1976			Bradley 1988
1917-1920	Kildare		Dunne forthcoming
1917-1923	Ireland	Agricultural and rural labour	O'Connell 1988
1921-1923	Waterford	Strike ITGWU agricultural labourers	Symes 2016:31-35
February 1922	Broadford, Co. Limerick	Soviet	McCarthy 1980
1944-1948		Federation of Rural Workers	Bradley 1986
1947	Kilkea, Co. Kildare		O Dubhshlaine 1994
	Castlecomer., Co Kilkenny		Feely 1981a, 1981b, 1981c
	Castlecomer., Co Kilkenny	Biographical	Brennan and Nolan 1990

**Assassination/outrage studies**

One focus of research has been on spectacular outrages and assassinations. The firing of Wildgoose Lodge in Co Louth has been the subject of a number of articles on local history journals and two recent books. The assassination of Major Mahon in Co Roscommon has produced a book, as well as a number of articles, while another high-level assassination – that of Lord Leitrim – has also produced a number of studies with varied approaches. The Maynooth local history series has also produced a number of pamphlet publications centred on assassinations.

For studies of more than one assassination Beames (1987b) examines 28 assassinations in Co. Tipperary in the decade 1837 to 1847, with eleven landlords, nine landlords' factors and employees and eight farmers the victims. In Beames (1983) he lists assassinations from 1806 to 1847, involving 28 landlords, 36 landlords' factors or employees, 34 farmers, 15 clergy and tithe proctors and 15 miscellaneous persons (such as informers and crown witnesses). Reilly has examined the murder of seven land agents in Co. Cavan over the period 1830 to 1860, while noting 'a further twenty were shot or otherwise injured'. (Reilly 2014: 16). Mulholland gives a grand total of fatalities during the land war (which he defines as 1879 to 1888) of seventy-six, in which he includes the famous Maamtrasna murders of August 1882 (Waldron 1992). He summarises as follows 'Those killed in attacks on direct agents of landlordism amounted to twenty-nine. Those killed as egregious violators of popular discipline in the campaign against landlordism amounted to twenty-one. There were eleven unintended fatalities arising from punishment beatings and shootings. Partisans of the popular movement killed by agents of the state or the landlords, or when out on moonlighting operations, amounted to eight. This comes to a total of sixty-nine. To this should be added legal executions, killing a total of seven (some of whom were clearly innocent).' (Mulholland 2016: 84). For purposes of international comparison, during the twenty years 1834 to 1854 Volin (1943) reports there were 144 cases of murder of landlords and their agents in Russia.

**TABLE 7: Assassination/outrage studies**

October 1816	Wildgoose Lodge	Louth	Paterson 1950; Casey 1974, 1975; Murray 2005; Dooley 2007
1823	Assassination –Franks family	Cork	Cronin 2009
1832	Assassination tithe proctors	Castlepooke, Doneraile, Co. Cork	Shine 1987
1835	Assassination Rev Charles Dawson	Ballinacarriga, Co. Limerick	Curtis 2012
1835	Assassination William Blood	Corofin, Co. Clare	Harbison 1983
1835-1855	Agrarian assassinations	Crossmaglen	McMahon & McKeown (various dates)
1837-1847	Assassinations	Tipperary	Beames 1987
1830-1860	Assassinations (land agents)	Offaly	Reilly 2014
1847	Assassination of Major Mahon	Strokestown, Co. Roscommon	Duffy 2007, Vesey 2008
1847	Rev John Lloyd Assassination	Elphin, CO. Roscommon	Enright 2009
1851	Bateson Assassination	Monaghan	McMahon 2006
1852	Assassination William Ross Manifold	Offaly	Lambe 2015
1855	Assassination Charlotte Hinds	Templeport, Co. Cavan	Gallogly 1979
1864	Assassination Thomas Reynolds	Rathcore, Co. Meath	Griffin 1994
1868	Assassination Policeman and landlord’s steward	Ballycohey, Co. Tipperary	Moran 1992
1878	Assassination Lord Leitrim	Manorvaughan, Co. Donegal	Dolan 1978
1879-1885	Barbavilla Assassination	Westmeath	Murtagh 1999
1879-1882	Land War assassinations		Mulholland 2016

1882	Assassination John Doolaghty	Drumdoonlaghty, Co. Clare	Butler 2006
1882	Assassination Michael Moloney	Caraloe, Co. Clare	Houlihan 2007
1894	Assassination James Donovan	Co Cork	O’Riordan n.d.

### **Repression/law/crime/justice**

These works on assassinations and outrages intersect with another developing area of study: writings on crime, violence, the law and the legal system, policing and repression provide another angle on our subject. The two foundational works for this aspect are once again by Americans, with Broeker (1970) dealing with 1812 to 1836 and Palmer’s enormous 1988 volume moving to the comparative as he engages with nothing less than policing and protest in England and Ireland over the period 1780 to 1850.

Palmer summarises the differences between Irish and English crime as English crime as being individual and for personal gain, while Irish crime was collective and for the gain of the group; English crime was not particularly violent, while Irish crime more commonly involved violence against persons and animals; finally, Irish violence had widespread support among the population. (Palmer 1988:45). On this last point Palmer writes ‘Again and again, Irish authorities trying to track down criminals encountered only the peasantry’s sullen consent to the crimes; indeed, daytime assassinations occurred with some frequency before loudly approving crowds’ (Palmer 1988:45). Another significant difference was the success Irish movements had: ‘Networks of Whiteboy government, though highly localised, crisscrossed southern and central Ireland. “Committees” (note the parliamentary term) arranged outrages; members were sworn to secrecy; “strangers” executed Whiteboy orders both to prevent detection and to ensure anonymity and develop (?) impartiality of punishment; and the neighbouring peasantry was intimidated or sympathetic. The result was a remarkable record of success’ (Palmer 1988:53).

Howlin (2013) gives a succinct account of the differences between criminal justice in Ireland and England in the nineteenth century. Haire (1980) details the army’s involvement in supporting the police during the land war, while Legg (2013) is a comparative study of the security forces in two counties during the last three decades of the nineteenth century and Malcolm (1998) outlines the military origins of the RIC. Townshend (1983) looks at British policy in response to both agrarian and nationalist violence from 1848 on. Crossman (1991) examines emergency legislation in response to agrarian agitation from 1821 to 1841. Regrettably unpublished is a thesis on policing the land war. (Ball 2000). Rudé (1978) provides statistics and fascinating details of Irish social and political prisoners transported to Australia between 1788 and 1868, providing useful comparison with social and political prisoners from England, Scotland

and Wales: overall figures given are 2,250 from Ireland, 1,2000 from England, Scotland and Wales and 154 from Canada. (Rudé 1978:8).

As previously noted, a careful introduction to the literature on crime, including policing, is provided by Griffin (2005). Work on repression of agrarian unrest, particularly in the nineteenth century has been provided by authors interested in the development of the police and particularly in the model the RIC provided for English colonial policing. As well as legal or military operations, more long-term innovations in repression were also developed by the English. 'Like so many other experiments in reform during the era, the reformed schoolroom was to be given its first test in Ireland, more or less frankly for the purpose of suppressing subversion and instilling obedience. When the national schools emerged... they immediately began to carry out the same mission by sanitizing and demystifying Irish history, muting the oral tradition, deemphasizing the Irish language, and extolling an extreme puritanical code of deference, obedience and chastity' (Scally 1995:144).

Howlin (2009) describes the state's responses to unsatisfactory verdicts in criminal cases by attempting to control the composition of juries, in which activities she unsurprisingly concludes 'the crown on occasion abused or over-used its power'. The peculiar difficulties involved in obtaining convictions in Ireland meant state protection of witnesses was often essential and they would be removed from the local area to police lodgings elsewhere until the trial took place; often afterwards they would be assisted to relocate to other parts of Ireland or, more frequently, to emigrate. In 1833 some £2,272 17s. 9d. was paid from the treason fund for removal and other expenses of witnesses: 'in the case of families payments of £250 were common, huge sums in the 1830s' while use of secret funds for emigration of witnesses to the US was 'common throughout the nineteenth century' (McEldowney 1986:133). McEldowney concludes 'it is *not* proved that the executive were able to purchase convictions; but if the scale of payments shown by the Hatherton papers [which detail expenditure for 1833 from the treason fund] is a fair indication of the payments throughout the century, the use of money is a ground for questioning the reliability of prosecution evidence in many cases' (McEldowney 1986:136). O'Hanlon notes a steep decrease in expenditure from the secret service vote after the land war, dropping from £18,057 in 1884-85 to £1,240 in 1898-99 (O'Hanlon 1983:350)

Intimidation of jurors occurred in plenty. A spectacular example of this intimidation can be given in the case of a massive assembly in July 1832 near the village of Ballyhale, in Co Kilkenny, reportedly attended by some 200,000 from the four neighbouring counties to commemorate an encounter at Carrickshock some seven months previously in which thirteen RIC, a process server and three protesters were killed. As Owens (2004:43) observes 'it was obviously timed to influence the impending trial in Kilkenny of eighteen men charged with the killings, and was but one part of a well-organized and determined campaign to sway the opinions of jurors.' This campaign appeared to succeed: 'We can never know the extent to which the members of the juries were intimidated by the image of their tenants and neighbours massing in the

tens of thousands a stone's throw from Carrickshock on the eve of the trial. We know only that a fortnight later they voted to acquit three of the defendants, before the Crown withdrew its case against them all'.

It's worth noting the lack of success the various security forces had in dealing with agrarian agitation. While police detectives were successful in infiltrating urban nationalist groups like the Fenians they had no such luck with the rural groups. Malcolm (2002) convincingly shows the failure of specialist/undercover detectives (also known as 'disposable men') in solving agrarian crime, compared with their success in infiltrating urban political groups of conspirators: 'There were 40 homicides in Westmeath between January 1848 and March, 1871, but during those 23 years only four persons were convicted of murder in the county.' (Malcolm 2002:89) Grace (2009:65) outlines the failure of the security forces regarding threatening notices: 'during the twelve-year period 1834-45 as few as eighty-five persons were committed to trial for posting threatening notices in Tipperary, notwithstanding the fact that it was the single most common crime in the county. [Grace (2009: 48) gives the number of threatening notices over the period 1836 to 1843 as totalling 1075.] The committal rate was even lower at national level because only 321 individuals were committed to trial for the crime during the same period.'. Palmer provides a similar picture of failure: 'Disturbed districts were at time virtually out of control. In Queen's County and Kilkenny in 1831-2, sixty-three murder committals resulted in a lone conviction for manslaughter (a 2 percent rate). In Tipperary over a four-year period, 129 committals for armed assembly at night brought but 21 convictions (a 16 percent rate). The Crown Solicitor for Leinster told Parliament in 1839 that as far as he could recall, some 300 Whiteboy offences in Kilkenny in 1832 had netted only five convictions.' (Palmer 1988:339).

### **Religious repression**

Here we must also attend to the often ambivalent actions and attitudes of the catholic church to popular movements. Catholic bishops denounced the Whiteboys in the 1760s and the Ribbonmen in 1822: 'The Whiteboys were excommunicated in Cloyne in 1762, in Ferns and Cashel in 1775, and in Ossory in 1779' (Connolly 1982: 308-309). Connolly (1982 :236) notes the ways Catholic clergy demonstrated their opposition to agrarian and other disturbances 'through the penalising of offenders, through a close personal supervision of their parishioners, through cooperation with the civil authorities, and through the mobilisation of their parishioners in support of law and order' Indeed, the catholic church and its local cadre was often mobilised to help maintain law and order by local magistrates; in other cases they took action on their own volition. Examples abound of this behaviour by priests: let one example from famine-era Limerick suffice. The quotation is a long one, but the incident is worth retelling not only for its obvious lessons, but also for its author's righteous anger:



Rockite notices were posted on the chapel gates of Coshma barony and the surrounding districts on Sunday 5 April [1846] calling on 'the labouring classes and starving population to assemble on Tory Hill on Holy Thursday' for the purpose of devising means to provide food and employment for themselves and their families... On Holy Thursday, about 2,000 gathered on the summit, where a large plaid banner was hoisted on a pole as a rallying point. One of these roads passed by Tory Hill House, the residence of Fr. Laurence Hartnett, PP [parish priest] Croom, where his two curates, Fathers O'Shea and Meehan, watched the movements of the people with intense anxiety.

At one o'clock Fr. Meehan ascended the hill and pulled down the flag, which was badly received by the people. He exhorted them to disperse, but in vain. He then retired and the rallying flag was again hoisted. Fr. James O'Shea, who was held in great esteem by the people, then ascended the hill, accompanied by two prosperous farmers. He stood beside the flag and paraphrasing the patriot priest of Boolavogue said: "Boys I suppose this is the banner under which I have to fight". The tumultuous roar from the assembled throng indicated their belief that another Fr. Murphy had come to lead them in their hour of need. But Fr. O'Shea had not come to fight. He had come to break the resolve of those who would take by force of arms the vital necessities of life denied to their starving loved ones. Playing on the great love of the poor for the minor clergy and the promise of government aid in ten or twelve days, he persuaded the assembly to disperse. Amid cries of 'we will be starved before then', the broken poor went back to their impoverished cabins, to the despairing glances of the old and the weak, and the anguished cries of their wives and their children, slowly starving to death. Fr. O'Shea returned to the elegance of the parochial mansion, the bountiful table its sixty-acre farm generously provided, and the gratitude of his pastor, who had ruled the Catholics of Croom for thirty-two years in direct succession to his uncle, who had ruled them for twenty-eight years.' (Ó Súilleabháin 2015:90).

By the time of the Land League the Catholic clergy had overcome its opposition to at least some forms of agrarian agitation and many Land League meetings and platforms were filled with Catholic clergy.

### **The oxygen of publicity**

Another aspect of repression involved the state's attempts to control the circulation of information and comment, primarily through newspapers. The growing importance of nationalist-inclined newspapers in the development of the land war (Legg 1999, Kane 2003, Dungan 2014) was well recognised by the state.<sup>28</sup> What's interesting here is that we find the whole 'terrorism and the oxygen of publicity' discourse one hundred years before the more recent examples of this discourse. Legg (1999: 158) quotes the Catholic parish priest of Ballymacelligott in Co. Kerry writing to W.E. Forster (then the Chief Secretary

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<sup>28</sup> It's worth noting that conservative newspapers also took part in the Land League controversy and not only in print: 'The proprietors of the *Mail* helped to plan the Boycott relief expedition, intended as a private-enterprise attempt to show that the Land League could be defeated.' (Maume 2011:559).

for Ireland) in October 1880 as follows: 'for all the mischief being done in our county I hold the *Kerry Sentinel* newspaper responsible. Articles teeming with the most reckless abuse of landlords and agents, with the most pernicious advice and inflammatory utterances, appear in almost every number of that wretched journal... I don't know what power the Executive possesses, but if it could suppress immediately the further publication of the *Kerry Sentinel* comparative tranquillity would shortly return to us'. Thus newspapers were condemned for journalistic terrorism while other state officials believed agrarian outrages would cease if only the state cut off the oxygen of publicity given them by the mass media, thereby ignoring the reality that previous agrarian movements had no problem performing outrages without the need for newspapers.

Moran (1994:194) notes the importance of James Daly, publisher of the *Connaught Telegraph*, that his 'active role was one of the primary reasons why the movement advanced so rapidly. In the first twelve months he spoke at a hundred demonstrations, contemporaries described him as the 'storm centre' of the movement. Once the agitation extended its geographical base in late April 1880, it became the preserve of the middle- and upper-class farmers. Throughout this period it depended on a literate and avid reading public for its mass support. Daly's role and that of the *Connaught Telegraph* was most effective among that section of tenant society which could read his editorials and reports'. For the growth of the Land League in Leitrim Mac an Ghalloglaigh (1983/1984: 170) places emphasis on the contribution of two newspapermen: 'More important was the work of Jasper Tully of the *Roscommon Herald* and Edward Gayer of the *Sligo Champion* in furthering the growth of the League in the county. Both men, and Joe Biggar to a lesser extent, travelled the county, appearing as guest speakers at numerous rallies, driving home the message of the League and whipping up enthusiasm for it'. Moran (2013) outlines the central role Thomas Clegg, editor of the *Clare Independent*, played in the Land league in Co. Clare.

The government was well aware of the importance of these newspapers and took action when it could, including introducing clauses into the Criminal Law and Procedure Act of 1887 to deal indirectly with the problem these newspapers posed. This legislation 'enabled the executive, first to proclaim districts to prevent the commission of crime, and then prohibit or suppress any associations within these proclaimed districts and make unlawful any assembly connected with the associations and the publication of the objects and proceedings of the associations.' (Legg 1999:166). Legg lists nineteen prosecutions of papers under the Act with the following papers convicted of publishing proceedings of the National League: *Carlow Nationalist* (1889), *Cork Daily Herald* (1887), *Cork Examiner* (1887), *Kerry Sentinel* (1887 twice, 1888), *Leinster Leader* (1889)(conviction squashed), *Munster Express* (1889 twice, one reversed on appeal) and the *Wexford People* (1889) while the following papers were convicted for publishing articles other than reports on League branches: *Limerick Leader* (1889), *Midland Tribune* (1889), *Sligo Champion* (1888, 1889), *Tipperary Nationalist* (three times in 1889),

*Tipperary Sentinel* (1889) and the *Waterford News* (1889)(reversed on appeal). (Legg 1999:168-169; see also Fitzgerald 2015). All of these newspapers were provincial or local papers.

### **Transnational influences and connections: land and labour**

As well as the transnationalisation of repressive methods previously referred to, there has been some work on transnational agrarianism. Attention to the transnational aspects of Irish rural agitation has mainly come from foreign authors examining the appearance of traditional agrarian tactics in agitation by Irish labour in England and the US. Particular attention has been paid to the Molly Maguires in the mining districts of Pennsylvania in the US, given their importance in early US labour history. Kenny (1998:9) argued 'the American Molly Maguires make little sense unless the specifically Irish origins of their strategy of violence are understood'. He uses the term retributive justice 'to describe a form of collective violence designed to redress violations against a particular understanding of what was socially right and wrong ... In Ireland, the tradition of violence in question was directed against landlords and their agents, policemen and magistrates, small farmers and tenants. In Pennsylvania, it was directed against mineowners and superintendents, policemen and municipal officials and skilled British miners.' (Kenny 1998: 8-9). The most recent work by Bulik (2015), while suffering from occasional outbreaks of the shillelagh syndrome, has broken new ground by emphasising the cultural aspects of the agitation in Ireland.

Other work has been done on Irish workers on canals and railroads in the US. (Mason 1998, Perry 2013; Horner 2010, Way 1993) Writing of the Lachaine Canal strike in Canada Horner (2010:39) notes 'the forms of resistance carried out by migrant labourers at Lachaine resembled the forms of peasant resistance that Irish historians date to the 1760s'. Margaret Brehony (2014) has argued that 'the evidence strongly suggests that Irish emigrants from the pre-famine era were seasoned agrarian and labour protesters with experience of collective action which they brought to bear on their encounter with industrial capital in Britain, the US and Cuba'. This is certainly true in the case of the Molly Maguires and similar patterns of resistance and agitation have been noted among Irish labourers building infrastructure in the US and Canada, mainly canals and railways, while the Irish provided leadership for certain struggles of the US working class. On the other hand however, as Bruce Nelson (2000) has observed, 'few would disagree with the assertion that the Irish in the US enthusiastically embraced white supremacy and quickly developed an almost maniacal antagonism towards African Americans'. Thus, while first defending those labour niches that the Irish succeeded in monopolising and later integrating into US society in a process aptly described as 'becoming white' and later still providing a model for integration processes for later waves of European migrants, the Irish opposed black workers. Against this must be counted Foner's observation that Irish integration into the US did not necessarily entail assimilation into a middle-class, racist position but

assimilation into the radical alternative: 'assimilation could mean a merger not with the dominant culture and its values, but with a strong emergent oppositional working-class culture' (Foner 1980:195).

A very different path has been followed by those who have examined transnational aspects of the Land League, in particular its organisation of funding and support in the US. The Land League became a transnational movement because the Irish had, by emigration, become a transnational people. As Maloney (2004:74) notes 'The Land League was remarkable because it emerged as a transnational movement whose nerve centres included Dublin, London, New York and Boston'. The study of the spread of the Land League to the US has been mainly the preserve of American historians, with historians of Catholic America in the vanguard. An early evaluation by Green (1949) emphasised the support given to the Land League by Irish-American Catholics, lay and clerical. More recently Janis (2015) has provided an extended analysis, which recognises the way the Land League provided women and the working-class with opportunities to partake in political discussion and organisation while recording the eventual victory of conservative nationalism over radical elements in both Ireland and the US. Janis's work looks at the Land League in the US on a national level: it is complemented by Ruark (2014) which looks at the reception of the Ladies' Land League in the state of Georgia.

The American Land League involved an alliance between physical force nationalists, conservative Irish-Americans (Catholic clergy, the middle class and elements of the Democratic Party) and American social and labour radicals. This last group saw the land war as the vanguard of a global opposition to monopoly, whether of land or of industry, and allowed those facing their own struggles in the US to express solidarity with the Irish Land League. In this coalition the Land League succeeded in being all things to all people, due to the many interpretations possible of its wonderfully vague slogan 'The land for the people': 'this popular phrase was sufficiently vague to be acceptable to all shades of nationalist opinion' (Janis 2015:11). But this unity could not last too long: 'An unwieldy coalition of disparate groups, the Land league eventually collapsed under the weight of ideological and class divisions' (Janis 2015:11).

The Land League also provides an early illustration of the problems posed for national movements by dependence on foreign funding. Keyes (2011) illustrates this vital transnational aspect of the land war by noting the differences between US support for the first phase of the land war (1880-1882) as against the second phase (1886-1891) during which it 'struggled for funds to assist evicted tenants in the absence of significant support from America' (Keyes 2011: 7). Indeed Keyes (2011: 120) argues 'The twists and turns of this movement can be directly linked to the ebb and flow of American funding ... and it would be the limitations of that funding that would determine the tipping point when compromise became inevitable and Parnell retreated from the semi-revolutionary Land League.'

As well as work on the transnational spread of the Land League to the US, there has been some work on the influence of the Land League on the development of

Scottish land activism (Cameron 2005; Newby 2004, Newby 2007)<sup>29</sup> as well as on the English Land League. There is also a political analysis of Davitt's work in internationalist terms. (Armstrong 2010). Finally we may note Ohlmeyer's report that 'M.K. Gandhi later attributed the origin of his own mass movement of peaceful resistance in India to the Land League, which served as a model of agrarian disturbance, and to Davitt, who had pioneered peaceful means of agitation, including the use of boycott, rent strikes and the press.' (Ohlmeyer 2015:181).

## VI Conclusions

As to the lessons that may be learned by social movements from the history this article sketches out, they are obvious ones, most of which are depressingly familiar to activists from many other movement histories. The most obvious is that movements should be suspicious of charismatic, professional politicians who may offer to lead their struggles. Parnell is the example here, as he was happy to use the Land League and the land struggle for his own benefit and happy also to sell it out when it suited him.<sup>30</sup> The lesson drawn by Henry George, (quoted in Janis 2015:177) sums this up:

'The main lesson of the Irish agitation to me is that radical men should not allow themselves any consideration of a temporary expediency to put themselves under the leadership of politicians or to abate one jot or battle of their principles'.

Similarly, movements should beware of being used for campaigns that bring them no benefit. The example here is the winning of Catholic Emancipation under Daniel O'Connell, another charismatic, professional politician. The lesson here is summarised in a well-used quote:

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 better wages, and not give so much to the landlords.

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<sup>29</sup> As an interesting aside, James Hunter castigates academic historians of Scotland in terms he explicitly compares with criticisms of Irish revisionist historians, condemning also 'the parochialism in which academic historians of Scotland –a singularly isolationist breed- have always wallowed' (Hunter 2010:19) while noting how one historian 'adopts a perspective on Highland history in which the mass of Highlanders drop largely from view' (Hunter 2010:26).

<sup>30</sup> Parnell was not of course the only leader of a devious and opportunistic nature. Another Land League official, John J. Loudon, was one of the largest graziers in Mayo, who, when he obtained a rent reduction from his landlord in 1879-1881, did not pass that reduction on to his tenants (Moran 1994:205). Later examples can be cited from the Ranch War where in Riverstown, Co. Sligo, leaders of the agitation (mainly expressed through cattle drives) not only had cattle driven from the land they rented as graziers, but also participated in these cattle drives.

Related to both these lessons, is the conclusion that we should be wary of broad front, cross-class alliances which subordinate material interests to broader 'national' interests. The Irish movement provides a useful example of the tendency of cross-class nationalism to betray the interests of the lower classes on whose militancy and support it had relied for its shock troops. Ireland provides a very early example of how cross-class national liberation movements will downplay class issues and call for sectional sacrifice for the good of the nation, suggesting issues such as access to land, wage increases or female suffrage should be put on the long finger, until national independence is achieved, at which magical stage all such issues can be dealt with when the coloniser is expelled from power.

These bourgeois leaderships of national liberation movements normally continue with their betrayal of lower class and peasant groups after independence with a rhetoric of national development requiring sacrifices (and of course it is the poor, the peasant and the indigenous who must make these sacrifices.) Furthermore, groups such as peasants or labour are exhorted not to alienate elite, business and landlord classes whose involvement in the national movement is considered essential for success. Laird (2005) provides a fine series of examples of such calls for sacrifice in the Indian case, where landlordism and serfdom were even more outrageous than in Ireland, combined as they were with the indignities and insults of caste.

Finally however, there is a positive lesson that movements which respond to immediate material interests can have both immediate and longer-term effects that benefit movement participants. While the agrarian movements detailed in this article did not succeed in the end in preventing the commercialisation of agriculture, the defeat of subsistence agriculture and the victory of capitalism, they did impede them, and in their immediate effect won useful victories and over the longer term impeded capitalist development in rural Ireland. Finally these victories were won in the main by spontaneous, local action, often undertaken by the weakest groups, the wretched of the earth. In Scally's words 'It may be a lesson to be learned about colonialism that... the most successful resistance to intrusion was devised by the most ostensibly weakest layer of the native population, not by the intellegensia and organized political movements, but by the subjected peasantry' (Scally 1995:232-233)

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