

Agrarian conflict in pre-famine County Roscommon

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A note on spellings and language

As far as possible quotations from manuscript and other contemporary sources have been rendered exactly as written in the sources, because this study is *inter alia* concerned with the significance of language as the medium for the construction of social reality. Where deemed necessary, a square-bracketed explanation has been added.

Spellings have thus been rendered faithfully, including proper nouns. However, where many alternative spellings of parish and townland names were previously used, the modern spelling has been substituted, for the sake of uniformity in identifying locations. Unless specifically alluded to in the text, references to parishes are to civil parishes.

Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used in the footnotes:

Devon Commission

Royal Commission of Inquiry into the State of the Law and Practice in respect to the Occupation of Land in Ireland. Report, Minutes of Evidence, Part I 1845 (605)(606) xix.1,57. Minutes of Evidence, Parts II and III 1845 (616)(657) xx.1, xxi.1.

SC 1824

Select committee to inquire into disturbances in Ireland; report, appendix, 1824, (372) viii.1; minutes of evidence, indices, 1825 (20) vii.1.

SC 1825

Select committee of the House of Lords to inquire into state of Ireland with reference to disturbances. Reports, minutes of evidence, index. 1825 (129) viii.1.

HL 1825

Select committee of House of Lords to inquire into state of Ireland with reference to disturbances. Minutes of evidence. 1825 (181) ix.1. Minutes of evidence, appendix, index. 1825 (521) ix.249. Report (1825). 1826 (40) v.659.

SC 1831-2

Select committee on disturbed state of Ireland. Report, minutes of evidence, appendix, index. 1831-2 (677) xvi.1

SC 1839

Select committee of House of Lords on state of Ireland. Report, minutes of evidence, appendix, index. 1839 (486) xi.1, xii.1

SC 1852

Select committee on outrages (Ireland). Report. 1852 (438) xiv.1.

NLI

National Library of Ireland, Dublin.

SOCP1

State of the Country Papers, first series, National Archives of Ireland, Dublin.

SOCP2

State of the Country Papers, second series, National Archives of Ireland,
Dublin.

OR

Outrage Reports, National Archives of Ireland, Dublin.

CSORP

Chief Secretary's Office Registered Papers

RLG

Roscommon and Leitrim Gazette

RJ

Roscommon Journal and Western Impartial Reporter/Roscommon Journal
and Western Reporter

OS Extracts

Extracts ... relating to the topography and antiquities of County Roscommon collected by the Ordnance Survey, Ms 14, vol 6

OS Letters

Letters containing information relative to the antiquities of the county of Roscommon, collected during the progress of the Ordnance Survey in 1837, by John O'Donovan. Ms 14 F.8-9, Royal Irish Academy, Dublin.

OS Memoirs

Ordnance Survey memoirs, Box 50, County Roscommon. Royal Irish Academy, Dublin.

Keogh

A statistical account of the county of Roscommon by the Rev. John Keogh drawn up for Sir William Petty superintendant (sic) of the Down Survey, Anno Domini 1683, John Rylands University Library of Manchester Ms 498, a copy of the original manuscript, Trinity College, Dublin.

Whitworth, statement

A Statement of the nature and extent of the disturbances which have recently prevailed in Ireland, and the Measures which have been adopted by the Government of that Country, in consequence thereof. From the Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, Whitworth, to Lord Sidmouth, 5 June 1816. PP (479) IX.569.

County Roscommon was allotted number 25 for the registration of papers in the Chief Secretary's office but, for the sake of clarity, this numerical prefix has been omitted when citing references from the CSORP and OR series.

Chapter One

Introduction: whiteboyism, nationalism and modernization

This work seeks to reconsider whiteboyism in Ireland from the beginning of the nineteenth century until the great famine. Nationalist histories have explained the “recurring state of war between the authorities and rebellious peasants in many parts of the country” from the mid-eighteenth century until the great famine in terms of national oppression.¹ However, since Irish Historical Studies was first published, a number of historians have been prepared to re-examine the “self-evident truths” that had been established (and popularised) in the cause of nation and state-building. Agrarian conflict has, since JS Donnelly jr’s pioneering work in the 1970s, been subject to considerable re-evaluation. This study examines the legitimizing discourses and repertoires of collective action through conceptual models used to understand English crowd behaviour during the same period. Specifically, I will employ the notion of a “moral economy” developed by EP Thompson. I will evaluate modernization theories of collective action, which place agrarian conflict in a pre-modern position on a linear historic continuum. David Fitzpatrick’s study of conflict in a Leitrim parish typifies such an approach. Finally, I will consider the criticisms of

Thompson's approach developed in recent years by proponents of the "linguistic turn" in English social history, criticisms that question the assumptions of historical materialism which underpin Thompson's approach. County Roscommon is the focus for this investigation, for reasons which will be made apparent. Broadly speaking, agrarian conflict became endemic, rather than episodic, from around the turn of the nineteenth century. For that reason I have concentrated on the subsequent fifty years.

Revisionist historians have seen popular historiography as perpetuating myths about a socially homogeneous Gaelic world which was dispossessed by conquest and oppressed thenceforward by an alien Saxon élite. Whiteboyism, as the phenomenon is generically known after the name given to an early manifestation of such conflict, was the response of a national community suffering oppression, particularly over land. The popular version of national history portrayed the Williamite inheritors of Ireland as absentees, enjoying an extravagant life in the clubs of Dublin and London which was financed by rents extorted from the defeated Gael. Estates were neglected or left to unscrupulous, rack-renting middlemen, who also profited greatly from the misery of the peasantry. It is notable, however, that nationalist historians do not often dwell long on the subject of agrarian collective conflict.

This version of Irish history was, of course, of considerable political use, both in justifying the struggle for national independence and, after independence, in establishing the authority and legitimacy of the Free State dispensation.

A number of works in recent years have sought to refute popular apprehensions of agrarian conflict as being embryonically nationalist. However, there have only been rare, and then only tangential, attempts to use conceptual techniques developed in the historiography of other societies to illuminate further the nature of collective identities and actions in pre-famine Ireland. This study will not involve detailed consideration of land and religion in Ulster, complicated as it was by other factors. It does not attempt to trace the story of particular movements and their immediate economic stimuli (JS Donnelly jr has undertaken such studies for the major eighteenth century movements).² Instead, it will place the endemic agrarian conflicts of the first half of the nineteenth century in a viable conceptual framework. It will become apparent that the “linguistic turn” currently informing the historiography of English popular protest breathes new life into the historiographic paradigms of nationalism. Nationalist explanations of such conflicts have been qualified or rejected, but this recent historiographic approach reinvigorates the ethnic boundaries of social identity circumscribed by nationalism.

This introductory chapter will describe in a little more detail the historiography of whiteboyism and more general perceptions of the fault lines in Irish society which have prevailed in popular nationalist historiography. It will then be helpful to consider how these have been qualified or rejected by academic writing on the eighteenth century and early nineteenth century whiteboy movements, and the limitations of these qualifications. The next chapter will consider Thompson’s conceptual model, which will help define more clearly the nature of agrarian conflicts

and relations on the land in early nineteenth century Ireland. It will then be necessary to consider the sources available for the study of agrarian conflicts and their potential problems before explaining the reasons for the geographic focus of this study. The evidence from County Roscommon will be considered in detail before returning to Thompson's conceptual framework, assessing its usefulness and what further refinement may be required in the light of the evidence from County Roscommon.

First, then, it is necessary to consider the seminal early analysis of whiteboyism of George Cornwall Lewis, and to place popular nationalist perceptions of whiteboyism in the broader current of nationalist histories of social relations on the land. A general picture of what is understood by the nationalist historiography of whiteboyism and its concomitant rural social relations may thus be briefly established.

Numerous parliamentary enquiries into the sources of conflict and poverty in rural Ireland were conducted in the first half of the nineteenth century, but Lewis was the first significant analyst of whiteboyism. It is apparent from his work that the nationalist understanding of Irish history in terms of ethnic and religious conflict was mirrored by British élite opinion. Cornwall Lewis summarised that attitude adroitly:

“some have attributed the turbulence of the inferior Irish to their inherent barbarism; some to their religion, some to their hatred of England; some to their poverty, some to their want of education.”³

However, Lewis was something of a revisionist in his own day, claiming that agrarian rebels were not disloyal, despite being characterised as such by local elites.⁴ His assertion that:

“The Whiteboy association may be considered as a vast trades’ union for the protection of the Irish peasantry”,

has been quoted widely.⁵ Cornwall Lewis adduces a mass of evidence for his view, much of it abstracted from the many parliamentary investigations into agrarian disturbances in Ireland. British parliamentarians suspected that behind much whiteboy activity there was a nationalist conspiracy, so Cornwall Lewis’s main concern was to demonstrate that the disturbances were not insurrectionary, nor an alternative front for the dissolution of the United Kingdom. His work is, therefore, specifically designed to answer such representations of whiteboyism, representations which were later to be mirrored by nationalist historians. Lewis saw whiteboyism as largely unconnected with nationalism. Despite the recent experiences of the 1798 rebellion, the emancipation campaign and the tithe war, he was convinced that whiteboyism was not a nationalist revolt. He quotes one witness to a parliamentary committee saying that an English gentleman who was travelling through Ireland, either from motives of curiosity or commerce, would do so in perfect safety.⁶

Hindsight means that Cornwall Lewis’s prescription for the ills of the countryside may seem rather feeble, (the conclusion of all Lewis’s work on the question is a demand for the extension of the Poor Law to Ireland), but his analysis is no less persuasive for that. It also demonstrates the

complexity of rural social relations, beyond the bipolarity of antagonistic confessional or ethnic blocs.

Popular nationalist historians of Ireland wrote a different account of whiteboyism. The Home Rule MP and publisher of The Nation, AM Sullivan, described it as Ribbonism and believed it had continued almost until the time of writing, 1877. However, he appears to make no distinction between agrarian combination and urban proto-nationalist conspiracy, alluding to a Dublin leader called Jones, whose letters were full of talk about liberating Ireland.⁷ Sullivan believed that such combinations were the product of a “vicious land system”.⁸ Subsequent historians have sought to distinguish more carefully between agrarian combinations and urban nationalist conspirators, who were more commonly called Ribbonmen.⁹ They have distinguished them on the grounds of social composition and objectives, but observers like Sullivan were less concerned to make such distinctions, and thus the names were frequently used interchangeably (in Sullivan’s defence, it ought to be acknowledged that many contemporaneous accounts of whiteboyism used “Ribbonism” freely when reporting agrarian collective action). McCartney asserts that “Ribbonism was mainly an urban movement”, that it was “opposed to mere agrarianism” and that it had a more significant political content than agrarian combinations. This view can be justified by an examination of parliamentary accounts of whiteboyism. The Meath chief constable, John Hatton, told an 1839 parliamentary enquiry that “they are very different ... The one is connected with the taking of Land, and that kind of System; the other is a revolutionary System”. He conceded

that people who were whiteboys could also be “Ribandmen”, but suggested a general social division between agrarian rebels and the nationalist conspirators:

“they will not allow any Person to become a Ribandman who is not a Man of Character for Industry and sober Habits.”¹⁰

It is evidently impossible to make absolute distinctions between agrarian and Ribbon activity. The county Roscommon evidence suggests that not only were agrarian protesters more politically conscious than previously supposed, but also that their politics was not “proto-nationalist”, a politics usually associated with Ribbonism. The name Ribbonmen first appeared in the State of the Country Papers relating to Roscommon in April 1815, but in connection with exactly the same kind of agrarian activity that had been attributed to Threshers immediately before that date. Indeed, some correspondents continued to call Roscommon agrarian rebels Threshers for some time after the first appearance of the Ribbonmen name.¹¹

Another journalist, R Barry O’Brien, in a work introduced by John Redmond, wrote that:

“the unfortunate Irish peasant, in addition to supporting the religion in which he believed, was obliged to pay rents to ‘absentee’ landlords, and tithes to the ministers of an ‘alien’ church”¹².

The key word is alien. Such linguistic usages are characteristic of a historiography that insists on the primacy of the national struggle between natives and foreigners. Redmond’s introduction describes the land system more generally as the “curse of the country”¹³ and O’Brien concludes that

even where the landlord was Irish-born “the bayonets of England ... were behind the landlords”¹⁴. Sullivan suggests that these rural conflicts pitted Irishman against Irishman and were thus wretched aberrations. However, both Sullivan and O’Brien were Home Rule MPs who, while sharing the nationalist consensus about the source of the problems faced by rural Irish people, had no enthusiasm for the bloody means employed by agrarian rebels to redress perceived wrongs. Insofar as these wrongs were the result of British rule, they fitted the nationalist view of the agrarian problem, but the solution was not direct action by the rural poor. This may at least partly explain the relative lack of attention paid by Irish nationalist writers to agrarian conflicts. If rural conflict could not wholly be explained by English oppression, or if too close an examination revealed conflicts within the community of oppressed Gaels, it might be either disregarded or dismissed with a general comment about English oppression. O’Brien’s sophistry concerning landlords and bayonets is an example of this approach. The creators of nationalist discourses about social relations wanted to demonstrate a national unity, rather than reveal areas of conflict.

However, constitutional nationalism’s dismay at the tactics of agrarian rebels was supplanted as nationalist orthodoxy by a view that treated whiteboyism more sympathetically. PS O’Hegarty criticized Sullivan directly:

“He had condemned Ribbonism, but neither he nor anybody else, until Parnell, had any alternative to it, or realised that it was essential to the continued existence of the Irish rural population, as being their only defence against the Government which misgoverned them and

the landlords who oppressed them ... They were forced to do hard and cruel things, but harder and more cruel things were done against them.”

O’Hegarty concludes, in a pithy statement of the popular nationalist understanding of whiteboyism, that “if their objects were sectarian and agrarian in fact, they were national in spirit”.¹⁵

This approach to whiteboyism can be located in a broader current of popular nationalist historiography concerned with rural social relations. While it takes a sympathetic approach to the problems of the rural poor, it can nevertheless be located on the same analytical continuum that allowed no source of conflict other than the struggle between native Gael and foreign conqueror. Such versions of Irish history were popularised widely through the history curriculum taught in the influential Christian Brothers’ schools. The popular perceptions of Irish history that evolved from the Christian Brothers’ education system have been examined by BM Coldrey, who demonstrates how the educational ethos developed by the Brothers was critical in the development of popular nationalist understanding of Irish history. That history defined the Irish nation as homogeneously Roman Catholic, Gaelic and oppressed, displaying a significant congruity with the popular historiography of whiteboyism. Coldrey suggests that:

“The principal theme of Irish history, as they expounded it, was that of Irish resistance to English invasion; of Irish suffering resulting from English persecution; of Irish struggle against English oppression.”¹⁶

Coldrey goes on to analyse Christian Brothers' texts. An example will give a flavour of the Brothers' approach to teaching history. The periodical Our Boys was aimed at the Christian Brothers' pupils. In ten instalments one 1914 serial included five examples of British cowardice, eleven of British cruelty towards Irish people, six of Irish chivalry faced with British crudity, ten of the Irish defeating the English in battle, three situations where Ireland was economically exploited by Britain and no examples where English men dealt fairly or generously with Ireland or its people.¹⁷

The significance of the Brothers' teaching of Irish history was that they were a dynamic order which produced its own textbooks and made a significant impact on the consciousness of generations of young Irish men. Their version of Irish history informed popular apprehensions of agrarian social relations (in the more general context of Irish history) before and after independence, and arguably until the present.

Popular historical novels such as Walter Macken's trilogy based on the Cromwellian Wars, the Great Famine and the War of Independence sustained this version of history in independent Ireland. Macken's novel The Silent People deals in some detail with whiteboyism. The hero muses on pre-conquest vertical social ties in Irish society, "when men were free and had access to the boards of their lords to argue and declare their freedom and their rights." The violence of whiteboyism is contrasted with the orderliness of O'Connell's election supporters, and his death is described as "the end of hope". Although this approach may appear to reflect Sullivan's, Macken did suggest additional complexities, such as

O'Connell's eviction of his tenants and the fact that a particularly unpleasant agent was a Catholic.¹⁸

Perhaps the most significant statement of the approach which seeks unite all native Gaels, humble or exalted, in a homogeneous Irish nation, was made by the Cork author and critic, Daniel Corkery. His 1924 work, The Hidden Ireland, ostensibly about eighteenth century vernacular poetry in Munster, is premised on the social, cultural and political unity of Ireland before the seventeenth century confiscations. The Gael in the hovel and the Gael in the Big House had shared an ancient and noble culture and society, based on communitarian ideals derived from race, language, and religion. These ideals were fundamentally at odds with the alien, acquisitive, culture of the conquerors. Corkery asserts:

“The Gaels in the big houses were one with the cottiers in race, language, religion and, to some extent, culture.”¹⁹

The political consequences of such a view are a belief that the fundamental fissure in Ireland was between the alien oppressors and the oppressed, conquered Irish. The limits of Corkery's approach were first outlined by Cullen thirty years ago.²⁰ For Corkery, as for the Christian Brothers and Home Rule MPs, the main problem of Irish society was the relationship with Britain, and national independence was required to resolve this problem. The colonial relationship to Britain oppressed the peasant in the hovel, the dispossessed Gaelic aristocrat and the Catholic professional, suggesting shared interests between these groups. The confiscations of the Gaelic aristocracy's estates had underpinned Ireland's subjection to

the British crown. National independence was required so that Irish society could develop, unimpeded by colonial handicaps. It is questionable whether some of the advocates of an "Irish Ireland" sought "development" in an economic sense at all, developing a discourse which suggested that social ills which are incompatible with a pious, Catholic people would accompany such development. De Valera's famous image of comely maidens dancing at the crossroads is self-consciously articulated in opposition to the perceived vulgar materialism of industrial society, Britain being paradigmatic.

To Corkery, and to popular nationalist writers like O'Brien, Sullivan and O'Hegarty, conflict in Irish history stemmed from the disruption of the Gaelic past by conquest, and the conflicts which racked the country over land from the 1760s until the Great Famine were proto-national, in so far as they arrayed the colonists against the native Irish. The tenants, oppressed by the exactions of middle men, an alien church and a hostile legal system combined to oppose their oppressors. The popular images of landlord and tenant relations in eighteenth and nineteenth century Ireland are those of rapacious middle men enforcing distress warrants or evictions, aided by a partisan police force and magistracy.

Professional historians of Ireland were largely concerned with other issues until relatively recently. This was so much so that the chapters on the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in a survey of history scholarship published by the Irish Committee of Historical Sciences in 1971, reprinted from *Irish Historical Studies*, failed to mention the conflicts which afflicted the countryside in the century before the famine.²¹ It was only with the

publication of Secret Societies in Ireland in 1973 that agrarian conflicts became the central focus of studies, by historians who examined the nature of whiteboy conflicts rather more precisely than had previously been the case. Two chapters in the book are particularly relevant, suggesting new approaches to pre-famine agrarian conflicts. Maureen Wall asserted that both Catholics and Protestants had been involved in whiteboy agitations, and that both Catholic and Protestant clergy had been targets.²² Less surprising, in view of the dislike of secret societies expressed by mainstream nationalist figures like Sullivan, was Wall's suggestion that the Catholic church had frequently come into conflict with its congregation over rural rebellions. However, her essay was a significant revision of the popular conception of a peasantry oppressed by an alien church and landlords (although the popular perception remained relatively immune to the work of professional historians). Joseph Lee's contribution to the book asserted bluntly that such agrarian movements were not nationalist. However, Lee repeated Sullivan's dubious nomenclature of a century earlier in using the term Ribbonmen to describe clandestine agrarian organisations.²³

In the 1970s and 1980s James Donnelly jr's contribution to the study of Irish agrarian movements was critical in opening up professional approaches to the subject. A succession of detailed papers profoundly revised the nationalist orthodoxy. Donnelly explicitly described his efforts as revisionist, and drew on sources which had previously been relatively unexplored.²⁴ His findings were revelatory. Donnelly's examination of the Whiteboys demonstrated conflict among the Catholic population, as well as

the same distaste among Catholic commentators for their rebellious lower order co-religionists that Home Rulers like Sullivan felt a century later.²⁵

The nationalist orthodoxy was challenged most directly in Donnelly's work on the Rightboy movement. Not only did Donnelly discover conflict among Catholics, but also he found Protestant gentry in positions of leadership in the movement.²⁶ Such findings led Donnelly to conclude that the social composition of agrarian movements varied according to the economic stimulus provoking collective action.²⁷ He also attempted to impose some sort of conceptual order on the mass of evidence he had considered. This included a consideration of theories of collective action and modernization.²⁸ It will be necessary to return to these themes shortly.

Popular nationalist views of the rural social relations which form a general context for whiteboyism have also been challenged and revised on a number of grounds, including land ownership and agrarian class composition and structure. It is useful to consider some of these revisions, relating in particular to the eighteenth century prelude to the uninterrupted whiteboyism of the first half of the nineteenth century. Séan Connolly has recently summarised these revisions thus:

"Ireland in this period can no longer be conceived in terms of the simple duality of anglicised landlord and Gaelic peasant".²⁹

Kevin Whelan has suggested that the significance of the post-confiscation Catholic landlord bloc has previously been underestimated. Legal devices such as holding land in trust were adopted widely to ensure the continuity of the Catholic landed interest. In this way as much as 20 per cent of the

land may have remained in the hands of its former owners, the most conspicuous in County Roscommon being the O'Connor Don of Cloonalis House, near Castlerea.³⁰

Additionally, Whelan suggests that even where, as on the majority of estates, eighteenth century landlords were disposed to hire Protestants as middle men (they were seen as more loyal and trustworthy), in practice it was not possible to do this. Whelan has gone on to suggest that the former owners of the land became middle men in a significant number of cases and retained an honoured status within the "indigenous" Gaelic population. Arthur Young noted in north County Cork:

"All the poor people are Roman Catholics, and among them are the descendants of the old families who once possessed the country, of which they preserve the full memory, insomuch, that a gentleman's labourer will regularly leave to his son, by will, his master's estate."³¹

It will be necessary to return to this "underground gentry", but for now it should be observed that the continued existence of Catholic land owners, and the role of former owners as middle men (a rôle reserved by nationalist histories exclusively for the worst Saxon parasites) are a challenge to nationalist orthodoxy.

Samuel Clark has suggested that layers of stratification existed in land relations in rural Ireland, another ground for qualifying the perceived unity in oppression of all Gaels. In a study focused partly on the period covered here, he suggests that it is necessary to distinguish not only the cottier and labouring poor from the more substantial tenant farmers, but

also an intermediate layer of smaller tenant farmers whose relative impoverishment led them to side with one or other of the classes he distinguishes among the rural population beneath the land owning group which occupied the apex of the social pyramid. Clark correctly sees conflict in the nineteenth century Irish countryside as primarily between the tenant farmer and cottier/labourer class.³² Clark's disagreement with the popular perception of a united peasantry fighting the landed colonial élite is asserted unequivocally:

"Popular accounts hold that in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the rural Catholic population fought continuously to resist the oppression from which it suffered at the hands of heartless and mostly absentee landlords ... If one examines this unrest carefully, one finds that it did not consist of one continuous struggle but of a number of different collective efforts by members of distinguishable social groups within the rural population, whose interests were not identical and sometimes diametrically opposed."³³

Clark proceeds to construct an elaborate table which divides the nineteenth century rural population into five different classes: non-farming élites, large independent landholders, small independent landholders, labourer-landholders and landless labourers. He attributes struggles over various issues to conflicts between different permutations of these classes. It will be necessary to return to this model in the next chapter when considering conceptual tools for understanding agrarian conflict. For now it is enough to observe that Clark's studies demonstrate heterogeneity among the non-élite rural population in Ireland in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Further evidence to suggest an absence of Gaelic homogeneity among the rural population is provided by Joseph Lee, who attributes 103 out of 163 outrages recorded for County Roscommon in the first five months of 1846 to “disputes between labourers and either landlords or, far more frequently, farmers”.³⁴

Clearly, then, the nationalist notion of social homogeneity among the rural population beneath the land-owning élite has been radically challenged, Whelan going so far as to suggest that the land-owners were nowhere nearly so uniformly English, Protestant and absentee as asserted in nationalist historiography.

Others have re-evaluated the general relations between the Catholic church and its flock in the eighteenth century, just as Donnelly noted the conflicts which arose between the Catholic church and its congregations. Where nationalists portrayed an image of the mass rock and the people and priests suffering together under penal statute as paradigmatic of relations between the Catholic church and its congregation, revisionist accounts suggest otherwise. While Clark and Lee have described instances of conflict between co-religionists, it is possible also to produce instances of conflict between the rural poor and their own clergy. These could be over the dues levied by the clergy for the performance of various rites, the expulsion of priests from chapels so that oaths could be administered or threats that were made to persuade priests not to interfere in the business of secret societies. Indeed, Donnelly’s study of the Rightboys suggests that one tactic could be to join a Protestant church. In

early 1786 several entire County Cork parishes seceded to the Church of Ireland.³⁵ Clergy of both denominations were attacked and assaulted.³⁶

So it was not only tithes payable to the Established church which were a source of conflict between churches and congregations. Michael Beames has described how, in the first Whiteboy movement of the 1760s:

“Catholic clergy were equally liable to the attentions of Whiteboys when their charges were deemed excessive.”³⁷

Priests' dues continued to be an issue for the rural poor after 1800, and Beames ascribes conflicts between Catholic priests and their congregations not only to economic motives, but also to the concerted effort by the Catholic church in the decades preceding the famine to tighten and consolidate its ideological control over the populace.³⁸ This process - and the contrast between earlier “folk” versions of Catholicism and Paul Cullen's ultramontane church - has been analysed seminally by Emmet Larkin and Séan Connolly. Larkin suggests that before the 1840s mass attendance was as low as 40 per cent and that the ratio of priests to people was so low as to severely limit “any effective service on the part of the clergy”.³⁹ More significant for the purposes of this study are Larkin's examples of the “performance” of the pre-Cullenite clergy - and their conflicts with Catholic congregations. He suggests that the clergy were guilty of drunkenness, womanising and avarice. The most significant of these for the congregation was avarice. In one 1840 case, parishioners from County Mayo petitioned the Pope about alleged abuses by the clergy.

There were fifteen different complaints registered in a petition which, Larkin suggests,

“was the product of a fierce local struggle for power, with the contending parties prepared to say and write the worst about their opponents”.⁴⁰

Indeed, in 1831 the Dublin archdiocese bishops set up statutory tariffs for the performance of clerical tasks such as baptisms, weddings and funerals. These dues had been the subject of many conflicts between clergy and congregation, as Beames suggested, and reveal clearly the inadequacy of the nationalist image of priest and people at one in oppression, and of their steadfastness in their faith. Connolly has noted the efforts of George Thomas Plunket, Catholic Bishop of Elphin between 1814 and 1827, to reform “drunken, immoral and disorderly clergy”.⁴¹

Connolly has furthermore pointed out the efforts of the Catholic church to impose a stricter discipline on its adherents. It is often supposed that the reform process began with Cullen’s accession to the see of Dublin in 1850, but the synod held that year at Thurles was the consolidation of a half-century of reform and reorganisation. Connolly suggests that conflicts between priests and congregation “contrast sharply with the pious picture ... of a clergy and laity united by common social origins and shared grievances”.⁴² Connolly has interestingly compared the attempts of the Irish Catholic clergy to impose order and discipline on their congregations with the efforts of moral reformers in England.⁴³

In 1807 a magistrate in Swinford, County Mayo, identified dues payable to Catholic clergy as a source of disturbances by Threshers, as well as tithes payable to ministers of the Established church.⁴⁴ Later that year Lord Hartland of Strokestown Park, County Roscommon, wrote to a fellow landlord after disturbances on his own estate:

“This business is a quarrell between the priests and their flocks about clerical dutys viz Christenings, marriages and for which they have lately considerably raised their fees.”⁴⁵

On 6 January 1814 magistrate John Wills read the riot act to an assembly of several hundred people at the Catholic church of Ballagh, also in County Roscommon, after the parish priest refused to say Mass because of their conduct.⁴⁶ As late as 1839 George Warburton, who had a long career as a constabulary inspector and knew Roscommon well, told a House of Lords committee that Catholic priests were violently discouraged from interfering in the activities of the oath-bound secret societies.⁴⁷ George Cornwall Lewis noted antipathy between the rural poor and Catholic clergy. He confirmed that Catholic priests' dues, as well as tithes, had been the cause of the Thresher disturbances in Connacht in late 1806 and 1807.⁴⁸ Cornwall Lewis also cited a case from 1775 in County Kildare when a priest was buried to his neck in thorns. He suggested that the Catholic clergy, nobility and gentry had been “most active” in the suppression of disturbance, and recounted the case of a murder in Kilkenny of a landjobber who was the brother of the Catholic Bishop of Ossory.⁴⁹ A parliamentary witness is quoted as lamenting that the “Whitefeet pay little

respect to their clergymen".⁵⁰ The Whiteboy and Rightboy movements were not to be interpreted as nationalist or religious rebellion:

"the Munster disturbances although they were carried on by Catholics ... were not intended to serve the cause of Catholicism".⁵¹

Historians seeking to discover divisions in Irish society which were not based on nationality, race or religion have also found evidence in the activities of early nineteenth century factions, such as the Caravats and Shanavests of east Munster. Factions were gangs which met almost ritually, particularly on fair days, to engage in combat for the sake of family or community pride. They were particularly associated with leading families (often the descendants of local pre-confiscation land owners – although gentlemen were less willing to be associated with factions after the turn of the nineteenth century – and possibly associated with the "underground gentry") or unitary geographic locations.⁵² For example, Boyle fair days in the early nineteenth century were regularly accompanied by confrontations between the mountain men and the plains men, factions from distinct areas near the town. A convention which excluded firearms from such conflicts was breaking down in the early nineteenth century and the conflicts were no longer restricted to market place confrontations.⁵³ One examination of the Shanavests suggests the faction was a vigilante gang formed by middle class nationalist farmers connected with the 1798 rebels:

"The Shanavests were an unprecedented middle-class anti-Whiteboy movement formed specifically to combat the Caravats. They seem to have combined vigilantism and informing with the

propagation of an ideological alternative to Whiteboyism, namely, nationalism.”⁵⁴

Roberts's analysis of 28 members of the Shanavests reveals that 21 were tenant farmers, though four were labourers, possibly because of family ties with members or because while the social status of a family had changed, their gang loyalty remained.⁵⁵ The faction was based on local groups who were bound by family ties that expressed hereditary family conflicts, not through the arms raid or the threatening letter but through fighting and prosecuting the Caravats, who more closely resembled a whiteboy association. Roberts suggests that rather than being kin-based factions, the rivalries of Caravats and Shanavests expressed opposing class interests among the rural population.

However, David Fitzpatrick has suggested that hereditary kin rivalries were the likely precipitant of conflicts over land and, indeed, conflicts between or within families and communities were much more significant than any between native Gaels and oppressive Saxon landlords or between social classes. His study of the Outrage Reports for one County Leitrim parish, Cloone, between 1835 and 1852 suggests a range of motives behind agrarian conflicts which leave little doubt that nationality was not the sole basis for conflict in rural Irish society before the mid-nineteenth century.⁵⁶ He sees these as being more significant than class divisions in non-elite rural society. Fitzpatrick suggests that community or family loyalty (or disloyalty) was more likely to be the source of outrage than any proto-national or embryonic class struggle:

“Many of the outrage cases ... discussed in a class context may be reinterpreted more profitably as intra-family disputes.”⁵⁷

This is at odds with Cornwall Lewis’s study. Cornwall Lewis was convinced that the phenomenon under consideration was “social”, rather than individual, crime:

“The persons who commit these crimes do not, like the bandits of Italy or the London thieves, follow crime as a profession: they are merely called out by their brethren for the occasion”.⁵⁸

Nor is it merely “the banding together of a few outcasts ... but the deliberate association of the peasantry, seeking by cruel outrage to insure themselves against the risk of utter destitution and abandonment.”⁵⁹

The question was clearly of some significance to Cornwall Lewis, who appeared particularly concerned to show that rural disturbances were the pursuit of individual ends through a collective discipline. This is a point he emphasized repeatedly. He pointed to the lack of petty theft associated with whiteboy raids on houses (they took money only to help cover legal costs and not for personal gain), where they removed arms and little else:

“Conduct of this kind clearly evinces the feeling of the Whiteboys, that they are the administrators of a general system, meant for the benefit of a *body*, and by which *individuals* are not to be allowed to profit”,⁶⁰

and again:

“The Whiteboys do not seek plunder in the individual case but to enforce a law for the general advantage of the poor.”⁶¹

For Lewis, the system was a generalized one, demanding the loyalty of a wide range of people, rather than expressing the desires of a particular family or community against another, so that "homicides are considered, not as casual acts of individual malice or vengeance, but as exemplary infliction, intended to deter all others".⁶² The people had a general sympathy with the cause of the Whiteboys and saw their own interests as bound up with its success.⁶³ Lewis distinguished between public and private grievances, adding that it was much easier to find witnesses in cases where the nature of the offence was private (he cited the example of the case of a murder of a husband by his wife and her lover).⁶⁴ Alexis de Tocqueville was shocked when he was told of the murder of an agent who evicted a sick woman and then destroyed her home before the woman's eyes. The agent was killed by a man "who was not personally interested in any way in the act ... but who acted out of vengeance for that deed".⁶⁵

Cornwall Lewis did allow that "although the Whiteboys' union was for the protection of a class, occasionally there were hatreds among the factions contained in that class".⁶⁶

Fitzpatrick, however, suggests that where there were family rivalries over claims to coveted farms, houses or jobs, the claimants were strongly tempted to reinforce their claims through intimidation, factional combination and outrage.⁶⁷ Indeed,

"Conflicts apparently between classes may often be reinterpreted as struggles within families; conflicts within classes may be construed as struggles between family factions."⁶⁸

For Fitzpatrick, these conflicts between and within social strata mean that concepts like class or community “carry little conviction”.⁶⁹ Avowed egalitarianism merely legitimised factional exclusivism.⁷⁰

Fitzpatrick also takes up and disagrees with Samuel Clark’s finely stratified model of the rural population, asserting that small and large farmers should not be separated into classes and attributed with the potential for hostile mobilisation.⁷¹ Indeed,

“The subtle stratification of agrarian society was a ladder which one could climb up or slip down, not a pyramid on which each man felt he had been assigned (perhaps unfairly) his proper station.”⁷²

Donnelly notes Fitzpatrick’s enthusiasm for the kin and community explanation, and concedes that there is evidence to support class, kin, communal or a combination of these as explanations of the causes of conflict, particularly in considering factions, which may have been led by a local family which had authority or power.⁷³ However, he emphasises that Roberts, Beames and Fitzpatrick all underestimate the impact of economic fluctuation on the social composition of whiteboy movements.⁷⁴ In making such an emphasis, Donnelly implicitly accepts Clark’s model of conflict between various non-élite social strata as being of primary importance in agrarian unrest. His work is frequently underpinned by examinations of how prevailing economic conditions may have influenced the social profile of those who become involved in whiteboy activity and the groups who actually come into conflict.⁷⁵ Donnelly shows how, for example, during the Rightboy movement, relatively benign economic conditions led to increased concern

across a broader social range with issues like priests' dues, tithes and rates. Issues like conacre rents were unknown as sources of conflict during the Rightboy movement.⁷⁶ However, while Donnelly delineates thoroughly the unique features, economic stimuli and social compositions of various movements, he does not examine the frequently similar legitimizing notions used by agrarian rebels to justify their actions, despite an acknowledgement that similar grievances were aired throughout the whiteboy period.⁷⁷ Appeals to custom, whether ancient or created contemporaneously to legitimize some new demand, were highly significant.

If rural Irish society was not characterised from the confiscations until the famine by two homogeneous social blocs - one Gaelic, Catholic and dispossessed, the other Anglo-Saxon, Protestant and in possession - the class distinctions stressed in some accounts, from Cornwall Lewis to Paul Roberts, are an alternative discourse of conflict in Ireland's social history. However, Fitzpatrick's work not only rejects the perceptions relayed through popular nationalist historiography, but also any determining significance being placed upon class relations in the pre-famine countryside. In doing so, Fitzpatrick's work can be located in a broader historiography of modernization which identifies solidarities in "pre-modern" societies as based largely around the parochial, familiar world of the peasant's family and the vertical ties to local community élites. This was a time when class solidarities in the "modern" urban and industrial sense did not yet exist. Fitzpatrick states his modernization approach explicitly when he quotes Cullen approvingly: "The changing character of

manifestations of unrest in the nineteenth century ... are a subtle indication of the progress of modernisation.”⁷⁸

Donnelly and Clark considered the impact of modernization when discussing conceptual approaches to Irish agrarian conflict, and placed such conflicts in a modernizing framework developed by Charles Tilly, in which conflicts were transformed over many years from local to national, reactive to active and communal to associational.⁷⁹ Tilly identified three types of collective violence - the primitive, the reactionary and the modern. The primitive stage was characterised by struggles between communal groups, the reactionary by small-scale conflict between communal groups or loosely organised members of the population and the modern undertaken by the complex, durable organisations of a significant section of the population against local élites or representatives of a central power.⁸⁰ Tilly has since rejected this analysis, and has attempted to understand how changes in patterns of collective struggle (which he now calls “popular contention”) occur without the need to build them in to a narrative of modernization in which reactionary social forces like the peasantry were swept aside by the development of commerce, capitalism and the consolidation of a centralised state apparatus.⁸¹ It will be necessary to return to this theme. What may be significant in terms of the historiography of Irish popular protest, however, is that Clark and Donnelly add the important qualification that both reactionary and modern forms could co-exist for a time.⁸²

It will be necessary to return to the notion of modernization when discussing conceptual models, but it is clear that Fitzpatrick's approach does mark a significant break from the popular nationalist historiographic consensus and also from other revisions of that consensus.

The suggestion by Fitzpatrick that agrarian collective actions were characterised by group identities springing from pre-modern sources of social identity - kin or community - echoes the work of George Rudé and Eric Hobsbawm. Hobsbawm's study of brigandage in southern Europe suggests that the social brigand appeared only before the poor have achieved more effective means of social agitation, "when the jaws of the dynamic modern world seize the static communities".⁸³ Hobsbawm's discussion of the secrecy and symbols of the brigands may appear familiar to the student of Irish agrarian movements, and he locates movements characterised by such "primitive" symbols as ones where "Bonds of kinship or tribal solidarity which ... are the key to what are thought of as primitive societies, persist."⁸⁴

In the process of modernization, rural conflicts such as the Captain Swing revolt and the Rebecca riots of the 1830s and 1840s were the "final upsurge of a dying social class ... As capitalist industry and agriculture developed, the peasant, like the handloom weaver, was inevitably doomed".⁸⁵

Rudé suggested that the result of the process was that "the machine wrecker, rick burner and "Church and King" rioter have given way to the trade unionist, labour militant and organised consumer of the new

industrial society.”⁸⁶ Pre-modern peasant bands were “fired as much by memories of customary rights or a nostalgia for past utopias as by present grievances or hopes of material improvement, and they dispense a rough-and-ready kind of “natural justice”.”⁸⁷

This backward-looking attempt to preserve customarily held rights was noted in an Irish context by Cornwall Lewis. He quoted evidence to a Commons select committee in 1831 which related the story of a peasant insisting on occupancy rights because his forefathers had been in possession of the small plot of land he was under pressure to relinquish.⁸⁸ One of the objects of the Whiteboys in 1761 had been to level enclosure fences - reversing a “modern” encroachment on customary rights.⁸⁹ Such appeals to custom were, as they became increasingly desperate and violent, often expressed in a quasi-legal language, based on an alternative, customary legal authority. Cornwall Lewis, discussing threatening notices, observed that “These mandates are often written in a style resembling a legal notice.”⁹⁰

Whelan has also observed these relations, based on customary senses of obligation between landlord and tenant, in his study of the downwardly mobile Catholic gentry after the Williamite wars. Whelan notes the sense of mutuality between the “shadow gentry ... perhaps facilitating access to jobs, subleases, conacre or cottier holdings”, and the rural poor, but also that, under the impact of economic change the “underground gentry” abandoned their patrician role and immersion in popular culture:

“By the late eighteenth century, these common ties in the informal intimacy of collective engagement in popular culture had snapped, to be replaced by a more formal, distant relationship.”⁹¹

As a consequence,

“The great redresser movements, the Whiteboys and Rightboys, sought a return to the days when the moral economy blunted the impact of the real one.”⁹²

Indeed, the earliest prefiguring of whiteboyism was in the actions of the Houghers in 1711 and 1712 against people who were “not ancient inhabitants and natives” (although that did not prevent Catholics from suffering at their hands in County Roscommon).⁹³

It was the “underground gentry” that was to re-emerge as the Catholic middle class and “strong farmer” interest in the nineteenth century, and as the backbone of O’Connell’s movement, adopting policies of “improvement” on the land, emancipation from religious penalties in public life and nationalism in politics. As part of this adoption of “improvement” they were to come increasingly into conflict with their Catholic tenants and sub-tenants.⁹⁴ Near Tuam in the summer of 1835, a Catholic priest acknowledged to de Tocqueville that Catholic and Protestant landlords “oppress the people in about the same way”.⁹⁵ It may be just such farming interests that were identified by Cornwall Lewis when he quoted evidence to a Commons committee which suggested that factions were led by farmers or sons of farmers.⁹⁶ The factions may, indeed, have been the echo of eighteenth century vertical loyalties between descendants of the

dispossessed Catholic gentry and the poor. Donnelly notes that factions were often known by family names, which signified particularly powerful or authoritative families.⁹⁷ The relative upward mobility of the tenant farmers would also make more sense of Fitzpatrick's slippery ladder image than any suggestion that social mobility might be "vigorous" for a rural population which included desperately poor cottiers and labourers.⁹⁸

TC Barnard has criticised Whelan's model, but for the purposes of this work there is a significant area of agreement, and that concerns the pervasive culture of landlordism in the eighteenth century. Where Whelan has suggested that hospitality, gaming and leisure were the principal pursuits of the "underground gentry", Barnard suggests that the new Protestant landlord élite adopted a similar ethos (although he disagrees with Whelan about some details of lifestyle).⁹⁹ Barnard, like Whelan, rejects the popular image of the absentee landlord, enjoying huge profits from the suffering peasantry. Rather, landlords and middlemen enjoyed vertical ties and a sense of mutuality with their tenants, whatever the confessional affiliation. The corollary of this is that where conflict did arise, it was not necessarily legitimized in terms of ethnic or religious difference, but more commonly in terms of the customary duties of the rich to the poor.

Maria Edgeworth's novel, Castle Rackrent, illustrates what Whelan and Barnard describe. It is narrated by a faithful Gael, Thady Quirk, whose family has lived rent-free on the Rackrent estate since "time out of mind".¹⁰⁰ The novel also illustrates the way in which old Catholic families could retain possession of their estates by means of legal sophistry. The Rackrents had earlier been called O'Shaughlin. Edgeworth's observation is acute,

and in the figure of the narrator's son, who becomes a lawyer and eventually owner of the estate, she foresees the trajectory Whelan suggests Catholic professionals and farmers were to take. O'Connell reported to a House of Lords select committee in 1825 that property in Catholic hands had "increased enormously" over the previous thirty years and that Catholics were very heavily involved in the mortgage business.¹⁰¹

As William Kinsella, Bishop of Ossory, observed to de Tocqueville:

"Everyday we see the rich Catholics of the towns lend money to Protestants ... many estates pass gradually into the hands of Catholics."¹⁰²

The Rackrent dynasty's patriarch "lived and died a monument of old Irish hospitality", allowing his tenants to get six months into arrears (which was customary on many estates) and the Rackrents are ruined by their spendthrift lifestyle.¹⁰³ Nor does any particular sense of Gaelic solidarity mark relations between landlord or middleman and tenant, where both were Catholics. The tone of the novel - at least when focused on the landlord class - is decidedly ironic, but there is an epiphanic moment when the people who live on the estate cheer their hard-pressed landlord, in fear of him being replaced by the hard-headed Catholic lawyer.¹⁰⁴ The novel is pervaded by a sense of affection between the land owning class and the poor who live on the estate, even when the landlord is frequently absent in Bath. The land owner's benevolence is illustrated when he throws the narrator a guinea from his waistcoat pocket.¹⁰⁵ The poor gather to welcome the last Rackrent and his wife back from honeymoon and are in contrast "much more alert in doffing their caps to these new men, than to those of

what they call *good old families*".¹⁰⁶ The novel is also characterised by imagery of decay. By the conclusion it is necessary to enter the house by walking to the rear entrance. The front is too narrow for a carriage "and the great piers have tumbled down across the front approach, so there's no driving the right way by reason of the ruins".¹⁰⁷ Eventually the house lies empty, with the wind blowing through it.¹⁰⁸ It is a striking image of the end of land relations characterised by mutual obligation and vertical ties.

Thomas Bartlett has suggested that this "moral economy" came conclusively to an end at the time of the anti-militia riots of 1793, following the disappointment of lower class Catholic hopes by the Catholic Relief Act, which had been a victory for the Catholic middle classes, clerical and lay. Bartlett suggests that relative harmony had, generally, characterised social relations in the eighteenth century countryside, dependent on easygoing practices - long leases, low rents and the tolerance of arrears.¹⁰⁹ This picture is consistent with the accounts given by Barnard and Whelan, and fictionalised by Edgeworth. One judge quoted by Cornwall Lewis suggested that the cause of agrarian conflict is the "relations dissevered, which between the higher and lower classes are the offspring of reciprocal protection and dependence."¹¹⁰ Similarly, de Tocqueville noted at around the same time as Cornwall Lewis, and forty years after the militia riots:

"The natural link that should unite the upper and lower classes is destroyed."¹¹¹

Cornwall Lewis commented that Irish peasants received no "interested protection and relief which a master would afford to his bondman".¹¹²

However, it is not clear that this moral economy was abandoned by those seeking to legitimise agrarian protest as suddenly as Bartlett suggests. Rudé has suggested that there is a time lag between the existence of new economic situations, social forms and forces on the one hand and the languages they are expressed in on the other.¹¹³ I do not want to suggest that appeals to custom merely looked backward. For many of the demands legitimized by such language were relatively new formulations based on new circumstances. This study will demonstrate the continued legitimization of agrarian protest through appeals to mutuality, custom and tradition through the first half of the nineteenth century and, additionally, that Irish agrarian rebels appropriated freely from other languages and repertoires of dissent to legitimize their collective actions. The use of such repertoires is evident in the daylight marches of the Rightboys in the 1780s, disturbing the strictly linear evolution of the development of popular protest suggested by terms like “pre-modern” and “modern” and implied in Rudé’s approach. Thus modernization explanations of agrarian conflict will be found inadequate.

Séan Connolly, reviewing revisionist assaults on the nationalist historiography of the eighteenth century, has suggested that eighteenth century agrarian movements like the Whiteboys and Rightboys “could be fitted without difficulty into the frameworks” suggested by the work of Rudé, Hobsbawm and Thompson, but there have as yet been few studies which make such a task central to their aims.¹¹⁴ Donnelly has noted that although the outbreaks of agrarian conflict in Ireland were as intense as Swing and

happened every decade between 1760 and 1840, no account like Hobsbawm and Rudé's has ever been forthcoming.¹¹⁵ Bartlett and Whelan have both used the concept of a "moral economy", but it has been peripheral to their main concerns.

It is now necessary to turn to Thompson in order to establish more carefully what is meant by the moral economy. The concept was developed and applied in relation to English social history. Cornwall Lewis suggests that the population shift from countryside to city and industrial production in Britain had absorbed the tendency towards violent conflict over re-ordered land relations, but the same process had not occurred in Ireland.¹¹⁶ This suggests that not only is it appropriate to consider the moral economy concept in an Irish context, but that it may even be more appropriate to do so than in the case of Britain. It will also be necessary to consider peasant societies more generally, and theories of the capacity of peasants for collective action before going on to consider the evidence in detail.

NOTES

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- ¹ JS Donnelly jr, Landlord and Tenant in Nineteenth-Century Ireland, (Dublin, 1973), p27.
- ² See JS Donnelly jr, 'The Rightboy Movement, 1785-8', Studia Hibernica 17-18 (1977-78) pp120-202, and JS Donnelly jr, "The Whiteboy Movement, 1761-5", Irish Historical Studies, xxi, 81 (March 1978), pp20-54.
- ³ G Cornwall Lewis, On Local Disturbances in Ireland, (Cork, 1977 edn), ix.
- ⁴ Cornwall Lewis, p10.
- ⁵ Cornwall Lewis, p80.
- ⁶ Cornwall Lewis, p200, quoting a Mr Griffith, engineer, to Commons select committee 1824, pp230-1, 233.
- ⁷ AM Sullivan, New Ireland, (London, 1877), p77.
- ⁸ Sullivan, p69.
- ⁹ See, for example, D McCartney, The Dawning of Democracy, (Dublin, 1987), pp 63-109, especially pp82-83.
- ¹⁰ SC 1839, p240.
- ¹¹ SOCP1 1713/21, John Wills, magistrate, Strokestown, to William Gregory, Dublin Castle, 13 Apr 1815. On 8 Jan 1818 Arthur Mahon of Cavetown, County Roscommon, wrote to Peel of "those insurgents usually called Thrashers", SOCP1 1956/18. Two men swore on 6 Feb 1818 that they had stopped at an inn near Boyle where around 30 men "who all stiled themselves Captain Thresher's men" were meeting, SOCP1 1956/23, informations of Denis and Peter Rush.
- ¹² RB O'Brien, A Hundred Years of Irish History, (London, 1911), p98.
- ¹³ O'Brien, p28.
- ¹⁴ O'Brien, p75.
- ¹⁵ PS O'Hegarty, A History of Ireland Under the Union, (Dublin, 1952), p419.
- ¹⁶ BM Coldrey, Faith and Fatherland, (Dublin, 1988), p113.
- ¹⁷ Coldrey, p128.
- ¹⁸ W Macken, The Silent People, (London, 1965 edn), pp43, 201-202, 344, 327.
- ¹⁹ D Corkery, The Hidden Ireland, (Dublin, 1967 edn), p64.
- ²⁰ For a discussion of Corkery, see SJ Connolly, 'Eighteenth Century Ireland: Colony or Ancien Régime?', in D George Boyce and A O'Day (eds), The Making of Modern Irish History, (London, 1996, pp 15 -33.
- ²¹ TW Moody (ed), Irish Historiography 1936-70, (Dublin, 1971).
- ²² M. Wall, 'The Whiteboys', in TD Williams (ed), Secret Societies in Ireland, (Dublin, 1973), pp6-25.
- ²³ J Lee, 'The Ribbonmen', in TD Williams (ed), Secret Societies in Ireland, (Dublin, 1973), pp26-35.
- ²⁴ JS Donnelly jr, 'The social composition of agrarian rebellions in early nineteenth century Ireland: the case of the Carders and Caravats, 1813-16', Historical Studies XV (1983), Radicals, Rebels and Establishments, ed PJ Corish, pp151-169. The sources for Donnelly's major articles on eighteenth century agrarian movements in Munster are mainly contemporary newspaper accounts. From 1798 to 1831 agrarian conflict is the primary focus of two series of State of the Country Papers (the second much smaller than the first) and from 1835 to 1852 by Outrage Reports, arranged by county. The Chief Secretary's Office Registered Papers also contain many "outrage reports". An evaluation of the sources available for the study of whiteboyism follows in chapter three.
- ²⁵ Donnelly, Whiteboy Movement, pp21, 37-38.
- ²⁶ Donnelly, Rightboy Movement, p127.
- ²⁷ Donnelly, The social composition, p154.
- ²⁸ S Clark and JS Donnelly jr, 'General Introduction', in S Clark and JS Donnelly jr (eds), Irish Peasants: Violence and Political Unrest, 1780-1914, (Manchester, 1983), pp3-21.

- ²⁹ SJ Connolly, ' "Ag Déanamh *Commanding*": Élite Responses to Popular Culture, 1660-1850', in JS Donnelly jr and K Miller (eds), *Irish Popular Culture 1650-1850*, (Dublin, 1998), pp1-29, quoted at p2.
- ³⁰ K Whelan, *The Tree of Liberty*, (Cork, 1996), p6.
- ³¹ A Young, *Arthur Young's Tour in Ireland (1776-1779)*, vol 1, (London, 1892 edn), p300.
- ³² S Clark, 'The importance of agrarian classes: agrarian class structure and collective action in nineteenth century Ireland', in PJ Drudy (ed), *Ireland: land, politics and people*, (Cambridge, 1982), pp11-36.
- ³³ Clark, *The importance*, quoted at p13.
- ³⁴ J Lee, 'Patterns of rural unrest in nineteenth century Ireland: a preliminary survey,' in LM Cullen and F Furet (eds), *Irlande et France XVIIe-XXe siècles: pour une histoire rurale comparée: actes du premier Colloque franco-irlandais d'histoire économique et sociale*, (Paris, 1980), pp223-237, quoted at p224.
- ³⁵ Donnelly, *Rightboy Movement*, p170.
- ³⁶ M Beames, *Peasants and Power*, (Brighton, 1983), p29.
- ³⁷ Beames, *Peasants and Power*, p28.
- ³⁸ Beames, *Peasants and Power*, p114.
- ³⁹ E Larkin, 'The Devotional Revolution in Ireland, 1850-75', *American Historical Review* lxxvii (1972), pp625-652, quoted at p627.
- ⁴⁰ Larkin, p633.
- ⁴¹ SJ Connolly, *Priests and People in Pre-famine Ireland 1780-1845*, (Dublin, 1982), p71.
- ⁴² Connolly, *Priests and People*, pp72, 252.
- ⁴³ Connolly, *Priests and People*, p172.
- ⁴⁴ SOCP1 1121/53, Major General Robert Taylor, Athlone, to unnamed, Dublin Castle, 1 Oct 1807, relating statement of William Brabazon, Swinford.
- ⁴⁵ SOCP1 1192/9, Lord Hartland, Strokestown, to General Stephen Mahon, 7 Dec 1808.
- ⁴⁶ SOCP1 1558/24, letter from Major John Wills, Strokestown, to William Gregory, Dublin Castle, 10 Apr 1814
- ⁴⁷ SC 1839, p70.
- ⁴⁸ Cornwall Lewis, p33.
- ⁴⁹ Cornwall Lewis, pp 24-25, 94.
- ⁵⁰ Cornwall Lewis, p117, quoting Mr WW Despard's evidence to the 1831 select committee appointed to examine the state of the disturbed counties in Ireland.
- ⁵¹ Cornwall Lewis, p26.
- ⁵² JS Donnelly jr, 'Factions in Prefamine Ireland', in AS Eyler & RF Garratt (eds), *The Uses of the Past. Essays in Irish Culture*, (London, 1988), pp113-130.
- ⁵³ JS Donnelly jr, *Factions in Prefamine Ireland*, p115.
- ⁵⁴ PEW Roberts, 'Caravats and Shanavests: Whiteboyism and faction fighting in east Munster, 1802-1811', in JS Donnelly jr and S Clark (eds), *Irish Peasants: Violence and Political Unrest 1780-1914*, (Manchester, 1983), pp64-101, quoted at p67.
- ⁵⁵ Roberts, pp89-90.
- ⁵⁶ D Fitzpatrick, 'Class, family and rural unrest in nineteenth century Ireland', in PJ Drudy (ed) *Ireland: land politics and people*, (Cambridge, 1982), pp37-75.
- ⁵⁷ Fitzpatrick, p59.
- ⁵⁸ Cornwall Lewis, p183.
- ⁵⁹ Cornwall Lewis, p247.
- ⁶⁰ Cornwall Lewis, pp223, 172.
- ⁶¹ Cornwall Lewis, p 192.
- ⁶² Cornwall Lewis, p82.
- ⁶³ Cornwall Lewis, p164.
- ⁶⁴ Cornwall Lewis, p207.
- ⁶⁵ A de Tocqueville, *Alexis de Tocqueville's Journey in Ireland*, E Larkin (trans and ed), (Dublin, 1990), p42.
- ⁶⁶ Cornwall Lewis, p228.
- ⁶⁷ Fitzpatrick, p45.
- ⁶⁸ Fitzpatrick, p68.
- ⁶⁹ Fitzpatrick, p43.
- ⁷⁰ Fitzpatrick, p47.

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- ⁷¹ Fitzpatrick, p55.
- ⁷² Fitzpatrick, p53.
- ⁷³ Donnelly, *Factions in Prefamine Ireland*, p116.
- ⁷⁴ Donnelly, *Social Composition*, p154.
- ⁷⁵ For example, Donnelly gives a detailed account of the economic context for whiteboyism, *Whiteboy Movement*, pp30-31; *Rightboy Movement*, p139.
- ⁷⁶ Donnelly, *Rightboy Movement*, p139.
- ⁷⁷ Donnelly, *Rightboy Movement*, p124.
- ⁷⁸ Fitzpatrick, p38.
- ⁷⁹ Clark and Donnelly, Introduction, p5; C Tilly, *From Mobilization to Revolution*, (Reading Mass., 1978), pp143-171.
- ⁸⁰ C Tilly, 'Collective violence in European perspective', in HD Graham and TR Gurr (eds) *Violence in America: Historical and Comparative Perspectives*, (New York, 1969), pp4-42.
- ⁸¹ C Tilly, *Popular Contention in Great Britain, 1758-1834*, (London, 1995), p37.
- ⁸² Clark and Donnelly, p10.
- ⁸³ E Hobsbawm, *Primitive Rebels*, (London, 1969), p24.
- ⁸⁴ Hobsbawm, *Primitive*, p3.
- ⁸⁵ G Rudé, *The Crowd in History*, (London, 1964), p162.
- ⁸⁶ Rudé, p268.
- ⁸⁷ Rudé, p5.
- ⁸⁸ Cornwall Lewis, p61.
- ⁸⁹ Cornwall Lewis, p2.
- ⁹⁰ Cornwall Lewis, p178.
- ⁹¹ Whelan, pp16, p24.
- ⁹² Whelan, p26.
- ⁹³ SJ Connolly, 'The Houghers: Agrarian Protest in Early Eighteenth-Century Connacht', in CHE Philpin (ed), *Nationalism and Popular Protest in Ireland*, (Cambridge, 1987), pp139-162, quoted at p158.
- ⁹⁴ Whelan, p18.
- ⁹⁵ De Tocqueville, p118.
- ⁹⁶ Cornwall Lewis, p231.
- ⁹⁷ Donnelly, *Factions in Prefamine Ireland*, p116.
- ⁹⁸ Fitzpatrick, p69.
- ⁹⁹ TC Barnard, 'The gentrification of eighteenth century Ireland', *Eighteenth Century Ireland* 12 (1997), pp137-155.
- ¹⁰⁰ M Edgeworth, *Castle Rackrent*, (Oxford, 1995 edn), p7.
- ¹⁰¹ SC 1825, p64, evidence of Daniel O'Connell.
- ¹⁰² De Tocqueville, p64.
- ¹⁰³ Edgeworth, p37.
- ¹⁰⁴ Edgeworth, p79.
- ¹⁰⁵ Edgeworth, p19.
- ¹⁰⁶ Edgeworth, p21.
- ¹⁰⁷ Edgeworth, p47.
- ¹⁰⁸ Edgeworth, p61.
- ¹⁰⁹ Bartlett, p216.
- ¹¹⁰ Cornwall Lewis, pp240-241.
- ¹¹¹ De Tocqueville, p40.
- ¹¹² Cornwall Lewis, p44.
- ¹¹³ Rudé, p197.
- ¹¹⁴ SJ Connolly, 'Eighteenth Century Ireland, Colony or Ancien Régime?', in DG Boyce and A O'Day (eds), *The Making of Modern Irish History* (London, 1996), pp 15-33, quoted at p22.
- ¹¹⁵ Donnelly, *Rightboys*, p121.
- ¹¹⁶ Cornwall Lewis, pp6-7.

Chapter Two

The Moral Economy of the Irish Crowd

EP Thompson's phrase has been debated vigorously by scholars working in English social history but, despite the tangential references by Whelan, Bartlett and others, scholars of Irish history have not made a significant attempt to consider its relevance.¹ This chapter will examine what "moral economy" means and whether it may be a useful conceptual tool for the study of pre-famine Irish agrarian conflict.

On an initial reading the stories of Whiteboys in pre-famine Ireland are similar to the romantic legends which surrounded the early years of trade unionism in England, described by Thompson as meeting "on dark nights on the peaks, moors, and wastes", bound together by "awe-inspiring oaths".² Just as the Pentridge rising of 1817 was "accompanied by signal lights on the hills", an anonymous letter to Dublin Castle on 1 April 1816 from Strokestown, County Roscommon, warned that "last night the hills around were lit with fires as signals from the rebels of this county to their friends".³ While there are clearly descriptive similarities, the essential similarity is less certain. Despite Cornwall Lewis's characterisation of the Whiteboy movements as "a vast trades' union for the protection of the Irish peasantry", there has been, as already suggested, a revisionist tendency to

see whiteboyism as a symptom of a “pre-modern” society where loyalties of class had not been established and the solidarities (or conflicts) of family or neighbourhood were the primary sources of collective action.

These descriptive similarities between the early years of trade unionism in England and whiteboyism in Ireland can be elaborated further, when considering the “moral pressure” of the brick through the window, the vandalising of machinery, assassination, and other tactics pursued by groups such as the Wiltshire shearmen, the Luddites and the Rebecca rioters. Such groups were asserting the primacy of their “moral economy” over political economy, much as Whelan has suggested the whiteboy movements in Ireland did.⁴ However, the potential of translating Thompson’s conceptual tool into an Irish context and thus exploring Irish peasants’ customary consciousness has not been pursued fully.

Indeed, nationalist historiography would reject such a model, as the conflicts between owners and occupiers of land in nineteenth century Ireland were seen as symptoms of national oppression, which precludes the prior existence of the sharing of customary mores by landlord and tenant, or the conducting of their relations in the context of a “paternalism-deference equilibrium”. In the previous chapter it was suggested that landlord-tenant relations in eighteenth century Ireland were characterised by laxity and not the vigorous oppression suggested by nationalist historiography. Vertical ties between landlord and tenant were stronger than has been suggested in popular nationalist historiography. Revisionists have challenged the notion of inherent national conflict, and the modernization explanation proffered by Fitzpatrick echoes the

“modernization” explanations of primitive rebellions suggested by Hobsbawm and Rudé. In pre-modern social arrangements, where vertical ties between master and labourer or landlord and tenant remained, any disturbance of the “paternalism-deference equilibrium” might result in the kinds of communal or personal action suggested by Fitzpatrick in his study of Cloone, County Leitrim. The phrase “moral economy” was used by Thompson to describe the vertical ties which prevailed before nineteenth century notions of class became established. I want to suggest that, by incremental mutations and under the impact of structural change, rural social relations in Ireland were similarly transformed. Whiteboyism occurred at a similar juncture to Luddism. “Pre-class” social relations could only exist, according to Thompson, in conditions of dependence, when élites controlled the whole lives of labourers and before non-monetary relations were translated into payments. However, paternalism might be theatrical as much as substantive, and deference was never unconditional.⁵ Thompson makes the significant qualification to the idea of an equilibrium that such arrangements were invariably the site of contestation. The gentry’s paternalism was not accepted on its own terms and deference was habitually not accompanied by illusions:

“It is necessary also to go beyond the view that labouring people, at this time, were confined within ... the fraternal loyalties and “vertical” consciousness of particular trades; and that this inhibited wider solidarities and “horizontal” consciousness of class.”⁶

Thus, while a “vertical” equilibrium may have persisted through much of the eighteenth century, this was not static and unchanging. When élites

attempted to renege on their “responsibilities”, they were challenged. Séan Connolly has found an analogy between this conditional deference and popular attitudes to the Catholic clergy in pre-famine Ireland, attitudes “of genuine submissiveness and of equally genuine resentment”.⁷ More generally, Peter Burke has described how during the early modern period in Europe the “clergy, nobility and bourgeoisie alike were coming to internalise the ethos of self-control and order”.⁸

Similarities between Nedd Ludd and the Wiltshire shearmen on the one hand and Captain Moonlight on the other need further qualification. Despite the descriptive and tactical similarities (it should be remembered that much Luddite work was conducted under cover of night - the night-time assemblies of rural protesters are too often seen as evidence of “primitive” organisation, whereas they might be more usefully seen as rational tactics in the context of illegality), the differences in economic role and status between early industrial production and peasant production require a consideration of the social nature of peasant production and how this modifies the forms collective action may take. Hobsbawm and Rudé identified the issue when they declared that peasants predominated in Ireland but that by the time of Captain Swing they were already unimportant minorities in England.⁹ To pursue this it will be necessary to consider some examinations of the nature of peasant production, and evaluate the usefulness of Beames’s and Clark’s work on economic strata and their status as sources of conflict in rural Ireland.

First, it is necessary to consider the extent to which the term peasant confers social, economic and cultural homogeneity on a certain group of people. What sort of person is a peasant and can the symmetrical polarity of patrician and pleb be usefully applied? It is necessary to consider the complex relations of the rural population in Ireland and draw conclusions about whether it is possible to identify who is under consideration and who is not. This is especially important in the light of criticisms of Samuel Clark's delicately stratified model of Irish rural society in the nineteenth century. Rodolfo Stavenhagen, writing of Latin America, noted bluntly:

“nothing is further from the truth than the once widely held idea of an undifferentiated peasant mass, a homogeneous and unchangeable rural substratum”.¹⁰

It has indeed also been suggested that the Irish rural population was not simply a homogeneous mass groaning under the oppressive English yoke. It should be noted that the landlords were wholesalers, rather than retailers, of land, and that beneath them were further sub-strata: middlemen and agents, farmers, plus further sub-lessees like cottiers and farm labourers whose land consisted of nothing more than a potato patch to feed the family.¹¹ Indeed, O'Connell told the 1825 Lords' investigation of Irish disturbances that there were as many as six or seven layers of landlords between the owner and the occupier. The potential for conflict between and among these sub-landlord strata has been suggested by the various revisions of nationalist orthodoxy, like Clark's, as well as theoretically.¹²

A helpful starting point is Michael Beames's description of peasant production being one where farms worked by family labour constitute the basic unit of production.¹³ This kind of definition allows almost anyone who worked in the countryside to be described as a peasant, but may not be so useful in understanding their relation to the land they worked or to their immediate landlord. It may suggest a homogeneity among the rural population beneath the numerically small élite which held title to the land, and may partially account for Beames's attention being focused on attacks on such élites and less on the conflicts among the population which did not actually own the land.

The defining characteristics of peasant producers have also been examined by Mick Reed, using Lenin's description of Russian peasant producers as a starting point for considering the English case.¹⁴

Four kinds of peasant producers are identified. They are, first, rural proletarians engaged in small-scale agricultural production for wage labour. The pre-famine Irish farm labourer might fit into this category. Second is the household producer who neither sells nor buys labour. Certain small-scale Irish producers, like cottiers, might fit into this category. The third category is middling producers making a meagre surplus that might be converted into capital, for example through the hiring of seasonal labour. Fourth are richer peasants - effectively capitalist entrepreneurs in the countryside, only connected to the peasantry through shared traditions and through continuing to work.

There are some similarities between Lenin's description and the models adopted by Stinchcombe, who distinguishes between hacienda

farming, family tenancies, family smallholdings, plantation agriculture and capital-intensive ranching. However, they would all need to be modified to some extent to fit the Irish context.¹⁵

Reed does not accept the kind of definitions Beames supplies, as he believes that allowing for both the sale of labour and capital investment in defining peasants makes differentiation between larger entrepreneurial farmers and labourers merely one of scale. He suggests that this would mean the same as defining someone's status by size of holding, and Reed appears anxious to eliminate certain kinds of farmer from the definition, so that peasants may be considered as one homogeneous social class - presumably with an increased aptitude for collective action.¹⁶ However, this is unlike the kind of scheme Lenin described. Reed asserts that most peasants are not entrepreneurial and are concerned with getting by, rather than accumulation. Even when labour is hired, this is most often as a temporary expedient, and does not result in capital accumulation, only reproduction. This point may be debatable but in any case it does not, as a consequence, mean that larger farmers who employed some labour were not also peasants. What it may suggest is the potential for conflict among the Irish rural population so frequently described as a homogeneous peasantry. Reed appears to assume that a peasant can not accumulate significant capital. It follows that any farmer who employs labour and accumulates capital can not be a peasant, but the place at which the peasant farmer becomes substantial enough to be a capitalist must be located somewhere on a continuum, rather than at a discrete qualitative point. It may well still be possible, however, to indicate tendencies towards

conflicts of interest based on matters such as the farmer's holding size or how many labourers he employs.

This debate over what a peasant is might be merely semantic if it was not for the fact that Reed's formulation means a sharp class differentiation between the land-owning farmer and the peasant (according to Reed's view) labourer. Reed seems too willing to find a homogeneous peasantry which is capable of class struggle, albeit more carefully defined than in previous accounts. In his concern to underline the class distinctions that obtained in the English countryside, Reed does not consider sufficiently the situation where capital can be accumulated through the extraction of rent as well as through wage labour. This means that someone who rents a family farm may be both a peasant and a "capitalist" of sorts if, for example, they are subletting or employing labour. It also means that there was a space for other antagonisms in the Irish countryside between people who were outside the land-owning class and who were all peasants in so far as the family farm was the basic unit of production. This could lead to potential polarities within the same kin, communal, ethnic or religious group. This would militate against a continued sense of reciprocity and mutuality, tending to lead towards horizontal, rather than vertical loyalties.

Historians of Ireland might also consider whether these apparently 'primitive' conflicts were in fact expressions of other divisions among the peasantry. Marx's assertion that peasants have the collective properties of potatoes in a sack, suggests that the cultural nodes through which economic distinctions are transmitted are individualistic and aspirational,

rather than collective, and that these are significant limitations on the capacity of peasants, as a class, for collective action.¹⁷ Indeed, disunity has been noted among peasants during agrarian protests, the aspirations of one group being unwelcome to another. In Spain during the revolution of 1873 the Spanish section of the First International complained of the difficulty of organising and forging unity among a stratified peasantry that included day labourers, tenant farmers and small landowners.¹⁸ From the importance attached by Reed to the qualitative significance of relation to the land (labourer or land-owner) an economic model can be derived which may illuminate the collective actions which did take place, despite Reed's insistence that the extraction of surplus is not characteristic of peasants as a class. For, considering peasants in Ireland or England, it is apparent that collective actions did indeed take place, rather than rural protest being merely the fissiparous activity of individuals. Marx's potatoes image needs some qualification, although his assertion of the peasantry's incapacity for *independent* political action for itself may remain true. The payment of rent to (or labour for) someone who might well also be paying rent and working the land complicates the picture.

However, it remains unclear that the collective ties underpinning peasant movements could only express pre-modern loyalties of neighbourhood or family, or indeed that collective peasant appeals to a moral economy did not, nevertheless, continue to mediate collective actions in circumstances which were changing. What seems certain from examining these economically-derived models is that, while the term

“peasant”, a family farmer, may define a broad spectrum of a rural population, it can also conceal a number of economic stratifications.

It would be wrong, then, to insist that the numerical predominance of agricultural labourers or small-scale farmers who accumulate no capital confers a social homogeneity or cohesion upon the peasantry which is reflected in the forms taken by rural conflict. While they remain peasants, tenant farmers who sub-let have a different relation to land to their tenants, which can produce conflict within the peasantry. Lenin’s suggestion of four categories in the Russian case is not necessarily definitive, but such a scheme at least shows how there can potentially be conflicts in the countryside within the peasantry. It is not unlike the models outlined by Clark and Stinchcombe. It seems reasonable to suppose that if only one or two labourers are employed regularly, the potential for farmer and employee perceiving an identity of interests is greater than where a large-scale farmer employs many labourers, from whom he is distanced by the scale of the enterprise as well as income. This could include ranch farms, even though they might produce similar commodities to the family farm. The defining characteristic might therefore be seen as relation to the means of production, in this case, the land, with greater potential for the sources of conflict being blurred in the small-scale enterprise where the farmer is less separated from the labourer, both socially and economically. In other words, the possibilities for vertical rather than horizontal bonds of solidarity are greater in the relative intimacy of the smaller-scale enterprise, where, for example, customary vertical bonds of interdependence are lived out daily. This suggests that in the Irish situation, where such bonds had

been cemented by kinship or community, the vertical reciprocity between, for example, tenant and sub-tenant, became increasingly troubled as farming became increasingly commercial, and less neighbourhood, orientated. While the ability to accumulate capital may be a critical economic distinction, it may coexist with cultural expectations which pre-date the reorientation of relations on the land towards commerce. In other words, vertical ties of paternalism, deference and customary practice based on the mutuality of the peasant community break down in the process of economic change, but the development or change of the productive forces may result in conflict which is legitimized through backward-looking consciousnesses and group identities. It might be some time before the cultural and social milieu which could legitimize collective action adapt to new circumstances, as Rudé suggested. A social hierarchy that produced social cohesion at one time is increasingly strained by the breakdown of a sense of customary duty and reciprocity. The question of how various groups in the Irish rural population legitimized the collective actions they took has not previously been fully addressed.

In this consideration of peasant production, economic categories which suggest potential for conflict have been explored, revealing layers of groups in the rural population, but these categories do not reveal the conscious loyalties or identities articulated by rural populations (or parts of them) engaged in collective action. It should also be noted that, while Clark was correct to point to the strata within the peasantry, potential conflicts can not simply be read off from the economic relations between these strata. How they formed new collectivities - of class or nation, for example - in the

context of economic change, would affect critically the forms and cultural expressions of conflict.

How could the vertical ties be evaluated? It is here that Thompson's concept of the moral economy must be considered in relation to Ireland. As suggested, there have been a number of works on Ireland which use Thompson's term freely, but it is worth examining the term in its original English usage before considering its Irish application.¹⁹

Thompson poses the question of a "moral economy" by asking how the behaviour of the hungry in eighteenth century England was modified by custom, culture and reason²⁰. He asserts that disturbances were not compulsive, blind, unselfconscious reactions to economic stimuli but that a consciousness underpinned them. This consciousness was related to pre-capitalist vertical reciprocities, characterised by the "paternalism-deference equilibrium"²¹. Hobsbawm and Rudé described it as "the usual baggage of the pre-political poor, the belief in the rights of poor men by custom, natural justice and indeed law which must not be infringed by the rich."²² Hobsbawm and Rudé have tended to dismiss the capacities of the poor for "horizontal" solidarities rather more readily than Thompson, as the earlier discussion of Thompson's insistence on the need to qualify the notion of an eighteenth century "equilibrium" has suggested.

For Thompson, equilibrium did not necessarily mean consensus. Plebeian culture was not wholly deferential, especially as the eighteenth century wore on and the gentry increasingly abandoned its paternalism under the pressure to accumulate capital. The gestures of paternalism

tended, in any case, to be a “studied technique of rule” and on the part of the labourer, total paternalist control over life was being eroded by the extension of trade and industry.²³ This may have created a space in which new horizontal ties might begin to be formed, without necessarily meaning that all deferential notions were discarded. An overall hegemony of the gentry might well co-exist with a non-deferential sense of custom. A key component of this can be seen in the tendency of “rights” and customs to be relatively new assertions on the part of the plebeians and that if there was any consistent model of custom adopted by participants in collective action it was at most “a selective reconstruction of the paternalist one”.²⁴

For example, English wreckers of the eighteenth century, appear to have shared certain views of property ownership with lower order Irish rebels, believing they had a “perfect right” to their plunder, seeing nothing incompatible in rescuing and then plundering, and refusing to recognise the coastguard’s authority.²⁵ Likewise, smugglers didn’t believe their activities were criminal, but the assertion of a right. Their activities have been described as “partly a defence of local economies against the development of commercial capitalism.”²⁶

Thompson saw the Black Act of 1723 as being the defining moment in England, signifying the end of crime between people - breaches of fealty or deference - being paramount, and the beginning of the centrality of crime against property.²⁷ Judicial and bureaucratic responses to Irish agrarian conflicts also reflected the Whig world-view, a product of a society where the “moral economy” had been abandoned by those able to accumulate capital and defended tenaciously by those resisting such “modernization”.

Thompson's assertion that "Recourse to the Act was most likely in a context of agrarian disturbance, especially when this was combined with class insubordination - as, for example, when resistance to enclosure took the form of firing into windows, threatening letters or the houghing (or malicious wounding) of cattle" could have been written of whiteboyism in rural Ireland, rather than about the situation in southern England during the eighteenth century.²⁸

How, then, did notions of custom and duty affect English social protest, and do these have anything to reveal about the Irish situation? Thompson identified three characteristics of popular action: anonymous threats, counter-theatre and direct action²⁹.

The first of these was identified with "a society of total clientage and dependency", where overt challenges to the established order might result in retaliation and loss of job and home.³⁰ It was the other side of the forelock-touching deference which might have characterised the daylight hours. These actions are listed as including anonymous letters, setting fire to stacks or outhouses, houghing of cattle, shooting or hurling a brick through a window, the gate taken off its hinges, the orchard felled and the fish-pond sluice opened at night. With the exception of the emptying of the pond, these actions were characteristic of Irish, as well as English conflicts. Thompson says these were found especially in rural societies where there were no overt or institutional forms of resistance available. As such, it would be expected that they characterized "pre-modern" social relations, in which labour was not free and able to organise itself. The

central concept of feudal custom was not that of property but of reciprocal obligations.³¹ These forms of action might well be found where a society's vertical reciprocities of duty and responsibility were still strongly felt by all and where the mutuality of the manor had not yet been completely replaced by the "reification of usages into properties which could be rented, sold or willed".³²

Such actions were commonly found among the rural poor in early nineteenth century Ireland. Nocturnal visits, attacks on property and intimidation were a constant feature of the period, referred to with weary regularity by Dublin Castle's correspondents among the police and magistracy. Threatening notices occurred regularly, too. A typical example posted on a chapel door threatened vengeance against "any person daring to drive cattle for rent", also "threatening to burn the houses, haugh the cattle and murder the families of any landholder who should on any account pay more for his holding than he did sixteen years ago".³³ This example is also noteworthy for the way in which it illustrates how a demanded norm - the rent paid sixteen years ago - is a recent assertion added to the expectations of the person who posted the notice, paradigmatic of the selective reconstruction of the paternalist model of customs. It also reflects the sense in which the 'primitive' and frequently private form of protest, the threatening letter or arson attack, could remain in use for a time in a new economic situation where social arrangements were changing fast.³⁴

Actions such as incendiarism reached their height in England in the last decade of the eighteenth century, when rural class relations were

changing rapidly. Attempts to restrict commoners' rights in forests galvanised many "threatening letters and the burning of buildings and stacks".³⁵ So it is apparent that similar tactical manoeuvres were employed by Irish and English agrarian protesters during the same period, even if the exact economic contexts of the English and Irish countrysides were different. While in England the "moral economy" operated at least partially in the context of the repeal of specific paternalist legislation, in Ireland it operated in a more "ambient" consciousness of custom. Thompson did allow such extension of the concept, as long as it is firmly anchored to a specific set of social relations, rather than abstract values.³⁶

A splendid example of the ambient nature of agrarian custom is provided by an incident which took place on 2 July 1816, in the civil parish of Dysart, a few miles from Athlone. A tenant voluntarily surrendered a lease, owing eighteen months' rent. The night before an "improving" tenant was due to move in, the house was burned down. This action was taken despite the voluntary surrender by the previous tenant, suggesting a belief in an inalienable right to land to live off, whether strictly "economic" in commercial terms or not. The arsonist was expressing a generalised value system conflicting with the rights of property, which in England had been developed so strongly through legislation like the Black Act. The former tenant clearly did not have a modern sense of contract law, and the fact that he surrendered the tenancy did not persuade him that he had no right to nurse a grievance. He felt that there was a moral economy which had greater validity than political economy. In 1839 three witnesses to a Lords' enquiry spoke of the sense of customary rights to land which prevailed among the

poor in Ireland. John Barnes, a County Longford stipendiary magistrate described how Lord Lorton had evicted between 30 and 40 Catholic families from his Longford estates and replaced them with Protestants. He added that “the People in Ireland, no Matter what the law is, look to the Possession as giving them a Right.”³⁷ The Earl of Donoughmore, a Tipperary landlord, described how Catholic landlords agreed with his views but that “the Principle of the Peasantry of Tipperary is, that when once in the Possession of Land they have a Right to continue on it”, and that there was a general combination among the peasantry to prevent landlords from exercising their just property rights.³⁸ Tipperary stipendiary Joseph Tabuteau attested:

“I think the man who holds the Tenement does not care under what Circumstances he is put out, whether fairly or unfairly; that he thinks he ought not to be put out.”³⁹

Thompson described a number of forms of action as counter-theatre. Activities like the swearing of oaths, wearing of ribbons, toasts and seditious (often Jacobite) oaths were examples of these activities. He also cites the instance of the Tyburn mob trying to stop the surgeons from snatching the deceased’s body as a symbolic instance of solidarity with the person who suffered the extreme outcome of a law they knew to be predisposed against them.⁴⁰ These were responses to the theatre of the rulers, which was most apparent to the rural poor in the law courts, where the major “actors” even wore “costumes”. It is just such a sense which must have informed the agrarian rebels of early nineteenth century Ireland.

Even though formally they looked back to a shared sense of vertical reciprocity, they were under no illusions about the extent of that mutuality. As Thompson suggested, "the deference was often without the least illusion".⁴¹ On 4 April 1812 two captured Threshers, one wearing women's clothes, were paraded through the streets of Roscommon in an example of self-conscious élite theatre:

"I brought the wounded prisoners in as solemn a manner as I could thro the town of Roscommon (this being a very crowded market day) and left them in view of a ... multitude for some time for their contemplation."⁴²

The functions of law were constructed in such a way as to obscure any partiality or injustice that might be inherent in defending the rights of property. The use of legalistic forms by agrarian rebels is the assertion of a contrary consciousness, based on endangered customs, which were increasingly abandoned by the gentry.

Examples of counter-theatre abounded in the forests of southern England, and the forms they took were all familiar in Ireland. Thompson's discovery of a Hampshire Black leader called King John is similar to the titles claimed by Irish agrarian rebels many years later. The title of King John also suggests an alternative allegiance and authority, and a code of customary usages that is parallel to the official laws of England. Likewise, agrarian rebels in early nineteenth century Ireland chose fanciful titles and ranks. For example, a number of threatening notices were recovered in March 1812 in County Roscommon and sent to Dublin Castle. They were signed by a Captain James Farrell. At almost the same time

another notice that was attached to a church door near Ballaghadereen was signed by Mr Fair Play. Other titles adopted at various periods in pre-famine county Roscommon (and in many other Irish counties) include Captain Moonlight, Captain Rock and Captain Right. Interestingly, Captain Farrell's notices begin "God save the king". Thompson suggested that such outpourings of loyalty might have been "rhetorical stratagems" (perhaps similar in nature to the deferential daylight tugging of the forelock).⁴³ Hobsbawm and Rudé also noted English rebels asking "how could justice be against the king and Government?"⁴⁴ If anything, Irish agrarian rebels stressed their loyalty rather more often than English ones. They shared the same predilection for whistling subversive airs, swearing people to seditious oaths and wearing ribbons, but they were less likely to have access to radical newspapers as the vehicles for political opposition which were said (with alarm) to have led to an increased availability of information among the English peasantry, although I will demonstrate later that they attained some primitive associational status.⁴⁵ The obvious parallel to the development in an Irish context would be the penetration of the Northern Star into the depths of the countryside in the 1790s but, as Whelan notes, this revolution was a revolution of literate, anglophone Ireland. The Enlightenment-inspired national revolutionary was not drawing from the same stock of ideas as the custom-inspired agrarian rebel, although it will become apparent that there was a much greater symbiosis between the popular custom-inspired politics of Irish agrarian combinations and radical politics in England than has generally been supposed. It should be noted that the language of the threatening notice

was English and that, even if these were written down by some kind of intermediary like a hedge-school master, it suggests a familiarity with cosmopolitan politics among the rural poor in Ireland. As Marianne Elliott has observed of Ireland in the 1790s:

“An inability to read was not necessarily a barrier to knowledge of contemporary events”.⁴⁶

The range of grievances nursed by Irish agrarian rebels was wide, and often underpinned by a conception of a fair price, much like instances of food riot in England. Such grievances included dues to Catholic priests for performing various rites, tithes and the prices of commodities like potatoes and spirits.⁴⁷ They could also be over the conversion of pasture to tillage and land being let at higher rents than prescribed by Captain Thresher.⁴⁸ It is noticeable, also, that Irish actions over prices were often open price-fixing actions like the characteristic market-place price-fixing of the English food riot, as well as anonymous demands or threats.

Direct actions by Irish rebels were also frequently more violent. They also tend to be visited upon the same kind of people as themselves, people who had, for example, taken land at higher rents than prescribed by the protesters. There are some examples of this in England, where for example violence was used against blacklegs rather than employers in protests against job-threatening technological advances, but the Irish countryside was also heavily militarised and it could be that it was much easier to exert discipline on members of your own class than on the landlords, protected as they were by magistrates and soldiers.⁴⁹ It may be

that the poorest layers of rural society were asserting the demands of custom against a layer of people they believed to be more suggestible. This might also find expression in the lack of recourse to legal remedies, associated with open rather than primitive or covert forms of conflict. It is noticeable that there were frequent attempts by English protesters to use the law and few by the Irish.

If the notion of a moral economy involves a shared sense of customary mutual obligation, does not the replacing of the “natural” layer of Irish aristocrats with British land owners through much of the island during the seventeenth century invalidate an attempt to use the concept in Ireland?

First, it is no longer considered axiomatic that ethnic conflict characterised landlord and tenant relations in post-confiscation Ireland. As suggested in the previous chapter, Whelan and Barnard have agreed on that much. A recent historiographic survey by Séan Connolly has also made a similar assertion.⁵⁰ The disengagement by the gentry from this shared sense of obligations and rights during the last quarter of the eighteenth century and their espousal of new concepts of property rights led to conflict legitimized through the assertion of customary rights by the rural poor. An unpublished thesis by James O’Neill discusses the “increased separation of popular culture from the upper classes” and devotes a whole chapter to the “estrangement of the upper classes from popular culture,” once shared.⁵¹ This was due to the emergence of a new upper class culture, less indulgent and more market-orientated.⁵² It is the same process described fictionally by Edgeworth.

James Scott describe similar processes in south-east Asia, when peasants complained that landlords' "sons and grandsons no longer follow their old patriarchal customs; they exercise their rights and neglect their duties".⁵³ However, O'Neill capitulates to the claim that the gap between popular and élite culture which arose in Ireland was due to the overwhelming impression which faced the Irish peasantry of a foreign, arbitrary legal system which could be capriciously altered according to the whims of the dominant classes.⁵⁴ O'Neill grants too prominent a place to national cultural characteristics and concepts of property rights understood by tenants (Irish) and landlords (English), "one popular and Irish, the other elitist and foreign."⁵⁵ Similarly, Robert Scally has suggested that the "predominantly Protestant landed gentry ... lay like a crust over the native culture".⁵⁶ I want to assert that it is not inevitable in that the problem should be put in this way in Irish historiography. Such a compression of the moral economy into a nationalist/colonist conflict misrepresents the processes of conflict arising from increasing class differentiation in the Irish countryside, and fundamentally repeats the nationalist approach. Stanley Palmer's assertion that in Ireland there was no deference or paternalism is misplaced.⁵⁷ Even Lord Hartland of Strokestown was "under some constraint from the long tradition of paternalism".⁵⁸

Barnard suggests that shared recreational culture was "regardless of confession or ethnicity", and depended much more on status, but also that

“The reciprocity between landlord and tenant, patron and client or master and servant, was well understood by upstart as willingly as by veteran.”⁵⁹

His objection to Whelan’s “underground gentry” is not on the basis of the divisions between land owners and occupiers in eighteenth century Ireland, but that there was any special distinction between “upstart” and “veteran” owners. Robert Scally has suggested (surprisingly, given his description of the Protestant gentry “crust”), that rich and poor enjoyed a “fraternal slovenliness”, whatever their confessional allegiance.⁶⁰ In fact, Whelan makes clear that conflict could arise from disappointed expectations of reciprocity between “native” Irish élites and land occupiers as well as between the “upstarts” and land occupiers.

Whelan has indeed suggested that Irish middle men themselves abandoned any sense of a Gaelic moral economy just before the period of greatest pre-famine agrarian conflict.⁶¹ Beneath the landlord stratum there were intermediate strata who could potentially be influenced by demands which appealed to custom and duty. The head landlord class was rarely, as has been observed, in any direct contact with the cottiers, labourers and small farmers living on his land, and the layer of tenant farmers and middlemen with substantial holdings directly from the head landlord were far more likely to be in regular contact (and dispute) with the rural poor, to whom they rented cabins and conacre gardens and whom they employed on their substantial leasehold farms. This layer was much more likely to be known to the rural poor, and the history of vertical reciprocities between neighbourhood and family groups with widely contrasting economic

fortunes was likely to inform demands for the performance of moral duties which had primacy over improvement or rationalisation. In that sense agrarian collective action might appear conservative in form and might indeed look backwards, as some of the demands considered thus far suggest. Whelan describes the process in which a layer of Catholic middle men had emerged who, as the eighteenth century progressed, increasingly abandoned the sense of vertical interdependence clung to by the rural poor. The changes are reflected in changing social attitudes (including family values) as the Catholic strong farming and middle classes distanced themselves from calendar custom, hurling, cock-fighting, horse-racing, patterns, wakes, bardic poetry and public drinking. The change was also reflected in the adoption of the English language.⁶² A Catholic Irish tenant was indeed quite likely to be the landlord of a Catholic labourer or cottier and O'Neill does acknowledge that agricultural "rationalisation" led to "increasing stratification" among the peasantry.⁶³ In addition, the stronger cottiers were able to haul themselves upwards and rent directly from head landlords, who increasingly employed agents and other professionals, rather than middle men. The emergence of this group, which Whelan contends was directly descended from the dispossessed Gaelic aristocracy, is recognised by O'Neill:

"Expressions of popular unrest were embarrassing to the emerging Catholic middle classes as well as to the hierarchy of the church".⁶⁴

He nevertheless places the breakdown of the moral economy in a Gaelic-versus-English cultural antithesis. It might more appropriately be described as the adoption by the emerging Catholic farming and middle class of

“modern” values based on political economy rather than a moral economy. A similar process was noted in England when, as coal-mining encroached upon Cannock Chase in Staffordshire, the “tangled skein of alliances in small communities” tended to be broken.⁶⁵

Referring to Irish agrarian conflicts in the first half of the nineteenth century David Fitzpatrick has suggested that “the primary change in the pattern of unrest was not class but family structure”.⁶⁶ If Fitzpatrick means to suggest that changing family structures affected rural disorder, it is worth noting that the middling Catholic orders were increasingly adopting primogeniture, where one child inherited the family farm and other children were dispersed among the professions and the Church. Such practices would inevitably lead to family conflict when first adopted in preference to the former practice of sub-division. The possibilities of settling scores and the difficulty of distinguishing between private and public issues have been acknowledged in an English context around the Captain Swing conflict, and the same difficulty does arise in an Irish context.⁶⁷

There are occasional references among the manuscript sources to collective action being used as a cover for the settling of private grievances in Ireland. For example, a Castle enquiry into disturbances near Ballaghadereen in August 1808 concluded that cattle had been houghed due to the “jealousy of one faction to another for taking a farm”.⁶⁸ There are doubtless others. But it may be that the private/public distinction is a pointless one. Public grievances, or ones which are expressed by collectives, can undoubtedly express individual grievances. It has already

been noted that factions were commonly associated with the interests or leadership of a family that had long-established authority in an area. Additionally, abductions and attempts to compel marriage were most often by the children of stronger farmers, anxious to secure a viable future. These “private” issues spilling into the area of “public” crime can be seen as a result of the adoption of commercial economic practices by a particular stratum in Irish rural society. The ways in which individuals resolved their subsistence problems was increasingly through collectives which responded to the structural and economic changes taking place, which rendered these collectives the most viable ways in which to oppose the reordering of rural social relations. This is not to collapse the conflicts into a linear “modernization” model that was entirely dependent for its social and cultural repertoires of dissent on the development of economic forces. I will decisively reject notions that Irish agrarian conflicts could only be “pre-modern” in the sense that they did not exhibit the associational forms associated with “modern” proletarian expressions of class. Thompson’s “moral economy” model demonstrates the ways in which custom and tradition could be employed in changed circumstances.

Undoubtedly breakdowns in family relations and disputes among kin over land could persuade people to settle private scores through the collective medium of the agrarian secret society, but the scale and widespread distribution of agrarian conflict suggests that conflict was about the very substantial changes taking place, as well as the reorientation of the middling Catholic family towards commercial farming.

It seems that a structural change in class relations was underway by the late eighteenth century, as improving head landlords emerged and the Catholic middleman, agent and strong tenant class began to abandon notions of customary reciprocity. Despite appeals to custom, the economic imperative had overcome the moral economy. The Catholic middle class now began to look towards using land for private gain in a commercial economy, not as a resource for sustaining the life of the community. They began to look to political liberty in the form of Emancipation and Repeal as a way to assert their growing economic strength. Kevin Whelan demonstrates this change, referring to a Wexford survey of 1814 to 1819, which claimed that “the middlemen of the present day are themselves but low farmers, a set of harpies who spread misery and oppression on the unhappy creatures who are compelled to live under them”.⁶⁹

Thus by the early nineteenth century in Ireland the rural poor were alone in attempting to assert customary values. If the passage of the Black Act in 1723 was a defining moment in the passage from a moral economy to political economy in England, then the same kind of process occurred in Ireland, certainly in the last quarter of the eighteenth century, when agents, middlemen and the Catholic tenant farming class increasingly adopted a commercial ethic.⁷⁰

It is evident, then, that Thompson’s “moral economy” is a viable concept for examining Irish agrarian conflict, and the following chapters will provide a detailed exploration of the themes of moral economy, nationality and modernization. Hobsbawm and Rudé, like Thompson, have noted the

customary legitimization of conflict. However, they have been less attuned to the ways in which custom and tradition disrupt any linear processes of “modernization”. They find, for example, in their study of Captain Swing, that:

“a rural society which was in some senses traditional, hierarchical, paternalist, and in many respects resistant to the full logic of the market, was transformed under the impetus of the extraordinary agricultural boom ... into one in which the cash nexus prevailed, at least between farmer and labourer. The worker was simultaneously proletarianised - by the loss of land, by the transformation of his contract ... and deprived of those modest customary rights as a man (though a subordinate one) to which he felt himself to have a claim.”⁷¹

This sense of placing conflicts in a broader process of “modernization” was also clearly identified by Charles Tilly in his studies of collective violence.

Stanley Palmer has suggested that:

“Ireland’s agrarian criminals, like England’s food rioters, were preindustrial or reactionary”.⁷²

As noted in the last chapter, Tilly has rejected his earlier view of grand narratives which describe the evolution from unfree to free labour, from pre-capitalist productive forces to capitalism. A careful reading of Thompson’s work demonstrates that he was aware of the contingencies imposed by tradition and culture on the forces of “modernization”. It may be that the Irish agrarian conflicts contained elements of different types of collective violence, but if the forms were conservative, the meanings were not necessarily so. Despite taking the forms of appeals to custom and being

against practices which can loosely be described as 'modernizing', they contained elements which give them a greater interest than if they were merely spontaneous, primitive acts of rebellion.

This is not to go so far as to say that these kinds of action were fully associational. There are only a few suggestions of the associational forms connected with class-consciousness. Nevertheless, their very existence within the "primitive" forms taken by agrarian protests suggests an embryonic institutional form for the wider aspirations of the rural poor. They will be seen to be separate from the emerging Catholic nationalist class, led later by O'Connell. A comparison of the peaks of disturbance and the peaks of O'Connell's campaigns reveals no congruence between them.⁷³ It may well be that the monster rallies that were attended, presumably, by many members of secret societies, were a reflection of the downturns and defeats of agrarian struggles as well as the political ascendancy of the upwardly mobile Catholic class. The actions of oath-bound combinations in Ireland suggest that Marx's sack of potatoes had unusual properties. Thompson suggests that class should become possible within cognition before finding institutional form.⁷⁴

An intriguing notice posted in County Tipperary in 1819 refers to the "murdered patriots of Manchester".⁷⁵ If the clock was moved forward fifty years it might be expected to have been a nationalist notice about the Manchester Martyrs. In 1819, it was an expression of solidarity with the poor of England. It is a suggestion of an embryonic consciousness operating in a quite different way to that of nationalism, a consciousness that was

silenced by subsequent Irish historiography. It also reveals elements of self-consciousness which disturb the flow of the grand narrative.

The final chapter of this work will consider criticisms of the grand narrative of modernisation, and of Thompson's conception of class. For now, it is apparent that there is at least something to work on in using the term "moral economy" to consider Irish agrarian conflict.

NOTES

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- ¹ See, for example, K Whelan, The Tree of Liberty, Cork 1996, pp16-22 and T Bartlett, 'An end to moral economy: the Irish militia disturbances of 1793', in CHE Philbin (ed), Nationalism and Popular Protest in Ireland, (Cambridge, 1987), pp11-218. Additionally, Marianne Elliott has noted "an acute awareness as to who had rights to what, and to a concept of landholding defined by tradition and customary right". See M Elliott, 'The Defenders in Ulster', in D Dickson, D Keogh and K Whelan (eds), The United Irishmen, (Dublin, 1993), pp222-233.
- ² EP Thompson, The Making of the English Working Class, (London, 1980 edn), p556.
- ³ Thompson, The Making, p732; SOCP1 1767/36, anonymous letter signed 'A Protestant', Strokestown, 1 Apr 1816, to Sir Edward Littlehales.
- ⁴ Whelan, p26.
- ⁵ EP Thompson, Customs in Common, (London, 1993) pp37, 38, 64.
- ⁶ EP Thompson, Customs, pp85, 57.
- ⁷ SJ Connolly, Priests and People in Pre-famine Ireland 1780-1845, (Dublin, 1982), p270.
- ⁸ P Burke, Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe, (Aldershot, 1994 edn), p272.
- ⁹ E Hobsbawm and G Rudé, Captain Swing, (London, 1985 edn), p3.
- ¹⁰ R Stavenhagen, Social Classes in Agrarian Societies, (New York, 1975), p64.
- ¹¹ C O'Grada, Ireland A New Economic History 1780-1939, (Oxford, 1994), p30.
- ¹² SC 1825, p51, evidence of Daniel O'Connell.
- ¹³ MR Beames, Peasants and Power, (Brighton, 1983), p1.
- ¹⁴ M Reed, 'Class and conflict in rural England: some reflections on a debate', in M Reed and R Wells (eds), Class, Conflict and Protest in the English Countryside, 1700-1880, (London, 1990), pp1-28.
- ¹⁵ A Stinchcombe, 'Agricultural enterprise and rural class relations', American Journal of Sociology, LXVII (1961-2), pp165-176.
- ¹⁶ M Reed, 'Class and conflict in rural England: some reflections on a debate', in M Reed and R Wells (eds), Class, Conflict and Protest in the English Countryside, 1700-1880, (London, 1990), pp1-28.
- ¹⁷ K Marx, 'The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte', Marx and Engels: Selected Works, (London, 1968 edn), pp96-179, quoted at p170.
- ¹⁸ M Molnár and J Pekmez, 'Rural Anarchism in Spain and the 1873 Cantonalist Revolution', in H Landsberger (ed), Rural Protest: Peasant Movements and Social Change, (London, 1974), pp158-193.
- ¹⁹ As well as Bartlett and Whelan's works, cited above, see also R Scally, The End of Hidden Ireland, (Oxford, 1995).
- ²⁰ Thompson, Customs, p187.
- ²¹ EP Thompson, 'Eighteenth century English society: class struggle without class?', Social History 3 (May 1978), p150.
- ²² Hobsbawm and Rudé, pp43
- ²³ Thompson, Customs, pp37, 41, quoted at p64.
- ²⁴ Thompson, Customs, pp 2, 212.
- ²⁵ JG Rule, 'Wrecking and Coastal Plunder', in Hay et al (eds), Albion's Fatal Tree, (New York, 1975), pp167-188, quoted at p176.
- ²⁶ C Winslow, 'Sussex smugglers', in Hay et al (eds), Albion's Fatal Tree, (New York, 1975), pp119-166, quoted at p150.
- ²⁷ EP Thompson, Whigs and Hunters, (London, 1975), p207.
- ²⁸ Thompson, Whigs, p246.
- ²⁹ Thompson, Customs, p66

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- ³⁰ Thompson, Customs, p66.
- ³¹ Thompson, Customs, p127.
- ³² Thompson, Customs, p135.
- ³³ SOCP1 1776/97, quoted in letter from yeomanry Brigade Major S South, to Lt Col Murray, 25 Oct 1816, enclosed with letter from Stephen Mahon to Peel, 2 Nov 1816.
- ³⁴ R Wells, 'The development of the English rural proletariat and social protest, 1700-1850', in M Reed and R Wells (eds), Class, Conflict and Protest in the English Countryside, 1700-1880, (London, 1990), pp29-53.
- ³⁵ R Wells, 'Social protest, class, conflict and consciousness in the English countryside, 1700-1880, in M Reed and R Wells (eds), Class, Conflict and Protest in the English Countryside, 1700-1880, pp121-214, quoted at p158.
- ³⁶ EP Thompson, Customs, pp 102, 340.
- ³⁷ SC 1839, p930.
- ³⁸ SC 1839, p955.
- ³⁹ SC 1839, p746.
- ⁴⁰ Thompson, Eighteenth century, p157. See also P Linebaugh, 'The Tyburn riot against the surgeons', in Hay et al (eds), Albion's Fatal Tree, (New York, 1975), p109.
- ⁴¹ Thompson, Customs, p85.
- ⁴² SOCP1 1408/40, Edward Mills, Fairy Mount, to Sir Charles Saxton, 4 Apr 1812.
- ⁴³ Thompson, Customs, pp92-3.
- ⁴⁴ Hobsbawm and Rudé, p63.
- ⁴⁵ R Wells, Social protest, p191.
- ⁴⁶ M Elliott, Partners in Revolution, (New Haven and London, 1982), p16.
- ⁴⁷ SOCP1 1120/47, C Seymour, Ballaghadereen, 15 July 1807, to unnamed, Dublin Castle; SOCP1 1408/27, Lt Gen Thomas Meyrick, Athlone, to unnamed, Dublin Castle, 7 Jan 1812.
- ⁴⁸ SOCP1 1401/15, Lt Gen Thomas Meyrick, Athlone, to W Wellesley Pole, Dublin Castle, 1 Jan 1812.
- ⁴⁹ AJ Randall, 'The shearmen and the Wiltshire outrages of 1802: trade unionism and industrial violence', Social History 7, no. 3 (1982), pp283-304.
- ⁵⁰ SJ Connolly, 'Eighteenth Century Ireland', in DG Boyce and A O'Day (eds), The Making of Modern Irish History, (London, 1996), pp15-33.
- ⁵¹ JW O'Neill, Popular Culture and Peasant Rebellion in pre-famine Ireland, unpublished PhD thesis, (University of Minnesota, 1984), p136.
- ⁵² O'Neill, p236.
- ⁵³ J Scott, The Moral Economy of the Peasant. Rebellion and Subsistence in Southeast Asia, (New Haven and London, 1976), p88.
- ⁵⁴ O'Neill, p212.
- ⁵⁵ O'Neill, p219.
- ⁵⁶ R Scally, The End of Hidden Ireland, (Oxford, 1995), p13.
- ⁵⁷ SH Palmer, Police and Protest in England and Ireland 1780-1850, (Cambridge, 1988), p52.
- ⁵⁸ Scally, p38.
- ⁵⁹ TC Barnard, 'The Gentrification of Eighteenth Century Ireland', Eighteenth Century Ireland, 12 (1997), pp137-155, quoted at p144.
- ⁶⁰ Scally, p42.
- ⁶¹ Whelan, p26.
- ⁶² Whelan, p26.
- ⁶³ O'Neill, p46.
- ⁶⁴ O'Neill, p286.
- ⁶⁵ D Hay, 'Poaching and game laws on Cannock Chase, in Hay et al (eds), Albion's Fatal Tree, (London, 1975), pp189-253, quoted at p200.
- ⁶⁶ D Fitzpatrick, 'Class, family and rural unrest in nineteenth century Ireland', in PJ Drudy (ed) Ireland: land politics and people, (Cambridge, 1982), pp37-75, quoted at p39.
- ⁶⁷ R Wells, Social protest, p164.
- ⁶⁸ SOCP 1192/7, Stephen Brannick, Ballaghadereen, to unnamed, Dublin Castle, 7 Aug 1808.
- ⁶⁹ Whelan, p53.
- ⁷⁰ Whelan, p18.
- ⁷¹ Hobsbawm and Rudé, ppxxi-xxii.

⁷² Palmer, p48.

⁷³ SR Gibbons, Rockites and Whitefeet, Irish Peasant Secret Societies 1800-1845, unpublished PhD thesis, (University of Southampton, 1983), p100.

⁷⁴ Thompson, *Eighteenth Century*, p157.

⁷⁵ Gibbons, p85.

Chapter Three

Representations of conflict: sources and their problems

The sources for the study of agrarian conflict may be divided into the parliamentary, the printed (newspapers and other contemporary material) and the manuscript. Of these, the manuscript sources comprising the State of the Country Papers, the Chief Secretary's Office Registered Papers and Outrage Reports are much the most significant, despite their limitations. All these sources transmit élite perceptions of agrarian conflict, and must be handled carefully. The rural poor made themselves known directly only through threatening notices and their actions. There was no whiteboy press, although it will be seen in a later chapter that towards the mid-century the Molly Maguires approached such a level of associationalism. Élite perceptions of agrarian conflict were very much conditioned by the experience and recollection of the 1798 rebellion.

There were frequent parliamentary enquiries into agrarian disturbances in Ireland during the first half of the nineteenth century. The evidence submitted to the variously constituted committees ranged from detailed examinations of local *causes celebres* to the most general overviews of the state of Ireland provided by experts, such as lawyers and economists. However, a major concern of the enquiries in the half century

following the 1798 rebellion appears to have been the quest for political stability and, as a consequence, to investigate any potential connection between agrarian conflict and political rebellion. In a study of riots in England, John Bohstedt has noted that all similar disturbances in Ireland were seen as potentially subversive.¹ Questions about the reorganisation or rationalisation of agricultural production, judicial reorganisation and police reform may be seen in this context.

An 1824 enquiry, for example, heard evidence from, *inter alia*, four barristers, two inspectors of constabulary, a yeoman, a civil engineer, two Catholic priests, two Church of Ireland ministers, a member of the committee who was a major landlord in Ireland, a magistrate, a Catholic middleman, and a landlord's agent.² The following year another enquiry heard evidence from a similar range of witnesses. It also took evidence from Daniel O'Connell, bishops of both Catholic and Established churches and a political economist.³ An 1839 Lords committee was addressed by a similar range of local officials, professionals and landed élite figures, among whom was Hill Wilson Rowan, a resident magistrate with nine years' experience. An examination of his evidence, and others', illustrates the problems caused by a reliance on parliamentary evidence about agrarian conflict.

Rowan warned the committee that "Ribandism" was centrally directed, had the objective of overthrowing the lawful government in Ireland and sought to establish a Roman Catholic monarchy in the country. Although Rowan acknowledged that local Ribbon societies operated as agrarian combinations, he told the committee of legal funds, printed forms

and regulations, books of proceedings and membership tickets.⁴ It is notable that these “modern” associational forms were said to co-exist within the same movement as “pre-modern” signs, passwords, disguises and threatening letters, suggesting a combined and uneven development in the political self-consciousness of the rural poor.

What is revealing about Rowan's evidence is not only the anti-Catholic hysteria that characterises it, but also the seriousness with which it was considered. Some members of this committee displayed similar instincts, explaining Orange anti-Catholic notices found in Mullingar as black propaganda by papists (although, similarly, a Catholic priest had told the 1824 committee that a Pastorini notice posted on his chapel door was the work of Orangemen).⁵ It is apparent that élite perceptions assumed rebellion to have a nationalist and confessional character. This suggests a caveat that must be applied when considering all the sources. Even when agrarian conflict was seen in terms of the revolt of a social class, this was not always clearly distinguished from nationalism. Astute observers like Cornwall Lewis may have made such distinctions, but not all parliamentary committee members took the same discerning approach. Such was the concern caused by Rowan's evidence that the Lords recalled Rowan to question him further, and later still asked William Kemmis, crown solicitor on the Leinster circuit, for his opinion of Rowan. This revealed the committee's anxiety to establish whether there was anything in Rowan's suggestion that there was a general and nationalist conspiracy. Kemmis said he could not remember any political rebellion since 1803.⁶ It must be recalled that ribbonism and whiteboyism were frequently impossible to

distinguish in an agrarian context. This, however, does not mean that any political content of agrarian combinations was necessarily the same as the urban proto-nationalist conspiracies usually termed ribbonism.

John Lewis O'Ferrall, commissioner of police in Dublin city, was questioned about central leadership or general objectives. He suggested that there was no such leadership, nor broader aims, because no more was known about the societies than had been known in 1822. In all that time of meeting and levying, there had never been more than local outrages. O'Ferrall believed that agrarian outrages and Dublin trade combinations had analogous functions, pursuing local economic objectives such as (in Dublin) stopping the employment of persons who had not served a regular seven-year apprenticeship. People who had violated some regulation of the trade combination were assaulted, much as agrarian rebels sought to regulate their specific economic circumstances and ensure future security.⁷

Historians have tended to view anti-stranger motifs in the language of agrarian combinations as evidence of parochial, vertical and "pre-modern" loyalties. However, they might be reinterpreted as protectionist measures similar to those that "modern" associations might demand. O'Ferrall's observations matched Cornwall Lewis's view of whiteboyism as a vast trade union of the rural poor, and they help clarify the distinction between whiteboyism and ribbonism.

Parliamentary committees were anxious about the manufacture and sale of weapons. They presumed that any attempt to overthrow British rule in Ireland would be accompanied by armed revolt. This means that arms

raids assumed a special significance. The 1839 Lords committee, for example, asked the Westmeath magistrate Robert Kelly about the sale of gunpowder to the lower orders.⁸ It will become apparent that the correspondents whose reports are contained in the manuscript sources also saw arms raids as especially significant, and for similar reasons. Lord Whitworth wrote to Viscount Sidmouth in June 1816 that the collection of arms was a “principal object” of agrarian rebels.⁹ There were many examples of arms raids being reported with no attribution of motive. This suggests presumptions about the nature of arms raids that the correspondents, and the parliamentarians, did not think they needed to state explicitly, because the nature of such raids was generally understood.

Another aspect of whiteboyism that suggested general objectives to the committees of enquiry was any ascribed sectarian basis for agrarian organisation. Indeed, such local disturbances that were considered in detail by the committees frequently concerned questions of sectarian antagonism, alleged or actual. However, many witnesses (while acknowledging that there were few Protestant members of agrarian combinations) believed that their almost completely Catholic membership was due less to exclusivism than to the general social and economic status of the Catholic and Protestant populations. Francis Blackburne, a barrister in Limerick, told the 1824 select committee that because landlords were all Protestants the result was that “religion happened to become enlisted in the cause” and the disturbances assumed a religious character “at least in appearance”.¹⁰ This is a succinct description of how confessional and class identity could intersect. Matthew Barrington, crown

solicitor for Munster, told the 1839 Lords enquiry that outrages “have been quite indiscriminate; they have had no particular Selection of Protestant or Roman Catholic”,¹¹ while another crown solicitor said that Catholics were assaulted, as well as Protestants.¹² The 1824 enquiry was preoccupied by the question of tithes, an indication of the way in which Westminster perceived issues associated with religion as being connected with nationalism.

Piers Geale, crown solicitor on the home circuit, said that ribbonmen assaulted their fellow Catholics, as well as Protestants, and that outrages connected with religion were not common. Geale knew only one political case, a notice encouraging rebellion, following the recent example set by the Canadian colony.¹³

The question of the recovery of estates forfeited by ancestors was also seen as a potential indicator of latent political rebellion. George Bennett, prosecutor in King’s County and Kildare, told the 1824 select committee that the memory of the seventeenth-century confiscations remained alive. He said:

“I have heard that in many instances they kept an idea in their minds that they would, at one time or other, recover their property.”¹⁴

As I have suggested, agrarian conflict increasingly accompanied the breakdown of any residual loyalties to the descendants of Irish nobles dispossessed after the Cromwellian and Williamite wars, a process described in Whelan’s work on the “underground gentry”. In 1825 Colonel John Irwin, a Sligo magistrate, told the committee of a map on the wall in McDermott’s pub near Boyle, County Roscommon, which showed all the

forfeited estates in Connacht.¹⁵ Rowan alleged to the 1839 Lords enquiry that Catholic priests kept lists of forfeited estates in order to restore them to their rightful owners when the occasion might arise.¹⁶ Captain Samuel Vignoles, a stipendiary magistrate who had served all over Ireland, told the same committee that the intention of all the variously named secret societies was to recover the estates their ancestors had been dispossessed of, but that there was only a hazy notion of a separation of Ireland from England and no desire to destroy the monarchy.¹⁷ Like Rowan, Vignoles believed the Catholic clergy to be implicated. This contrasted with the earlier evidence of Meath chief constable John Hatton, who told the committee that the Catholic clergy opposed "ribandism".¹⁸ Meath stipendiary magistrate George Despard told the committee of efforts by Catholic priests to subdue ribbonism.¹⁹ The same committee heard of oaths of both loyalty and disloyalty to the monarch.²⁰

There were many other witnesses who demurred from the views of Vignoles and Rowan. They proclaimed that the objects of agrarian secret societies were local, economic and, generally, non-sectarian. There was no evidence of gentry or clerical leadership among them (most witnesses did not imagine that the rural poor might produce their own leaders) and they were as likely to punish Catholics as Protestants for breaking their laws. Whitworth reported in 1816 that he could not ascertain that the various combinations proposed to themselves any definite object of a political nature, nor that there was any evidence they were led by people "of weight" in "talents or property". The redress of local grievances was their object.²¹ George Bennett told the 1825 hearings:

“I do not think the lower class of the peasantry of Ireland care two-pence about emancipation.”²²

He added that the better class of farmers and professional men were the only ones who mentioned the state of the law regarding Catholics. Indeed, the 1824 committee had been told:

“the Catholic having acquired property, and having been admitted into professions, became ambitious and anxious to participate in all the privileges of the constitution.”

Religious distinctions were indeed more marked among the upper orders, although Catholics of the lower orders might be persuaded that they had a common interest with their Catholic betters.²³ John Irwin agreed that the Catholic peasantry cared little about emancipation.²⁴ Oliver Kelly, archbishop of Tuam, told the 1825 select committee that, while the members might think that poorer Catholics would not gain anything immediately from emancipation, “it would tend most materially towards tranquillizing their minds ... It would have the most soothing effect”.²⁵ Kelly's words demonstrate a belief that although lower class Catholics might not make any concrete gains from emancipation, such a measure would be welcomed for its symbolic significance and would assist in the maintenance of social stability. The removal of confessional disabilities may well have held symbolic significance for all Catholics and would thus be welcomed. Kelly may not have intended consciously to commend the duping of the lower order of Catholics, but there is a sense in which he appeared to be selling the measure to the Westminster committee on the grounds that it would help maintain order. However, Kelly was clearly

acknowledging a division in the Catholic population according to social status and wealth, contrary to the monolithic view of identity adopted by popular nationalist histories of the period.

George Warburton, the inspector of constabulary who played a major part in Roscommon, was one of those who believed that there were two different kinds of secret society, co-existing and occasionally overlapping. One was local, agrarian and economic; the other national, sectarian and political. In terms of the former, he testified to the 1824 select committee that the oaths he had seen did not discriminate between Catholics and Protestants. Similarly, Roman Catholic gentlemen worked as hard as Protestant gentlemen to put down disturbances. Michael Collins, Catholic parish priest of Skibbereen, told the same hearings that Catholic peasants viewed Catholic and Protestant gentlemen similarly. In nearby Dunmanway a Catholic magistrate was particularly unpopular because he was a considerable dealer in tithes.²⁶

It is indeed apparent that the witnesses who appeared before the committees had differing views on the nature of agrarian disturbance. While many believed that all rebellion must be nationalist in character, the views of those who comforted parliament that the conflicts were not national have provided material for those who have sought explanations for agrarian conflict in the process of modernization. These views considered such conflicts to be the outcome of the "improving" processes that might broadly be associated with modernization. Tomkins Brew, a stipendiary magistrate, former Orangeman, Irish speaker and landlord, made this connection quite clear. He told the 1824 committee that "outrages" occurred

due to a “want of land” as tillage was turned into pasture to send cattle to market in Dublin and Liverpool.²⁷ The views of such witnesses, and Cornwall Lewis, have become tablets of stone. The Limerick barrister Francis Blackburne, for example, told the 1824 parliamentary enquiry that demography, subdivision of holdings and the resulting high rents led to agrarian conflict, and that it was more intense where landlords were absent.²⁸ Matthew Barrington, crown solicitor in Munster, told the 1839 Lords’ committee that agrarian conflict invariably concerned land.²⁹ These appraisals at best only tell part of the story

This study shows that land was one issue among a number connected with economic security that could precipitate conflict, and questions the teleology of modernization. Cormac O’Grada has suggested that absenteeism, while providing potent images of profligacy for nationalist propagandists, was not of critical significance in the management of estates.³⁰ However, the people who offered reassurance to parliament with the suggestion that there was little prospect of agrarian combination becoming nationalist rebellion also assumed that there was no basis for any other significant challenge to the established order. This was because of the lack of leadership by members of a higher social order and because of the evident conflicts between lower-order Catholics and their wealthier co-religionists. While witnesses were evidently correct to claim that there was little evidence to connect agrarian upheaval with nationalist political revolt, their complacency about the lack of leadership by elite Catholics obscures the significance of agrarian combination. There was a tone of relief, for example, in Whitworth’s 1816 communication that there appeared

to be no general political object in the disturbances. In seeing the potential for rebellion in national or religious terms, Whitworth was not conscious of the growth of embryonic class identity among the rural poor. Thus the line of questioning pursued by the 1839 committee assumed that if agrarian disturbance was not national in character, it could not have any other political character.³¹

Similarly, the historiography of modernization also assumes the agrarian rebels could see no further than their plot of land and would not readily draw general political conclusions about the world and their place in it. These two dominant paradigms of nationality and modernization are inherent in the sources for considering pre-famine agrarian conflict, rather than merely being later historiographic additions. It is a primary aim of this study to disengage from those assumptions that have informed historians' views of agrarian conflict ever since Cornewall Lewis's analysis.

Parliamentary enquiries also frequently reduced the rebelliousness of the rural poor to racial stereotypes of a quasi-mystical attachment to land. Stereotypes about Irish attachment to the land may have been useful to nineteenth-century parliamentarians for explaining the ferocity of the rebellions but the Irish rural poor were concerned with economic security as much as any metaphysical identification with the land. While Ireland's particular land tenure arrangements were indeed the single most significant cause of disturbance, they were one among a range of economic concerns mediated through a customary consciousness that, formally, bore marked similarities to the moral economy of the English crowd.

Recent historians of Irish agrarian unrest have mined the parliamentary archives in order to interrogate the nationalist story of agrarian conflict. They have also used the manuscript material extensively, but have nevertheless often failed to move significantly beyond the paradigms constructed by the early parliamentary enquiries. The parliamentary papers do provide material that challenges the historiography of national struggle, but as sources they are limited significantly by the preoccupations of Westminster with the prospects for political stability. There were many witnesses who were able to provide some comfort in this respect, but mainly because of their assumptions about the nature of any political challenge Westminster might face in Ireland. The more thoughtful commentators provided an analysis which has provided the basis for modernization explanations of pre-famine agrarian conflict.

The contemporary printed sources consist of miscellaneous articles, pamphlets and, most importantly, newspapers. The pamphlets suffer from the same problems as the parliamentary papers, as they were most frequently written by people concerned to find political remedies that suited one of the élite groups contending at Westminster, and to provide remedies for perceived problems of economic and social organisation which would create a stable basis for Britain's continued political rule. Newspapers, especially the local newspapers which were published in Ireland from the early nineteenth century, could offer a much more detailed local view than

the set-piece committees of parliamentarians in London, with their carefully selected witnesses and stage-managed lines of questioning.

Unfortunately, newspapers also suffered from problems of perspective. The case of the two most significant newspapers published in county Roscommon during the period under consideration illustrates the problem. The Roscommon and Leitrim Gazette was published each Saturday in Boyle from April 1822 until beyond the period that concerns this study. The Roscommon Journal and Western Impartial Reporter (from November 1832 it became the Roscommon Journal and Western Reporter and is referred to hereafter as the Roscommon Journal) appeared weekly in the county town from July 1828. Boyle was a town noted for the sectarian displays of its significant Protestant population, and the political stance taken by its proprietor, John Bromell, reflected this hostility to Catholicism. The Gazette's unreconstructed loyalism meant Bromell aligned it wholeheartedly behind the parliamentary opposition to emancipation, supporting the "free and independent principles of the British constitution".³² The local landlord, Lord Lorton,³³ was eulogised almost weekly. He was complimented on reducing his tenantry, for his residing at nearby Rockingham and for the fact that rent arrears on his lands were very low. Bromell asserted that there would be no need for an Insurrection Act if other areas had landlords like Lorton.³³ A very different perspective on Lorton, a fierce anti-Catholic, will emerge from the next chapter. Another landlord who will emerge in a different light in a later chapter was Godfrey Hogg of Gillstown. He was a Brunswicker but nevertheless "an indulgent landlord", according to the Gazette.³⁴ It will become apparent that the

Gazette had a very different view to less partisan observers, including the local chief constable.

A nationalist, Charles Tully, published the Roscommon Journal. In sharp contrast to Bromell, he wrote disparagingly of Lorton and the activities of the Boyle Brunswick Club, describing the Brunswickers as “blood hounds” and Lorton’s home as the “Rockingham kennel”, from which summonses were sent to the “old beagles, which were discarded as unfit for hunting, and their young cubs”.³⁵ The imagery reveals an interesting perception of the Ascendancy and its profligate sons held by a member of the vigorous, economically virile Catholic middle class. This perception is entirely consistent with Edgeworth’s depictions in Castle Rackrent and The Absentee. In November 1829 Lorton summoned a meeting at Elphin to call for the introduction of the Insurrection Act. Tully sarcastically reported that the meeting was held at Elphin to “save wear and tear on our Courthouse”. The Viscount had taken the chair “spontaneously”. Almost everyone at the meeting was related to Lorton by blood, marriage or employment as agents, and they called for the “*benign influence* of the Insurrection Act”, which would give them “the power of *transporting* every poor idiot who (after hours) may wish to gaze at his *prototype the man in the moon*”.³⁶ Elphin was nearer Lorton’s power-base in the north of the county. Tully was challenging the patronage-led politics of the Ascendancy, which was being replaced by an increasingly professional police and judiciary. Lorton’s holding of an unofficial meeting at Elphin, rather than him appearing in the county’s administrative centre, was evidence of this. Electoral rivalry lay behind the conflict between these two

groups. One group was represented in parliament by Lorton's son, and the other by the O'Connor Don. This confirms the suggestion that confessional differences (particularly the frustration of Catholic aspirations before 1829) were felt more keenly among these groups than among the poor.

If the editorial approach of the Roscommon and Leitrim Gazette represented the rearguard action of the local Ascendancy, then the Roscommon Journal was the voice of members of an emergent élite that was increasingly (in Tully's case) finding a voice in Westminster, through O'Connell. Bromell's opposition to emancipation and repeal reflected the anxiety of a once-dominant group that believed itself threatened by the rise of a new local economic élite personified by people like Tully. Indeed, Tully's nationalism did not deter him from writing to the Lord Lieutenant in the same sycophantic terms habitually used by local Protestant magistrates and land owners when he perceived himself under threat from his rebellious co-religionists. In May 1839 he claimed that the M'Donell family had made a number of attempts on his life, following the publication in his newspaper of an unsympathetic report of the trial of a member of the family.³⁷

Newspaper accounts of agrarian collective action occasionally provide useful information that complements the manuscript sources. For example, an arson attack on the "out offices" and barn of a Mrs Mitchell, of Coolmeen, Castestrange, was reported without comment in the State of the Country Papers for County Roscommon, but the Roscommon and Leitrim Gazette revealed that "suspicion rests on some of those persons who were

lately dispossessed for non-payment of rent.”³⁸ Resident magistrate John Duckworth reported on Sunday 14 December 1845 that the previous day five armed men had sworn men on John Hackett’s land, only 100 yards from Lorton’s demesne (Hackett was Lorton’s steward), not to work “under a certain rate per day”. When Monday came the men refused to work.³⁹ The following Saturday the Roscommon and Leitrim Gazette reported that the men had been sworn in Ardcarne parish, and that the rate specified was 10 pence a day in summer and 8 pence a day in winter. Hackett had sacked all who took the oath and on the following Thursday the remainder of the men were sworn to stop work until the dismissed men were reinstated. This incident will be reconsidered later.

However, newspapers were generally much less comprehensive in their coverage of agrarian combinations. The 1839 Lords’ committee heard that newspapers were by then less interested in threatening notices and so fewer were reproduced in the press.⁴⁰ Charles Tilly’s comprehensive account of English “contentious gatherings” between the mid-eighteenth and mid-nineteenth centuries acknowledges that the use of periodicals as enumerative sources is problematic, and the Roscommon newspapers confirm this.⁴¹ Any statistical account of agrarian unrest derived from the newspaper accounts would be even less reliable than the manuscript sources. While Tilly has nonetheless made newspapers the primary evidence for his work, it is fortunate that a further archive is available for the study of Irish agrarian unrest.

The fear of nationalist revolt not only conditioned the views taken by parliamentarians and some local newspaper proprietors, but also those taken by local élites such as land owners, military personnel and law enforcers. These are indeed the very people who must be relied upon for manuscript sources of information about whiteboyism. They tended to scrutinize each incident for evidence of nationalist taint, neglecting other questions about the nature of whiteboyism. Thus the manuscript sources also pose problems.

For example, Stephen Mahon (MP and heir to the Strokestown estate) replied to Peel's enquiries about incidents in County Roscommon that had come to his attention in July 1816:

"It however appears to me that the burnings and outrages have arisen from private resentment, and not from a General Inclination to Disturbance."⁴²

The events he was talking about were the burning down of a house that belonged to a wealthy farmer named Charles Tinsillant (I reproduce one of three spellings of this surname within the course of two letters from the same magistrate, William Bowles) in Dysart parish. Tinsillant was the "confidential manager" of an estate and when he took a 180-acre farm and built a new house, it was burned down.⁴³

Mahon's comment presumes Peel's concern to be with insurrectionary disturbances, and his assurance that these matters are not such might leave the student of whiteboyism still unclear about the nature of the events. Likewise, Matthew Wyatt of Loughglynn House, near

Castlerea, reported a case of conflict between a man called O'Hara and his father-in-law. That conflict had led to two outrages. Wyatt added:

"I am happy to say that - savage and inhuman as these outrages are ... they are fortunately unassociated by any party or political spirit whatsoever."⁴⁴

Such relief, unfortunately, does not make the cause of the conflict any more apparent. Like parliamentary enquiries, local élite sources presumed "political" to mean sectarian or nationalist.

It must be added, however, that while the Protestant Bishop of Elphin and certain local magistrates reacted hysterically and self-interestedly to perceived conspiracies, such responses went to the top of the administration in Ireland. There is an overall impression of a sense of unease about the legitimacy of their position, which runs through to the Lord Lieutenant. A draft letter on the state of Ireland from Whitworth to Sidmouth (which formed the basis of the statement of 5 June 1816 contained in the parliamentary papers) attributed the disturbances to conflict between Catholics and Protestants of the lower orders.⁴⁵ Such a misjudgement can only be properly understood in the context of an élite that was acutely conscious of the religious gulf between it and most of the population. Hence, Whitworth understood conflict in such terms alone. It may be suggested that this élite was rather more conscious of these differences than the lower orders were. As with parliamentary enquiries, questions of political revolt and confessional conflict were never far from the minds of the State of the Country Papers correspondents, from the

lowliest yeomen to the Lord Lieutenant. Yet it is evident that these concerns were not usually the primary motivations of the agrarian combinations.

The manuscript sources are littered with letters warning of massacres of Protestants which were to take place at appointed times. In August 1817 a memorial was sent to the Lord Lieutenant suggesting that all the Protestants of Strokestown were to be put to death “on the 8th of next month”.⁴⁶ A man wrote from Castlerea to warn the yeomen that “a general massacre of Protestants is to take place”.⁴⁷ Such forecasts were never fulfilled, but the fact that they were treated at all seriously is revealing. They expose a sense of embattlement and consciousness of difference among the local élites composed of magistrates, yeomen, land owners, Protestant clergy and the military that actually appears rather stronger than any sense of difference felt by the rural poor. A letter from Major John Wills to William Gregory, complaining of a number of arms raids in which “all the persons from whom arms were taken were Protestants”, reveals acutely the problems with the perceptions of local élites. It was something of a self-fulfilling prophecy that, if most legally held arms were in the hands of Protestant members of the local élite and their employees, then Protestant houses were likely to be the targets of such raids.⁴⁸ A short time later, a Dublin civil servant demonstrated such élite assumptions of confessional polarity when recommending a Roscommon landlord to gather about him only “Protestants and unquestionably loyal Catholics”.⁴⁹

It should also be borne in mind that inclusion in the Outrage Reports and State of the Country Papers could be somewhat arbitrary, according to

the whim of a hurried clerk or other chance event. As such, many cases which do not bear scrutiny as collective actions are included in the papers, especially during the years 1836-1838. During that period, shortly after the reorganisation of policing, many crime reports that can not be considered qualitatively to be reports of collective action found their way in to the Outrage Reports. This may be an indicator of police reorganisation and the bureaucratic structures established to record crime. Before the spring of 1837 classified schedules of crime were submitted by district chief constables to county and provincial inspectors, and thence to Dublin. After that time they stated the facts alone, rather than classifying the crimes.⁵⁰ The reorganisation of crime reporting may have made it more likely that a lack of clerical discrimination between collective and "ordinary" crime explains the relatively high incidence of crime that is not collective in the Outrage Reports of the late 1830s. Such changes mean that it is dangerous to rely on reports from those years alone when considering the nature of collective action. One 1840 report, for example, related a case in which a man was arrested for selling a sheep suspiciously cheaply at Elphin market. He claimed to have bought the animal in County Galway two weeks earlier, and a letter from the police in Galway confirmed that he had indeed done so.⁵¹ However, this report found its way in to the Outrage Reports. A more typical example of the inclusion of "ordinary" crime among the Outrage Reports was of the robbery near Frenchpark of a Mayo man on his way home from one of Fr Mathew's temperance meetings, held in Boyle on 20 September the same year.⁵² In January 1838 chief constable Reed reported the stoning of the house of a poor man in Ardcarne parish, but

believed it to be a “drunken frolic”.⁵³ Chief constable Carr reported from Castlerea that a boy died after being hit on the head by the older brother of a playmate.⁵⁴ When six men broke into Lord Crofton’s out offices at his Mote Park demesne in November 1840, it was reported as a crime story in the Roscommon Journal.⁵⁵ The point here is that if the report had been in the Outrage Reports series, historians might seek a public or collective element that did not necessarily exist. This is not to say “ordinary” crime is not interesting, but that it is distinguishable from collective action and is not the subject of this study.

Additionally, the reports were submitted on printed forms from January 1841, and for a few years appear to have been fairly comprehensive statistical accounts of local crime. However, there was a section on the form which asked about motive, and this was often filled in perfunctorily, with clauses such as “his being driver on an estate”, “to prevent his occupying a house” or “quarrel about land”.⁵⁶ From 1844 these forms, which may be the nearest the manuscript sources came to a comprehensive statistical account of agrarian collective action, are not extant. From 1846 the papers were almost exclusively resident magistrates’ accounts of the proceedings of petty sessions and assize cases. Beames suggested that it is difficult to obtain statistical accounts of agrarian collective action before the constabulary began compiling detailed reports in the 1830s but, as I have suggested, these statistical problems persisted through to the chronological conclusion of the Outrage Reports in 1852. Indeed, Fitzpatrick ruled statistical evidence from these sources as inadmissible in his study of the Outrage Reports for Cloone from 1835

onwards, although he also noted that this source is “unreliable, unsystematic, incomparable in its richness and detail”.⁵⁷ Joseph Lee noted that the archival material for the study of agrarian collective action was copious but fragmentary, and that the comprehensiveness and consistency of official coverage varied considerably.⁵⁸

Such changes in the way agrarian collective crime was reported reflect the changes in police organisation in the first half of the nineteenth century. The State of the Country Papers were generally submitted by the amateur gentlemen who raised militia corps, by brigade majors of the yeomanry and by the landed gentry. Where they were systematic, they remained descriptive, rather than quantitative, such as the frequent “abstracts of reports of General Officers and Brigade Majors of Yeomanry”, which frequently declared merely that all was well.⁵⁹ Correspondence from the “amateurs” was rare in the later series, after policing reform.

The State of the Country Papers frequently took the form of anxious letters from prominent members of local élites such as the Protestant Bishop of Elphin. He wrote a series of near-hysterical letters to Gregory during the Thresher conflicts in 1813. The bishop said he had been told that all Protestants were to be murdered the following week and that the magistrates were all either “timid and incapable old women” or “corrupt and disaffected”. The bishop did not trust the militia, two thirds of which he believed were disloyal. He said that all the men in the county were Threshers.⁶⁰ Similarly, Lord Lorton wrote frequently to Peel in 1816 to request the implementation of the Insurrection Act. However, it appears Peel was unimpressed by Lorton’s belief that “the activity of the Gentry has

had a great effect towards intimidating the disaffected".⁶¹ It was reform instigated by Peel that began the end of the dominance of policing by people like Lorton. Such accounts as Lorton's are not only unreliable as a statistical source, but also reveal much about the consciousness of the writers as well as the nature of agrarian collective action.

Numerous letters from resident magistrates in 1845 warned of seasonal migrants returning from England with weapons. The writers always presumed that this made agrarian conflict a close relative of nationalist rebellion.⁶² Warburton suffered from the same tendency, despite his rôle in the emergent professional policing system. For example, he attributed the swearing of a man to give up his holding in 1830 to the man's employer being a Protestant.⁶³ It seems much more likely that the man was sworn because he was a herd, as agrarian combinations tended to presume in favour of tillage, which could yield subsistence for the rural poor. Just as the parliamentary sources reveal much about the preoccupations of a national élite, the manuscript sources reveal the concerns of local élites. As the first half of the nineteenth century proceeded, police reform made the papers more disinterested as accounts of agrarian violence, and individuals such as the Bishop of Elphin and Lord Lorton are encountered infrequently among the Outrage Reports. However, despite these caveats, there is much that is useful in the manuscript sources, as they reveal detailed information that was not presented to committees or reported in newspapers. Despite their statistical limitations, the manuscript sources come closer to revealing the nature of agrarian collective action.

The only occasions in any of the sources when the agrarian combinations spoke for themselves were in the threatening notices which were copied and submitted to the Castle. These notices provide the most significant evidence about the consciousness of the peasantry, and will therefore form the basis of much that follows in this study. However, this is not to say that peasants only made themselves known through their texts, which were meagre in number when compared to élite texts. They also revealed themselves in their actions, reported by others like Warburton and Lorton. For these reasons, the manuscript sources are the most significant sources for the study of whiteboyism, and provide much of the evidence that follows.

NOTES

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- ¹ J Bohstedt, Riot and Community Politics in England and Wales 1790-1810, (London, 1983), p5.
- ² See list of witnesses, SC 1824.
- ³ See SC 1825.
- ⁴ SC 1839, p546, evidence of William Kemmis.
- ⁵ SC 1839, p602, evidence of Thomas Uniacke; SC 1824, p379, evidence of Rev Michael Collins.
- ⁶ SC 1839, p546, evidence of William Kemmis.
- ⁷ SC 1839, pp399-400, evidence of John O'Ferrall.
- ⁸ SC 1839, p501, evidence of Robert Kelly.
- ⁹ Whitworth, statement, p4.
- ¹⁰ SC 1824, p22, evidence of Francis Blackburne.
- ¹¹ SC 1839, p584, evidence of Matthew Barrington.
- ¹² SC 1839, p673, evidence of Piers Geale.
- ¹³ SC 1839, p676, evidence of Piers Geale.
- ¹⁴ SC 1824, p94, evidence of George Bennett.
- ¹⁵ SC 1825, p698, evidence of Col John Irwin.
- ¹⁶ SC 1839, p171, evidence of Hill Wilson Rowan.
- ¹⁷ SC 1839, pp301-2, evidence of Captain Samuel Vignoles.
- ¹⁸ SC 1839, p244, evidence of John Hatton.
- ¹⁹ SC 1839, p269, evidence of George Despard.
- ²⁰ SC 1839, p198-199, heard a Sligo magistrate read out a paper purporting to be "obligations of the Fraternal Society" and proclaiming loyalty to William IV; while at HL 1839, p328, Despard told of similar obligations that included a disavowal of allegiance to the king.
- ²¹ Whitworth, statement, p4.
- ²² SC 1824, p101, evidence of Richard Willcocks.
- ²³ SC 1824, p204, evidence of Sergeant Lloyd.
- ²⁴ SC 1825, p695, evidence of Col John Irwin.
- ²⁵ SC 1825, p245, evidence of Archbishop of Tuam, Oliver Kelly.
- ²⁶ SC 1824, p345; SC 1824, p389, evidence of John O'Drischol, barrister.
- ²⁷ SC 1839, p1038, evidence of Tomkins Brew.
- ²⁸ SC 1824, pp6, 14, evidence of Francis Blackburne.
- ²⁹ SC 1839, p577, evidence of Matthew Barrington.
- ³⁰ C O'Grada, Ireland: A New Economic History, (Oxford, 1994), p125.
- ³¹ See, for example, SC 1839, p400, evidence of John O'Ferrall.
- ³² RLG, 27 Apr 1822.
- ³³ RLG, 31 Jan 1824.
- ³⁴ RLG, 7 Mar 1829.
- ³⁵ RJ, 11 Oct 1828.
- ³⁶ RJ, 21 Nov 1829.
- ³⁷ OR 1839/3453, Charles Tully to Lord Lieutenant, Viscount Ebrington, undated, [May 1839].
- ³⁸ SOCP1 2502/37, Wills to Gregory, 15 July 1823; RLG 12 July 1823.
- ³⁹ OR 1845/28909, letter from Duckworth to unnamed, Dublin Castle, 14 Dec 1845.
- ⁴⁰ SC 1839, p298, evidence of John Wright, former chief constable in counties Donegal and Leitrim.
- ⁴¹ C Tilly, Contentious Repertoires in England and Wales, (London, 1995), p65-66.
- ⁴² SOCP1 1767/46, Stephen Mahon to Sir Robert Peel, 28 July 1816.
- ⁴³ SOCP1 1767/43, William Bowles to Peel, 17 July 1816.
- ⁴⁴ SOCP1 1767/52, Matthew Wyatt to Peel, 21 October 1816.
- ⁴⁵ SOCP1 1567/1, Lord Lieutenant to Viscount Sidmouth, 5 Jan 1814.
- ⁴⁶ SOCP1 1833/32, anonymous memorial to the Lord Lieutenant, Aug 1817.
- ⁴⁷ SOCP1 2176/6, H Caldwell to General P O'Loghlin, 28 Jan 1820.

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- ⁴⁸ SOCP1 2176/3, Wills to Gregory, 14 Jan 1820.
- ⁴⁹ SOCP1 2176/12, Hewitt, Custom House, Dublin, to Grant, 10 Feb 1820.
- ⁵⁰ SC 1839, p75-76, evidence of George Warburton.
- ⁵¹ OR 1840/8865, John Daly, chief constable, Elphin, to inspector general, October 1840.
- ⁵² OR 1840/16911, Frederick Carr, chief constable, Castlerea, to inspector general, 26 Sep 1840.
- ⁵³ OR 1838/6, James Reed, chief constable, Boyle, to James Shaw Kennedy, inspector general of constabulary, 18 Jan 1838.
- ⁵⁴ OR 1838/91, Frederick Carr, chief constable, Castlerea, to W Miller, deputy inspector general of constabulary, 19 Sep 1838.
- ⁵⁵ RJ, 5 Dec 1840.
- ⁵⁶ OR 1841/8107, 27 May 1841; OR 1841/8109, 9 June 1841; OR 1842/8011, 8 Apr 1842.
- ⁵⁷ M Beames, Peasants and Power, (Brighton, 1983), p51; D Fitzpatrick, 'Class, family and rural unrest in nineteenth century Ireland', in PJ Drudy (ed) Ireland: land politics and people, (Cambridge, 1982), pp37-75, quoted at p42.
- ⁵⁸ J Lee, 'Patterns of rural unrest in nineteenth century Ireland: a preliminary survey,' in LM Cullen and F Furet (eds), Irlande et France XVIIe-XXe siècles: pour une histoire rurale comparée: actes du premier Colloque franco-irlandais d'histoire économique et sociale, (Paris, 1980), pp223-237.
- ⁵⁹ For example, SOCP1 1389/25, Oct 1811. Major General Meyrick reported that "nothing of a seditious tendency has occurred in the western district during this month." The use of the word "seditious" suggests the concerns of the administration with nationalist rebellion.
- ⁶⁰ SOCP1 1538/19, 20, 21, 22, 23, Power Le Poer Trench, Church of Ireland Bishop of Elphin, to Gregory, 4 Aug, 5 Aug, 7 Aug, 8 Aug, 12 Aug 1813.
- ⁶¹ SOCP1 1767/64, 65, 66, Lorton to Peel, 19 Dec, 23 Dec, 31 Dec 1816.
- ⁶² See for example OR 1845/14253, Edmond Blake, RM, to Edward Lucas, undated, summer 1845.
- ⁶³ CSORP 1830/W18, George Warburton, Roscommon, to William Gregory, Dublin Castle, 2 Feb 1830.

Chapter Four

County Roscommon: “the sensational and the routine”

Roscommon was among neither the most disturbed nor the most peaceful counties of Ireland. Some studies have focused upon especially turbulent counties like Tipperary, or on particular categories of crime.¹ Fitzpatrick’s study of agrarian unrest examines evidence from Cloone, a Leitrim parish that was notoriously disturbed.² In 1845 a correspondent from near Carrick-on-Shannon reported to Dublin Castle that he feared “another Cloon in one of the heretofore most quiet parts of Roscommon”.³ It has not been established that studies of such places as Cloone or Tipperary provide the best evidence to sustain generalizations about the nature of agrarian conflict. Further, counties that were relatively undisturbed (or were disturbed in particular untypical ways, such as the northern counties in the 1790s) may also not reveal the general character of agrarian conflict in the half century before the great famine. Donnelly’s accounts of the eighteenth century Munster movements remain the most comprehensive and detailed studies of specific whiteboy movements.

Only in the mid-1840s could county Roscommon be said to be among the most disturbed counties in Ireland.⁴ Beames suggested that County Roscommon was the only Irish county in which conacre became an issue of

major importance.⁵ Acknowledging that the conacre crisis was “particularly acute in Roscommon”, it may nevertheless be suggested that the conacre issue clarifies the essence of land issues, rather than demonstrating any Roscommon exceptionalism.⁶ The county was otherwise one of the more disturbed counties in the second decade of the century and during the 1830s, but was relatively peaceful during periods when, for example, Munster was much disturbed. Beames also suggested that “Roscommon ... exhibited a continuous propensity for outrage throughout the pre-famine period”.⁷

The manuscript evidence for this continuing (if frequently unspectacular) conflict over a significant period is critical to the purpose of this study, and has been considered in the previous chapter. However, it will also be useful to provide a brief account of the social and economic contexts of the county in the first half of the nineteenth century. Coleman recently proposed that factors which could influence the incidence and reasons for disturbance included soil capacity, types of agriculture, population and emigration levels, and the relative numbers of landless and agricultural labourers.⁸ The aim of this study is not to trace the immediate economic stimuli of agrarian collective action but instead to examine the legitimising consciousness and social forces underpinning agrarian conflict over a number of issues connected with the stability and security of the Irish peasant's world in the first half of the nineteenth century. However, an examination of the factors suggested by Coleman, and other factors, in county Roscommon shows the relatively unremarkable economic and social conditions the county experienced in the period in question and the suitability

of using the evidence from the county to draw more general conclusions about collective conflict in pre-famine Ireland.

Additionally, an illustration of the traditional and cultural background reveals that Roscommon complies with general accounts of social relations in the first half of the nineteenth century. Some of those typical features that will be explored here included, the decline of middle men, increased grazing, the end of rundale and consolidation of holdings. Culturally, the traditions and customs associated with the county were also typical. They reflected the beginning of the end of the interchange between the “great tradition” and the “little tradition”. The “great tradition” was the culture of the educated, learned at their élite schools, and the “little tradition” was the customs worked out “in the lives of the unlettered in the village communities”.⁹ The case of Lord Lorton demonstrates how paternalism and deference persisted, although neither Lorton’s paternalism nor the deference of the peasantry were uncomplicated.

Skeffington Gibbon’s witty 1829 account of the county’s gentry suggests that the county fell within a familiar discourse of Anglo-Saxon oppression and Irish poverty:

“The whole of the aristocracy of this fine county are absentees, and the soil is generally let to middlemen or opulent graziers, who expel the small farmers and oppress the working slaves.”¹⁰

I have suggested that this image of land arrangements in nineteenth century Ireland must be modified significantly and it will become apparent that Gibbon’s hyperbolic assessment of the county was inaccurate. There were

significant numbers of resident landlords (although it has been suggested that the advantage of this is debatable), the middle men were by this time declining in number and small, directly-rented farms were proliferating. Grazing was on the increase, and the poor were increasingly reclaiming marginal land, which they rented directly from their landlord. This accompanied their removal from farms that were being consolidated.¹¹ However, Gibbon's comment demonstrates that Roscommon could be viewed as a microcosm of Ireland, even if his perceptions were erroneous in detail. Emigration from the county before the famine was "not unusually significant" and the county was also representative in that it "enjoyed neither the relative prosperity of the eastern maritime economy, nor the grinding poverty of the counties of the western seaboard".¹² Additionally, Roscommon occupies a median position in respect of farm sizes, proportions of tenants to labourers and commercial development.

Roscommon's physical geography is characterised by a mix of the celebrated limestone grazing lands and marginal carboniferous uplands where clachan settlement persisted into the 1830s.¹³ Keogh had surveyed the county for Petty in 1683, although O'Donovan, working for the Ordnance Survey in the 1830s, said that Keogh's "acquaintance with the places he describes was very imperfect and limited".¹⁴ However, Keogh did note the geophysical diversity of the county:

"The soil is such wherein nature approximating extremes together here ... more sensibly than Elsewhere hath made some parts thereof

extraordinary good both for pasture and corn and others again both extraordinary bad".¹⁵

The county was thus already known, long before Weld's 1832 survey, for the grazing plains extending from Roscommon to Boyle, "harbouring few other inhabitants but sheep".¹⁶ The plains were dominated by large grazier ranches that Young described thus:

"A great part of Roscommon, particularly from Athlone to Boyle, 30 miles long and 10 broad, is sheep walk".¹⁷

Keogh and Young's findings (corroborated by Weld in his 1832 survey) provide the foundation for Donnelly's suggestion that the co-existence of rich pasture with adjacent tillage explains the severity of the conacre struggles in the county during the 1840s.¹⁸

The marginal lands were dominated by the nucleated rundale settlements called clachans until the 1830s. During his 1776 tour, Young had been told that farms around Strokestown were generally let in rundale, with holdings ranging in size from two to 300 acres, farmed by from 10 to 15 families.¹⁹ From the 1830s onwards, Cawley has found that there was a marked decline in clachan settlement in upland areas like Slieve Bawn.²⁰ Weld also reported the end of rundale, noting that Lord Mount Sandford, a major absentee landlord with estates in the Castlerea district, had brought to an end the system of co-tenancies which still prevailed in many parts of the county.²¹ It will be seen that the end of rundale partnership arrangements was frequently accompanied by conflict, not least between the former partners. Such findings are consistent with the supposition that such agro-economic and tenurial arrangements were giving way to dispersed settlement

patterns as Roscommon experienced a process of economic change during the first half of the nineteenth century. Culturally, changes in inheritance patterns in favour of impartible arrangements accompanied the growth of single-family, livestock-orientated farms.

Tillage increasingly gave way to pasture in the 1820s.²² However, this change was also frequently accompanied by the direct renting by agricultural labourers from head landlords of ever-smaller plots on which to grow family subsistence crops. Gacquin has found that, according to the 1828 Tithe Applotment book, on the Clonbrock estate at Eskerbaun in the south of the county there were 62 families consisting of 370 people, with an average holding of 4.72 acres. Before 1824 there had been four 72-acre leases on the same land, which very probably concealed many sub-lettings.²³ The drive to “improve” estates meant that land holders were increasingly removed and farms consolidated, particularly from the mid-1830s onwards. Rev John Finn, Catholic curate at Ballymote, told the Devon Commission that the extent of consolidation had been “enormous” for twelve years.²⁴

The realignment towards direct lettings accompanied the efforts on some estates to “improve” agricultural output and efficiency. For example, during the early 1820s the Earl of Clancarty’s tenants in Moycarn half-barony, in the south of the county, were encouraged to participate in a competition. Prizes were offered to the tenants with the “neatest habitations”. To enter the competition, the tenants had to have a chimney and well, a paved or gravelled space in front of the door, had to whitewash the dwelling annually, keep their livestock in an outhouse and the dung heap had to be at least six feet from the rear of the house. Quite apart from the issue of improvement, it

is difficult not to see this as an attempt to impose cultural change at the same time as economic “modernization”. The tendency of the Irish rural poor to share the same dwelling as their livestock and maintain adjacent dung heaps has been widely reported. It is not so apparent, however, that the poor themselves saw such changes as the imposition of a foreign national culture upon their comfortable “Gaelic” squalor. The Clancarty competition was accompanied in September 1822 by a “plan for the encouragement of industry” which involved loans for flax production.²⁵ Similarly, in 1824 Lorton gave land free for flax production.²⁶ A Devon Commission witness attested that Lorton gave preferential terms to tenants who undertook improvements.²⁷ Indeed, much of the focus of the Devon Commission was on the prospects for “improvement”.²⁸

As in many Irish counties, conacre and cottier land holders paid vastly more per acre than did more substantial farmers. The stipendiary magistrate John Wills wrote to Charles Grant:

“Lands are set in this county from twenty to forty shillings an acre which is not considered high – average is thirty shillings – such as do not hold ground and take what is termed con acre in this country pay from five to seven guineas per acre.”²⁹

Weld observed:

“The rent of one of these cabins, with one quarter of an acre of land immediately behind it, payable to the middle-man, amounted, as I was informed on the spot by the tenants, to six guineas; but when out of lease the head landlord charges only £2 9s 4d.”³⁰

Similarly, it was reported to the Devon Commission that a tenant who held land from Lord Lorton at 25 to 27 shillings an acre, was letting conacre at £13 an acre.³¹ Scott, in his study of peasants in south-east Asia, noted that “the overriding importance of family subsistence leads to paying more for land than “capitalist” investment criteria would indicate”.³² The poorest people in pre-famine Ireland evidently endured similar conditions.

Rent payments were delayed, as elsewhere, so that most were paid at least six months in arrears.³³ Indeed, Denis Kelly told the Devon Commission that it was the custom on his estate for the rent to be paid a year in arrears.³⁴ The ratios of land holders to labourers and of farms to families occupied in agriculture also demonstrate Roscommon’s median status. The ratio of land holders to labourers was 1:0.66, against a national average of 1:0.86, and the ratio of farms to families was 1:1.2, placing the county ninth in a table that ranged from 1:1.96 to 1:0.8 (excluding County Dublin).³⁵

The development of County Roscommon’s median social profile may be traced through an examination of estate records dating from the mid-eighteenth century. From the 1750s to 1780s leases on the King estate were typically granted for three lives in parcels of between 100 and 150 acres to people with names that were to recur among the social élite of the county in the early nineteenth century.³⁶ By the early nineteenth century, leases on the same estate were more typically for 31 years, or a number of lives, whichever was shorter.³⁷ In the third decade of the nineteenth century, leases on the estate were generally for 21 years, thus demonstrating the disengagement by land owners from commitments to long leases at low rents.³⁸

Rents payable by tenants also rose dramatically in the early years of the nineteenth century. On the Mahon estate, for example, Christina Wynne was paying £15/10/8 for Tansyfield in 1795, but her lease expired in November 1798 and the land was let to James Hughes the following May at £64. The rent on Luke Taaffe's land at Farnbeg was raised from £6/14/8 to £25/15/0 in 1804.³⁹ Such significant increases very probably reflected the war time boom, which led to land being leased back by the French family "during the height of the war prices" for 2 guineas an acre that they had let at 15 shillings. At the same time the French family was letting land for conacre at 6_ guineas an acre.⁴⁰ Young had been told in 1776 that rents in the county were typically around 20 shillings an acre.⁴¹ Weld's 1832 survey described how the author had met an old man who held five acres on a 30-year lease at 25 shillings an acre, but expected that the rent would be raised significantly when the lease was renewed.⁴² In such circumstances it is perhaps not surprising that rents to cottiers and for conacre also rose steeply. However, while rents on the Mahon estate in the first decade of the century were more than £2 an acre, by 1846 smaller parcels of land were being let at a typical £1/10/0 an acre, although rents had increased again to £2 an acre by 1848. These fluctuations are consistent with the general economic trends associated with war and slump in the early nineteenth century.⁴³

On the Lorton estate some cottier rents in the first decade of the century were in excess of £3 an acre. On 1 November 1802, for example, three men took leases of 2 acres and 3 roods at £7/2/6 a year at Abbeytown. There were eight such tenancies at Abbeytown, plus one of an even smaller plot. Twenty-six years earlier, however, a 92 acre farm at Ardgower townland

had been let at little more than £1 an acre. Even when the same land was let in 1851, the rent had increased only modestly, to £1/7/0 an acre, again indicating that the significant rent increases of the early nineteenth century were not sustained.⁴⁴

Ardkina in Estersnow parish was the scene of protests in 1838 when Lorton took action to clear at least part of the townland. The townland may be seen as a microcosm of developments on the Lorton estate and indeed more widely. Ninety-three acres at Ardkina had been let for named lives in March 1780 to Samuel Owens at 11 shillings an acre.⁴⁵ The changes between then and 1850, when tenants held scraps of land of 1 acre, 2 roods and 2 perches at £1/5/0 an acre directly from Lorton's agent, reflect the disappearance of middle men like Owens, increasing pressure on the land and the efforts of some landlords to "improve" their estates. It is notable that Lorton's lease book describes a lessee as having surrendered her tenancy at Ardkina in 1850. For the lessee, economic pressures that rendered continuing customary arrangements unviable were more probably perceived as compulsive. The collective action taken by the Ardkina tenants in 1838 is considered in chapter six.

The middle men were on the decline, although they still attracted the wrath of Denis Browne, the splenetic MP from neighbouring Mayo. Browne claimed that the poor of Roscommon lived on mountains and were harshly dealt with by their immediate landlords. When they had reclaimed a few acres of mountain the landlord planted grass seed and sent them off to reclaim another patch of upland. The land in Roscommon was "much held by land jobbers, middle men who have made by this trade great fortunes ... the

laws entrusted to these men as mags are administer'd partially", according to Browne.⁴⁶

Browne's assessment is striking, particularly as it is by a man who effectively led gentry opinion in Mayo.⁴⁷ He might have been speaking directly of such personalities as Godfrey Hogg, (who was a witness before the Devon Commission when it took evidence in Roscommon on 27 July 1844) and others whose names recur frequently in the manuscript sources.⁴⁸ It is evident that Roscommon had a number of middle men who were involved intimately with the local administration of the United Kingdom state, and whose rôles were reformed in the first half of the nineteenth century. Many were Protestants, but a substantial number were Catholics. Indeed, Coleman has suggested that by the 1840s "the immediate landlord of most Roscommon tenants ... was likely to be a co-religionist." Coleman has suggested that Catholicism was much weakened as a social bond between farmer and labourer when issues of property arose. For example, Protestants like Hogg were colleagues of Oliver Grace, a Catholic and chairman of the county's magistrates, who "shared their attitudes on the rights of property and on law and order".⁴⁹ In an earlier chapter I have explored more generally how landed Catholic attitudes to the rights of property were increasingly aligned with economic imperatives, rather than customary usages. In this, Catholic landlords in Roscommon were not untypical. The county was also typical of the southern counties in the proportions of Catholics to Protestants. Boyle was known to have a significant Protestant presence, but elsewhere Catholics predominated. The 1749 religious census enumerated 2,363 Catholics and 585 Protestants in Boyle, a ratio slightly exceeding four to one.

More typical were the three parishes of Kilkeevin, Baslick and Ballintober, which comprised the Castlerea union. There the figure was 4,483 Catholics and 338 Protestants, a ratio of 13.26 to one.⁵⁰ Unfortunately, the censuses of 1821 to 1851 did not survey religious affiliation, but they do reveal the remarkable demographic explosion that reflected the national trend. Between 1749 and 1841 the combined population of the three parishes grew from 4,821 to 17,141, an increase of 356 per cent. Cormac O'Grada has suggested a slightly higher national growth between 1741 and 1841 of around 425 per cent.⁵¹

The county also occupies a median position in terms of commercial development, lagging behind Leinster counties but ahead of those further west.

Table 1: Populations statistics for selected parishes in County Roscommon. (Source: Census of Population of Ireland)

	1821	1831	1841	1851
Baslick	3,227	3,574	3,603	2,140
Ballintober	2,152	2,480	2,616	2,226
Kilkeevin (including Castlerea)	9,094	10,867	10,922	9,780

Markets were established in the towns by the beginning of the nineteenth century, with new ones continuing to open, such as a linen market in Ballaghadereen in 1823.⁵² The markets held at numerous centres in the county sold corn, butter, home-produced linen and cloth.⁵³ Weld observed:

“The roads which have been ... made through the country, and the numerous markets which have been opened, have increased tillage in a very remarkable degree.”⁵⁴

Like other counties, factions troubled fairs and markets around the county. As I have already noted, battles between the plains men and the mountains men were regular features at Boyle fair in the 1820s.⁵⁵ As late as 1846, Elphin fair was disturbed by clashes between “two dreaded and rival factions”, the Carneys and Flanagans.⁵⁶ Indeed, there is evidence to suggest that factions did not disappear in the years before the famine, upsetting historians’ linear projections that such “pre-modern” practices ought to have disappeared. Faction fights were still being recorded in County Roscommon, for example, in December 1850.⁵⁷

Commerce was conducted through the Sligo and Athlone branches of the Provincial Bank, and its notes were circulating along with Bank of Ireland tender.⁵⁸ Corn and butter were exported from the county by canal, and large numbers of carmen transported grain, flour and oatmeal to Dublin.⁵⁹

A picture thus emerges of a county that bears many of the features associated with general social and economic relations in rural Ireland in the half century before the famine. Commercially, the wartime boom was accompanied by increased economic integration into the UK. The land was owned by a small number of men, some of whom were absentees. Their estates were let to middle men, who were themselves under pressure and being replaced by agents and direct leases.

This middle man stratum had originally been seen as a bulwark against any landed Catholic resurgence but may well have shared a common

repertoire of customary attitudes with the “fallen” Catholic gentry – and a certain level of cultural exchange with the peasantry. One such “underground gentry” figure, Macdermot, described himself as the Prince of Coolavin, according to Young. The O’Conor Don, however, had kept possession of his estates and was paid “the greatest respect” by his tenants, who sent him presents of cattle.⁶⁰

A stratum of Catholic farmers (and agents) was emerging, abetted by the relaxation of anti-Catholic laws and the casuistry with which their eighteenth century ancestors had conducted their legal arrangements in respect of property. These men came into conflict with the lower strata among the peasantry as they adopted the ethos of improvement. The names of middle men, agents and substantial farmers recur more frequently in the manuscript sources as objects of agrarian combination than do those of the head landlords, although this began to change to reflect the increasing number of the rural poor who rented tiny plots directly from land owners, as the mid-century approached.

However, the land owning élite retained a certain cultural hegemony, remaining as leaders of opinion, despite the gradual replacement of this county oligarchy by a professional, centrally-directed legal, judicial and fiscal apparatus. In 1817 Lord Lorton acknowledged that he frequently went out at night to ascertain whether his tenants were at home.⁶¹ Yet within a few years Lorton and his colleagues had been replaced by a professional police force. Lorton’s 1816 letter to Peel requesting help to suppress agrarian unrest reveals the gentry’s anxiety about the processes Peel had begun. It may be

recalled that he believed the “resident gentlemen” as effective as a professional Peace Preservation Force in maintaining order.⁶² Lorton thus resisted political and administrative change, holding decidedly conservative views, at the same time as he vigorously pursued economic “improvement”.

The example of Lord Lorton and his complex relations with his tenants illustrates the persistence of a culture of paternalism and customary expectation, and its explosive potential in a context of economic and social change. Indeed, Lorton’s complexity as a character arises directly from his espousal of change, which was nevertheless combined with a paternal expectation of continued deference and compliance by his tenants with the re-ordering of their economic relations. Holding 29,242 acres in the county, he was the single largest land owner and was “widely considered to be an improving landlord”.⁶³ John Duckworth told the Devon Commission that Lorton demanded 25 shillings an acre for prime land, and the O’Conor Don’s agent, James M’Gan, asserted that Lorton was “not a high landlord”.⁶⁴

Lorton was born Robert King in London in 1773. He attended Eton College and inherited his father’s Roscommon estate in 1797, which was encumbered by debts of around £119,000. The annual rental income of the estate was around £10,400 at this time. He has been described as a “man of strong principle, dedicated to developing an efficient and economically viable estate. He strove to maintain a good tenant relationship and also to maintain law and order.”⁶⁵ Another assessment suggests:

“To this day he survives in folk memory as an awesome figure.”⁶⁶

What can certainly be said is that he was a staunch Protestant and believer in the Ascendancy. Yet he combined this, not with the profligate lifestyle

associated with that class in the eighteenth century (evidently including his forbears), but with an improving ethos and a close involvement in the management of the estate.

Boyle was his family's town, and as well as owning it, Lorton (who was ennobled in 1806) was involved in providing its cultural identity. He was a president, patron and trustee of the Boyle Savings Bank (founded 1822), and patron of the Boyle Charitable Loan.⁶⁷

Lorton wrote to the Roscommon and Leitrim Gazette in 1824 to declare that he was not an Orangeman.⁶⁸ Skeffington Gibbon acknowledged that Lorton had ended "Orange excesses" in the town, which had previously been notorious for its sectarian displays.⁶⁹ However, Lorton was a vigorous champion of Protestantism. He spoke against emancipation in the Lords on 23 February 1827, describing the Protestants of Ireland as "a proscribed and persecuted people".⁷⁰ In April the same year he published an address to his tenants, warning them against wicked men who claimed he was a bad landlord because of his opposition to emancipation.⁷¹ In 1845, "ever faithful to the cause of Protestantism and truth", he voted against Peel's Maynooth grant bill in the Lords.⁷²

Lorton saw no contradiction between his stance on emancipation and the relentless "improvement" of his estates on the one hand and a paternal care for the poor on the other. He chaired the first meeting of a Society for Improving the Condition and Increasing the Comforts of the Irish Peasantry in 1823, in which he attributed poverty to the absence of much of the county's gentry.⁷³ (His proselytising did not end there, for he also chaired a Society for Promoting Christianity Among the Jews).⁷⁴ He was behind a committee for

the relief of the poor that was formed to deal with famine in 1822, employing 279 men, 60 boys, making daily soup and subsidising meal prices. Of 4,000 people in Cloonygormican, Killukin and Kilcooley parishes, 2,400 were “unable to procure for themselves the necessaries of life” at that time.⁷⁵ (It is worth noting that there was apparently no congruence between agrarian unrest and the famines that afflicted the county in 1817 and 1822. Indeed, Broeker has suggested that the 1822 famine ended an outbreak of agrarian conflict that had begun in 1820).⁷⁶

After emancipation Lorton addressed his tenants in paternal terms, aiming “to renew those precious relations between landlord and tenant and to resuscitate that reciprocity of good feeling”.⁷⁷ When Michael McGlinn, a tenant holding 14 acres, reached the age of 100 in 1822, Lorton gave him an annual allowance of 35 shillings for the remainder of his life. This was a fine example of a (quite possibly unselfconscious) theatrical paternalism which could engage with popular sentiment at little cost to his lordship.⁷⁸

In February 1837 ten of Lorton’s tenants were fined £2 each or 1 month imprisonment for cutting down timber belonging to Lorton at Tawnytaskin. Chief constable Robert Curtis reported that wood was scarce and Lorton’s steward marked more than 100 trees for cutting to give to tenants but “a number of the tenants got into the wood with hatchets of their own and commenced cutting for themselves and did not confine themselves to the timber which was marked”. Before they could be stopped, they had cut more than 100 trees in excess of those marked for Lorton’s gift. Lorton’s largesse was linked to his tenants receiving it gratefully and passively. Self-help was punished with the usual severity of the law.⁷⁹

Lorton evidently believed in a combination of “carrot and stick” to cure his tenants of their customary notions of the correct economic relations between landlord and tenant. His wife ran a free school in order to instil Protestant virtue and good habits in Catholic children, but Lorton was prepared to evict large numbers of tenants in order to put into effect his “improvement” and “rationalization” schemes.⁸⁰ In addition to the clearance of Ardkina townland in May 1838, Mattimoe records the clearing of 128 tenants in the early 1840s from other townlands around Boyle in order to rid Lorton’s estate of perceived troublemakers.⁸¹ In May 1843 a memorial to the Boyle Board of Guardians claimed that 171 families had been evicted from land that had long been occupied by them and their ancestors because “his Lordship wanted to enlarge his holdings”. Others who had sheltered the evicted families were themselves served with notice to quit the estate, “where so few have leases”.⁸²

However, the Gazette insisted on perpetuating Lorton’s paternal vision of landlord and tenant relations in May 1839, after a public meeting in Boyle expressed approval of Lorton. The newspaper suggested that the circulation of “slandorous calumnies” against Lorton would make the country more wretched “by severing the tie that should exist between Landlord and Tenant.”⁸³ The meeting had followed the notorious murder of four Protestant tenants on Lorton’s Longford estate. The previous month Lorton had advertised in the Gazette that he would evict Roscommon tenants if similar events occurred there.⁸⁴ Lorton explained to the 1839 Lords committee on the state of Ireland that the victims had been among nine Protestant farmers given land after he cleared (with compensation) many sub-lessees from the

land at Ballinamuck. Lorton said the murderers had been protected by the community. He “came to a Determination to level the Town; it was put into execution” with plenty of warning, so “it was therefore at their own Option”. Forty “miserable huts” were levelled. He knew the “relative duties” of landlord and tenant and he had, indeed, recently received an address from his Roscommon tenants complimenting him on his conduct towards them.⁸⁵ A Longford stipendiary magistrate also told the same committee that “In the County of Roscommon he is a most kind and excellent Landlord”.⁸⁶

There is a discernible iciness in Lorton’s tone that would admit of no alternative. This was also reflected in an address, published in the Gazette in October 1846, warning people once more against the “machinations of wicked and designing men” who on this occasion wanted “to turn the awful infliction, which it has pleased the Almighty in his infinite wisdom, to visit upon this unhappy land, to their own account” by suggesting the hungry should resist paying rent or should take food from the fields for themselves.⁸⁷ This attitude seems to have persisted for the duration of the famine, for in March 1851 Lorton evicted a number of tenants from Annagh townland in Kilronan parish, for non-payment of rent.⁸⁸

The Roscommon Journal made a rather different assessment of Lorton. When the £10 freeholders were registered as electors following emancipation, a number of “creatures in the pay of his Lordship” (the diction suggesting the continued importance of patronage in electoral politics) objected to all Mr French’s freeholders. French was a potential electoral rival to Lorton’s son in the county.⁸⁹ The following month the Journal published its sarcastic report of the meeting held at which was chaired “spontaneously” by

Lorton. It will be recalled that the Journal claimed that almost everyone there was related by blood, marriage or as employees to Lorton.

It is evident from the example of Lorton that members of the “great tradition” had paradoxical consciousnesses, making it difficult to portray them as simply “modernizers” or “conservatives”. What of the “little tradition”? Burke suggests that much that is transmitted orally may originate in élite literary output. O'Donovan noted that many old tales he heard were in fact passed on by people who had heard someone literate rendering an account of a story told by Keating.⁹⁰ Burke has noted this symbiosis between élite and popular cultures across Europe, although it must be added that élite discourses were frequently modified to comply with previously stored ideas.⁹¹ This thesis seeks to demonstrate that peasant collective actions were not limited by a “pre-modern” position in a linear historic process, and that they adapted freely both from the “great” cultural tradition but also from other geographic locations and economic or social contexts, as it suited their purpose. O'Donovan's note on oral tradition shows precisely how a story viewed as part of the “little tradition” may in fact be an adaptation from an élite source such as Keating's Foras Feasa ar Éirinn. Just as oral tradition did not reflect a linear development, I will demonstrate in the ensuing chapters that a “traditional” consciousness did not restrict Roscommon peasants to reactionary, parochial, spontaneous collective actions.

However, it will be useful to mention briefly some of the county's history and traditions (particularly concerned with the interchange between peasants and élites) that demonstrate how Roscommon conforms with accounts of the cultural background to the theory of the moral economy, and

thus the county's general suitability as a focus for studying collective agrarian conflicts in this way.

The county was subjected to much the same kind of confiscations during the seventeenth century as others: Cromwell awarding Strokestown to the Mahons and the Kings receiving Boyle as a reward for services rendered during the Williamite wars.⁹² Keogh recorded that "the first breach that was made in Connaught upon the Irish party" was in a battle in 1641 against a force led by the O'Connor Don.⁹³

Whelan's idea of an "underground gentry" may be borne out by the common fascination with genealogy. This interest extended not only to the descendants of former land owners displaced by such as the Mahons and Kings, but also to professional surveyors employed in the Ordnance Survey. O'Donovan filled many pages with accounts of the "pedigrees of some respectable ancient families".⁹⁴ The Ordnance Survey memoirs for the county also contain a number of genealogies.⁹⁵ Gacquin's study of Kiltoom and Cam parishes suggests that there were indeed a number of farmers who were descendants of the dispossessed Gaelic aristocracy. Gacquin finds that 33 of 36 freeholders in a 1795-1796 list from the two parishes were Catholics. Bryan Fallon of Coolagarry, a direct descendant of Redmond O'Fallon, the last elected head of Clann Uadach, rented 680 acres from Henry Kenny in the mid-eighteenth century for 31 years. His family became Protestants in 1767.⁹⁶

The interchange between "great" and "little" traditions involved a good deal of paternalism and deference, but also some shared conceptions. Keogh had written without any hint of scepticism of St Bride's Well, five miles

from Athlone, "famous for medicinal waters whereby many cures are wrought".⁹⁷ Skeffington Gibbon noted that land owners and middle men expected tributes of fowl as well as labour from their employees.⁹⁸ This vertical reciprocity has also been attested in the case of the Lysters of Newpark. Gacquin notes that "the natives frequented the house and were welcome there". The Lyster family were mentioned favourably in a 1786 vernacular poem in which their names were rendered in Irish, suggesting that in the late eighteenth century the Protestant land owner and Gaelic peasant strata lived in rather less hermetic isolation than Corkery believed.⁹⁹ In 1828 the Roscommon Journal reported:

"Mrs Bowen Lyster, wife to Col. Bowen, has visited her estate at Athleague, in this County, after an absence of nearly thirty years. She was met by her numerous and respectable Tenantry, who paid her off with the respect due to so amiable and good a Lady. The town was a scene of joy and merriment for the whole of the night, with illuminations, bonfires, music &c. Mrs Bowen was so pleased with the reception, that she ordered some Barrels of Porter on the occasion."¹⁰⁰

As late as 1837 the Journal reported that:

"Upwards of one hundred fellows (preceded by musicians) passed through this town, from Fairymount, to cut down the crops of that justly esteemed Gentleman James LYSTER ... a distance of ten miles. They cut down upwards of twenty acres of corn, and previous to their returning home they assembled at Mr Lyster's hall-door and heartily cheered that Gentleman and his amiable lady, on presenting

themselves at the windows to thank the poor fellows for their voluntary and unsolicited conduct.”¹⁰¹

It will be seen that such events did not prevent the beating by whiteboys of a bailiff who came to distrain cattle on the Lyster lands in lieu of rent arrears. This event is a late example of the interaction between élite and popular culture noted recently by Sean Connolly.¹⁰²

The withdrawal by the upper and middle strata from shared conceptions of the world, when magic and mystery, duties and rights were gradually replaced by more prosaic commercial relations, legitimised violent collective resistance on the part of the rural poor. Aspects of the “little tradition” such as the Wren Boys’ use of costume, which were well-known in Roscommon, then found their way into the repertoires of resistance used by agrarian collectives.¹⁰³ This coincided with the increasing proscription by the Catholic Church of manifestations of popular religion. By the 1840s the Kilronan pattern still attracted thousands, but the Brideswell pattern (involving several days of hard drinking) had been denounced by the clergy.¹⁰⁴ The hostility to “non-Christian manifestations of supernaturalism”, manifested in the attack on “venerable old customs” like patterns and wakes, was part of a tightening of discipline by the Catholic church.¹⁰⁵

Roscommon peasants were participants in the cultural interchange between traditions, but their involvement with élites did not mean that their customs were uncomplicatedly deferential. As Thompson suggested, traditional culture could also be rebellious. The county was, along with Sligo and Mayo, the centre of the most serious anti-Militia resistance in 1793 (and it was among the last places where the militia remained established).¹⁰⁶ The

Defenders were also present in the county during the 1790s, and a well-known ballad celebrates a battle at Crossna in 1793. The leader of the Defenders in the county, John McDermot, had been “no humble tenant” and had once been a member of the militia and converted to Protestantism. The ballad says he led 1,500 men at Crossna against paying rent, although Gibbon reported that it was to support the abduction of a Miss Tennison.¹⁰⁷ Again, it is possible to discern the “underground gentry” retaining enough authority to rally a significant number of followers through the strength of a vertical attachment. Whether the notion of an “underground gentry” is sustained or not, it is apparent that there was an interchange in eighteenth and early nineteenth century Ireland between “great” and “little” traditions that is quite independent of Corkery’s conception of the determining loyalties of “race, language and religion”. This interchange co-existed with an awareness of mutual obligation that could be the source of antagonism when one party abrogated its role in the equilibrium.

In January 1812 Samuel Hodson of Hodson’s Bay reported an attempt by Threshers to compel people to build a road and bridge at a point where some had been killed while fleeing from the army in 1795. Hodson evidently saw continuity between Defenderism and the Threshers, saying that in 1795 they were “then called Defenders”.¹⁰⁸ Indeed, Denis Browne saw a dimension to the 1798 rebellion that has perhaps been obscured by other events of that year, when there was only a handful of United Irishmen in Boyle.¹⁰⁹ Browne explicitly linked the participation of the poor in the 1798 rebellion to social injustice, rather than a developed sense of national oppression, writing that “the people burst from those trammels and this misrule into Rebellion”.¹¹⁰

The contrast between the Ireland of Corkery's account and the changes taking place in the first half of the nineteenth century are captured in O'Donovan's wry story of a well said to have been blessed by St Patrick. It was at the point where St Patrick had divided the "deep and impassable" River Boallus to get across, "as neither boat nor vessel was available".¹¹¹ O'Donovan wrote that the well had "latterly lost a great portion of its sanctity, its water is now made use of in the town of Boyle for every purpose required."¹¹²

Another incident, reported in the press and the Outrage Reports, illustrates dramatically the ways in which the forces of change were confronted by a rebellious traditional culture. As the remains of a Miss McDermottroe were brought to the family burial ground at Kilronan, a crowd tried to prevent the hearse from going to the church, saying the body should be conveyed directly to the burial ground, as was usual with that family. A scuffle ensued and,

"as the coffin ... was carried into the church yard some Roman Catholic clergymen shut the gate, and by using their whips rather freely, prevented the people from going into the church."

A large quantity of spirits had been distributed to the people before the body was removed from the house.¹¹³ The McDermottroes were the descendants of a minor native gentry family, potentially members of the "underground gentry". It is safe to assume that the immediate family had given the instructions for the non-traditional funeral procedure, demonstrating the break with the past by such families as they re-emerged, now possessing new values as a Catholic middle class. The Gazette lost no time in attacking "the

peasantry to whom conciliation is extended”, dramatising the fracas between a Mr Dodwell and the bearers on one hand and the tradition-bound peasants on the other. According to the Gazette the coffin and its bearers were hurled into a ditch, “where renewed punishment awaited them”. Two weeks later Dodwell and a number of magistrates wrote to complain about the report, saying that only a few “foolish persons” tried to stop the hearse going into the church, and that the Catholic priest had intervened to help.¹¹⁴ The alignment of the Catholic clergy with such a break with tradition illustrates that one of the most important groups of mediators between élite and popular cultures had, in the first half of the nineteenth century, distanced itself from popular religious observance.

It is apparent, then, that County Roscommon is suitable for an investigation of Irish agrarian conflict. From the late eighteenth century it experienced a number of characteristically Irish economic and social developments. Additionally, its social, cultural and historic background complies with general accounts of Irish society until the early nineteenth century.

Charles Tilly has examined events that “other historians ... found routine, redundant or trivial. That is the point: to include both the sensational and the routine”.¹¹⁵ Agrarian conflict in County Roscommon has been studied closely for similar reasons. There are relatively few references in this study to major events like the Mahon murder because it is as important to study the seemingly trivial matters reported in the endless stream of correspondence between the county’s law enforcers and Dublin Castle. This chapter has

shown that Roscommon provides a reasonable median basis for conducting such a study, and the next two chapters proceed with that detailed examination.

NOTES

¹ For example, MR Beames, 'Rural conflict in pre-famine Ireland: peasant assassinations in Tipperary 1837-1847', Past and Present 81 (1978), pp75-91, considers county Tipperary over a ten year period. The range of the investigation is limited further by focusing exclusively on murders.

² D Fitzpatrick, 'Class, family and rural unrest in nineteenth century Ireland', in PJ Drudy (ed) Ireland: land politics and people, (Cambridge, 1982), pp37-75. Fitzpatrick criticises the narrowness of Beames's approach in Beames, Rural conflict, but does not appear to consider whether the exclusive reliance on data from one notorious place may distort his own findings.

³ OR 1845/8075, letter from C MacArthur to unnamed, Dublin Castle, 13 Apr 1845.

⁴ Anne Coleman, Riotous Roscommon: Social Unrest in the 1840s, (Dublin, 1999), p14, suggests that Roscommon was statistically the most disturbed county in Ireland only in 1845. Another local historian, Cyril Mattimoe, has suggested that Roscommon earned the reputation of being the fourth most disturbed county in Ireland; C Mattimoe, North Roscommon – its people and past, (Boyle, 1992), p148.

⁵ MR Beames, Peasants and Power, (Brighton, 1983), p123.

⁶ J Lee, "The Ribbonmen", in T Desmond Williams (ed) Secret Societies in Ireland, (Dublin, 1973), p28.

⁷ Beames, Peasants and Power, p45.

⁸ Coleman, p56.

⁹ P Burke, Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe, (Aldershot, 1994 edn), p24.

¹⁰ S Gibbon, The recollections of Skeffington Gibbon from 1796 to the present year, 1829, (Dublin, 1829), p165.

¹¹ I Weld, Statistical Survey of the County of Roscommon, (Dublin, 1832), p297.

¹² Coleman, p7, p53.

¹³ M Cawley, "Aspects of continuity and change in nineteenth century rural settlement patterns: findings from County Roscommon", Studia Hibernica (Ireland) 22-23 (1982-83), p113.

¹⁴ OS letters, p269.

¹⁵ Keogh, pp 97-98.

¹⁶ Keogh, p99.

¹⁷ A Young, Arthur Young's Tour in Ireland (1776-1779), (ed AW Hutton), (London, 1892 edn), p215.

¹⁸ Weld, p182; JS Donnelly jr, Landlord and Tenant in Nineteenth-Century Ireland, (Dublin, 1973), p33.

¹⁹ Young, p216.

²⁰ Cawley, p115, 120.

²¹ Weld, p474.

²² Coleman, p18.

²³ W Gacquin, Roscommon Before the Famine: the parishes of Kiltoom and Cam, (Dublin, 1996), p39.

²⁴ Devon Commission, p234, evidence of Rev John Finn.

²⁵ Clancarty Manuscript, NLI, Ms 31761.

²⁶ RLG, 23 Oct 1824.

²⁷ Devon Commission, Part II, p249, evidence of Robert Lynch.

²⁸ Devon Commission, Part I, p51, reports that "a large portion [of County Roscommon] is capable of improvement". It was estimated that there were 130,000 acres of bog and unimproved land in the county, of which 40,000 acres might be reclaimed for cultivation, 80,000 drained for pasture and 10,000 were unsuitable for improvement.

²⁹ SOCP1 2176/49, Wills to Grant, 8 June 1820.

³⁰ Weld, p323.

³¹ Coleman, p20.

³² JC Scott, The Moral Economy of the Peasant. Rebellion and Subsistence in Southeast Asia, (New Haven and London, 1976), p13.

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- ³³ Weld, p333.
- ³⁴ Devon Commission, p341, evidence of Denis Kelly.
- ³⁵ Beames, Peasants and Power, pp18-19.
- ³⁶ King Papers, NLI, Ms 4120.
- ³⁷ Lorton Papers, NLI, Ms 3104.
- ³⁸ Lorton Papers, NLI, Ms 3105.
- ³⁹ Pakenham-Mahon Papers, NLI, Ms 2597, rent ledger 1795-1804, folio 25; folio 27.
- ⁴⁰ Weld, p296, p297.
- ⁴¹ Young, p217.
- ⁴² Weld, p255.
- ⁴³ Pakenham-Mahon Papers, NLI, Ms 9471, rentals and accounts, 1846-1854.
- ⁴⁴ Lorton Papers, NLI, Ms 3104, lease book, folios 2/1, 2/2, 2/3, 10/1.
- ⁴⁵ Lorton Papers, NLI, Ms 3104, lease book, folio 14/1.
- ⁴⁶ SOCP1 2175/9, letter from Denis Browne to unknown, Dublin Castle, 23 Jan 1820.
- ⁴⁷ D Jordan, Land and Popular Politics in Ireland, (Cambridge, 1994), p78.
- ⁴⁸ Devon Commission, Part II, pp348-351.
- ⁴⁹ Coleman, p12.
- ⁵⁰ Religious Census of the Diocese of Elphin, 1749, National Archives of Ireland, Ms 2466.
- ⁵¹ C O'Grada, Ireland: A New Economic History 1780-1939, (Oxford, 1994), p6.
- ⁵² RLG, 2 Aug 1823.
- ⁵³ TW Freeman, Pre-Famine Ireland: A Study in Historical Geography, (Manchester, 1957), p258.
- ⁵⁴ Weld, p182.
- ⁵⁵ For example, see RLG, 4 Oct 1823, 5 June 1824, 1 Jan 1825.
- ⁵⁶ RLG, 13 Dec 1845, 3 Jan 1846.
- ⁵⁷ OR 1851/1, Kirwan to unnamed, 31 Dec 1850, outlined how two Catholic priests had attempted to persuade factions to disperse after a race meeting.
- ⁵⁸ Weld, p206.
- ⁵⁹ Coleman, p7; Gacquin, p20, Freeman, p258.
- ⁶⁰ Young, p219.
- ⁶¹ SOCP1, 1833/29, Lorton to unknown, Dublin Castle, 11 Jan 1817.
- ⁶² SOCP1, 1767/65, Lorton to Peel, 23 Dec 1816.
- ⁶³ Coleman, p8.
- ⁶⁴ Devon Commission, pp237, evidence of John Duckworth, and 231, evidence of James M'Gan.
- ⁶⁵ AL King-Harman, The Kings of King House, (Bedford, 1996), pp43, 45, 48.
- ⁶⁶ Mattimoe, p173.
- ⁶⁷ OS Memoirs, ii ii 3.
- ⁶⁸ RLG, 25 Sep 1824.
- ⁶⁹ Gibbon, p141.
- ⁷⁰ RLG, 3 Mar 1827.
- ⁷¹ RLG, 7 Apr 1827.
- ⁷² RLG, 14 June 1845.
- ⁷³ RLG, 7 June 1823.
- ⁷⁴ RLG, 21 Sep 1823.
- ⁷⁵ RLG, 22 June 1822.
- ⁷⁶ G Broeker, Rural Disorder and Police Reform in Ireland, 1812 – 1836, (London, 1970), p138.
- ⁷⁷ King-Harman, p46.
- ⁷⁸ Lorton Papers, NLI, Ms 3105, Deerpark folio.
- ⁷⁹ OR 1837/17, Robert Curtis to Warburton, 15 Feb 1837.
- ⁸⁰ RLG, 30 Sep 1837.
- ⁸¹ Mattimoe, p150.
- ⁸² Memorial presented to the Boyle Board of Guardians on 26 May 1843, returns relative to the Boyle Union, Parliamentary Papers 1843 (443) L.403.
- ⁸³ RLG, 4 May 1839.
- ⁸⁴ RLG, 20 Apr 1839.
- ⁸⁵ SC 1839, pp1,048, 1,052, 1,054, evidence of Lord Lorton.
- ⁸⁶ SC 1839, p985, evidence of John Barnes.

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- ⁸⁷ RLG, 24 Oct 1846.
- ⁸⁸ OR 1851/254, sub-inspector J M'Mullen, to unnamed, Dublin Castle, 19 Nov 1851.
- ⁸⁹ RJ, 24 Oct 1829.
- ⁹⁰ OS Letters, Vol. 2, p251.
- ⁹¹ Burke, p58, p60.
- ⁹² Gibbon, p7.
- ⁹³ Keogh, p109.
- ⁹⁴ OS Letters, Vol. 2, p234.
- ⁹⁵ OS Extracts, p360-361, p370-405.
- ⁹⁶ Gacquin, p20.
- ⁹⁷ Keogh, p120.
- ⁹⁸ Gibbon, p167.
- ⁹⁹ Gacquin, p20.
- ¹⁰⁰ RJ, 9 Aug 1828.
- ¹⁰¹ RJ, 23 Sep 1837.
- ¹⁰² S Connolly, ' "Ag Déanamh *Commanding*": Élite Responses to Popular Culture, 1660-1850', in JS Donnelly jr and K Miller (eds), Irish Popular Culture 1650-1850, (Dublin, 1998), pp1-29.
- ¹⁰³ Beames, p99.
- ¹⁰⁴ Coleman, p12.
- ¹⁰⁵ SJ Connolly, Priests and People in Pre-famine Ireland 1780-1845, (Dublin, 1982), pp143, 113.
- ¹⁰⁶ T Bartlett, 'An end to moral economy: the Irish militia disturbances of 1793', in CHE Philpin (ed), Nationalism and Popular Protest in Ireland, (Cambridge, 1987), pp191-218; Broeker, p72.
- ¹⁰⁷ Mattimoe, p143.
- ¹⁰⁸ SOCP1 1408/28, Samuel Hodson to Major General Doyle, 10 Jan 1812.
- ¹⁰⁹ Mattimoe, p145.
- ¹¹⁰ SOCP1 2175/9, Denis Browne to unnamed, Dublin Castle, 23 Jan 1820.
- ¹¹¹ OS Extracts, p244.
- ¹¹² OS Letters, Vol. 2, pp242-243.
- ¹¹³ OR 1838/79, Reed to Warburton, 14 June 1838; Crossley to Drummond, 31 July 1838.
- ¹¹⁴ RLG, 16 June 1838; 30 June 1838.
- ¹¹⁵ C Tilly, Popular Contention in Great Britain, 1758-1834, (London, 1995), p68.

Chapter Five

“The Affliction of the Poor”

The next two chapters will trace agrarian conflict in pre-famine county Roscommon, considering the evidence according to themes suggested by the historiographic and conceptual approaches outlined in the preceding chapters. These include nationalist views, modernization theories and the Thompsonian model elaborated in the second chapter, although it is impossible to consider them entirely discretely.

Beames and Donnelly have undertaken some of the most significant work on agrarian conflicts in their studies of specific conflicts. Beames identified various movements in the first half of the nineteenth century, and the counties that were affected by them. Donnelly has published a number of notable studies, particularly of the eighteenth century Munster movements. However, this study focuses not on specific movements but on a broad chronological span, as it is about the legitimizing consciousness which underpinned conflict across both the peaks and troughs of agrarian unrest. Nevertheless, it is worth recalling Beames’s chronological summary at the outset of this narrative of the conflicts that affected county Roscommon.

Beames identified three movements in County Roscommon during the first half of the nineteenth century: the Carders, 1813-1816; Ribbonmen,

1819-1820 and the Molly Maguires, 1844-1847.¹ Not only was unrest in the county not confined to those periods, but also it was legitimized by a remarkably coherent and rational consciousness throughout the period under consideration. However, a year-by-year computation of the number of offences reported in the State of the Country Papers, Chief Secretary's Office Registered Papers and Outrage Reports would demonstrate that indeed there were more agrarian "outrages" during the years suggested by Beames. That economic stimuli provoked certain collective responses among the peasantry is not especially surprising and is not the focus of this study. What will become apparent is the general consistency in the underpinning legitimation. It is to this I now turn.

Palmer has noted that a house attack that included beatings and the administering of an oath might be counted merely as "administering an oath" or "house attack". Any statistical account of the incidence of agrarian conflict must necessarily be inaccurate, but may suggest the relative incidence of various conflict indicators (table two).² These indicators of conflict have been derived from the sources according to the categories that are of central concern in this work. The three major categories are nationality, modernization and the moral economy. Under these three headings are a number of associated subordinate categories. Incidents occurring between 1798 and 1828, which are recorded in the State of the Country Papers over the period and the Chief Secretary's Office Registered Papers reports from the Connacht inspectorate from 1826 to 1828, have been assigned to these categories. This means that the figures do not

show how many “outrages” took place, but how many of a particular kind of indicator have been discovered in the main sources. For example, a night-time abduction involving disguise and the swearing of a woman to marry one of her abductors may contain three indicators of a “pre-modern” type. The documents do not constitute a comprehensive statistical account of agrarian conflict, so this approach comes as close as is possible to providing statistical evidence connected to the purposes of this study.

Additionally, the indicators are contentious. The justification for treating land, (the most important indicator only because of its numerical predominance), as an aspect of the moral economy of Roscommon peasants, is to be located in the subsequent qualitative discussion. It is critical to remember that disciplining members of the rural community according to customary expectations could suggest a different explanation of actions that may have appeared *prima facie* to be intra-family or neighbour disputes. This assertion of a collective discipline ultimately suggests that conflicts between contending social classes were the basis for agrarian unrest, albeit in the absence of “modern” associational class culture. I will demonstrate that class could happen in the context of Irish tradition and before the rise of associational forms.

Other indicators, such as incidents that could only be considered as “ordinary” crime, have been excluded where they do not reveal something about the explanatory frameworks under consideration. These limitations should be borne in mind when considering table one below.

It may also be argued that “modernization” and “moral economy” are not exclusive concepts. A central aim of this work is to demonstrate the

tendency of the moral economy concept to lead to a location of class antagonism legitimised through a customary consciousness as the underpinning of agrarian conflict, however contradictory and complex the relations between customary consciousness and class may appear. This is contrary to modernization explanations, which suggest that class antagonisms had not yet appeared in rural Ireland, and that primary identities were family or parochial, as Fitzpatrick has suggested. Further, I have assigned actions against tithe levels to the category of "Food, prices, other", except where there is evidence that the objection was on the grounds of religion. It is apparent, for example, that the Threshers of 1806 and 1807 objected to both the levels of tithes and the dues charged by Catholic priests, not to the payment of tithes or dues per se. For this reason, many anti-tithe actions are better explained by the peasants' moral economy than by any sectarian or national impulse.

It is thus evident that the figures are contentious, and they are included here merely to demonstrate that there is substantial scope for the interpretation of agrarian conflict according to the Thompsonian "moral economy" model. The general caveats about the sources considered in chapter three should also be recalled, as should an anonymous letter written to the Roscommon and Leitrim Gazette that suggested:

"few of these [outrages] are reported even by the Police".³

There were some years with no reports. It is apparent that these are lacunae, rather than evidence of peaceful years. For example, there are only five "outrages" in the 1821 papers. It is not sustainable, however, after reading the reports from 1820 and 1822, to believe that there were only five

“outrages” in the county during 1821. It seems likely that most of the papers for 1821 have been lost. A number of reports for 1828 to 1831 can be located in George Warburton’s correspondence with Dublin Castle in the Chief Secretary’s Office Registered Papers. Local newspapers may help fill some of the gaps, but their limitations for the purpose of this study have been discussed in an earlier chapter. The “amateur” nature of law enforcement and the rudimentary bureaucracy during much of the period under consideration in this chapter mean that correspondence from gentlemen, magistrates and the military was often confined to general statements of fears of widespread rebellion (frequently to justify requests for military reinforcements and personal protection). This means that many papers speak generally, rather than enumerate “outrages”. For example, Sir Edward Crofton of Mote Park, one of the county’s major land owners, reported on 9th December 1810:

“I have heard of a vast many meetings and outrages that would be too tedious to mention”.⁴

This broad statement was written in a letter which did not list any single incident. The only attempt to provide outrage statistics is contained in the 1828 State of the Country Papers, when an attempt to be rather more systematic was made. Monthly crime returns were made for the county, and a consideration of these will help clarify the shortcomings of any attempt to enumerate agrarian crime from these sources. Given the

Table 2: agrarian indicators in Co. Roscommon, 1798-1828

(sources: Chief Secretary's Office Registered Papers and

State of the Country Papers)

NATIONALISM

Elections/politics	8
Religion	24

MODERNISATION

Faction fight/riot	7
Family, neighbour, stranger	8
Abduction/rape.	2
Disguise, oaths, signs, passwords	46

MORAL ECONOMY

Food, prices, other	81
Land	78
Law	11
Labour.	14
Politics	8

notorious difficulty in distinguishing between private and public crime, the individual and the collective, these figures should be treated cautiously, but nevertheless demonstrate that the indicators suggested in table two are the tip of a statistical iceberg. The source of the returns in table three was George Warburton, inspector of constabulary for the province, who collated them from reports of constables across the county.

Table 3: crime returns, Co. Roscommon, June and July 1828

(source: State of the Country Papers)

<u>Offence</u>	<u>June</u>	<u>July</u>
Murder	2	1
Robbery	2	0
Burglary	1	0
Malicious burning	1	0
Common assault	94	123
Assault "connected with Ribbonism"	2	4
Illegal notices	3	0
Livestock theft	1	3
Rape	4	2
Riot.	5	1

Incidents which a person who was close to the events in 1828 might have considered social or individual may obscure collectively held attitudes and beliefs about rights and duties, the proper ordering of society and about legal authority.

When considering the evidence in terms of how it relates to popular nationalist historiography, it has been necessary to consider instances of conflict on the basis of perceived religious and national grounds, as well as contrary instances of conflict within a national or religious group.

In 1808 a man was carded four miles from Strokestown. His crime was having given evidence against seven or eight "Thrashers". Whether the communal law of the rural poor was upheld through consent or terror is in a sense irrelevant here - the point is that a collective justice was imposed. The correspondent relating this incident was Lord Hartland of Strokestown, who added:

"This business is a quarrell between the priests and their flocks about clerical dutys, viz Christenings, marriages for which they have lately considerably raised their fees and against which these thrashers complain much and swear every one not to comply with them nor give more than what was usual."⁵

As I suggested in the introductory chapter, Mahon's words illustrate that the whiteboys did not discriminate on the grounds of confessional affiliation, nor did they evince a nationalist consciousness in targeting the Catholic clergy. In the winter of 1806 and 1807 a campaign against tithe levels and priests' dues had been waged across Connacht. The Marquis of Buckingham had noted that "the systematic plan of swearing whole parishes to give only four shillings per acre tithe money, and to diminish to one-half the dues of the priests, and to obey Captain Thrasher, spread without check of any sort through Sligo and Roscommon" in 1806.⁶ In February 1807 Harlow Knott of Battlefield, near Boyle, reported that six stacks of tithe oats belonging to Lewis Irwin had been scattered and a notice posted on a chapel door, telling the curate that he had paid too much for a piece of land.⁷ Major General Robert Taylor reported from Athlone on 1 October the same year that the Thresher activity was caused by "opposition

to tithes” and “church money”.⁸ Later that month Robert Lloyd of Elphin reported to the under secretary, James Trail, that Creeve and Aughrim parishes in County Roscommon were “greatly disturbed” by “the oppression of Tythe farmers and the exactions of their Priests”. Indeed, in Creeve the priest and people were at “open war” with each other.⁹ The rural poor viewed tithes and priests’ dues as economic impositions which ought to obey the laws of custom. It suggests that at this time they did not oppose tithes on the grounds that they were collected for the maintenance of the established church, but rather the sums levied. Francis Blackburne, a barrister from Limerick, told the 1824 select committee that opposition to tithes arose not from the view that they were an unjust demand but from an inability to pay.¹⁰ Customary expectations of reasonable prices for clerical duties lay behind the oaths that were being sworn. The immediate economic stimulus of this particular agitation is also evident. Sir Edward Crofton reported in December 1810:

“There was an immense number at the Chapel of Fuerty this day to proclaim Captain Thresher’s laws to the priest.”

He suggested, in addition, that fairs were becoming places where the lower orders were meeting under the pretence of being merely parish factions, but in fact to ascertain their numbers and strength. Crofton appeared to imply a belief that factions were relatively harmless but that these assemblies signified something more sinister. Open rebellion could only be kept down in this “most desperately disturbed country” by a display of military force, Crofton concluded.¹¹ The belief that whiteboy organization was qualitatively more serious than factional dispute was evidently shared

by the Catholic clergy. While whiteboys were less frequently excommunicated for their crimes in the nineteenth century than previously, in the Kildare and Leighlin diocese they were still refused absolution for their sins until after they had done penance for a year. In the adjacent province of Cashel faction fighting, on the other hand, required a three week act of contrition.¹²

A Catholic farmer called John Fallon, of Runnamoat, near Roscommon town, also revealed, in a letter dated 19 October 1811, that agrarian protesters made no concession to his denomination. He wrote that the Threshers, amongst whom his own shepherd was most active, had turned him out of his chapel on the Sunday before last and that the priest had been turned out at the same time.¹³

Fallon's letter is not only further evidence that the Threshers were indiscriminate in terms of action against Catholic clergy as well as Protestant (in the first two decades of the century there appear to have been more protests over dues to Catholic clergy than tithes or tithe farming), but also that they were quite willing to act against Catholic farming interests such as those embodied by Fallon.

Catholic members of the judiciary made no special allowance for their co-religionists. Colonel William Doyle reported in December 1809 that a magistrate named Burke on the Roscommon/Galway border was anxious to demonstrate to "the lower orders" that Catholic magistrates were as ready to call out the military to quell disturbance as those of the established church.¹⁴ It is clear from this small handful of incidents that, while not at the centre of the disturbances attributed by Beames to

Threshers in the adjacent counties of Leitrim, Longford, Mayo and Sligo, in the first decade of the nineteenth century the movement had spread across most of Connacht and into Leinster. Later, unrest was to spread from Roscommon to neighbouring counties. While it is doubtless fruitful to consider the movements at their peaks, according to Beames's account, these examples demonstrate a general conception of the correct ordering of the world.

Further examples of conflict with Catholic clergy and "native" farmers arose. Some years after Hartland's observations, notices fixing fees for performance of duties by Catholic clergy were still being posted, although less frequently. For example, in 1820 rates included 11 shillings and four pence half penny for marriage and two shillings eight pence ha'penny for anointing of the sick.¹⁵ An 1822 notice demonstrated the continued antipathy towards Catholic farmers. The notice warned the farmer to be a better neighbour, for General Springlawn had heard of his bad temper, and that he must leave the neighbourhood or lose his life. The correspondent enclosing this notice commented that the man was instead:

"a highly respectable and humane character; having done numerous acts of kindness among his poor neighbours during the winter. He is of the Roman Catholic religion."¹⁶

The 1824 Lords' select committee was told that rent campaigns did not discriminate between Catholic and Protestant landlords. A parish priest from Skibbereen, Rev Michael Collins, told the same committee that the Catholic poor made no religious distinction about whom they rented from.¹⁷ Thomas Costello, a parish priest in County Limerick, told the 1825 select

committee hearings that the whiteboy oath made no mention of religion.¹⁸ Indeed, another witness told the committee that the Catholic bishop of Ossory's brother had been murdered for taking land over other people's heads.¹⁹ In February 1824 the Roscommon and Leitrim Gazette reported the imprisonment of two men for assaulting the parish priest of Creeve while he was "remonstrating with his congregation on the late outrages in the County Roscommon."²⁰ The Roscommon Journal reported in January 1830 that another parish priest had been "most active in putting down nightly meetings".²¹ George Warburton, inspector of constabulary for Connacht, told the 1824 parliamentary enquiry that whiteboys did not discriminate between Catholics and Protestants in their campaigns "against property".²²

The nationalist Roscommon Journal distanced itself from whiteboyism. Attacks on houses near Grange were described as "on pretence of looking for arms". The sensitivity of élites to arms raids because of the imputed national and rebellious character of such actions should be recalled here. The Journal appears to have been suggesting that the attackers were criminals who were discrediting nationalism. The following week it described how "party feelings" (i.e. conflicts between Ascendancy and emergent Catholic élites) were put aside at a series of meetings "in the great question of preserving the public peace and tranquillity of the county".²³

However, there were also numerous instances where correspondents attributed sectarian motives to agrarian rebels, and indeed

there were a number of instances where bloodcurdling Ribbon oaths were relayed to Dublin Castle. There appears to have been a systematic attempt to boycott Protestant shops in Strokestown for about a month. The first complaint about this was made by a particularly partial source, the Protestant Bishop of Elphin. On 4 August 1813 he complained that notices had been posted in Strokestown saying no-one should deal with any shopkeeper who was an Orangeman, and that the Threshers had sworn all the people in the neighbourhood not to work for Orangemen. Men who disobeyed had been carded. A letter to the bishop from a magistrate named Devenish revealed that all Protestants were to be murdered the following Thursday in a general rising of the rebels. The massacre did not materialise.²⁴

The following day the bishop wrote again, saying four Protestants had been named in a notice posted in Strokestown. One, a shop keeper called Boyd, had written to him saying that another shop keeper, Egan, had removed his usual window display and replaced it with coffin mountings, "as there would be a great demand for them again". The bishop's letter also enclosed a threatening notice that said:

"we bid no person or persons whatsoever to buy any commodity from any of the villainous crew calling themselves Orangemen ... now Depend on it that there will be a proper watch set for to mark all those that will Dare to attempt to go inside the Doors of the persons herein mentioned First that upstart orange scoundrel Boyd."²⁵

It would be reasonable to suppose that the movers of such a campaign against Protestant shopkeepers were men like Egan, and it is possible that

such sectarianism prevailed more among shopkeepers than among the rural poor. Indeed, it is possible to speculate that such sectarianism among shopkeepers prefigures the confessional exclusivity of later nationalism, which found much of its support and cadres among the shopkeeper and "strong farmer" strata in rural Ireland. This possibility is further corroborated by a copy of a catechism found in the house of a man named as a "very comfortable farmer called Hynes", espousing the Catholic cause and the tree of liberty that was planted in Irish soil. The catechism asked:

"What is your intention? It is destroy Protestant kings of Erin - to burn churches - to destroy heretics."²⁶

The contrast with the loyalty to the king of the whiteboy "Captain Farrell", who will be encountered shortly, is remarkable. It is also apparent that sectarian notices such as the one found at Hynes's house tended to express individual motives, rather than collective legitimization.

On 7 August the bishop's horse was hit in the eye by a stone thrown from behind a wall while the bishop was returning from a visit to Athlone and an old woman living two miles from Elphin was "much abused merely for the crime of being a Protestant".²⁷ Furthermore, the bishop reported that the homes of two Protestants were attacked and a prominent land owner remarked that Catholics were being prevented from working with Protestants who had "in any manner been obnoxious to them".²⁸ A notice forbidding people to work on a Protestant church under construction was posted on the structure, and a man was carded for having bought shoes from a Protestant. Windows were broken in a house where a Methodist

service was being held. Yeomanry commander James Kemmis, stationed at Boyle, reported that a general rising and the carding of all Protestants was planned. However, Kemmis concluded:

“danger to the country as represented frequently does not exist ... The wretchedness of the poor and consequently the vicious state of their morals, arising from oppression, is a strong and I think principal cause of those disturbances, for which the remedy rests with the landlord to apply.”²⁹

The system of non-co-operation with Protestants had subsided by September 1813.³⁰ A correspondent from County Sligo wrote to the chief secretary, Robert Peel, that there had been attempts to spread the boycott into that county and notices had been posted on Catholic churches in two baronies bordering Roscommon by men who came from Roscommon in white shirts. He commented that the notices were ridiculed by everyone. One of the notices stated:

“We do forthwith Caution all Romancatholicks in future to have no Communication with Orangemen or with any prejudiced Protestant thats known to be a bad man in the country also we do caution them to purchase no tithes from any jobber only serve him with due notice to take the tithes unless the proprietors settles with the people we do further caution any man that attempts to cant any land in the possession of another.”³¹

The anti-Protestant “system” (more accurately, perhaps, a boycott of certain Protestant businesses) which occurred in Strokestown in 1813 was not the

only instance of anti-Protestant sentiment emerging from County Roscommon in the early years of the nineteenth century.

A catechism submitted to Dublin in August 1815 expressed similar sentiments to those in the document recovered from Hynes's house. It promised an endeavour to recover lost rights usurped by tyrannic and oppressive Protestants and Orangemen, and professed an ability to swim three leagues in Orange blood. It also talked of the tree of liberty, of America and of France. The anti-Protestant sentiments appear to sit strangely alongside the language and imagery of brotherhood.³² In early 1820 a similar catechism talked of swimming nine leagues in Orange blood.³³

Evangelical Protestantism was the target on one occasion in 1819, when "Ribbon-men" served notices on several people not to send their children to a Sunday school, after which the bible was apparently torn up on the road and called the devil's book. The vicar of Roscommon wrote to the Castle in 1819 that the local Catholic priest had warned people about sending their children to the school "with all the terrors of priestcraft". The partiality of the vicar's language may not be surprising, and serves to reinforce the point made in chapter three about the sources' structural prejudices.³⁴

An oath sent to Dublin Castle early the following year bound anyone taking it thus:

"You will not buy anything from a Protestant unless you get either better or cheaper than from a Catholic".³⁵

This amounts to little more than self-help for the Catholic shopkeepers. Another, recovered from a man committed to Roscommon gaol two months

later, reveals more generalised anti-Protestant sentiments. It promised to help the French or anyone else endeavouring to liberate the downtrodden, to be ready to collect money or arms to further the cause, only admit Catholics (or worthy Protestants) to membership, and wade knee-deep in the blood of Protestants and others who despise "our blessed communion".³⁶ Its particular displeasure was reserved for "those who feed on the tenth part of our labour." This reveals some tendency towards general political conspiracy, some sectarianism and the familiar grievance of tithes. The general opposition to tithes, the enthusiasm for the French and the national politics suggest that this "proto-nationalist" oath originated among artisans, publicans, shopkeepers and strong farmers, rather than among the cottiers and agricultural labourers.

John Wills, the stipendiary magistrate, summarised his views on the disturbances in a long letter responding to questions put by Peel's successor, Charles Grant, in June 1820. He suggested that there were no economic justifications for the disturbances that had afflicted the county, that tithes had not been collected in a vexatious manner (indeed some had not been paid for two years), and that rents and tithes were only a pretext for disturbances which were in fact intended to overthrow the established church and government. However, he admitted that "They have attacked the house of both Protestants and Catholics". Wills added that during the disturbances of 1813 to 1815, when the disaffected had assumed the name of Threshers and Carders, Catholic priests' dues had been an issue, although they were no longer a major grievance. Catholic priests

could have worked harder to persuade their flocks such activities were wrong, but they had lost influence. Grant had asked whether farmers and gentry could have resisted the rebels more determinedly, which is a revealing question. For Grant clearly perceived the "strong" farming stratum as separate from these lower orders. Wills, however, suggested that the farmers were too scared to come forward "in consequence of their property being open to depredation". This suggests strongly that the gentry and head landlords, being further removed and rather better protected from agrarian rebels, were relatively immune from the "system", but that intermediate strata might be more effectively disciplined according to custom. This was a belief that was virtually dispelled by the mid-century. The relative lack of attacks on head landlords is not necessarily attributable to satisfaction with their performance.³⁷

On another occasion a threatening notice expressly disavowed any sectarian intent:

"some malicious and ill disposed person has circulated reports that our intention is to destroy our country Protestant men but they are mistaken we abominate such barbarity".³⁸

However, in another case some men called on a publican called John McNulty in Loughglynn. McNulty swore (whether willingly or not is unclear) "not to buy two pence worth from any other religion but the Roman Catholic, that is from any heretick, to pay no tithes to the parson, to throw down or level Protestant Houses and New Churches, if any invasion arise to aid and assist against the king".³⁹ It is apparent that national and religious sentiments were frequently expressed by such men as McNulty and

stronger farmers like Hynes, confirming that such ideologies prevailed more among them than among the rural poor, whose objects tended to be more overtly economic and local. Indeed, Warburton told the 1824 select committee that anti-Protestant Ribbon oaths came from sources in Dublin and were not local or spontaneous. The lower classes had never thought about emancipation until the Catholic Association was formed and emancipation “would not quiet the people”.⁴⁰

In December 1823 Wills reported a horse being maimed and two attacks on its owner's house, saying that the man's Protestantism was the only reason that could be assigned for the outrages.⁴¹ There are no further mentions of religious antipathy in the Roscommon papers under consideration in this chapter.

Hostility towards Protestantism must be seen in a broader Irish context, at the point of intersection of confession and class. For, as is often mentioned in the sources, Protestants in County Roscommon were almost exclusively not of the “lower orders”. They were a tiny minority in the county, yet owned much of the land, held many of the important positions as middle men and agents, magistrates and police, ran shops and services and farmed tithes. It is therefore not altogether surprising that there were manifestations of an anti-Protestant consciousness when the peasant's subsistence equilibrium was disturbed. The 1824 select committee was particularly concerned about opposition to tithes. I have already noted that the rural poor more frequently objected to the amounts demanded by farmers and proctors than to the payment of tithes. Some of the witnesses understood that the appeal of Catholic solidarity was rather limited. Henry

Newenham a magistrate from County Cork, suggested that disturbances did not commence because of religious antipathy but that "it is one of the strongest handles the ill-disposed can make use of to turn to their own purposes".⁴² Francis Blackburne told the same hearings that because the landlords were all Protestants, the disturbances assumed a religious character "in appearance", and that as a result "religion happened to become enlisted to the cause".⁴³ Richard Willcocks, Warburton's equivalent in Munster, believed that Catholic emancipation would not end "outrage". The "better class of farmers and professional men" were the only ones who mentioned the state of the law in respect of Catholics and they enlisted the help of the Catholic clergy to try to pacify the lower orders. Insurgency was directed as much against them as against Protestants. He added:

"I do not think the lower class of the peasantry of Ireland care two pence about emancipation."⁴⁴

A Sligo magistrate told the 1825 enquiry that Catholic peasants cared little about emancipation, but that the clergy and some other Catholics had told them it would be a great benefit.⁴⁵

The function of Catholicism as a solidarity mechanism was threatened whenever the people often seen as brokers of influence among the Catholic rural poor - for example, the clergy and the "underground gentry" - spoke or acted against secret societies. Another witness, William Becher (also a member of the committee), said that shopkeepers were anxious about their religious "disabilities". His comments articulated the changes taking place and the process of erosion of the vertical and communal ties within Catholicism:

“the Catholic, having acquired property, and having been admitted into professions, became ambitious and anxious to participate in all the privileges of the constitution ... though perhaps the lower orders may not be so much benefited by any political concession, yet they may be easily led to think that they have a common interest with the Catholic body in endeavouring to effect the object of a full enjoyment of the privileges of the constitution”.⁴⁶

O’Connell acknowledged in his evidence to the 1825 committee that the removal of “disabilities” would remove only the “double aspect” of oppression and that he had never attributed all Ireland’s ills merely to “the want of emancipation”.⁴⁷ William Despard, a magistrate in Queen’s County, said in his evidence to the 1831 parliamentary investigation into the state of Ireland that there had been “a complete separation” since 1828 between the lower orders and gentlemen. It is perhaps not surprising that this separation occurred at the same time as the reform of 1829, which granted the “privileges of the constitution” to a limited number of better-off Catholics. Despard added that Catholic farmers were ill-treated as much as Protestants, and the Catholic clergy were doing everything in their power to stop “outrages”.⁴⁸

In August 1808 a report from the Mayo and Roscommon border suggested that “an attack on his majesty’s government never was the object of this mob” and that “jealousy from one faction to another for taking a farm caused the haughing of some cattle.”⁴⁹ In 1810 there were reports of hundreds gathering at night, wearing white shirts and organising outrages.

One major general believed that such assemblies were not significant and “frequently originate from family feuds.”⁵⁰ Jealousies over coveted farms and reports of family disputes appear to confirm David Fitzpatrick’s view, considered in the first chapter, that the agrarian outrages of pre-famine Ireland reflected the pre-modern family-orientated solidarities of Irish peasants. A number of instances which may, to follow Fitzpatrick’s suggestion, be interpreted as kin or communal conflicts, occur through the papers and can be considered now. The “pre-modern” use of disguise was also evident. Lord Lorton wrote of a skirmish with a party of men wearing white shirts near Castle Tenison in December 1806. The following December an encounter with “thrashing rebels” near Lough Key, “all dressed in white shirts & white handkerchiefs in their hats with straw bands around their waists” was reported to Lorton.⁵¹ These incidents could be understood as evidence of the solidarity function (and practical use for identification purposes) of a common uniform, and do not necessarily mean the agrarian rebels were “pre-modern”.

The use of the word “faction” is noteworthy. In this context it appears to confirm the suggestion that families or neighbourhoods could be equated with factions. However, faction conflicts may have been rather more complicated than merely recreational set-pieces for the playing out of “pre-modern” or vertical loyalties. Sir Edward Crofton, in the same letter that claimed open rebellion needed to be crushed, remarked that:

“under the plea of one parish being challenged by another, or one leader’s part by another’s, they frequently meet both at fairs and

dances, much more to shew or find out the strength of their parties than to fight.”⁵²

There was an implication in this remark that the factions were perfectly conscious of the effect their counter-theatre may have had, and that something potentially more threatening than a “primitive” or “pre-modern” group squabble was latent in such a rendezvous. Wills made a similar suggestion in 1814:

“several hundreds assembled during day time at Fairymount under the pretence of fighting but from every information I have been able to collect it was for the purpose of shewing there numbers and administering a new oath.”⁵³

It may be that these meetings were not for the purposes of agrarian conspiracy, but non-violent ritual confrontations. However, there was apparently some connection between factions and agrarian movements, rendering it sometimes difficult to distinguish precisely between faction fighter and whiteboy. The County Limerick parish priest, Thomas Costello, believed that faction fighting and whiteboyism were unrelated.⁵⁴ This prefigures Beames’s assessment, but it seems more likely that there was a certain level of organizational symbiosis and overlap in membership between factions and whiteboyism. Roberts’s study of the Caravats and Shanavests, however, demonstrates the ways in which the two kinds of organization could have divergent ideological tendencies.⁵⁵

Later in 1814, the suggestion that faction meetings disguised something more worrying was made again when a magistrate reported a meeting of between 2,000 and 3,000 men at Cavetown, near Boyle, on

Sunday 10 July “under pretence of fighting but nothing of that kind took place”.⁵⁶

It is apparent that factions were often led by descendants of the dispossessed land owners who had maintained a local presence and some authority. The 1824 parliamentary enquiry into disturbances heard a number of witnesses attest to this. Willcocks reported that a man who led a faction in County Tipperary boasted of the blood of his ancestors.⁵⁷ Indeed, such loyalties may have been behind family-based disputes over land, as a Cork parish priest suggested in his evidence to the 1825 parliamentary enquiry:

“I mean by clanship factions for fighting and carrying the object of a particular family or a particular set of persons”.⁵⁸

John Irwin told the 1825 select committee that on his Sligo estate two men with the same surname had fought for the lands on which one of them lived, both claiming that they were the descendants of a family Cromwell had dispossessed.⁵⁹ James Lawler, a Catholic who was an agent and a magistrate at Killarney, told the 1824 select committee of a dispute over land that had been confiscated after the Williamite wars. He noted that the dispossessed family “particularly venerate the memory ever since”.⁶⁰ The heads of factions were people who had command of people with the same name or family, or were in some way connected with him, the Limerick landlord Richard Bourke told the following year’s parliamentary enquiry into Irish disturbances.⁶¹

At this point modernization and nationalist explanations of conflict both tend to converge at a conceptualization of social relations between

strata in pre-famine rural Ireland which suggests that vertical solidarities led to a confession-based identity. If “vertical” loyalties to the descendants of the dispossessed “native” land owners persisted, however, these were under increasing strain as both “native” and “upstart” middle men, farmers and landlords withdrew from cultural reciprocity with the rural poor. It is evident that social and economic relations between the rural strata beneath the land owners became increasingly conflictual from the time of the Whiteboys onwards. The withdrawal of farmers and middle men from popular culture and the decline of vertical mutuality was the concomitant of economic reorientation by the farming and land owning élites. This may be connected directly with Thompson’s analysis of how the basis of social and economic relations on the land in England shifted from custom-driven vertical reciprocity towards class conflicts, even where the cultural and associational forms of class were not apparent.⁶²

There are some further examples of conflicts that appeared to be based on family or other “pre-modern” loyalties. A merchant from Roscommon town who was also an extensive farmer re-let land, a farm and offices after the previous tenant left owing eighteen months’ rent. The night before the incoming tenant took up residence, all were burned down. The magistrate William Bowles deduced that “all those outrages have been committed on people who have taken land that was thrown up by other tenants”.⁶³ The outrages were attributed by Stephen Mahon to “private resentment”.⁶⁴ Lieutenant General Thomas Meyrick reported that a house at Ballagh, near Slieve Bawn, recently out of lease and taken by a new tenant, had been set fire to by some friends of the old tenant.⁶⁵

Actions on the basis of private resentments, however, could be legitimised by reference to collectively accepted views on rights to land. The previous tenant clearly believed he had a right to the land that was superior to the contractual one that required him to pay a certain rent.

Such private resentments could be related to family or community conflicts. The case of the O'Haras of Castlerea was mentioned in chapter two, and the dispute resulted in murder on 14 October 1816.⁶⁶ Private grievances were considered a major cause of disturbances in County Roscommon in 1820. Michael Dunne wrote from the head office of police to Grant:

"The disturbances in this county appear to have originated in private grievance (not religious ones) by the taking of land over each other's heads."⁶⁷

However, the collectively-held views of subsistence rights that legitimized these actions were public and social. They may have been the values of a "community", encompassing different social strata in vertical ties connected with the "underground gentry", but these ties were snapped as Catholic farmers, agents and middle men disengaged from customary arrangements to seek improvement and emancipation. On 1 November 1822 notices were posted on the houses of Patrick Connor and Christopher Carley in Kiltreevan parish, "threatening vengeance against them, or any other persons, who may set lands or tenements to a man named Cadigan of that place". Cadigan's house had been set fire to on 28 October.⁶⁸ Such disputes may indeed be the consequence of family or

neighbourhood disputes over desirable parcels of land, but they reflect communally held principles of rights and justice.

Further, it is unclear whether these disputes were between more substantial farmers who might not have had access to the counsels of the communal disciplinarians and therefore had to pursue their vendettas individually. The threats made to Connor and Carley suggest that they were indeed tenant farmers who were letting land to the rural poor. Likewise, the case of the Roscommon merchant's farm appears to relate to the tenancy of a substantial holding. This is not to suggest that such "private resentments" or family disputes might occur only between substantial tenant farmers, although it does stimulate further reflection on the issue of agrarian social stratification. For example, private grievance was behind the burning down of two houses in Kilgefin parish on the night of Sunday 1 June 1823, after two men took joint possession of a piece of ground which had formerly been rented collectively by them and others. It appears that such a dispute, involving rundale, would certainly have occurred between poorer peasants.⁶⁹ The sources reveal only two further cases in County Roscommon of disputes attributed to private causes, which may have been occasioned by disputes between or within families over land during the period covered by this chapter. It is thus apparent that "private" grievance could not be regarded as the primary source of collective mobilization of the rural poor. There also appears to have been a distinction between the collective means the rural poor used to further individual interests and the factional or family-based mechanisms deployed by farmers.

Community solidarities were expressed in hostility to strangers. A notice was posted on a door on Kilcooley parish warning all strangers to quit lands taken in the district.⁷⁰ On another occasion notice was served on a man to give up “the widow Gounleys ground ... and if you go to the said land you will rue the day you first thought of coming there.” On 29 March 1820, four days after the notice was served, the house it was posted on was burned down. This warning may have been to a stranger or to someone who had moved in on a coveted piece of land.⁷¹ In April 1822 a notice from “General Rock” was served on John Carr in Athlone barony, warning him to return to his own country, and in the same area the following year a Galway man was beaten for working in the neighbourhood.⁷² Francis Blackburne noted hostility to the hiring of strangers in his evidence to the 1824 select committee.⁷³ However, just as family-based factions could close ranks when faced by a common enemy (usually police), so on one occasion Galway and Roscommon people who were fighting at Mount Talbot fair united when the police became involved. The police opened fire and killed two people.⁷⁴

Actions against strangers were not confined to Ireland. The Roscommon and Leitrim Gazette noted that “Captain Rock” appeared in England in 1824, when a number of Irish labourers sought work in Lincolnshire. The indigenous workers “drove off” the Irish migrants. This demonstrates that there was nothing peculiarly Irish in the “protectionist” measure of seeking to secure employment by excluding others. It might also be noted that there is nothing inherently “pre-modern” in such tactics.⁷⁵

It may be sustainable that the root of some agrarian actions, in addition to those just considered, was private (or even family or neighbourhood) but only in an abstract sense, because agrarian crime habitually involved communal discipline and such discipline was invariably salutary and public. Whether an action was against someone of the same or higher social status, it could be justified by a public, shared sense of custom. It was wrong to evict, and it was also wrong to take land from which someone had been evicted.

The sense that agrarian outrage was also pre-modern in that it was conservative, irrational, spontaneous and resisting technological and modernizing processes, may also be considered. Conflict ensued as landlords (whether owners, agents, middle men or farmers) in Ireland increasingly adopted the ethos of improvement and disturbed the customary equilibria, as the intrusion of commerce brought change to the subsistence-orientated peasant community. However, the violence of such conflicts did not necessarily signify that the protesters were reacting blindly and spontaneously to external stimuli. Randall's discussion of the Wiltshire "outrages" of 1802 notes that social historians have equated violence with organizational immaturity but suggests that the violence was directed specifically, as the shearmen believed employers were breaking both statute and custom. Nocturnal visits, threatening letters, the exclusion of strangers who came from Gloucestershire, supra-regional links with Yorkshire, subscriptions for parliamentary campaigns (rather similarly to O'Connell's Catholic rent) and the attacks on blacklegs rather than

employers all characterised these “outrages”. Indeed, the use of the same descriptive term used to describe Irish disturbances is noteworthy in itself.⁷⁶ In the absence of institutional or associational forms for collective bargaining, new ways of asserting the validity of custom were added to Irish repertoires of resistance. The parliamentary sources also repeatedly emphasize the success of agrarian movements in achieving reductions in prices and especially in lowering rates for conacre. The O’Conor Don told the 1831 parliamentary enquiry into disturbances of Roscommon landlords agreeing to reduce rents.⁷⁷

An aspect of agrarian conflict which can be considered at this point is the question of political motivation. For the assertion that such conflicts belonged to a “pre-modern” era in which solidarities were with family or neighbourhood is closely aligned with the view that they were also “pre-political”. This was discussed in chapter two, particularly in relation to the work of Rudé, Hobsbawm and Fitzpatrick. Indeed, the close connection between “pre-modern” and “pre-political” appeared to be confirmed by Matthew Wyatt, a landlord and magistrate from near Castlerea. In a letter to Peel in which he discussed the case of the O’Haras, he commented:

“I am happy to say that – savage and inhuman as these outrages are ... they are fortunately unassociated by any party or political spirit whatsoever.”⁷⁸

The O’Hara case, it may be recalled, concerned the murder of a man by his son-in-law. Political, in the sense used by Wyatt, inevitably meant the “high” politics of parliament and nation. It is for this reason that the parliamentary

enquiries were so interested in the question of leadership by men of a higher social status. In the aftermath of 1798, combination was inevitably taken to be the precursor of nationalist rebellion. Edward Mills, county sheriff, linked the nocturnal agrarian activities with the “high” political causes of the time:

“They are growing more haughty every day, thanks to my Lords Grey and Grenville.”⁷⁹

Religious disaffection was also taken to be a similar indicator, though it was evidently much less apparent to agrarian rebels themselves.

There were a number of attempts to discern whether whiteboyism was pervaded by any party spirit, which reward detailed examination. The Church of Ireland Bishop of Elphin spoke of “open rebellion”.⁸⁰ Thefts of arms were always seen as potentially political, doubtless due to the memory of 1798, especially when combined with acts of insubordinate counter-theatre like the group of men who styled themselves Captain Thresher’s men, who met in a pub and then proceeded to Boyle to throw mud at the statue of William III on the town’s bridge.⁸¹

The raising of political issues around election times was believed to inflame passions and, however obliquely, influence the disposition to outrage of the rural poor. This connection between the public political sphere and the shady world of whiteboyism (for example, the relationship between the O’Connellite mass movement and agrarianism) has proved notoriously difficult to illuminate. It may be that any scheme which entirely separates the two is unsatisfactory. The parliamentary enquiry held in 1831 was told that agrarian disturbances were not connected to the

emancipation campaign. William Despard suggested that emancipation meetings provided an “organized machinery of operation” which was appropriated by “other people” who harangued people after the emancipation rallies were over.⁸² Irish peasants were neither “pre-political” nor “political” if the meaning of the word is limited to possessing a developed conception of fully-enfranchised parliamentary democracy. The Marquis of Sligo reported in early 1820 that:

“the whole thing as far as I can judge arises from the vile extortions of the gentry in the county of Roscommon whose system of letting land in conacre at exorbitant rents drives the people to despair, famine and misery of the highest degree. In addition to this they feel the tythes are very oppressive to them, as they are collected out of the fag end of their means after rent and other taxes have been extorted from them, probably in not the most lenient way.”

He believed that such a situation could develop into a general political revolt and warned ominously that pike manufacture had commenced in county Roscommon (this, like the arms raid, was regarded as another sign of political conspiracy and imminent rebellion).⁸³ These considerations are related to the theme of leadership, which is also addressed in the Roscommon sources.

A riot in Strokestown in 1819 - after a “misunderstanding” between the parish priest and his parishioners - was related to elections, one commentator suggesting that “the party spirit that has been consequently excited ... does not appear to have subsided yet”.⁸⁴ A magistrate named Strickland wrote the following year that “the general impression they give is

that their conspiracy is diffused over every part of Ireland". He also claimed shortly afterwards that bodies of men numbering three to four hundred were meeting nearby at night, armed with pikes and guns, that they exchanged oaths and catechisms and that "their object is nothing short of rebellion". He believed "the secret association of the Ribbonmen to be spread very generally over Ireland". This warning about the extent of the perceived conspiracy was in an enclosure submitted to the Castle by the Mayo MP Denis Browne (who has already appeared in this study), in which Browne's own letter explicitly referred to the 1798 rebellion.⁸⁵ Browne also understood that disaffection might be translated into political terms (his homily on the state of the county may be recalled) and considered that the troubles that had started in Roscommon were spreading all over Ireland. He called for the re-enactment of lapsed 1798 legislation and concluded:

"I fear you must prepare for a general rebellion."⁸⁶

A correspondent near Castlerea suggested that each village or townland had a captain, who received orders from officers commanding parishes, who in turn received orders from barony commanders and county generals. A general rising and attack on Castlerea was planned for the following night, but if not they would at least release a man name Moran, who was due to be whipped publicly for an unnamed misdemeanour. The contrast in the scale of the potential outcomes forecast by this writer may at first seem rather ludicrous, and needs to be explained both in terms of the writer's own beliefs and fears (expressed in this instance by an explanation that "after getting arms and ammunition a general massacre of Protestants is to take place") and the relationship between local grievance and general

political outlook. If local and economic grievances could increase the disposition towards general rebellion, then the alternatives of rebellion or (if such was not feasible at a given moment) the more prosaic objective of liberating a friend may not be utterly ridiculous.⁸⁷ The anticipated rising did not take place, but Wills nevertheless asserted that "a competent system of organization exists, not only in this neighbourhood but throughout this and the adjoining counties".⁸⁸

Wills's belief may have been based partly on his own perceptions and political outlook, but also on notices such as one he sent to Dublin in February 1820. This notice, from Captain Right, instructed the recipient not to allow a particular man called Studders to stay in his house, or it would be destroyed. The captain threatened to punish "as far as the United Powers directs". Such grand titles may have provoked Wills to believe general conspiracies were afoot, but they may more profitably be explained in terms of the counter-theatrical language discussed earlier. However, the connection between a local objective and a language of conspiracy reveals once gain the problematically ambient relation between the local and the political. One of the most useful manifestations of this relationship was provided by Stephen Mahon. He wrote:

"Notices in writing have been lately posted on the doors of chapels and other conspicuous places fixing the prices of labour and the rent of land directing all herds and shepherds of the large farmers to cease from attending their flocks and herd and requiring the abolition or diminution of tythes and a general division of land among the labouring class."⁸⁹

Mahon's letter reveals the connection made between the local and particular on one hand and general solutions to the rural poor's political, economic and social predicaments on the other. Utopian visions may be part of the political programme of peasants. Millenarianism has indeed been identified as a product of peasant social movements, and has been noted in Ireland during this period, particularly in the "Pastorini prophecies". However, evidence of millenarianism is almost entirely absent from County Roscommon in this period. On one occasion an unknown correspondent told Denis Browne that a preacher called Thomas Dixon had appeared, proclaiming that the hour of peace was approaching. He was also said to have been seen at the head of two parties of Ribbon men across the border in county Galway.⁹⁰ This seems an unlikely millenarian tale, as Dixon was a Maynooth-trained Catholic priest who had been converted to Protestantism two years after taking up a curate's position in Killala, County Mayo, and who testified about the dangers of popery to an 1825 Lords' enquiry into Irish disturbances.⁹¹ There are no further references in the State of the Country Papers to millenarian movements touching the county. The Threshers' support for Bonaparte "who is to set all this right" in 1806 and 1807 may perhaps be understood as expressions of abstract millennial desires.⁹² Peter Burke has suggested that millenarianism was one of the available cultural responses to perceived injustice among the peasants of early modern Europe.⁹³ At this juncture in County Roscommon, it appears that millenarianism had a limited resonance and that more concrete political responses were forming during this period of rapid change. The co-existence of general political visions and concrete local

demands must render questionable the suggestion that peasants were incapable of moving beyond the specific and the local.

Wills attempted some detailed answers about possible political ends in a lengthy reply to questions put by Grant. He suggested that Ribbonism was no more than the continuance of the agrarian movement that had been known a few years earlier as the Threshers and the Carders. However, some had been led further, to believe that the Established religion and government were their bitterest enemies, that they were slaves and that by overturning both their situation would be improved.⁹⁴

Such statements lead inevitably to the question of leadership. There appears to have been a general assumption among the magistracy and politicians that agrarian rebels needed external leadership, so there was a particular sensitivity to whether there were men of a “better sort” pulling the strings. This was, at least partially, mistaken. It is a similar assumption to the one that underpins the approach that sees peasants as a pre-political order. I will demonstrate in the next chapter that whiteboys had their own leaders, “organic intellectuals” who could make political generalizations. However, it seems that there must also have been intermediaries between whiteboys and the literate, monoglot anglophone world. There were a number of occasions when the chimera of agitators or Catholics of the “better orders” in leadership rôles haunted political and judicial élites, but rarely any concrete evidence of leadership by other groups. John Kelly, the parish priest at Mitchelstown, believed that whiteboyism “could not have been devised by the lowest order of the peasantry”.⁹⁵ However, the Lord Lieutenant wrote to London in 1814:

“Nor is there any evidence at all conclusive that they act under the guidance of leaders of respectability either in point of talents or property.”⁹⁶

Lieutenant General Sir Edward Paget reported that there was no positive proof that “political incendiaries” were fomenting revolt during the disturbed months of early 1820, although it was likely that “some such miscreants have been thus employed, and have contrived to convert the just grievances of this indigent and oppressed peasantry, to their own diabolical purposes”. Paget believed that some amelioration of poverty was required in order to prevent insurrection. He added that all his colleagues believed poverty resulting from exorbitant rents and the cheapness of labour were “the main ground of the present disorders”.⁹⁷ Another military man opined the following year that “much local mischief may be contemplated, but I do not apprehend therefrom, a general and simultaneous rising”.⁹⁸ In 1824 the Roscommon magistrate Arthur Browne expressed anxiety at “a disposition on the part of the lower orders to purchase fire arms”, although he was “not disposed to impute this inclination to any aims of a political nature”.⁹⁹ A Roscommon magistrate reported that “men of wealth and prosperity” were aiding those who committed outrages. However, by the following year there was “great activity in collecting the Catholic rent”. This suggests that where O’Connellism did penetrate the rural poor, it seems to have succeeded most in periods of hiatus in agrarian disturbance, when the poor may have looked for deliverance to élite leadership rather than their own efforts. It may also be seen as further evidence of the breakdown of vertical ties between

patron and land holder, as the rural poor acted increasingly for themselves.¹⁰⁰

However, if “pre-modern” peasants were hostile to strangers, it seems unlikely that they would welcome the intervention of agitators from beyond their familiar world. The kind of leader they had generally acknowledged might be the descendant of a dispossessed local lord, as suggested by Whelan’s view of the “underground gentry”, (or indeed one of the “upstarts” who adapted to local mores, according to Barnard). If such people no longer reciprocated, then the bonds of mutual loyalty were dissolved. It was in these circumstances that customary expectations could be transformed into class conflicts. It has often been assumed that O’Connell’s campaigns for emancipation and repeal reached far among the lower orders, but the evidence for homogeneous national consciousness among whiteboys is flimsy. Indeed, there appears to be little evidence of the appeal of the two campaigns to whiteboys other than the size of attendances at his mass rallies, and Séan Connolly has suggested that “it remains doubtful how far down the social scale either movement really penetrated”.¹⁰¹ The evidence I have adduced confirms that the penetration of O’Connell’s confessionally exclusive nationalism was indeed limited. If the clergy were his footsoldiers, they met a fierce opposing army in Roscommon whiteboy organisations. Having also established that the other “natural” leaders of Catholic Ireland were disengaging from customary and vertical cultural ties with the rural poor in the early nineteenth century, the fascinating references to other kinds of outside agitation may now be considered.

In 1812 the return of a man who had lived in England for a number of years aroused suspicion. One magistrate believed he had been deeply implicated in disturbances in England and his return to Ireland was not for the best purposes.¹⁰² In 1820 Wills wrote that English men and Scots had been among the people in Roscommon and “talked a good deal about the distresses and grievances of the people”. They had pretended to be pedlars.¹⁰³ Hedge school masters have been considered as possible intermediaries between whiteboyism and the literate world. It appears that radical ideas could have been disseminated by itinerants and translated aloud in public by sympathetic residents, much as the Northern Star was distributed in the 1790s, a process which led to “the jacobinising of the secret societies”.¹⁰⁴

When an allegation was made that an English man (whose day job had been as a coachman to Sir Edward Crofton’s brother-in-law) was relaying orders down a chain of command for the posting of Thresher notices on chapels, James Irwin, a Roscommon magistrate, wrote:

“If this be true, an Englishman, a stranger, unconnected here, he must ... be the agent of others far above himself.”¹⁰⁵

Another magistrate, Devenish, said he could find no connection with the Catholic dissent.¹⁰⁶ In October 1816, just before the Spa Fields riots in London, an anonymous correspondent in London informed Peel that there was a “Provisional Government” organized in every part of Ireland and Britain, exciting disaffection and fomenting disloyalty. It was connected with similar movements in Madrid, Paris and Rome, raising arms and ammunition.¹⁰⁷ Denis Browne, writing in 1819, commented that the riots in

England had been heard of but had caused no trouble, although all the mischief in Connacht was in County Roscommon.¹⁰⁸ He was writing two months after Peterloo and three weeks after the procession that heralded Henry Hunt's entry into London, accompanied by Arthur Thistlewood (of whom more shortly) and banners of green silk, emblazoned with Irish harps.¹⁰⁹ A printed copy of Hunt's address on the eve of Peterloo had been distributed widely in Ireland.¹¹⁰ A Mayo magistrate reported "that communication exists between the disturbers in England and those in this country ... swearing in Ribbon Men at the Chapels after the Priest goes away".¹¹¹ Browne appeared to contradict his earlier view when he wrote in December 1819:

"All depends on England if mischief there be put down."¹¹²

Browne evidently believed that the local disturbances could potentially be transformed into some kind of social crisis, and the prospects for the importing of political radicalism from England could be the spark to the agrarian tinder. Another correspondent entertained the notion that a sportsman was the go-between in this revolutionary scenario, suggesting:

"Donnelly the great Boxer is acting secretary for the rebels of both England and Ireland & that the correspondence is carried on through him."¹¹³

Other writers agreed, one claiming that there was certainly an "active correspondence" between English and Irish radicals, and another that there were 100,000 guns in the counties of Roscommon, Mayo and Sligo, and that rebels were meeting near Boyle at night under Protestant leadership.¹¹⁴ It is evident that there was some connection, although it may

be that any formal communications were with the nationalist Ribbon societies. Here again, the opaque relations between agrarian rebellion and Ribbonism frustrate attempts to be more precise about the connection. For English radicals the espousal of Irish nationalism was a means to oppose the British political élite (O'Connell endorsed the Charter in 1838, and it was broadened to demand repeal of the union in 1842, although he derided Chartism) as well as an end in itself.¹¹⁵ However, it may safely be supposed that the language of liberty had penetrated further merely than the farmers, shopkeepers and publicans who provided the organizational spine of Ribbonism, and that the notion of liberty had a different, egalitarian nuance among whiteboys, even where it was laced with millenarian or sectarian ideas. The Ribbonism that prevailed in Connacht in 1819 and 1820 was certainly more agrarian than conspiratorial and nationalist. It prompted a lengthy report from Peel's successor as chief secretary for Ireland, Charles Grant, to Lord Sidmouth, the Home Secretary. Grant said there was "no proof that they deserve the name of a radical insurrection". Nor had he been able to establish that there were English emissaries to the Irish, or "a connection between the Radicals and the Ribbonmen".¹¹⁶

There was, however, an opportunity for radicalism to be preached in Boyle, and an audience. A correspondent wrote to the Roscommon and Leitrim Gazette to complain that that there was "at our doors, an expatriated Yorkshire radical, and his protégée in this town".¹¹⁷ George Warburton told the 1824 select committee that the son of the ultra-Jacobin Arthur Thistlewood (who was executed for leading the Cato Street conspiracy of early 1820) was believed to be in Ireland, distributing medals bearing the

image of a tree or cap of liberty.¹¹⁸ Thistlewood senior had been a member of a group that had advocated a return to small farms and 'spade-husbandry', which may have accounted for his son's interest in Ireland. Arthur Thistlewood had also possibly been involved with an English man in Paris in raising funds, and had spent the time between Spa Fields and Cato Street moving "from one midnight meeting to another", building an "underground chain of communication" across England. He had also been acquainted with Irish veterans of 1798 in London. The uprising he planned for London in the spring of 1820 was to be accompanied by the posting of bills proclaiming a "Provisional Government".¹¹⁹ There appears to be a connection between what Peel's informant told him in 1816 and the details of events in England between late 1816 and early 1820, so it may be that there was some extension of that network to Ireland. The informant presumably felt there was some reason to write from London to the Chief Secretary in Dublin, just as Grant and Sidmouth later corresponded about a possible connection between English radicalism and Irish agrarian disturbances. It should not be assumed that the same kind of effective intelligence-gathering was available to Grant as was available to Sidmouth, for agrarian societies were notoriously hard to penetrate, unlike English conspiracies. They were particularly vulnerable, as a result, to the misconceptions of political élites. Even if Grant's information was accurate, it is evident that at the very least there was an interchange of motifs, emblems and ideas of liberty. It was after Peterloo that the "address to Irishmen" posted in Clonmel, County Tipperary, told of the "murdered patriots of Manchester".¹²⁰ There were rumours that Arthur Thistlewood was

in Ireland. Three hundred copies of a handbill talking of Peterloo and Hunt's triumphant procession were seized from a man at a fair in Thurles.¹²¹ In the "combined and uneven development" of consciousness of class among the Irish rural poor, the emblematic significance of Peterloo was grafted on to the Irish agrarian tradition. Thus might the developing consciousness of class appropriate motifs and emblems from France, Paine and now Radicalism, as social relations in rural Ireland were re-constituted according to different principles. A lawyer at the trial of two Galway Ribbonmen in 1820 said that the lower orders had disengaged from the affinity that should exist between landlord and tenant. In the shifting language and emblems of agrarian rebels it is possible to discern the hardening of class polarizations after the withdrawal of élites from vertical affinities.¹²²

The anxiety of a ruling élite about its position on both sides of the Irish Sea is readily discernible. The anxiety functioned in two paradigms. One was an anxiety about the possibility of social upheaval and the other was about the potential for nationalist rebellion and independence in Ireland. These were not exclusive. The privileges and position of the Established church, for example, were common ideological components of each paradigm, but what is interesting is that the social upheaval paradigm has largely been obscured by nationalist and modernization historiographies. In one, social conflict was subsumed into the cause of national liberation, and in the other peasants are deemed to have been incapable of acting beyond certain limitations imposed by their economic and cultural status before the widespread development of factory

production and the associational forms that accompanied it. Some observers, like Denis Browne, were aware of the social dimension to this unrest. On one occasion, even the Roscommon and Leitrim Gazette could talk of the rural poor's "revolutionary designs on property" without mentioning religion or nationalism, but habitually the Gazette, and élite sources generally, accentuated the national.¹²³

There is a mass of evidence concerning who participated in agrarian conflict and who the victims were. The following account will lead to a consideration of the moral economy of these conflicts.

A common theme in much of the recent historiography of agrarian conflict has been the relative immunity from attack of the head landlord class, contrary to the nationalist notion of struggle between rapacious Saxons and a homogeneous, oppressed Irish tenantry. The occasions when a land owner was directly attacked were usually made explicit in the State of the Country Papers. However, the papers offer a number of clues about the status of people who were more frequently attacked or disciplined according to customary expectations.

For example, some physical description of a house that was visited is often given, which compensates to some degree for the shortage of information regarding farm size or occupation. This might be the mention of whether the building was glazed, the number of doors, the presence of outbuildings, how many floors there were, the presence of live-in servants and the type of roof. Mathew Simpson's information to a magistrate investigating a nocturnal visit to his home reveals that he and his father's

servant were made to get up and swear to keep Captain Thresher's laws.¹²⁴ Additionally, the use of the word farmer usually signifies a more substantial tenant. For example, when 30 or 40 person calling themselves Ribbon men attacked a farmer's house in late 1818 and plundered it for arms, one of their number was shot dead by the farmer's son.¹²⁵

There were further reports of attacks on middling farmers, such as Charles Tinsillant, who has already been encountered. He was described as a wealthy farmer who took a farm of 180 acres on the estate he managed, built a new house and then had it burned down.¹²⁶ A yeomanry officer reported the destruction of a farmer's hay and a shot being fired at a Mr McDermott's servant, while another report gave an inventory that could only signify the relative comfort of the victim's home. When he was visited at night, a man named McCawley fled through the back window of his house and the attackers bayoneted his beds and chests. Then the "captain" ordered the gang to fire into the lofts.¹²⁷ On another occasion attackers were described as having broken down the doors of Thomas Mullins's house in Kilmeane parish, the plural "doors" signifying comparative wealth.¹²⁸ Another man claimed compensation for the burning down of his outhouse, saying it was because he had given evidence against Ribbonmen four years earlier.¹²⁹ Similarly, it was reported that out offices containing wool had been burned down near Castlestrange. The Roscommon and Leitrim Gazette noted that:

"Suspicion rests on some of those persons who were lately dispossessed for non-payment of rent."¹³⁰

In December 1823 an outhouse with a horse inside was burned down at the other end of the county, near Keadue, and on other occasions windows were broken and the inhabitants sworn not to prosecute Captain Rock's men.¹³¹ Three attacks accompanied by demands for weapons were mounted on the houses of better-off farmers in Moore parish.¹³² These examples give an impression of the nature of agrarian conflict in the county over the period. It would be possible to construct a wildly inaccurate table reflecting crimes against members of particular social groups, but the examples considered here give a more valuable qualitative impression of the nature of such conflicts. Land conflicts tended to involve farmers on one side, and cottiers and labourers on the other.

Evidence suggesting that strong farmers were frequently the object of attacks does not, of course, prove that they were attacked by employees, conacre sub-tenants or cottiers. On some occasions they may have been attacked by rivals for the substantial farms they rented, but there is a strong suggestion that attacks by other substantial farmers were often by people against whom they had given evidence in court or information to magistrates. Given the reluctance of many among the rural population to testify against agrarian rebels, through fear of the sanctions that might be imposed, this appears to confirm that the emergent strong farming class was becoming less likely to feel bound by such unofficial, communal discipline.

The evidence is also sometimes apparently contradictory. For example, when Roscommon was at the periphery of the Thresher disturbances of 1807, it was suggested that the Threshers were "by no

means unpopular with the middling gentry".¹³³ On the other hand, a middling farmer called Thomas Sandford, "a respectable farmer much above the common crop", gave evidence against men who called at his house to persuade him not to testify against one of their number. After his court appearance Sandford had soldiers stationed at his house at the public expense. The steps the authorities took to protect a witness also demonstrate the strength of the moral sanctions imposed by agrarian rebels. Donnelly has suggested that the social composition of a movement could vary according to prevailing economic conditions, which led to the adoption of particular programmes.¹³⁴ For example, the movement of 1806-1807 was likely to appeal to a broader range among the peasantry, as it involved priests' dues and tithes.

However, when the house of Peter Boland was attacked, the magistrate Devenish did supply the Castle with information about holding size, revealing that Boland was a farmer of 40 acres who was shot for refusing to co-operate in punishing a man who had informed the authorities about an unlicensed still. It should be noted that the notion of an alternative legal authority is present here and that the agrarian rebels were not solely concerned with land, seeking to enforce their conception of what was right over a broader spectrum of social relations. Boland was described as a man with "strong connections", and it was also suggested that someone in Boland's family might have been concerned in the attack. It may be that lurking behind this incident was a struggle within an emergent strong-farming family group over control of the illicit distilling business in the Strokestown area.¹³⁵

Other incidents which may be connected to economic change and shifts in rural social relations included attacks on graziers. Lieutenant General GV Hart reported to Sir Charles Saxton on 23 March 1812 that County Roscommon was now the seat of disturbance in the western district and that oaths were administered nightly "to the lower orders of people and some farmers". He also considered that the action against herdsmen was taken

"with a view, it is supposed, of compelling farmers etc to convert their pasture lands into tillage for the production of Grain instead of animal foods for exportation."¹³⁶

A substantial farmer, John Gifford, complained that hundreds were gathering to swear the herdsmen, ordering them to give up the stock in their charge on pain of death. His father had 41 bullocks and 90 sheep at the mercy of the whiteboys and not a night was passing without some new edict.¹³⁷

Actions against grazing, and concerning the price of land, especially conacre, were a significant cause of grievance over a number of years. On the night of Tuesday 28 March 1820 a party of 100 men delivered threatening letters to farmers and agents in the parish of Killinvoy, demanding that the price of conacre be reduced.¹³⁸ It was a deeply entrenched customary notion that the primary use of land was to provide subsistence minima for its occupiers.

There were actions in 1819 against graziers near Castlerea, when men calling themselves Ribbon men "assembled by night ... and rode

away the horses out of the pasture fields".¹³⁹ Wills reported six weeks later that:

"The Banditti ... swore all the herds belonging to the Gentlemen of the Country to drive the stock off the Lands in order to leave the lands bare, and such is the intimidation excited by their threats, that a number of the Herds actually drove the Cattle home to their Employers residence."¹⁴⁰

A month after this incident a group of men visited the house of a herdsman in Rahara parish and swore him to give up such work. On the same night a flock of sheep was slaughtered near Strokestown.¹⁴¹ Martin Conway of Carrick, near Athlone, was sworn to obey Captain Rock and give up his job as a herd to Mr Kelly.¹⁴² James Knott's herd was visited and the employee was sworn to give up his job.¹⁴³ The agrarian protesters were here again engaged in disciplining members of their own order according to customs that accorded subsistence rights to all.

A threatening notice posted in St Peter's parish, near Athlone, attacked landlords generally and held out the vague threat of revolutionary social change:

"Whereas by a late act passed by our legislature an act to suppress landlord or landlords that will dispossess their tenant or tenants or cart his or their effects Now we the Knight of St Patrick's Rock ... declare that this cartron is in a deplorable state and oppressed by their landlords and we do hereby warn the inhabitants of this Cartron that each and every of them will refrain from taking any lands the grass of said lands bid or cart any cattle distrained for rent without are

severely under the sign of our law ... landlords' lands will be left desolate if they remove tenants ... it is the affliction of the poor that caused me to express myself in this way ... N.B. It is not in opposition to king or country we are but in opposition to such landlords as will not lower their lands or such people as will deviate from the above act – we do not mean to dispossess them of their properties but it shall be left in their own hands until they lower the rents.”¹⁴⁴

In the terms suggested by Burke's conceptualization of five possible responses to wrongs, these sentiments are undoubtedly in the radical range.¹⁴⁵ They are more than the moralism that requires a return to customary relations, for they demand significant changes in those relations. Yet they do not go so far as the millenarian yearnings sometimes attributed to the crude political programmes of whiteboys, for the demands made are concrete. Judging from the self-consciousness of “it is the affliction of the poor that made me express myself in this way”, the writer of the notice was evidently aware that he was moving forward from a customary outlook to make new demands that might provide a more permanent solution to his problems. He was also therefore insistent that his demands were only reformist, and that he did not want to turn the world upside down. Such embryonic self-consciousness of class illustrates the way moral or customary demands were being shifted as a consequence of structural changes.

The anti-landlord sentiment was also present in attacks on people connected with substantial landlords, such as William Guthrie, an agent at

Ardmore. His windows and doors were broken down and a gun was stolen.¹⁴⁶ A threatening notice was left at Patrick Spearman's house at Mount Cashel. Spearman was wood ranger to Stephen Mahon.¹⁴⁷ Henry St George, a substantial land owner, was murdered on leaving his brother's estate near Ballinasloe, and there was a further attempt to assassinate a "gentleman" near Mount Talbot.¹⁴⁸ In January 1827 a carriage bearing Lords Churchill and Crofton was pursued for five miles along the road from Athlone towards Crofton's house at Mote, near Roscommon, with an unsuccessful attempt being made to stop it in Kiltoom parish.¹⁴⁹ The attacks on head landlords, such as when the soldiers protecting Lord Hartland's house were pelted with stones, were infrequent. These attacks were doubtless more effective as counter-theatre than as moral sanctions, such as when Thomas McNaghten's evening meal was disturbed by a volley of stones flung through the windows of the room he was dining in.¹⁵⁰ MacNaghten was the owner of a building at West Park, Drum parish, that was being converted into a police station.¹⁵¹

A man of "good character" was murdered near Athlone for not complying with a threatening notice to quit his house and land in the spring of 1820.¹⁵² A band of men forced their way into Michael Kilroy's house in the spring of 1822 and swore him to divide a farm he had recently rented. Almost a year later a nearby house was burned down because a new tenant had taken the property.¹⁵³ The same year three more properties were attacked and the occupiers ordered to give up their holdings.¹⁵⁴ When hay was burned, animals maimed and an empty house knocked down in Moore parish, Wills explained that the victims all lived on the estate of

Captain Thomas St George and the lands had been surrendered the previous May by the occupying tenants. Suspicion for the attacks on the new tenants' property rested on the former occupiers.¹⁵⁵ It is notable that the lands had been surrendered, not repossessed. The implication was that the former occupiers believed in a right to occupy the lands that was bestowed by custom and that was more important than their ability to fulfil contractual rent obligations.

Also in 1823, a band of 100 men attacked the houses of seven men who had taken land from Colonel French. The new occupiers were sworn to surrender their holdings. In another similar case a house was burned down in consequence of the occupier taking lands from which defaulting tenants had been evicted.¹⁵⁶ In late 1826 an agent was shot at for driving [distraint] cattle in lieu of rent and two drivers on the estate of Morgan Crofton near Boyle lost a barn, an outhouse and cattle in an arson attack.¹⁵⁷ A house at Ballyglass was burned down in consequence of the occupier taking lands from which defaulting tenants had been evicted.¹⁵⁸

Such examples, and the number of people involved in enforcing the collective mores of the peasant community, demonstrate amply that land and its occupation were significant causes of conflict. The fundamental need of the peasant is considered to be land, so it might be expected that rents and evictions would be the most important causes of conflict. However, agrarian rebels sought to impose a customary control on all aspects of economic life in order to ensure the satisfaction of subsistence

needs and provide future security. Land was not the only cause of disturbance. As Richard Bourke told the 1825 select committee:

“I think they only require security”.¹⁵⁹

Threshers, Ribbon men, Rockites and the variously named agrarian protesters acted in defence of their more widely perceived collective economic interests. Those are merely the three main whiteboy appellations in the county during the thirty years between 1798 and 1828. Other names like Lamplighters, Steel Boys, Hearts of Steel and Finishers also occurred.

In July 1807 Brigade Major Ninian Crawford wrote from Strokestown that whiteboys were “swearing the People who have Potatoes & other articles for sale not to demand (or take) above a certain price, on pain of being carded”.¹⁶⁰ An innkeeper near Knockcroghery was reported to have been carded in December 1811 for not selling whiskey at a stipulated price. Lieutenant General Thomas Meyrick reported from Athlone that several sheep belonging to a farmer in St John’s parish had been killed because he had taken land at an increased rent. However, Meyrick concluded:

“the views of these people seem to be to regulate the prices of provisions and liquor, to prevent farmers taking ground over the heads of old tenants and to deter new settlers from coming into the county.”¹⁶¹

This assessment is not consistent with the familiar view that land and rents were the sole focus for agrarian protest in Ireland, contrary to the “price-fixing” riot and other mechanisms designed to operate in a “market economy” such as England’s. On 22 February 1817 a crowd took meal and potatoes from several stores at Athlone market and set prices for the sale

of the goods.¹⁶² EP Thompson suggested price-fixing was known in Ireland, and these Roscommon instances do reveal a blending of Irish tradition with functional responses to economic developments.¹⁶³ The examples already described show that the range of grievances encompassed many aspects of the peasant's economic life and security. A further example of such comprehensive prescriptions for a return to economic stability is contained in a threatening notice:

"March 11th 1812. God bless the King. Gentlemen and farmers of the parish We will not allow any priest but 11 shillings and 4 pence half pence for publick marridge and 1/ for anointing and 1/7 for baptism. No man or woman shall lay offerance only one Crown for Mass and we will not allow any Proctor on any account. Let the parish minister come forth and set his Thydes as usually in the year 1782 any man that asks more than £6 per acre for dinged ground woe be to that man any man that gives more shall share of the same fate any whose lease is up no man shall bid for it till three years after date we were waiting in this parish this many years back Woe be to any man that take this down for 21 days. No more at present but we desire that ye Land Holders and priest and minister of the parish ... to take warning by this we will not allow any publican but 4/ Noggin for spirits, 6 for punch and 4 for brandy. So fare well for a short time. James Farrell, Captn".

The notice was posted again four days later, and is a fascinating glimpse of the consciousness of the rural poor. It prescribed reasonable prices for land, drink and the clerical duties of both the established and Catholic

churches, as well as professing loyalty to the crown. In a further notice this Captain Farrell declared "every man according to his Mens".¹⁶⁴ It is apparent that land was not the only cause of conflict, and indeed shopping was a significant part of the peasant's financial calculations. It also looks back to enforce customary rates for tithe collection. This notice demonstrates exactly where the "moral" response to perceived wrongs shaded into the "radical" response.¹⁶⁵

In early 1812 Meyrick reported that levies were being collected at night to fund legal defences of accused Threshers, although Roscommon appears to have been one of the few places in the western district, Meyrick's command, which continued to be disturbed. Regulation of food prices was again mentioned as a cause of such combinations.¹⁶⁶ Prices fell during the summer and relative calm prevailed, according to a subsequent yeomanry report.¹⁶⁷ A farmer who had sold potatoes at market in Ballaghadereen was murdered nearby. This act suggests that the assassin or assassins were among the very poorest and had no cash to buy provisions. They fed and sheltered themselves from the produce of conacre gardens that they paid for in labour. It had been preceded by a notice posted nearby in March which threatened people who sold provisions at market. The notice claimed:

"This is no Thrashing, burning nor Defenderism but seeing that we are all in a state of starvation ... we will gut them and burn them and their propertys to ashes. from Mr. 'Fair Play'."

It is significant that the notice expressed a sense of anger that the writer (and his like) were in desperate straits because potatoes were being sold

while people were struggling against starvation. This reflects the peasant's belief in having a right to subsistence, aside from any laws of markets or of supply and demand. It also appears to be, like the murder of the farmer, an attempt to stop the sale of potatoes, rather than merely regulate prices.

Rather more typical were the notices posted near Ballaghaderreen at around the same time which reflected the encroachment of the market. They attempted to fix prices, rather than abolish markets completely. One warned that:

"Any person that charges a penny more than half a crown here for potatoes and two shillings a stone for meal ... shall be made an example to the whole country",

while another was slightly more generous:

"This is a general notice to all those pitiful rascals that has ... potatoes or meal to sell dare demand or receive no more than three shillings per hundred and two shillings per stone for meal. Now you parcel of devils ye would see your fellow creatures starve for one stone of meal but now let it be known to you ... any man that dare go beyond these rules shall suffer death ... Thomas Costello, [a local magistrate] I expect youl have nothing to do with this notice of mine because I dont meant to harm King and or Country but shivering to prevent starvation ... God Save the King".¹⁶⁸

The writer of the first of these three notices was anxious not to be associated with any more widespread conspiracy and the third, likewise, was anxious to clarify that his ends were economic, not political (they may have been written by the same person). The professions of loyalty to the

crown may have been sincere or may have been the “rhetorical stratagems” noted by Thompson. The declarations of loyalty were widespread enough for Thomas Drummond to tell the 1839 Lords’ investigation into Irish disturbances that one of the most common forms of oath used by agrarian protesters declared allegiance to the queen.¹⁶⁹ The belief that the king was badly served by ministers and gentry and that if he knew about these injustices they would be rectified (or alternatively that he was not the true king) has been noted in other societies, and recurs in the County Roscommon sources. For example, during the Cossack rebellion of 1773 many peasants in Russia saw the gentry, not the monarchy, as the cause of their distress and sought protection from a just monarch. The “good tsar” motif was a vital ideological component of the rebellion.¹⁷⁰ Similarly, Blacks in eighteenth century England declared their loyalty to the house of Hanover.¹⁷¹ Such stratagems were not confined to peasants, and appeared during the agitation in favour of Queen Caroline as a means to attack the corruption of the Hanoverian court when George IV acceded to the throne in 1820.¹⁷² One notice directed against distraining and evicting landlords and posted on 2 November 1823 in St Peter’s parish, near Athlone, addressed the point explicitly:

“It is not in opposition to king or government we are but in opposition to such landlords as will not lower their lands or such people as will deviate from the above act - we do not mean to dispossess them of their properties but it shall be left in their own hands until the lower the rents”.¹⁷³

Thus the discourse of Irish agrarian rebels bears comparison with the common British radical theme that it was ministers, rather than the crown, that were to blame for the people's woes. There was no intimation of a desire for liberation from the Crown.

Comprehensive notices dealing with many aspects of economic life continued to appear, although at certain times with different emphases. Catholic clergy fees were a central complaint in 1813, but by 1820 Wills mistakenly reported:

“In the years 1813, 1814 and 1815, when they assumed the name of Carders and Threshers such a practice prevailed but under the Ribbon system I have never known it to exist in this county.”¹⁷⁴

Dues to Catholic clergy were indeed mentioned in the notices posted from one end of the county to the other in March 1820. These fixed prices for crops, fees for Catholic clergy of 11 shillings, four and a half pence for marriage and two shillings, eight and a half pence for anointing the deceased, as well as tithes to be paid to the minister at six pence per acre, tilled or untilled, no proctors to be allowed, no vestry money to be paid by Catholics and “no man whatsoever to bid, propose or demand another's ground or land”.¹⁷⁵ The comprehensiveness of the economic prescriptions of the whiteboys is again striking.

The concerns and rudimentary versions of the tactics that are more usually associated with industrial conflict could also arise. For example, on the night of 2 June 1823, 30 to 40 perches of a ditch were destroyed alongside a new road being built near Strokestown. The cause was apparently that the workers on the road had been insufficiently diligent, and

as a result their employers had suggested that they might be paid, henceforth, a fixed fee for completion of the project. Wills explained:

“it appears that a combination exists amongst the workmen employed to prevent the work being undertaken by contract in order to protract its performance that employment might be afforded the longer to the labouring classes.”¹⁷⁶

There were a number of other cases of industrial conflict. The owner of the Lissdiernan Mills, Roscommon town, was attacked on 25th November 1821, and on 14 January 1823 windows were broken and threatening notices posted at Daly’s mill near Athlone.¹⁷⁷ Twenty people broke into Gonville French’s stable at Ballyforan, assaulted his servants and told them to tell French to raise the wages of the men.¹⁷⁸

The memory of perceived wrongs or past defeats could also stimulate whiteboy activity. It may be recalled that a letter from Samuel Hodson, of Hodson’s Bay, Lough Ree, to Doyle, revealed that a bridge had been built by order of the Threshers at a spot where some of their number had been cornered and killed in 1795, when there was no bridge to cross. Mr Hodson related that

“in the year 1795 after burning Mr Mills’s house their flight was interrupted and a considerable number of their body, then called Defenders killed and drowned.”¹⁷⁹

It is worth noting that the Threshers had, according to these sources, been related to the early eighteenth century Houghers and to the Defenders. This appears to demonstrate a continuity in the perception of agrarian protest by

some members of non-farming élites. Matthew Lyster, a County Roscommon magistrate, wrote to the Castle in the autumn of 1798 to request the assistance of troops to put down Houghers and defend gaols.¹⁸⁰ It is interesting to note that Lyster had also given the movement the name attached to the earliest outbreak of agrarian violence, which afflicted Connacht in the second decade of the eighteenth century. This appellation, importantly, located whiteboyism in a tradition of agrarian rebellion. The notion of moral economy is, as has been observed, centrally concerned with custom and tradition. The whiteboys' alternative conceptions of justice and law are a further example of the comprehensive moral economy which governed social and economic relations on the land in pre-famine Ireland.

The corollary of this was a continuity in the legitimising consciousness of the agrarian rebels. Indeed, while I have shown how the rural poor continued to perceive social relations in terms of custom, the disengagement of élites from paternalist notions of social relations remained incomplete, despite the embracing of "improvement". I have shown how Lorton sent such "mixed messages", and it ought to be noted that changes in outlook were gradual, rather than irruptive. Echoes of paternalism and deference may be found in the threatening notice posted on an estate gate in Drum parish in August 1823, which said that if it was not for the kindness of the mistress to the poor, "the plantation would be consumed to the hall door".¹⁸¹ Another landlord reduced conacre rents to £1 an acre after hearing of a potato crop failure in 1828.¹⁸² The previously-mentioned Studders would not be hurt out of respect for Mrs Armstrong, "as she been a good Gentlewoman in the place".¹⁸³ Dr John Church gave

evidence to the 1824 parliamentary enquiry into Irish disturbances of the parish priest's gratitude for a one-third rent abatement and the provision of almost constant employment by Lord Headley.¹⁸⁴ Warburton spoke of the attachment to the landlord if he was considered a gentleman.¹⁸⁵ Richard Griffith, a civil engineer, told the same hearings that the lower orders respected the higher gentry more than their immediate landlords.¹⁸⁶ A Catholic civil servant, Anthony Blake, expressed similar views:

"I do not think that the man who sub-lets, has that sort of feeling towards the person to whom he lets, that the proprietor of the land would have".¹⁸⁷

What was being described to the parliamentary committees was the emergence of a new breed of intermediate landlords who viewed land as a commercial proposition and were not custom-bound, after the comparative laxity and indulgence of eighteenth century landlord and tenant relations. It should also be remembered, however, that the poor did not accept such paternalism without conditions and also that such paternal care may have been an example of a "studied technique of rule". Rev Michael Collins suggested such an approach, telling the 1824 select committee that looking after the poor would make them "feel an interest in the continuance of the existing order of things", much as Archbishop Kelly had suggested emancipation might have a "soothing effect", even if it had little material benefit for the rural poor.¹⁸⁸

A long complaint from a magistrate to Dublin Castle on 18th March 1807 was an example of the frustration felt by Crown servants at the

solidarity displayed in the court room between jurors and the accused. A respectable farmer, “much above the common crop”, had been forced to swear an unlawful oath after a search for arms at his house during the night. Three defence witnesses provided fabricated alibis, contradicting each other, and the conduct of a member of the jury was particularly remarked on as “a curious instance of the casuistry by which men can reconcile themselves to doing what they know to be wrong. He required the juror’s oath to be repeated, and exclaim’d ‘I knew it was so, our oath is to find according to the evidence’.”¹⁸⁹ Another complaint was of “would-be legislators” who, on 18 June 1807, carded a man near Ballaghadereen. He was found guilty on two counts, one of being a herdsman and another of selling potatoes above the price the Threshers allowed.”¹⁹⁰

These two examples demonstrate the ambivalence, if not outright hostility, felt by peasants towards the official law when it was not in line with custom. The second complainant used the language of law to describe the norms asserted by the peasant community against a particular transgressor. Further examples of this can be found throughout the sources and, indeed, threatening notices and agrarian actions often adopted a counter-theatrical legal language, suggesting a customary consciousness at odds with the official legal system. The very acts of swearing oaths, serving notices and punishing wrongdoers can be seen as parallel legal actions defined by a customary consciousness, one that was increasingly in conflict with the official legal system. In such opposing conceptions of justice, one based on the rights of property and the other on customary balances of rights and responsibilities, the “dialectical

antagonism of class" is apparent. John Kelly, the parish priest from Mitchelstown, told the 1825 parliamentary enquiry that there was a widespread lack of confidence in the justice system and that one of Ireland's greatest blessings would be to have an equal distribution of justice to all classes. Kelly added, notably:

"I do not here make distinction of classes as it regards religion, but I mean the poor and the rich".¹⁹¹

Some other aspects of the counter-theatre of agrarian combinations may be considered alongside these specifically "legal" ones, and illustrated by a number of examples.

John Wills reported that nightly meetings of men in uniforms of white shirts were taking place in Oran parish during early 1814. The men were being sworn to obey Captain Thresher's laws. The sense of a parallel, customary justice and authority, is expressed here in the costumes (which could also have the practical value of disguise), the oath and the rank attributed to the leader. Such meetings were reported frequently at this time, and from Longford, to the east, and Mayo, to the west.¹⁹² A notice reported in the Roscommon and Leitrim Gazette in 1822 warned that "General Springlawn will not allow paper servers in his dominion".¹⁹³

In 1820 Wills again noted aspects of counter-theatre when a battle took place between the police and a body of about 400 men between Ballintober and Oran. The rebels were formed into divisions and had an advanced guard. After the confrontation, two hats with badges on them were recovered. It may be noted in passing that Wills was also keenly aware of the value of theatre. He ordered that the body of a whiteboy killed

in the confrontation be taken to Roscommon, where it was market day, and there exhibited, "which I think may have a good effect."¹⁹⁴ Similarly, a week later, Wills suggested that "where the punishment is capital ... it should be carried into effect at such places as the outrages occurred and their bodies not given up to their friends."¹⁹⁵ The parallel with the approach taken by the Tyburn authorities over the disposal of bodies is striking.¹⁹⁶

On another occasion the men who collected money in Tibohine parish "for the alleged purpose of relieving their brethren" described themselves as the police. Such titles were designed to bestow authority upon men who might otherwise have appeared merely criminal, and legitimised their actions as being according to a legal system, however unofficial.¹⁹⁷

So, conflict was expressed in a language of law, justice and legislation. This was recognised by Sir Edward Crofton in bitter anticipation of a forthcoming nocturnal gathering. Seeking advice from the Castle on how to proceed, he remarked that whatever happens:

"I shall have the fiery ordeal of the Irish parliament to pass."¹⁹⁸

This "parliament" legislated that no-one should co-operate in the prosecution of alleged whiteboys, a problem complained of frequently by magistrates. For example, Wills complained that at assizes in early 1814 the jury had resolved to acquit nine accused men if capital indictments had proceeded. Although nine people were sentenced to transportation, the houses of those who gave evidence were attacked and burned down shortly afterwards.¹⁹⁹ Whitworth had noted the disproportion between the number of committals for agrarian crime and the number of convictions,

which he took to be proof of a disordered society. It can be observed that it is proof of the rural poor seeking to impose their own order on society, and that their antagonism to the official judicial system was mirrored by their adherence to their alternative conception of justice.²⁰⁰

Other aspects of agrarian conflict might also illustrate the moral economy of the Irish rural poor. The attacks on men who took land given up by others may be taken to illustrate the belief that the fundamental right of a tenant (and obligation upon the land owner to provide) was the means of subsistence. It has already been noted that men who gave up land nevertheless felt embittered and often attempted to impose sanctions upon incoming occupiers. The Church of Ireland Bishop of Elphin complained that agrarian protest was “mostly occupied in removing the property of every person whose landlord has it under seizure for rent”.²⁰¹ The tone of the bishop’s letter betrayed that he did not understand how the whiteboys failed to share his straightforward sense of contract law. The response to distraint of cattle for arrears of rent illustrates the tenacious attachment to custom that created a solidarity among the peasantry. More than 200 people turned out to help recover cattle when Roger O’Connor, Patrick Dyer and others drove cattle in lieu of rent in January 1815.²⁰² The cattle were forcibly rescued. Similarly, in October 1822 around 200 people assembled near Carrick-on-Shannon, tied up a guard and carried off oats and potatoes that were under seizure for arrears of rent.²⁰³ There is a real sense here of communal norms (and an acknowledgement of a right to a livelihood) being enforced. These norms could be upheld in surprising ways, as when whiteboys were accused of compelling people to repair roads.²⁰⁴

Custom was explicitly upheld as a model for social relations in a notice posted on a chapel door, promising vengeance against people driving cattle for rent, and threatening to burn the houses, hough the cattle and murder the families of any landholder who should on any account pay more for his holding than he did sixteen years ago.²⁰⁵

Workers on a road-building project combined against contracting the work so that they could prolong their employment. A notice was posted which claimed that "any man taking a task shall suffer punishment for so doing Because the Country at large is against it without giving every man his chanch". The notice demanded work opportunities equal to those enjoyed by Lord Hartland's tenants.²⁰⁶ Work opportunities should also be characterised by a fair distribution of opportunity.

It is apparent that the notion of a moral economy, of customary rights and responsibilities between the members of the rural community, has much to offer as an explanatory tool in the context of whiteboyism. For it not only has something to say about land conflicts, but also the many other aspects of economic and social life which whiteboys sought to regulate. However, it is also clear that embryonic claims which shifted the repertoires of resistance were being made as the peasantry became increasingly differentiated. To borrow once more the terms used by Peter Burke, the moral response was being transformed into a radical response. Thompson's analysis of rebellious traditional culture suggests the way in which class antagonisms could be located within a formally conservative consciousness. The next chapter will trace the continuing agrarian conflict

in county Roscommon as far as the great famine, again seeking to consider such conflicts in terms of the historiography of popular protest and EP Thompson's conceptualisation of a moral economy.

NOTES

¹ Beames, Peasants and Power, (Brighton, 1983), p43.

² It has been pointed out that "the unsystematic character of the outrage reports renders statistical analysis inadmissible"; D Fitzpatrick, 'Class, family and rural unrest in nineteenth century Ireland', in PJ Drudy (ed) Ireland: land politics and people, (Cambridge, 1982), pp37-75, quoted at p44.

³ RLG, 31 Jan 1846.

⁴ SOCP1 1278/20, Crofton to unnamed, Dublin Castle, 9 Dec 1810.

⁵ SOCP1 1192/9, Lord Hartland to Stephen Mahon, 7 Dec 1808.

⁶ Fortescue Mss, NLI; Letter of Marquis of Buckingham to Lord Grenville, 11 Dec 1806, (Historical Manuscripts Commission Reports on the Manuscripts of JB Fortescue, vol viii (1912) pp463-468, quoted at page 463.

⁷ SOCP2, Box 158/4047, Harlow Knott to William Elliot, 16 Feb 1807.

⁸ SOCP1 1121/53, Robert Taylor to unnamed, Dublin Castle, 1 Oct 1807.

⁹ SOCP2, Box 158/4451, Robert Jones Lloyd, Elphin, to James Trail, Dublin Castle, 21 Oct 1807.

¹⁰ SC 1824, p35, evidence of Francis Blackburne.

¹¹ SOCP1 1278/20, Crofton to unnamed, Dublin Castle, 9 Dec 1810.

¹² SJ Connolly, Priests and People in Pre-famine Ireland 1780-1845, (Dublin, 1982), pp229-230.

¹³ SOCP1 1388/34, John Fallon, to unnamed, 19 Oct 1811.

¹⁴ SOCP1 1229/7, Colonel William Doyle, assistant adjutant general, to unnamed, Dublin Castle, 11 Dec 1809.

¹⁵ SOCP1 2188/10, notice enclosed with letter from Colonel P. Brown to Gregory, 27 May 1820.

¹⁶ SOCP1 2363/4, Sir John Elley to Lieutenant Colonel Thomas Sorrell, 27 Mar 1822.

¹⁷ SC 1824, p345, evidence of Rev Michael Collins.

¹⁸ SC 1825, p420, evidence of Rev Thomas Costello.

¹⁹ SC 1824, p203, evidence of Sergeant Lloyd, p266, evidence of John Dunn.

²⁰ RLG, 28 Feb 1824.

²¹ RJ, 30 Jan 1830.

²² SC 1824, p136, evidence of George Warburton.

²³ RJ, 20 Dec 1828, 27 Dec 1828.

²⁴ SOCP1 1538/19, Church of Ireland Bishop of Elphin, Power Le Poer Trench, to Gregory, 4 Aug 1813, enclosing letter (same date) from Devenish to Bishop of Elphin.

²⁵ SOCP1 1538/20, Trench, Bishop of Elphin, to Gregory, enclosing letter from Boyd to Bishop of Elphin, 5 Aug 1813.

²⁶ SOCP1 1538/17, letter from magistrate signing as R Cuppiadge (sic) to Gregory, 4 July 1813.

²⁷ SOCP1 1538/22,23, Trench, Bishop of Elphin, to Gregory, 8 Aug 1813 and 12 Aug 1813.

²⁸ SOCP1 1538/25, Trench, Bishop of Elphin to Gregory, 14 Aug 1813. SOCP 1538/27, Brigade Major A Lyster to Sir Edward Littlehales, 24 Aug 1813.

²⁹ SOCP1 1538/28, Trench, Bishop of Elphin to Gregory, 29 Aug 1813. SOCP 1538/29, letter from Kemmis to Lt Colonel Murray, Boyle, 3 Sep 1813, enclosed.

³⁰ SOCP1 1538/31 Lt Gen GV Hart to Peel, 7 Oct 1813, enclosing information from Edward Wilson, magistrate, dated 24 Sep 1813.

³¹ SOCP1 1544/95, Brigade Major Bridgeham, Ballymote, to Peel, 3 Oct 1813.

³² SOCP1 1713/12, enclosed with letter from Francis Waldron, magistrate, Drumsna, Leitrim, 24 Aug 1815.

³³ SOCP1 2175/23, enclosed with letter from unknown source to Denis Browne, 1 Feb 1820.

³⁴ SOCP1 2074/8. Thomas Blakeney to William Gregory, 12 June 1819.

³⁵ SOCP1 2176/9, enclosed with letter from Wills to Charles Grant, Roscommon, 6 Feb 1820.

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- ³⁶ SOCP1 2176/37, submitted to Dublin Castle, April 1820.
- ³⁷ SOCP1 2176/49, Wills to Grant, 8 June 1820.
- ³⁸ SOCP1 2188/10, enclosed with letter from Colonel P Brown to Gregory, 27 May 1820.
- ³⁹ SOCP1 2363/10, information sworn by William Swift, submitted by Wills to Gregory, 29 May 1822.
- ⁴⁰ SC 1824, pp140, 141, 142, evidence of George Warburton.
- ⁴¹ SOCP1 2502/53, letter from Wills to Henry Goulburn, 16 Dec 1823.
- ⁴² SC 1824, p300, evidence of Henry Newenham.
- ⁴³ SC 1824, p22, evidence of Francis Blackburne.
- ⁴⁴ SC 1824, pp101, 117, evidence of Richard Willcocks.
- ⁴⁵ SC 1825, p695, evidence of Colonel John Irwin.
- ⁴⁶ SC 1824, pp185, 204, evidence of William Becher.
- ⁴⁷ SC 1825, p127, evidence of Daniel O'Connell.
- ⁴⁸ SC 1831, pp37, 43, evidence of William Despard.
- ⁴⁹ SOCP1 1192/7, Stephen Brannick to unnamed, Dublin Castle, 7 Aug 1808.
- ⁵⁰ SOCP1 1278/19, Major General Montresor to Sir Edward Littlehales.
- ⁵¹ SOCP2, Box 157/3941, Lorton to unnamed, 27 Dec 1806; SOCP2 Box 158/4568, Molloy McDermott to Lorton, 26 Dec 1807.
- ⁵² SOCP1 1278/20, Sir Edward Crofton to unnamed, Dublin Castle.
- ⁵³ SOCP1 1558/24, Major John Wills to William Gregory, 10 Jan 1814.
- ⁵⁴ SC 1825, p419, evidence of Rev Thomas Costello.
- ⁵⁵ PEW Roberts, 'Caravats and Shanavests: Whiteboyism and faction fighting in east Munster, 1802-1811', in JS Donnelly jr and S Clark (eds), Irish Peasants: Violence and Political Unrest 1780-1914, (Manchester, 1983), pp64-101.
- ⁵⁶ SOCP11 1558/34, letters from magistrates McMahon and Harrison, enclosed with letter from Wills to Gregory, 23 July 1814.
- ⁵⁷ SC 1824, p114, evidence of Richard Willcocks.
- ⁵⁸ SC 1825, p397, evidence of Rev John Kelly, Mitchelstown.
- ⁵⁹ SC 1825, p696, evidence of Colonel John Irwin.
- ⁶⁰ SC 1824, p450, evidence of James Lawler.
- ⁶¹ SC 1825, p325, evidence of Richard Bourke.
- ⁶² EP Thompson, 'Eighteenth century English society: class struggle without class?', Social History 3 (1978), pp133-165.
- ⁶³ SOCP1 1767/44, William Bowles to Peel, 20 July 1816.
- ⁶⁴ SOCP1 1767/46, Stephen Mahon to Peel, 28 July 1816.
- ⁶⁵ SOCP1 1408/27, Lt Gen T Meyrick to unnamed, 7 Jan 1812.
- ⁶⁶ SOCP1 1776/97, Stephen Brannick, brigade major of yeomanry stationed at Athleague, 25 Oct 1816, enclosed with letter from Stephen Mahon to Peel, 2 Nov 1816.
- ⁶⁷ SOCP1 2188/15, Michael Dunne to Grant, 11 Oct 1820.
- ⁶⁸ SOCP1 2363/20, Wills to Goulburn, 1 Dec 1822.
- ⁶⁹ SOCP1 2502/32, Wills to Gregory, 2 June 1823.
- ⁷⁰ SOCP1 2176/30, Wills to Gregory, 3 April 1820.
- ⁷¹ SOCP1 2502/27, Wills to Gregory, 15 Apr 1823.
- ⁷² RLG, 4 May 1822, 30 August 1823.
- ⁷³ SC 1824, p8, evidence of Francis Blackburne.
- ⁷⁴ RLG, 19 June 1824.
- ⁷⁵ RLG, 28 Aug 1824.
- ⁷⁶ AJ Randall, 'The shearmen and the Wiltshire outrages of 1802: trade unionism and industrial violence', Social History 7 (1982), pp 283-304.
- ⁷⁷ SC 1831, p32, evidence of the O'Connor Don.
- ⁷⁸ SOCP1 1767/52, Wyatt to Peel, 21 Oct 1816.
- ⁷⁹ SOCP1 1408/36, Mills to Sir Charles Saxton, 24 Mar 1812.
- ⁸⁰ SOCP1 1538/25, Trench, Bishop of Elphin to Gregory, 14 Aug 1813.
- ⁸¹ SOCP1 1956/23, information of Longford carriers Denis and Peter Rush, sworn 6 Feb 1818.
- ⁸² SC 1831, p40, evidence of William Despard.
- ⁸³ SOCP1 2175/7, Marquis of Sligo, Peter Browne, to unnamed, Dublin Castle, 20 January 1820.
- ⁸⁴ SOCP1 1963/32, from unnamed correspondent, general office of yeomanry, Athlone, to Dublin Castle, 1 Aug 1818.

- ⁸⁵ SOCP1 2074/20, JC Strickland, Loughglynn, to Gregory, 2 Dec 1819; SOCP1 2176/10, Strickland to Grant, 7 Feb 1820; SOCP1 2175/1, Strickland to Browne, 16 Jan 1820.
- ⁸⁶ SOCP1 2175/8, Browne to unnamed, Dublin Castle, 23 Jan 1820.
- ⁸⁷ SOCP1 2176/6, information of H Caldwell, Castlereagh, 28 Jan 1820.
- ⁸⁸ SOCP1 2176/7, Wills to Grant, 31 Jan 1820.
- ⁸⁹ SOCP1 2176/24, Stephen Mahon to Grant, 7 Mar 1820.
- ⁹⁰ SOCP1 2175/23, letter to Denis Browne, 1 Feb 1820; SOCP1 2175/28, letter to Browne.
- ⁹¹ HL 1825, pp504-512, evidence of Thomas Dixon.
- ⁹² Letter of Marquis of Buckingham to Lord Grenville and reply on Captain Thresher's campaign against tithes, 11 Dec 1806. Fortescue Mss (Hist Mss Comm Rep Fortescue Mss Vol viii, 1912, pp463-468), pp464.
- ⁹³ P Burke, Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe, (Aldershot, 1994 edn), p174.
- ⁹⁴ SOCP1 2176/49, Wills to Grant, 8 June 1820.
- ⁹⁵ SC 1825, p401, evidence of Rev John Kelly.
- ⁹⁶ SOCP1 1567/1, Lord Lieutenant to Viscount Sidmouth, 5 January 1814.
- ⁹⁷ SOCP1 2189/12, Lt Gen Sid Edward Paget to unnamed, Dublin Castle, 5 Apr 1820.
- ⁹⁸ SOCP1 2291/11, Lieutenant Colonel Farquharson to Major General Sir John Elley, Boyle, 2 Dec 1821.
- ⁹⁹ SOCP1 2625/26, Arthur Browne to Goulburn, 20 Dec 1824.
- ¹⁰⁰ SOCP1 2832/34, James Keogh, undated (1827); SOCP1 2730/23, Joseph Tabuteau, Ballinasloe, to Gregory, 14 June 1825.
- ¹⁰¹ SJ Connolly, Priests and People in Pre-Famine Ireland 1780-1845, (Dublin, 1980), p30.
- ¹⁰² SOCP1 1408/22, Lieutenant General GV Hart to Sir Charles Saxton, 17 May 1812.
- ¹⁰³ SOCP1 2176/49, Wills to Grant, 8 June 1820.
- ¹⁰⁴ K Whelan, The Tree of Liberty, (Cork, 1996), pp 73, 75.
- ¹⁰⁵ SOCP1 1408/47, James Irwin to Saxton, 27 Sep 1812.
- ¹⁰⁶ SOCP1 1538/16, Devenish to Peel, 6 Feb 1813.
- ¹⁰⁷ SOCP1 1775/4, "Amicus" to Peel, 12 Oct 1816.
- ¹⁰⁸ SOCP1 2074/12, Browne to Gregory, 7 Oct 1819; SOCP1 2086/7, précis of correspondence between magistrates and Dublin Castle for all Ireland, October and November 1819.
- ¹⁰⁹ EP Thompson, The Making of the English Working Class, (London, 1980 edn), pp746-7, quoting the Cap of Liberty, 15 Sep 1819.
- ¹¹⁰ D Macraill, Irish Migrants in Modern Britain, 1750-1922, (New York, 1999), p131.
- ¹¹¹ SOCP1 2086/7, précis of correspondence between magistrates and Dublin Castle for all Ireland, October and November 1819. Sir S O'Malley, Castlebar, had been informed of the connection between English Radicalism and Irish disturbances on 2 Nov 1819.
- ¹¹² SOCP1 2086/8, Browne to unnamed, Dublin Castle, 11 Dec 1819.
- ¹¹³ SOCP1 2086/10, Edward Kelly, Mote, to unnamed, Dublin Castle, 16 Dec 1819.
- ¹¹⁴ SOCP1 2086/11, unsigned letter, undated (late 1819); SOCP1 2086/12, Geo Anderson, Dublin, to unnamed, Dublin Castle, undated (late 1819).
- ¹¹⁵ JK Walton, Chartism, (London, 1999), pp7, 27.
- ¹¹⁶ SOCP1, 2188/11, Grant to Sidmouth, 30 May 1820.
- ¹¹⁷ RLG, 27 Nov 1824.
- ¹¹⁸ SC 1824, p139, evidence of George Warburton.
- ¹¹⁹ Thompson, The Making, pp673, 761, 766, 772.
- ¹²⁰ SR Gibbons, Rockites and Whitefeet, Irish Peasant Secret Societies, unpublished PhD thesis (University of Southampton, 1983), p204.
- ¹²¹ SH Palmer, Police and Protest in England and Ireland 1780-1850, (Cambridge, 1988), p218.
- ¹²² SOCP1 2188/11, enclosed with letter from Grant to Sidmouth, 30 May 1820.
- ¹²³ RLG, 23 Aug 1823.
- ¹²⁴ SOCP1 1408/34, information of Mathew Simpson, 18 Jan 1812.
- ¹²⁵ SOCP1 1963/43, abstract of reports from general offices and brigade majors of yeomanry for Nov 1818.
- ¹²⁶ SOCP1 1767/42,44, from William Bowles to Peel, 14 July 1816 and 20 July 1816.
- ¹²⁷ SOCP1 1767/48, Major S South to Stephen Mahon, 7 Oct 1816; SOCP1 1776/88, information of McCawley, submitted by Stephen Mahon to Peel, 6 Oct 1816.

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- ¹²⁸ SOCP1 2502/26, Wills to Gregory, 15 Apr 1823.
- ¹²⁹ SOCP1 2502/30, Wills to Gregory regarding compensation claim by James Craig, 4 May 1823.
- ¹³⁰ SOCP1 2502/37, Wills to Gregory, 15 July 1823; RLG, 12 July 1823.
- ¹³¹ SOCP1 2502/53, weekly report from Wills to Goulburn, 16 Dec 1823; SOCP1 2884/19, George Warburton, statement of outrages for Nov 1828.
- ¹³² SOCP1 2832/33, information of Daniel Gurin, Moore parish, regarding attack on 5 Mar 1827.
- ¹³³ SOCP1 1120/61, solicitor general, Roscommon, to unnamed, Dublin Castle, 17 Mar 1807.
- ¹³⁴ JS Donnelly jr, 'The social composition of agrarian rebellions in early nineteenth century Ireland: the case of the Carders and Caravats, 1813-16', Historical Studies XV (1983), (ed PJ Corish), Radicals, Rebels and Establishments, pp151-169.
- ¹³⁵ SOCP1 1538/16, Devenish to Peel, 6 Feb 1813.
- ¹³⁶ SOCP1 1408/39, Lt Gen GV Hart to Charles Saxton, 28 Mar 1812.
- ¹³⁷ SOCP1 1408/38, John Gifford to Godfrey Burne, 23 Mar 1812, enclosed in letter to Saxton, 26 Mar 1812.
- ¹³⁸ SOCP1 2176/30, Wills to Gregory, 3 Apr 1820.
- ¹³⁹ SOCP1 2074/28, yeomanry captain John Holden to Wills, enclosed with weekly report, 14 Dec 1819.
- ¹⁴⁰ SOCP1 2176/13, Wills to Grant, 12 Feb 1820.
- ¹⁴¹ SOCP1 2176/29, Wills to Gregory, weekly report for proclaimed county of Roscommon, Mon 20 Mar to Sun 26 Mar 1820.
- ¹⁴² SOCP1 2502/42, Wills to Gregory, 14 Aug 1823.
- ¹⁴³ RLG, 13 Nov 1824.
- ¹⁴⁴ SOCP1 2502/49, threatening notice enclosed with letter from Wills to Goulburn, 13 Nov 1823.
- ¹⁴⁵ Burke, p155.
- ¹⁴⁶ SOCP1 2176/3, Wills to Gregory, 14 Jan 1820.
- ¹⁴⁷ SOCP1 2502/26, Wills to Gregory, 15 Apr 1823.
- ¹⁴⁸ SOCP1 2074/15, inquest into death of Henry St George, 31 Oct 1819; SOCP1 2766/49, Warburton to Goulburn, 19 Dec 1826.
- ¹⁴⁹ SOCP1 2832/22, unnamed correspondent to Warburton, 4 Jan 1827.
- ¹⁵⁰ SOCP1 1963/34, abstract of reports from general offices and brigade majors of yeomanry for Sep 1818.
- ¹⁵¹ RLG, 19 Oct 1822.
- ¹⁵² SOCP1 2176/32, W Handcock to Gregory, 11 Apr 1820.
- ¹⁵³ SOCP1 2363/9, Wills to Gregory, 27 May 1822; SOCP1 2502/27, Wills to Gregory, 16 Apr 1823.
- ¹⁵⁴ SOCP1 2502/29, Wills to Gregory, 29 Apr 1823; RLG, 3 May 1823.
- ¹⁵⁵ SOCP1 2502/47, Wills to Goulburn, 18 Oct 1823.
- ¹⁵⁶ SOCP1 2502/51, Wills to Goulburn, 21 Nov 1823; SOCP1 2832/23, chief constable John Browne to Warburton, 5 Jan 1827.
- ¹⁵⁷ SOCP1 2766/49, Warburton to Goulburn, 19 Dec 1826; SOCP1 2832/28, chief constable D Winslow to Warburton, 7 Jan 1827.
- ¹⁵⁸ SOCP1 2832/23, chief constable John Browne to Warburton, 5 Jan 1827.
- ¹⁵⁹ SC 1825, p318, evidence of Richard Bourke.
- ¹⁶⁰ SOCP2, Box158/4233, Crawford to chief secretary (Sir Arthur Wellesley), 1 July 1807.
- ¹⁶¹ SOCP1 1401/7, report of Lt Gen Thomas Meyrick, 1 Jan 1812.
- ¹⁶² SOCP1 1838/19, abstract of reports from general offices and brigade majors of yeomanry for Feb 1817.
- ¹⁶³ Thompson, Customs in Common, pp295-6.
- ¹⁶⁴ SOCP1 1408/39, enclosed with letter from Lt Gen GV Hart to Sir Charles Saxton, 23 Mar 1812, Athlone.
- ¹⁶⁵ Burke, p155.
- ¹⁶⁶ SOCP1 1401/7, report of Lt Gen Thomas Meyrick, 1 Jan 1812.
- ¹⁶⁷ SOCP1 1401/32, Brigade Major Synter to Dublin Castle, undated.
- ¹⁶⁸ SOCP1 1408/24, notices enclosed with a letter to Dublin Castle from Charles Costello, Ballaghadereen, 30 Mar 1812.
- ¹⁶⁹ SC 1839, p1,127, evidence of Thomas Drummond.

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- ¹⁷⁰ P Longworth, "The Pugachev Revolt: the last great Cossack-Peasant Rising", Rural Protest: Peasant Movements and Social Change, H Landsberger (ed), (London, 1974) p243.
- ¹⁷¹ EP Thompson, Whigs and Hunters, (London, 1990 edn), p146.
- ¹⁷² Thompson, Customs in Common, pp92-93.
- ¹⁷³ SOCP1 2361/49, enclosed with correspondence from Wills to Goulburn, 13 Nov 1823.
- ¹⁷⁴ SOCP1 2176/49, Wills to Grant, 8 June 1820.
- ¹⁷⁵ SOCP1 2188/10, enclosed in correspondence of Colonel P Brown to William Gregory, 27 May 1820.
- ¹⁷⁶ SOCP1 2502/36, Wills to William Gregory, 9 July 1823.
- ¹⁷⁷ SOCP1 2363/2, Wills to Gregory, 23 Feb 1822; SOCP1 2502/22, Wills to Henry Goulburn, 23 Jan 1823.
- ¹⁷⁸ SOCP1 2884/16, statement of outrages for May 1828; SOCP1 2886/12, statement of outrages for April 1828.
- ¹⁷⁹ SOCP1 1408/28, Samuel Hodson, Hodson's Bay, to Major General Doyle, 10 Jan 1812, enclosed with letter from Meyrick to Seymour, 11 Jan 1812.
- ¹⁸⁰ SOCP1 1017/45, Matthew Lyster to unnamed, 19 Oct 1798.
- ¹⁸¹ SOCP1 2502/46, enclosed with letter from Wills, Roscommon, to chief secretary Henry Goulburn, 25 Sep 1823.
- ¹⁸² RLG, 23 Aug 1828.
- ¹⁸³ SOCP1 2176/17, threatening notice enclosed with letter from Wills to Grant, 24 Feb 1820.
- ¹⁸⁴ SC 1824, p422, evidence of John Church.
- ¹⁸⁵ SC 1824, p161, evidence of George Warburton.
- ¹⁸⁶ SC 1824, p232, evidence of Richard Griffith.
- ¹⁸⁷ SC 1825, p38, evidence of Anthony Blake.
- ¹⁸⁸ Thompson, Customs in Common, p64; SC 1824, p363, evidence of Rev Michael Collins; SC 1825, p245, evidence of James Doyle, RC Bishop of Kildare and Leighlin.
- ¹⁸⁹ SOCP1 1120/63, Burke, Roscommon, to unnamed, 18 Mar 1807.
- ¹⁹⁰ SOCP1 1120/47, letter from Charles Seymour to unnamed, 15 July 1807.
- ¹⁹¹ SC 1825, p397, evidence of Rev John Kelly.
- ¹⁹² SOCP1 1560/3, Brigade Major D'Arcy, Longford, to unnamed, Dublin Castle, 1 July 1814; SOCP1 1560/6, Lt General GV Hart, 1 Jan 1814.
- ¹⁹³ RLG, 4 May 1822.
- ¹⁹⁴ SOCP1 2176/12, Wills to Grant, 12 Feb 1820.
- ¹⁹⁵ SOCP1 2176/15, Wills to Grant, 19 Feb 1820.
- ¹⁹⁶ P Linebaugh, 'The Tyburn Riot Against the Surgeons', in Hay et al (eds), Albion's Fatal Tree, (New York, 1975), pp65-117.
- ¹⁹⁷ SOCP1 2176/30, Wills to William Gregory, 3 April 1820.
- ¹⁹⁸ SOCP1 1538/, Sir Edward Crofton to unnamed recipient, Dublin Castle, 13 Aug 1813.
- ¹⁹⁹ SOCP1 1558/27, Wills to Gregory, 13 Mar 1814.
- ²⁰⁰ Whitworth, statement, p11.
- ²⁰¹ SOCP1 1767/56, Trench, Bishop of Elphin to Peel, 10 Dec 1816.
- ²⁰² SOCP1 1956/26, information of constable Roger O'Connor, Boyle, 20 Jan 1815.
- ²⁰³ RLG, 19 Oct 1822.
- ²⁰⁴ SOCP1 2074/29, Lieutenant Colonel John French to Major General O'Loghlin, undated, Dec 1819.
- ²⁰⁵ SOCP1 1776/97, Stephen Mahon to Peel, 2 Nov 1816.
- ²⁰⁶ SOCP1 2502/36, notice enclosed with letter from Wills to Gregory, 9 July 1823.

Chapter Six

Custom and Class

There were a number of significant ways in which Irish society changed rapidly as the first half of the nineteenth century proceeded. These changes included landlord “improvements”, economic integration into the UK and the well-known demographic explosion. There were also significant changes in the tactics of whiteboys, although the persistence of conflict legitimised by reference to custom, tradition and subsistence rights is notable. Despite changes such as a decrease in night time agrarian activities, in the use of disguise and, significantly, increasingly direct conflict with landlords and the state, the Irish rural poor’s views of rights and obligations continued to be informed by a customary consciousness which did not readily accord with nationalist or modernizing historiographies of popular protest and violence. Nor can the shift towards direct conflict that did occur be ascribed either to the emergence and hegemony of O’Connellite nationalism or progressive modernization of political, economic and social life.

Given the nature of the sources, any statistical account of the incidence of agrarian conflict must necessarily be inaccurate, but can give some impression of the scale of conflict and, more significantly, the relative incidence of various conflict indicators.¹ As in the previous chapter, these indicators of conflict have been derived from the sources according to the

categories that are of central concern in this work. The three major indicators under consideration are nationality, modernization and the moral economy. Under these headings are a number of associated subordinate categories. Incidents occurring between 1828 and 1852 and recorded in the Chief Secretary's Office Registered Papers reports from the Connacht inspectorate to 1835 and in the county Outrage Reports from that year on, have been assigned to these categories. This means that the figures do not show how many incidents took place, but how many of a particular kind of indicator have been discovered in the main sources. For example, a night-time abduction involving disguise and the swearing of a woman to marry one of her abductors may contain three indicators of a "pre-modern" type. The justification for treating the most important indicator (because of its numerical predominance), conflicts over land, as an aspect of the moral economy of Roscommon's rural poor, is to be located in the subsequent qualitative discussion. The "indicators" table makes the assumption, which I demonstrate to be reasonable in the narrative, that it is possible to interpret whiteboy actions in terms of a moral economy. It is critical to remember that disciplining members of the rural community according to customary expectations could rule actions that may have appeared *prima facie* to be intra-family or neighbour disputes. This assertion of a collective discipline evolved into embryonic struggles between contending social classes. Other indicators, such as incidents that could only be considered as "ordinary" crime, have been excluded where they do not reveal something about the explanatory frameworks under consideration. These methods and caveats should be borne in mind when considering table four below. It may also be

argued that “modernization” and “moral economy” are not exclusive concepts. The central aim of this work is to demonstrate the tendency of the moral economy of the Irish poor to lead to a location of class antagonism legitimised through a customary consciousness as the underpinning of agrarian conflict, however contradictory and complex the relations between customary consciousness and class may appear. This is contrary to modernization explanations, which deterministically relegate class antagonism to a future date.

The small number of indicators that appear to fall within nationalist explanations of agrarian conflict may be considered briefly. These include disturbances at election times, such as when the O’Conor Don was elected MP in January 1835. Before polling day six ewes belonging to John Heague of Strokestown were killed in Lisanuffy parish, chief constable Blakeney attributing this to Heague’s intention to vote for Barton, O’Connor’s opponent.² Two notices posted in Strokestown the following month warned Heague:

“take Notice if you dare to sow the land you took from Mr Conry that was held by the tenants for four years you will be sorry for it”.

The second notice declared:

“if you attempt to deprive the poor Tenants that got the trouble of reclaiming the Field that you took from Mr Conry you will repent it”.³

Thomas Conry was an agent to the Mahon family, the major land owners in the Strokestown area, and it appears that Heague had been installed in a consolidated farm after the removal of rundale partners or a number of small

farmers from the lands in question. From the second of these notices may be derived a sense that rights to occupy land were held by those whose toil had made it viable, rather than any contractual right established by a lease. The slaughter of ten sheep belonging to Lord Hartland in the Strokestown demesne was possibly related to this dispute. Chief constable Blakeney's attribution of the slaughter of the ewes to Heague's support for the "Ascendancy" candidate against the Catholic aristocrat in the election was erroneous, and illustrates the problems posed by sources that rely on the interpretations of police and state officials. Events may be recounted through their consciousnesses, with various implicit assumptions. Similarly, Blakeney attributed an action intended to intimidate another landlord, Gilbert Hogg, as a consequence of Hogg voting for Barton in the election. This was in March 1835, when three roods of conacre land at Culbeg in Kilglass parish, which were stripped for burning, were turned back. A grave and a cross were erected at the site "for the purposes of intimidation".⁴ Another explanation may be found in the Hogg family's tough attitude to its tenants. Gilbert Hogg had been celebrated in the Roscommon Journal for facing two murder charges, and his father Godfrey was among the hardliners when the magistracy met to condemn whiteboyism and call for government action.⁵ Such ongoing conflicts between farmers and their tenants, sustained over a number of years, are instances of endemic class conflict in the pre-famine Irish countryside. Indeed, stipendiary magistrate Samuel Vignoles told the Lords' 1839

Table 4: agrarian indicators in Co. Roscommon, 1829-1852

(sources: Chief Secretary's Office Registered Papers and Outrage Reports)

NATIONALISM

Elections/politics	18
Religion	20

MODERNISATION

Faction fight/riot	13
Family, neighbour, stranger	39
Abduction/rape	13
Disguise, oaths, signs, passwords	16

MORAL ECONOMY

Food, prices, other	115
Land	147
Law	55
Labour	51
Politics	20

committee hearings that not one person in prison for collective agrarian crime had stated that separation from England had been his or her objective.⁶

Antipathies based on religion might also be indicators of an emergent O'Connellite nationalist consciousness (this being the period when the United Irish rhetoric of universal fraternity was being replaced by more confessionally exclusive senses of nationality). These, too, are infrequent in the sources. There is an 1835 reference to an armed party being assembled

near Keadue one night in the hope of encountering Leitrim Orangemen, whose meeting night it was (although O'Connell's nationalism was avowedly non-sectarian, it assumed the "Irish nation" to be a Catholic one).⁷ In November 1837 two windows were smashed at James Brown's house in Tibohine parish. He attributed this to his having "cast some reflections on the Catholic religion some time ago in the hearing of two of his neighbours", chief constable Carr reported.⁸ In December 1840 chief constable Daly reported a piece of counter-theatre. Gowns, religious books and cupboards belonging to Sir Gilbert King had been burned in the school room at Charlestown, Kilmore parish. It seems likely that these items were the object of a symbolic attack because of their association with a Protestant attempt to evangelize among the children of Catholics.⁹

This was also the period when manifestations of "folk" religion were being replaced by a more ultramontane version of Catholicism, although before the famine its success in dispelling this rival popular culture was "remarkably unimpressive". This process might be seen as a concomitant of the abandonment by the Catholic middle class of customary attitudes to social and economic arrangements. The Catholic Church was attempting to break the hold of customary religious beliefs in pursuit of its own agenda at the same time as landlords were disengaging from customary social relations with the rural poor. Instead of appearing as the steadfast friend of the oppressed, as suggested in nationalist historiography, the Catholic clergy were more often found sternly admonishing whiteboys. From the 1820s onwards, summoned by O'Connell, the Catholic clergy became political agitators, but their agitation was not aligned with the primitive politics of the

rural poor. The Catholic priest "was ... taking sides in a conflict within his congregation".¹⁰

In 1845 Rev Edward Dillon spoke out from the pulpit after an angry crowd forced a police officer to take refuge. He said that the officer was only doing his job. Constable Robert Buskerville reported to Frederick Carr, the Castlerea chief constable, that Rev. Dillon "deprecated the system of wight boys and that it was calculated to marr the prospects of men of foresight and of talent who were labouring for their country's good."¹¹ The implied approval of the constitutional methods of O'Connell was contrasted with the hostility of the crowd towards a representative of the state. Historians have tended to assume that hostility to the state means hostility to a colonial state, and have taken it as evidence of nationalist consciousness. Michael Beames made that assumption when claiming that agrarian rebels rarely attacked state officials. He took this to mean there was no nationalist consciousness among the rebels.¹² It is simply not true that attacks on state officials were rare. However, Beames correctly asserts that the police were objected to not because they were representatives of a colonial regime but because they were obstacles to the administration of whiteboy justice. Clark and Donnelly suggested that Catholic farmers could be the objects of local, economic antagonism but that generalized outlooks viewed Protestantism and the state as enemies.¹³ The state could be viewed as an enemy without it being seen as a colonial or Protestant state. Indeed, the Roscommon sources for the study of whiteboyism suggest that state officials like the police were seen as oppressors of the poor, rather than as deniers of religious or national freedoms.

One of the county's bastions of Catholic opinion, which was becoming coterminous with nationalist opinion during this period, was the Roscommon Journal. It commented on the Saturday after Rev Dillon spoke out:

"This county has never been in so disturbed a state, owing to the wretchedness of the peasantry."

The publisher, Charles Tully, reminded readers of his previous warning that there would be a reaction from the peasantry if there were widespread evictions to make way for graziers, but he added:

"We deprecate as much as others the foolish and disgraceful conduct of the peasantry."¹⁴

Tully's approach to agrarian violence thus had two elements. One, highly critical of some land owners, believed the worst excesses of "Ascendancy" landlordism had to be controlled. The other was equally critical of peasants who took direct action against those excesses, however legitimate their grievances, aware of the potential for social upheaval inherent in challenges to those rights – rights that the emergent Catholic commercial class was striving to share. This approach foreshadows that of later nationalist writers like Sullivan, sympathising with their co-religionists' oppression but not condoning any action the peasants might take for themselves if it appeared to contest the principle of the rights of property.

In April 1846 there was an attack on a house where a Catholic priest had dined and was reposing. The priest called out to tell the attackers who he was and was told "to mind his own affair". Glass was broken in the hall door. The detail about the hall door suggests that the priest was staying with someone of fairly substantial means. The whiteboys were certainly not

impressed by the fact that there was a Catholic priest within the house they were attacking.¹⁵ Nor were they impressed when Rev M Walker preached against Molly Maguire at the chapel of Elphin, members of the congregation reportedly laughing aloud.¹⁶

In January 1848 joint resolutions penned by the Catholic parish priests of Lisanuffy and Cloonfinlough were submitted to Dublin Castle, proclaiming:

“we hold in horror & detestation the detestable crimes of Assassination by which this County has been recently afflicted ... while hundreds of our unfortunate neighbours were – as they now are – famishing around us, not a half dozen of individuals were found to disturb the rights of property by the commission of Petty Larceny.”¹⁷

The phrase “rights of property”, used so often by local representatives of the Ascendancy in the sources under scrutiny, had found its way into the lexicon of Catholic clergymen, even when such rights might perhaps have been reasonably mitigated by the extraordinary circumstances of the famine. They were also rights that were contrary to the moral economy of the peasantry. In July the same year Rev Madden, the parish priest of Roscommon, was commended to the under-secretary for keeping his flock “in very good order”.¹⁸ Madden, who was also chaplain to the county prison, specialized in using the dying recantations of condemned men against whiteboyism.¹⁹ In 1849, when resident magistrate John Andrew Kirwan suspected renewed agrarian activity in his district, he reported that he had denounced it at the Boyle Petty Sessions and that the “Priests from the Altars have done the same”.²⁰ It is apparent that, despite some exceptions, the nationalist image of religious oppression and the solidarity of clergy and oppressed along

confessional lines is a significant distortion. Indeed, the separation between priests and the poor continued until the famine as the “devotional revolution” gathered pace and as the clergy became increasingly identified with the farming, shop keeping and professional classes from which they generally came.

The historiography that places agrarian conflict on a linear continuum that pre-dates the development of the emergence of class-based social and economic distinctions asserts that solidarities and conflicts before such a development were based on parochial and kin networks. There are a number of examples that suggest such loyalties and divisions, but as table four suggests, these are many fewer than indicators of class antipathies and collective actions. Evidence of tactics which pre-date associational expressions of class has also been interpreted as “pre-modern”. For example, the anonymous threatening letter, the oath and the use of disguise might all be associated with societies of clientage or dependence, when legal, associational class forms like the trade union and friendly society were as yet unknown. Such a society might be expected to persist longer in a rural setting, where the strength of the collective discipline of the workplace was less likely to bind workers to each other. However, the collectivity of class organisations is prefigured by the communal discipline intrinsic to the customary consciousness of the rural poor. The evidence from County Roscommon does not sustain the historiographic approach that places agrarian conflict at a point on a continuum before the development of class

affiliations. Indeed, evidence of “pre-class” identities might profitably be reinterpreted.

Threatening letters, oaths and disguise continued to be used throughout the period under consideration. They appear to have been less frequent as the mid-nineteenth century approached. It was certainly much less common for whiteboys to display paraphernalia such as ribbons (which had been considered evidence of Jacobite affiliation in early nineteenth century reports of agrarian conflict), although as late as November 1828 Johnston and Thomas Morton described witnessing a gang wearing white ribbons on their hats attack some police officers. Similarly, the Tree of Liberty image that was associated with Paine and Jacobinism no longer appeared in the second quarter of the nineteenth century.²¹ The people who visited Bridget Carty's house one night in October 1836 came with blackened faces and wore their coats turned inside out.²² Later that month men armed with pitchforks, with blackened faces and wearing white shirts over their coats, robbed a woman in Kilonan parish of money her husband had been given by the master at the Arigna iron works.²³ Similarly, a group of men with straw fixed around their hats and wearing their coats inside-out removed distressed furniture from a house in Boyle parish.²⁴ In January 1841 seven men with blackened faces swore John Maguire of Clonaff half-parish not to serve any more “law papers”.²⁵ The reversed coats may have provided a sense of uniform and collective solidarity for these groups.

Disputes among or between kin groups also occurred. John Dunican of Ballinamene was murdered on the way home from drinking in December 1835. At the inquest into his death Edward McKeane and Pat Flynn were

blamed. Chief constable Curtis suggested that “some spite” had existed between these men and Dunican because he had mistreated his wife, who was a relative of theirs.²⁶ In February the next year Peter Cunningham of Ballinafad, just over the county boundary in Sligo, died after his brother-in-law, Owen Sharket, poisoned him. Sharket’s object “was to be possessed of property that would be left to the deceased by his father”.²⁷ In May 1836 Peter Kelehar died after he was beaten by Patrick Lennan of Mount Talbot. The two men had been drinking whiskey and had quarrelled over payment. Chief constable Sparling noted tersely: “They were near relatives.”²⁸ On 22 December 1837 Sally McGreevy, aged 80, was murdered by her daughter-in-law Mary, in Ardcarne parish. The two women had lived together for several years, “but on the most unhappy terms”.²⁹

These murderous incidents reveal some interesting aspects of agrarian crime. It appears that when family or neighbour disputes arose, they tended to be more violent than collective conflicts. It is a weakness of David Fitzpatrick’s argument that agrarian disputes were based on the “pre-modern” loyalties and antipathies of family and neighbourhood that he used findings from only one parish, one that was notorious for its violence. Fitzpatrick has also used a relatively narrow period, when the difficulties concerning the use of the Outrage Reports as indicators of collective crime were particularly acute, as I have already noted. It is possible that Fitzpatrick’s reliance on the reports from Cloone, County Leitrim, have resulted in a distorted view of the perceived reasons for conflict. It is also apparent that such disputes were recorded most frequently in the Outrage Reports for County Roscommon in the late 1830s, the years when the

reports for the county appear to be most comprehensive. Indeed, it is questionable whether some of the reports, particularly from this period, can be considered reports of collective crime at all. The label "outrage reports" might be changed to "crime reports". It also reveals that family disputes were just that. Disputes between or among families over land were never conducted by large assemblies of people turning out to enforce one person's claim against a member of their own family or a neighbour, nor to ensure the enforcement of the mores of the community, although the participants might want to legitimise their action by persuading people they were doing that. A number of examples illustrate this. In September 1836 John Finnerty of Kilglass parish claimed his mearings had been thrown down by his brother, although the reporting police officer was not inclined to believe him because the two were in dispute over land.³⁰ In the same parish the following August Bernard Donohoe found his potatoes and cabbages cut down. He blamed Patrick, Michael and James Donohoe, whom Blakeney described as relatives. Blakeney confided in the deputy chief inspector of police that "his tale appears doubtful" and that a family dispute over a pig was behind the allegation.³¹ In February 1839 there was a "riot" between two related families named Kean in Kilgefin parish after one man tried to remove potatoes from the land of another without paying the due rent.³² Such family disputes may be the point where faction fighting and agrarian combination appear most closely connected. The brother of the Catholic parish priest in Kilgefin, Rev John Hanly, believed it was relatives who stole £400 from the priest's house in November 1839.³³ In June 1840 houses were attacked in Kilronan parish in an attempt to compel a family member to supply potatoes to a relative.³⁴ A

Catholic priest was suspected of posting a notice on the chapel wall and, at Cootehall, advising people not to frequent John Bruen's public house because of a dispute between the priest and Bruen, who was married to that cleric's niece.³⁵ In February 1852 the Catholic parish priest of Termonbarry, James McNally, complained of a parishioner, Constantine Maguire, entering the chapel and breaking into pieces a pew McNally had just erected for members of his own family. The new pew had been erected where Maguire's used to be.³⁶ These instances demonstrate the ways in which the forms of communal discipline could be appropriated to pursue private grievances.³⁷

Faction fights were often organised around family or neighbourhood loyalties, but their congruence with agrarian conflict is not established, although, as I noted previously, there appears to have been some relationship, despite the evidence of witnesses who told parliamentary enquiries that they were unrelated to whiteboyism.³⁸ Faction fights may be seen as part of the culture of the Irish countryside, but as only an aspect, rather than as a paradigm, of the customary consciousness of the rural poor. These set-piece battles seem usually to have been recreational. They happened most frequently on fair and market days after drink had been taken, or after funerals and other solemn or festival occasions. In December 1835 a party of men returning from a funeral in County Leitrim gathered and attacked a pub at Crossna, near Cootehall, where some men belonging to another faction were drinking. It is apparent that most factions were bound together by a neighbourhood or family loyalty, plus the almost essential elements of fairs and drink, although two groups of ten men were arrested for fighting after mass one Friday in March 1836 at the chapel of Aughamore,

Ballaghadereen.³⁹ A faction fight based on family loyalty took place at Elphin in May 1842 between the Feenys and the Byrnes.⁴⁰ Similarly, police dispersed the Giblin and Dowd factions after they assembled to fight in January 1843.⁴¹ As late as 1850 resident magistrate John Kirwan reported preventing a faction fight due to take place at Cootehall races, and another at Killukin races.⁴² On some occasions the factions made peace hastily to attack the police, and on others they appeared to be cover for more sinister combinations, as noted in the previous chapter. In 1845 one resident magistrate welcomed faction fights as an alternative to agrarian combination. After dispersing a faction fight in Elphin on St Stephen's Day, John Blake wrote:

"One good result that may be anticipated from this disposition to riot on the part of the Country People will be, viz, that it will lead in a great measure to knock up the system of Outrage, as it will much shake the confidence they had in each other, and informations may be more easily obtained."⁴³

The fact that the fight occurred on St Stephen's Day suggests also the recreational or quasi-ceremonial nature of such collective conflicts. Blake's view reflected widely believed elite views that factions were a welcome and relatively innocent distraction from the serious business of agrarian conflict.⁴⁴

The 1824 select committee had been told:

"Some people think it a good thing to set the lower classes at variance."⁴⁵

It may be that factions reflected continuing loyalties to local pre-confiscation élite families whose descendants had become the “underground gentry”, and who were reappearing among the nationalist strong farmer stratum.

Family-centred disputes were also often ostensibly about marriage. Such disputes were frequently accompanied by the abduction of a woman whose dowry included a piece of coveted or desirable land. They arose most frequently among the better-off farming and retailing families. In December 1835 a group of men abducted a widow called Mary Berne from a house at Ballykilcline, Kilglass parish, to compel her to marry one of the men.⁴⁶ The following month five men abducted 16-year-old Rose Hart from her home at Ardmore, Boyle parish. Her father told the police where to seek her and they did indeed find her, nine miles away. They arrested two men, one of whom had wanted her to marry him.⁴⁷ In April 1836 Catherine Hanley was snatched from her house (a two-storey building) in Cortober, on the Roscommon side of the Shannon opposite Carrick, and taken over the bridge into County Leitrim. The police pursued the cart she was in and traced it to William Betheridge. Betheridge and his brother, plus two accomplices, were arrested. Thomas Lloyd JP observed that “the Bertridges are of a very respectable family and no doubt but their relatives will exert themselves to prevent prosecution”.⁴⁸ The same month “an abduction of a very respectable girl, a farmer’s daughter near Hill Street took place”. Police rescued the girl and arrested five men.⁴⁹ When Philip Murphy of Tibohine parish let down a woman and married another, his house was burned down.⁵⁰ In October 1837 Anne Seally was forced from her house in Termonbarry parish by a neighbour, John McNamara, with his brother and other people, and sworn

that she would marry none but he. Chief constable Blakeney noted that Seally's mother was a widow.⁵¹ In February 1838 four men attempted to abduct Margaret Bannon from Monksland, St Peter's parish, but were prevented by a servant boy.⁵² Four similar examples were reported in the first fortnight of February 1838, including the abduction of Mary Anne Kelly in Kilmore parish, she "having a fortune".⁵³ In February 1840 chief constable Daly reported the abduction of a farmer's daughter who was worth £400. Thirteen windows were broken at the house she was taken from, indicating the residence of a better-off farming family.⁵⁴

Hostility to strangers might be seen as another aspect of the "pre-modern" loyalties of the parochial Irish peasant, and indeed such hostilities were occasionally evident, most frequently in connection with taking work or land that ought to be available to local people. In September 1840 Michael Fallon's hay was burned after he rented a meadow. Blakeney explained in his report of the incident that Fallon was "a stranger and not connected with the land on which the hay was cut. The tenants it is supposed committed the injury, considering that they had the best right to the meadow."⁵⁵ The language of connection with the land is significant, suggesting a customary, parochial conception of rights to land. In January 1836 Robert Begley of Athlone was warned by a threatening notice posted at the crossroads at Fairymount not to buy land in that part of the country, about 23 miles from Athlone.⁵⁶ A notice was posted in May the same year near Keadue warning people against countenancing a grazier from County Sligo named Simon Mulvany. As a result, several people who had sent their cattle to Mulvany for grazing withdrew their stock from his care.⁵⁷ Although the reporting constable

believed hostility to Mulvany as a stranger was the reason for the notice, the notice may have been occasioned by hostility to the use of land for grazing instead of producing subsistence crops. Perhaps Mulvany's offence as a grazier was compounded by being a stranger. A notice posted on a door in Cloontuskert parish in June 1837 warned people not to give lodgings to strangers, and not to work for less than one shilling a day.⁵⁸ Given the context of conflict over wages in which this warning against strangers was delivered, the hostility to strangers may be seen as the operation of an impulse towards economic protectionism. If this is evidence of pre-modernity, then many parts of the industrialized world remain in a pre-modern age today. The same impulse was suggested to chief constable Johnston by a notice put under Gilbert Gannon's door in Kilmacumsey parish later that year. Johnston wrote:

"The reason assigned by Gannon his having workmen from another part of the country who work at a lower rate."⁵⁹

The rural poor's apprehension of social relations was revealed in the diction employed by the writer of this notice. He warned the strangers they would be "civilised" by Captain Rock, suggesting strongly the sense that a customary view of labour was the proper way to ensure subsistence and security, not the free contract of master and employee. During construction of the Roscommon Poor House in October 1840 a notice was posted on the door, warning:

"We the labouring class of the town of Roscommon and its vicinity do early apprise you that it is our fixed determination to stop all further

employment being given to strangers from distant parts of this and other counties.”⁶⁰

Two men from Mayo were attacked in St Peter’s parish and compelled to swear not to work for Malachy Naghton of Drum.⁶¹ The attackers might have been enforcing expectations that Naghton would give work to local men. As an employer Naghton presumably did not want to be bound by customary obligations that might affect his costs. The moral economy of the Irish crowd obliged reciprocity in social and economic relations. When that reciprocity was sundered, class conflicts over jobs, pay, land and prices ensued, even when transmitted through customary forms and language. Language, consciousness and tradition did not determine the meaning of the collective actions taken, but provided a formal framework that evolved to reflect changes in the social and economic relations between groups such as employers and workers, landlords and tenants. As Thompson suggested:

“Custom may also be seen as a place of class conflict.”⁶²

A language of hostility to strangers was employed to justify the class antipathy that was expressed in a threatening notice sent to a land agent named as Hugh Doogan. The notice, posted in September 1839 in Taughmaconnell parish, ordered Doogan to return to his native county on account of his “perpetual annoyance to Mr Omoore’s tenants” and to surrender his turbary rights and a piece of land he held.⁶³ Analogously, a parliamentary enquiry heard that Welsh workers left their jobs at Drogheda dock after “combinators frightened them”.⁶⁴ While this antipathy to strangers may appear “pre-modern”, the authorities prosecuted the combinator under thoroughly “modern” trade union legislation. Elements of identities and

organization that have been considered as “pre-modern” existed among the rural poor of pre-famine Roscommon, but these may be seen as collective responses to structural factors. They were not confined to particular times or locations. They were aspects of an uneven consciousness that adapted traditional forms to pursue conflicts that were embryonic class conflicts. One examination of peasant movements that has been written within a paradigm of “modernization” notes that peasants were like British industrial workers in the early nineteenth century in making reactionary demands about regulation of wages and the supply of labour.⁶⁵ Similarly, James O’Neill suggested that agrarian unrest was a reactionary response to economic change in the growing importance of English capitalism.⁶⁶ To term such demands reactionary is to say that they impeded the accumulation of capital and the re-organisation of production in non-traditional ways. However, to reject this mechanically linear conception of historic processes does not require the abandoning of the notion that conflict between social classes was the outcome of structural change.

Any anatomisation of the customary consciousness that informed pre-famine agrarian conflict must necessarily examine attitudes to the legitimacy of struggle and to the impositions of local élites (landlords, employers and retailers, for example) and the state. A sense of legal authority derived from a conception of rights that preceded modern contract law continued to inform the activities of agrarian protest as the third decade of the century closed. There was a striking contrast between agrarian rebels’ respect for the unwritten authority of custom and their unwillingness to co-operate with the

law. JS Donnelly jr has suggested “they were trying to replace the legal system which they detested with an unwritten but more just code of their own devising.”⁶⁷ Hobsbawm noted that “the social bandit is the very opposite of the criminal, in the public mind. He represents morality.” His moral authority was greater than that of the official system.⁶⁸ De Tocqueville summarised the situation neatly:

“In Ireland nearly all justice is extra-legal”.⁶⁹

Indeed, the evidence from Roscommon is of a pervasive sense of solidarity that militated against co-operation with the state when it acted against those perceived as defending the rural poor. Police officers and Dublin Castle officials frequently misinterpreted such unwillingness to co-operate with the official law as simply the consequence of intimidation. For example, in December 1835 a party of men, some armed, entered Michael Farrell’s house in Termonbarry parish and demanded arms. Farrell, like others, attempted to conceal this from the authorities, prompting the reporting police officer to grumble that “several persons whose houses have been entered endeavoured to deny their having been so.”⁷⁰ When a wanted man named John Kelly was recognised and seized by police outside the Catholic church in Dysart parish under a pre-existing arrest warrant in May 1833, the party was followed from the church by a mob, which assaulted the police and rescued Kelly.⁷¹

Robert Atkinson, a police officer at Strokestown, reported to George Warburton, the inspector of police for Connacht, that men took money to James Regan’s house in Bumlin parish in May 1828 to hand over cash collected for the benefit of Captain Rock’s brother, whom they believed to be

imprisoned in Longford jail. When Regan declined to take the money they replied that they had sworn to leave it with him and would be perjured if they did not. Constable Atkinson also reported the swearing of people not to prosecute any of Captain Rock's men.⁷² The scene is intriguing: two unknown men hand over cash, rather than absconding with it, and another man declines to take money freely offered. Given the poverty that generally prevailed in the county at this time, it is a remarkable example of customary consciousness affecting the behaviour of the rural poor. Instead of merely obeying economic instincts, custom and a sense of obligation affected their actions to the degree that they did not merely see the money as a means to private enrichment.

"Captain Rock" posted a notice in July 1838 on a house in Aughrim parish ordering levies to be delivered to Martin Cooney's home.⁷³ Similarly, fifteen houses were visited in the Elphin district in March 1831 to raise cash to appoint counsel for some prisoners.⁷⁴ A group of seven or eight men (some armed) compelled each of twenty different households in the parishes of Kiltristan and Kilmore to hand over 1s/6d in April 1836. The fact that the same amount was demanded in each house suggests a levy, rather than a straightforward theft. A gang of robbers would presumably have taken as much as it could from each house.⁷⁵ In November 1838 a party of around ten men, some armed with guns, visited sixteen houses in Termonbarry parish between 8pm and 10pm, demanding money to send a young man out of the country. They raised 1/- from each of ten of the houses visited.⁷⁶ It should also be noted that Rowan, the anti-Catholic witness to the 1839 Lords enquiry, believed that the whiteboy associations frequently funded defences

in criminal cases.⁷⁷ This suggests a widespread, if primitive, form of associational activity.

Hostile attitudes to the official law were also demonstrated in the opposition to the seizure of illicit stills, involving ferocious pitched battles with the revenue police, which frequently involved firearms.⁷⁸ The sanctions of a community against a thief were expressed by someone styling himself Captain Macentire, who left a notice for Thomas Costello of Ardcarne parish in November 1840, telling Costello to flee the house he was staying in as it was the residence of a man charged with murder:

“Besides not paying for what you eat ... you are impeached with amany atheft and you would not be let live so long in that Murdering House”.⁷⁹

The captain did not leave the alleged offender to the official law, instead judging Costello by standards seen as more important.

The manager of the Arigna Iron Works, Thomas Cox, was shot dead in the early morning of 23 February 1828.⁸⁰ In August 1832 the watchman at the works, who was a principal witness for the prosecution in the case against the men accused of Cox's murder, received a notice forbidding him from testifying, and a hyperbolic warning that 10,000 men were at the sender's command.⁸¹ The protection the law might afford those who testified against whiteboys involved the breaking of a solidarity that commanded greater loyalty among the rural poor than any to the state. Such a notice should be interpreted as a sign of intense class conflict at the works. It is too easy to see such notices, and the violence that precipitated it, as indicating a primitive, pre-modern form of struggle. Jim Smyth has suggested that the

Irish lower classes did indeed have “political interests” and that whiteboyism can not be dismissed as non-political because it does not conform to later conceptions of politics. Indeed, agrarian unrest had a “formative political potential”.⁸² After the French revolution the language of popular protest changed to talk of systems of liberty and equality.⁸³ These changes are apparent in threatening notices from County Roscommon. However, social historians have tended to adopt a template for class that sees the development of trade union gradualism, mild political reformism and its comfortable containment within the “modern” state as the natural form of development, according to the process of “modernization”. The murder of a manager does not fit such a scheme. Given the circumstances of illegality and the traditions of protest in rural Ireland, the Arigna Iron Works incident may be seen more profitably as a class conflict in specific historical circumstances, rather than as a primitive struggle that can only be explained by referring to “pre-class” solidarities. While social historians have tended to link violence with “primitive” rebellion and organisational immaturity, its presence may be reinterpreted as a symptom of organisation, especially in the specific circumstances of Ireland.⁸⁴

However, the apparatus of the courts was readily made use of when it appeared there might be some gain to be made for those opposing the established order. When Daniel Egan of Bumlin parish refused to testify against a special constable suspected of poaching he was stabbed in the thigh for not taking an opportunity to exact some retribution on a police officer. This incident, reported in January 1835, demonstrates the depth of the antagonism between the rural poor and the state. In the willingness of the

rural poor to use the official law when it suited their ends, it is possible to discern that appeals to customary notions of right, when made, were legitimising means and not necessarily ends in themselves. The actions of whiteboys were underpinned by a consciousness of class antagonism that led them to adopt the tactical approach perceived as most likely to succeed in specific circumstances.⁸⁵ Punishment was also meted out to those who sided with the state, as when James Kenny's house was burned down the following month, after his prosecution of men who had committed murder.⁸⁶ Similarly, in January 1835 a Mr O'Donnell received a threatening notice after he prosecuted people who attacked his labourers while they were working, and in July the same year the house of a man living near Ballyfarnon was burned down. The cause attributed on that occasion was that the occupier had testified against a man for stealing carts from the Arigna company.⁸⁷

Although sanctions against those among the peasantry seen to break their moral and customary codes continued to be frequently employed and the legitimising consciousness that allowed such attacks continued to be ostensibly traditional, landlords, agents and representatives of the state were increasingly the victims. This demonstrates the co-existence of a customary, backward-looking consciousness with changed material conditions. Pre-eminent among these was the vigorous assertion of property rights by some landlords and agents through the ethos of "improvement" (and the landlord and tenant relationships established in this process, unencumbered by middlemen) as well as the increasing professionalization of the legal and state mechanisms. The results were reflected in a combined and uneven consciousness in which the traditional and the new co-existed. The protests

of the rural poor were parochial and filtered through tradition but at the same time demonstrated a consciousness of new egalitarian notions derived in the early nineteenth century from the Tree of Liberty and, as the century wore on, other cosmopolitan developments like Peterloo, Radicalism, Reform and Chartism. It is in this sense that custom as a legitimization of rebellion was modified. Thompson saw in Luddism a similar moment of transition, looking back to customs which could not be revived, but also using ancient rights to establish new precedents.⁸⁸ These new precedents were fundamental articulations of the processes whereby change was apprehended and attempts made to regulate it.

Thus the agents of the state could be the objects of attack as when, in March 1835, an excise officer's lumber boat was smashed up at its Shannon mooring. The cause assigned for this offence was that the officer concerned had encouraged a man to prosecute people for an assault on Godfrey Hogg's house the previous September, Hogg being the well-known magistrate and landlord.⁸⁹ Eight sheep belonging to a farmer named Owen Lynch of Moor parish were killed one night in the same month, "injury to property having become prevalent in this parish". In the same bundle of correspondence was a report that a party of seven men had visited fourteen houses in Bumlin parish, demanding money for the support of a prisoner held in Roscommon gaol.⁹⁰ What is common to both incidents, one familiar and the other suggesting changing tactics, is antagonism to the official law.

The continued use of familiar tactics was evident also in a threatening notice posted in January 1836 on a house belonging to W Lewis Morton at Bogwood, purporting to be from Captain Rock of Castlebar. This ordered

Morton to comply with the laws of the country or be visited with severe punishment.⁹¹ The critical point here is the question of whose laws. Indeed the very act of swearing people, and why it was so vigorously proscribed by government, was that it raised questions of allegiance directly. The conception of an alternative legal code based on customary usages, and a different value system, is again evident. Likewise, in March the following year a threatening notice was posted where a new section of road was being built to Drumcormick. It said:

“Notice that any person or persons found working on the new road without 10 pence per day will be dealt with according to law, Galway dated ____.”⁹²

This notice shows, like the notice sent to Morton, that legal authority was vested in the whiteboys and not in the state. It also demonstrated the way in which objectives which may, however loosely, be associated with trade union activity, increasingly co-existed with such tactics as the threatening notice. It echoes loudly Thompson’s suggestion that “class should become possible within cognition before it could find institutional expression”.⁹³ However, if institutional expression means the “modern” trade union, then some caution must be exercised, for Irish agrarian rebels should not be required to form a trade union, issue membership cards, appoint a bureaucracy and pay subscriptions before they can retrospectively be accorded the status of a class with a consciousness of antagonisms towards other classes. The Drumcormick notice also demonstrates that land was not the only concern of Irish agrarian rebels. A threatening notice posted in Taughmaconnell parish in September 1837 concerned itself with employment, warning thus:

“Take notice that any person that will come to herd for Edward Naghton Esq^{re} will be punished, and not by law.”

Chief constable Sparling noted that Mr Naghton had sacked his herdsman for misconduct.⁹⁴ Indeed it is apparent that land was only the most common issue provoking agrarian unrest in Roscommon because of the specific significance it had in the subsistence economy of Irish peasants. The rural poor legitimized their actions to defend or gain economic security in similar ways, whether the specific object was land, prices, wages or some other aspect of economic life.

In February 1836, the month after the visit to Morton, five houses in Kilmore parish were visited by a party of around 30 men, who levied a total of five shillings from the occupants “for a prisoner in Roscommon gaol”, the sums involved suggesting that the subscribers were among the poor and might be most susceptible to the enforcement of this alternative jurisprudence.⁹⁵ The same month 16 houses in Termonbarry parish were visited and sums of between 1/- and 2/6 levied at each for prisoners, although Strokestown chief constable Thomas Blakeney opined that “the money is obtained not for the use of Prisoners, but for the purposes of dissipation.”⁹⁶ Elphin chief constable Frederick Carr complained the following month that it was “next to an impossibility to get any person to give us the slightest information” and requested that a reward be offered to Patrick Mooney, who had provided vital information enabling the police to arrest a man suspected of murder, “as the services of such a person was never more wanted in this county”.⁹⁷ Carr's comment confirmed the difficulty of

persuading people to abandon their customary notion of justice in favour of the state's.

This was demonstrated directly when Carr's colleague at Athlone, Alexander Lowrie, reported later the same year that an armed party attacked two men guarding corn seized for unpaid rent in Taughmaconnell parish. The chief constable reported that the keepers denied knowing their attackers "but I am satisfied the contrary is the fact".⁹⁸ When a stack of oats belonging to Henry Roache, a farmer in Cloontuskert parish, was burned down, Roache said it was because he had paid his tithes "and by that means incurred the displeasure of his neighbours".⁹⁹ In Fuerty parish in May 1837 a group of men locked up the sheriff's bailiff and took away property that had been seized in lieu of unpaid debts.¹⁰⁰ A few days later two men attacked a tithe process server in Bumlin parish and destroyed fourteen processes he was serving in the neighbourhood. A number of people were reported to have stood by and offered no assistance to the beleaguered man.¹⁰¹ It is notable that a number of processes were destroyed, suggesting again that a shared conception of law was being enforced, rather than a few unwilling individuals attempting to avoid payment, although the following month a party of armed men swore bailiff Denis Swiney to destroy decrees under which a Mrs Croghan's goods had been seized in Lisanuffy parish.¹⁰²

In January that year ten men had visited Patrick Hagan at night and smashed a window in his house. They swore Hagan to surrender promissory notes and decrees he had obtained at the quarter sessions, leaving the settlement of his claims to the parish priest. In this instance the priest was seen as an arbiter, but it should not be assumed that Catholic priests played

a central role in the moral economy of the Irish countryside, or that Catholicism supported this customary consciousness. Rather it is apparent that, while some clergymen may have done (probably those still most closely connected with the “traditional” cultural practices of their parishioners, often curates), many others had moved towards a more “modern” acknowledgement of the rights of property and the state, encouraged by such concessions as emancipation.¹⁰³

Memory played a significant role in this moral economy, many assertions of claimed rights being, unsurprisingly, derived from recollection of how things used to be and attempting to restore an equilibrium perceived as disturbed. Conflict over conceptions of justice, for example, could thus be sustained for many years after the event that caused the disturbance. A man named Henderson took over Tully House in Moore parish in 1839 from the St George family. When he sacked an employee he was reminded in a threatening notice of the assassination of Henry St George twenty years earlier, which was mentioned in the previous chapter.¹⁰⁴ At Deerpark, Boyle, in May 1840, Pat Boland was attacked and killed in an altercation about a dispute that had happened seventeen years earlier. A man named as Mattimo and two others were suspected of the crime.¹⁰⁵ Robert Curtis, chief constable at Boyle, reported in August 1837 that a threatening notice had been put under Pat Concannon’s door in Boyle parish. Concannon had “some years earlier” informed on two men, who were then transported for robbery. The notice warned:

“To Pat Concannon, informer, Ballinamene.

Take notice, I noticed you Patt Concannon about nine months ago to leave the neighbourhood of Ballinamene as there will be no informer or spy there ... we listened no longer but will punish you ... Signed Capⁿ Rock.”¹⁰⁶

A notice posted on the chapel door in Taughmaconnell parish in June 1838 warned:

“To the publick at large. Prohibiting any person or persons whatsoever to take or propose for the lower Shraduff except the person or persons thereunto entitled by hereditary right lest it should enevitably inflict an insurmountable punishment or incur my displeasure pursuant to the Statute, in such case lately made and provided. Jeremiah Macubees.”¹⁰⁷

The diction used in the notice was once again intended to convey a sense of legal authority. “Jeremiah” was enforcing a customary right, held not through contractual tenure but by hereditary possession. This notice also demonstrates the significance of land in the customary sense of justice and of rights. Similarly, in February 1837 Michael and Sally Byrne attacked police officers who came to seize their conacre potatoes and a heifer in lieu of rent due to William Mulloy of Oakport.¹⁰⁸ In December 1845 a farmer called O'Connor from Castlerea was sworn to give up his farm, as the children of the former tenant required it. O'Connor had leased the farm 20 years earlier after a previous tenant had been evicted.¹⁰⁹ A man complained to the O'Conor Don in March 1846 that a group of men had tried to make his mother swear to give up four acres to the son of a man who had been dispossessed of them in 1831.¹¹⁰ Land disputes were the most frequent

cause of conflict within the framework of expectation associated with the customary consciousness of Irish agrarian rebels.

The breaking open of pounds to release distrained livestock, attacks on process servers, the destruction of processes and the “rescue” of property seized for debt continued for many years, frequently in daylight.¹¹¹ This may be explained as signifying an increasing “modernization” of the tactics of protest, or the necessity of responding to perceived wrongs which could only be dealt with during daylight (process servers would have been unwise to work at night). This second possibility may be viewed as reflecting the increasing professionalization of the workings of the state, precipitating formal changes in whiteboy organisation and methods. Daylight gatherings had occurred during the eighteenth century Rightboy movement in Munster, when open evangelical marches were held before churches and mass assemblies elected committees of local leaders to draft resolutions.¹¹² Broeker suggested that 1829 was a watershed, daylight actions becoming more common thereafter.¹¹³ Gibbons saw 1824 as a point after which agrarian conflict became less parochial, attributing the change to increasing communications by canal, rail, roads and newspapers.¹¹⁴ I find it impossible to identify a date with such precision. As Tilly has observed of change in English “contentious gatherings”, there was no fixed point when one set of repertoires was exchanged for another.¹¹⁵ More than fifty years after the Rightboy movement, although daylight assemblies were increasing, they were still unusual enough for police officers in Roscommon to make special mention of them in their reports to the Castle.¹¹⁶ A woman complaining of attempts to persuade her to surrender her holding in 1846 noted that her

enemies assembled in open day and were permitted to go unquestioned by the country people.¹¹⁷ A landlord named George Lloyd complained in 1847 that the whiteboys “walk day and night” and he had been warned that his life was in danger.¹¹⁸ Open assembly was clearly perceived as significant, for a notice posted on a crane at a crossroads three miles from Boyle in June 1837 proclaimed:

“Take notice that any person working for the Tory’s of the half Parish will suffer some, we are the Boys that’s not afraid to come out in the day light, fight for freedom.”¹¹⁹

The notice displayed a collective self-consciousness and a belief that open organisation was an advance on covert action. This accompanied a general opposition to those seen as the opponents of whiteboys. It is not surprising that a primitive form of political generalisation accompanied daylight mobilization.

There is no suggestion that daylight made it easier to capture the rebels. For example, a large party of men armed with pitchforks, sticks and stones attacked Bernard Ginty at noon one day in March 1838, compelling him to destroy processes he was serving in Cloontuskert parish.¹²⁰ The following month John Robinson and Michael Nugent were stoned early in the morning while serving processes for Rev Thomas Gordon Caulfield in Cloonfinlough parish, but they refused to swear not to serve processes.¹²¹ Like process servers, bailiffs worked during daylight, creating the tactical necessity of daylight organisation. In May 1838 the under agent of Lord Lorton and two bailiffs were attacked with pitchforks and sticks by tenants they were coming to dispossess of their holdings, while a number of women

threw stones at them. Chief Constable Reed reported that the agent and bailiffs withdrew from the scene of conflict at Ardkina townland, Estersnow parish, and returned later accompanied by Reed and twenty men, when they accomplished their purpose.¹²² The evolution of the tenure arrangements on this townland were considered in chapter three. The conflict between Lorton and his tenants also demonstrates the increasing incidence of direct conflict between land owners and occupiers, as the owners increasingly became direct landlords of the occupiers of the land and sought to “improve” their estates. While other potential occupiers of the land could be disciplined within the community, the increasingly professionalized mechanisms of the state had to be confronted by day. However, night-time attacks continued, as when, at the end of the following month, a bailiff’s house in Ardcarne parish was visited at midnight and a number of outstanding warrants removed from the premises.¹²³ In January 1841 seven men with blackened faces entered John Maguire’s house in Clonaff half parish, ordering him not to serve any more papers for a law agent named Lawder.¹²⁴

Landlords and agents of the state required police protection to overcome this customary sense of law and exact compliance with the demands of the state for taxes and of the landlords for distress. In the autumn of 1842 poor rate collector James Sharkey of Elphin complained that the rate was only paid in Shankill parish when he was accompanied by police,¹²⁵ and in the autumn of 1845 Michael Egan, a landlord near Tulsk, called for police protection to execute distress warrants “to enable me to obtain my rights”.¹²⁶ While the rural poor may have continued to harbour a sense of rights based on custom, any reciprocity on the part of the landlord

had apparently been abandoned and state mechanisms had been reformed to enforce new, non-traditional conceptions of property rights.

While an alternative conception of justice, the law and rights underpinned whiteboy activities, and disputes concerning land were most frequently the subject of conflict, the moral economy of the Irish rural poor involved customary attitudes to a wide range of economic and social arrangements. These arrangements included who was employed and on what terms. Actions could frequently take the form of threats against former employers, against people who had taken jobs after someone was sacked or those accepting a rate of pay that was considered too low. In July 1840 Pat Foley of Knockcroghery was sworn to give up his job after it emerged that he was working at a lower rate of pay than others.¹²⁷ M'Carty Colclough, chief constable at Athlone, reported the following month that James and Walter Kelly of Taughmaconnell parish had received a threatening notice after sacking a herd for "improper conduct".¹²⁸

Warburton reported a threatening notice served on a "respectable farmer" in March 1832 in the very south of the county. He noted that the farmer paid labourers no more than four and a half pence a day without food.¹²⁹ In January 1834 several persons were sworn not to work for Mr Morton, and several sheep belonging to a Dr Lloyd had been shorn after Lloyd failed to comply with a notice demanding that he sack a particular servant. Several houses in Kilglass parish were visited and the residents sworn not to work for Godfrey Hogg. A notice was posted at a forge on the border with County Sligo, ordering people not to work for the "perjurer" who

prosecuted Brennan.¹³⁰ In August 1836 a threatening notice was served on Patrick Cummins in Creeve parish for having been employed as a herdsman following the dismissal of John Beirne.¹³¹ Such actions demonstrate how the pursuit of private grievance and the expression of a collective will could both be mediated through whiteboy tactics, underpinned by shared conceptions of the right ordering of society.

However, many such disputes took “traditional” forms but suggest a consciousness of collective interests beyond the family or neighbourhood. A notice that was removed from a gate at Cootehall in April 1837 ordered men working on public works to accept no less than 1 shilling a day.¹³² In June the same year a notice fixing a similar rate was posted in Cloontuskert parish after Longford men came to work there for 8 pence a day.¹³³ The following month around five men called on the steward of some public works in Lisanuffly parish and told him that men labouring on the new road from Curraghroe to Longford should earn no less than 10 pence a day and a man and horse three shillings a day. A notice prescribing these rates was found posted the following day.¹³⁴ In September several notices were posted in Ballinamene prescribing a rate of one shilling per day, one warning:

“You Paddy Moran James Henigan ... and all others are not to work for Mr Patterson or for any other Tory less than one shilling per day or we will pay you another visit on another day.”¹³⁵

The dismissal of Patterson and his like with the epithet “Tory” demonstrates that the word was in use as a standard shorthand expression of class contumely. It is significant that the earlier construction of the word to describe the dispossessed landed Catholic losers in Cromwell’s confiscations had now

evolved into a “modern” usage. Further notices were posted against other employers (and visits paid to employees) in the same area during the same month, thus constituting a general wages dispute. Pat Daly was warned not to work for Charles Peyton for less than a shilling a day and a notice posted on the chapel at Cootehall said:

“Take notice any person or persons who will work for Tobias Peyton or that Blind Brat Edw^d Patterson unless they get 1^s 3^d per day let them look what may occur.”¹³⁶

One of the Peyton family lodged informations against some men, who were arrested and bailed in Boyle. Warburton wrote to Morpeth:

“On our return from the Court House we were followed by a mob shouting that they were out in spite of us.”¹³⁷

The official law and its representatives were the object of the crowd’s defiance, as well as the employers whom the police and legal apparatus were perceived to serve. This is a development of class-consciousness among the “mob”, in that generalizations about the perceived collusion of the employers, the police, and the official justice system were being drawn. In an 1841 outrage report from Strokestown that described the swearing of men not to work for less than nine pence a day, the dispute was labelled “combination”. In the eyes of the reporting police officer, at least, such disputes were evidence of class organisation.¹³⁸ An incident at Roosky in February 1842 was likewise described as “a case of combination ... intimidating labourers from working for the Road contractors under certain advanced wages.”¹³⁹

There is some further evidence to suggest that the geographic extent of such wages combinations was greater than one employer's lands. Two notices posted on a farmer's house in Creeve parish purported to be from a committee attempting to enforce wage regulation at a shilling a day across the province of Connacht. One notice was addressed to the farmer and the other to employees accepting less than the rate prescribed by this "Independent Committee". However, it may be that the invocation of a committee title was merely a device to add authority to the notice.¹⁴⁰ The shilling a day demand extended across the county, from the Peytons' and Patterson's workforces in the north-east of the county through Creeve, a little to the south and to Bellanagare, further to the west. Chief constable Carr reported that several people in that district had been sworn to work for no less than a shilling a day.¹⁴¹ Similar demands were made in the south of the county the following May.¹⁴² In August 1838 road labourers went on strike for nine pence a day, their employer only being willing to pay seven pence.¹⁴³ In December 1845 labourers in Ardcarne parish swore not to work for Lorton's agent, John Hackett, for less than 10 pence a day in the summer and eight pence a day in the winter. Hackett sacked all who swore and the situation hardened as all his employees stopped work for the reinstatement of those sacked. The Roscommon and Leitrim Gazette noted that this development coincided with sightings of large parties of armed men around the parish at night, including an encounter between police and around 40 men near Cootehall and shots being fired near a gentleman's house in that neighbourhood.¹⁴⁴

One night in June 1837 a group of men broke into a barn belonging to a farmer named James McDermott in Cloontuskert parish and removed two wheelbarrows, which they smashed to pieces. Sparling explained:

“This outrage was committed in consequence of McDermott having taken a quantity of Turf to cut by Task, which prevents the Labourers of being employed by the day.”¹⁴⁵

Furthermore, this action was part of a campaign, for ten days later newly cut turf belonging to George Beggs in the same parish was destroyed “in consequence of the said Beggs having got his turf cut by Task, and not having employed labourers by the day.”¹⁴⁶ This action could be explained as a “modern” trade dispute over piece rates and day rates, but articulated through a “traditional” action. It demonstrates the way in which old forms could be appropriated for the pursuit of “modern” ends.¹⁴⁷ Such apparent paradoxes reveal the limitations of modernization as an explanatory model for the complex interacting shades of consciousness and culture that fused within Irish agrarian protest.

The tactics of whiteboyism could be put to use in other situations where there was a perceived right or need which ought to be satisfied, such as the construction of a direct line of road from a townland to the main road, as was the cause of disturbance in Kilglass parish in December 1835.¹⁴⁸ On Christmas night in 1835 in Termonbarry parish several armed men with blackened faces recovered a flich of bacon that had been seized under a court order.¹⁴⁹ A horse was seized in August 1836 from the stable of a landlord named Bennison at Ballyfarnon after it was held there following its

capture by the revenue police while the animal was carrying illicit malt.¹⁵⁰ As many as 300 people were calculated to have taken part in the dispersal of stones assigned for road repair into adjacent ditches and a bog in Ardcarne parish in the same month. Curtis commented:

“a combination in my opinion exists for the purpose of preventing competition in the contracting of repair for roads.”¹⁵¹

The customary culture of the peasantry was such that chief constable Sparling sought advice on the proposed moving of graves to allow an extension to a Roscommon town church, anticipating much opposition.¹⁵²

In Keadue one night in May 1837 a notice was posted on Michael Noon's door ordering him to return six pence per hundredweight of the money he had charged for potatoes. “Captain Rock” said Noon should only charge one shilling and six pence, not two shillings.¹⁵³ The similarity of this procedure to the English price-fixing riot is again striking. Alan Booth has described how mealmen in the north-west of England were targeted, their wares sold at a price determined by the protesters and the “just” price given to the mealmen.¹⁵⁴ It suggests a conception of rights and justice based on subsistence rights and not on the market. Like the English food riot, conflict over rights to food in the market might be seen as a forum for class struggle.¹⁵⁵ Such actions were far from unknown. In June 1839 Reed reported that three men had been attacked and oaths administered. He said the victims were sworn “not to demand a higher price for their meal than 16s per cwt, and 2/6 for potatoes and where they had sold the latter commodity at a higher rate to return the difference.”¹⁵⁶ Similarly, the following week, around ten men fired shots into William Glynn's house near Keadue, and swore him

to refund two shillings to a man to whom he had sold potatoes. Glynn was also sworn not to charge more than 2s/6d per hundredweight in future.¹⁵⁷ The following month eight men set on a man they claimed had charged too much for meal.¹⁵⁸ In Kilronan parish during August 1839 a man named Michael Tansy was visited and ordered to refund any money he had received for potatoes in excess of two shillings and six pence per hundredweight.¹⁵⁹ At Buckhill in the west of the county two sheep were killed at much the same time because their owner, a comfortable farmer, had been selling provisions at a high price on credit, and had displeased some people by not extending such terms to them.¹⁶⁰ This dispute between a “strong farmer” and customers is an example of the conflict emerging between the strong farming class and the rural poor. Similarly, in November the previous year two turf ricks belonging to Patrick Mulanny of Boyle were set on fire and when he rushed out to tackle the blaze the windows and door of his house were broken. Reed reported that Mulanny sold meal, potatoes and other goods, “which he generally gives on credit charging exorbitant prices and is in consequence obliged to process many of his debtors.”¹⁶¹ A Catholic called Michael Skevington or Skeffington received a threatening notice sent though the post office that chastised him for charging 25 per cent interest on loans, and ordered him to reduce the interest by 10 per cent. The notice observed:

“you have many desent people paying such damnable interest because they are distressed for money – but I will put a stop to such infernal usury.”¹⁶²

William Irwin, a constable based at Roscommon, reported a food riot in the town in May 1839, attributing it to a sudden rise in prices. Irwin said a crowd

tried to stop carmen taking potatoes away from the market and threatened to cut their sacks. The police protected the carmen and there were no potatoes available by 2pm. Irwin commented:

“numbers of the poor people of the Town were not at that hour supplied nor could they get any to buy.”¹⁶³

The food riot at Roscommon also demonstrated that integration into wider markets led to conflict. For several mornings in June 1837 a crowd assembled in the Curlew mountains north of Boyle to stop carmen taking potatoes out of the county to the market in Sligo town, another sign of resistance to change which should not be construed simply as spontaneous, conservative or reactionary.¹⁶⁴ On the contrary, such actions reveal considered collective responses to perceived needs, appropriating old forms for use in actions undertaken to manage contemporary problems. A man in Boyle received a letter through the post office that ordered him not to send eggs to Dublin for sale, or they would be destroyed.¹⁶⁵ In May 1840 a group of men, women and children knocked John Farrell of County Leitrim from his horse and took two hundredweight of potatoes he had bought at Ballyfarnon. Reed said the attack was to prevent potatoes being taken out of the county after a sudden price rise caused fears of impending scarcity.¹⁶⁶ A few days later two carmen were attacked in Roscommon town after buying potatoes at Elphin. Their sacks were slashed and the potatoes taken.¹⁶⁷ Carmen were attacked and a horse's ear cut off in a dispute over “differences relating to the sale of Butter in the market of Boyle” in January 1850.¹⁶⁸

The rural poor also believed they had rights to timber and turbary. In a May 1837 letter concerning Kilgefin parish, Denis O'Connor of

Edgeworthstown, County Longford, complained of “the habit the peasantry of that neighbourhood got of taking timber by night of a property ... I also got the Catholic clergyman to protest against these conduct but from long habit tis all of no use ... unless some aid is given we must give up all idea of improvement in that vicinity.”¹⁶⁹ O’Connor’s complaint is a fine example of “improvement” pitted against custom, and property rights against traditional use-rights. The assertion of customary rights was also apparent in September that year when three tons of hay were burned in Taughmaconnell parish. They belonged to a Captain Scott of Banagher in neighbouring County Offaly. Chief constable Sparling said the attack occurred because “Captain Scott took the land on which the hay grew from the tenants for his own use.”¹⁷⁰ A great number of trees were cut down and removed from James Lyster’s estate at Fairymount, Kilgefin parish, in January 1839.¹⁷¹ After the resulting prosecutions Lyster’s wood ranger, Martin Mulligan, was attacked on his way home to Fairymount from Roscommon market.¹⁷² In July 1840 a notice was posted on Patrick McLoughlin’s door in Kilglass parish, ordering him to stop prosecuting people for trespassing on Nicholas Balfe’s lands, to whom he was bailiff and driver.¹⁷³

Resistance to unwelcome change extended to matters as diverse as industrial espionage at a coal mine near Castletenison, and an 1837 proposal to move the location of Strokestown market from Brown Street to Church Street.¹⁷⁴ The magistrate and land agent to the Mahons, Thomas Conry, had asked for it to be moved. Chief constable Blakeney reported that the market had been held in Brown Street since it was established by a patent granted during Charles II’s reign. Conry had in fact moved the market some time

earlier. The traders had remonstrated and appeared determined to assert their rights. Blakeney believed it was “a duty in which the police should be cautious, as interfering with a long established right and custom”. Blakeney was evidently uneasy about the move, discerning the tension between custom and “progress”, but was resigned to supporting Conry’s wishes.¹⁷⁵

John Loughan, Lord Lorton’s water bailiff, went to destroy three weirs built illegally on the Boyle river in November 1848. He said that the weirs were “very injurious to the adjoining Lands and fishery”, but Loughan was met by a party of more than 30 men who swore to kill him if he tried to remove them.¹⁷⁶ James Mulhall exchanged shots with men he caught fishing for eels near his father’s mills on the same river in September 1845.¹⁷⁷

During the course of the first half of the nineteenth century direct conflict between the owners and the occupiers of the land became more common, although still legitimised through the invocation of custom. The moral economy of the rural poor increasingly took an overtly class inflection as whiteboy activity became less focused on disciplining members of the rural community and more on direct conflict with land owners and the state that enforced the landlord’s rights to distress and eviction, in the context of the land owners’ and farmers’ disengagement from customary vertical and communal ties. The moral economy of Irish agricultural labourers and cottiers was evolving in to a more conflictual relationship with those who had formerly shared their vertical and community consciousness, whether farmers, middle men, agents or landlords. It will be recalled that the Queen’s County

magistrate, William Despard, identified 1828 as the precise year when there had been “a complete separation between the two classes”.¹⁷⁸

The county’s magistrates expressed this view when they agreed “that the object of these disturbances is to interfere with the letting of lands – the amount of rents and the hire of Labourers etc.” The words of the magistrates express the ideology of political economy, implying that interference in the free bargain of landlord and tenant or master and labourer was unwanted. It was precisely the conflict between such freedoms and the moral economy of the rural poor that caused conflict. Warburton noted a class distinction between the farmers, who were more inclined to give information, if protected, and the cottiers and labourers. The latter warned others to give up land they had recently taken and attempted to lower rents through intimidation.¹⁷⁹

An agent was “murdered by some of the nightly unpaid Police of the Country” at Cranagh, some two miles from Athlone in December 1828.¹⁸⁰ Henry Gardiner was struck on the back of the head on his way home to Boyle one day in October 1837, confiding in chief constable Curtis that he had been warned by his own workforce that he was a marked man.¹⁸¹ A Mr Thompson was threatened near Athlone over his plan to evict tenants at Knockanyconor, St John’s parish, in 1843, while threatening notices were on occasion addressed to landlords as a class.¹⁸² Godfrey Hogg was ordered to let conacre at a cheap rate on his land at Ballymartin, Kilglass parish, in May 1843.¹⁸³ A landlord named Harrison reported that his out offices at Cloonara were burned down and guns taken in April 1845. He added:

“This county is in a state of open rebellion & all the valuable fire arms of the gentry are at this moment in the hands of the pesantry.”¹⁸⁴

Direct attacks like these were to become the rule, rather than the exception. Landlords clearly felt that the possession of arms by peasants was still a yardstick for judging their inclination to rebel, despite the time that had elapsed since 1798. A police officer in Roscommon town warned in early 1847 that “the Peasantry here are as well Armed as the Police”.¹⁸⁵

One tactic that was frequently employed was incendiarism. In April 1830 a house from which a man had recently been evicted for non-payment of rent was burned down.¹⁸⁶ A house in Creeve parish was burned down in May 1834, prompting the reporting police officer, Frederick Carr, to observe:

“the Tenants on those lands are at law with their Land Lord Mr Aitcheson none of whom have paid their rent with the exception of Vaughan.”

All had been served with notice to quit and had raised cash for their legal expenses.¹⁸⁷ John Dolan's house in Moore parish was burned down in March 1835 “in consequence of Dolan being about to take some land held by other people.”¹⁸⁸ In September the same year an unoccupied house near Elphin was burned down after it was rented by Samuel Goodman following the eviction of the former tenant for non-payment of rent.¹⁸⁹ In December 1835 a house was burned down at Kilmacross, leading Boyle chief constable Robert Curtis to note in his report that the occupier had “some time ago taken this house and some land from which another man was ejected for non payment of rent.”¹⁹⁰ A family bought the interest in a house and four acres in Drum parish in April 1837 when the tenant emigrated to the United States, but it

was burned down before they could take up residence. Although no reason was assigned for this action, it may be assumed that someone else had coveted the holding.¹⁹¹ When a horse, a cow and two heifers belonging to Thomas Killian of Taughmaconnell parish were maimed in July 1837, chief constable Lowrie explained that Killian had recently bought the interest in a farm “and it is supposed some persons in the immediate neighbourhood wished to get the land”.¹⁹² In March 1838 an empty house near Roscommon town that belonged to a Miss Hall of Dublin was consumed by fire. Chief constable Sparling at Roscommon town observed:

“The cause appears to be in consequence of the former tenant, named Denis Grealy, having been dispossessed for non payment of rent and the house let to another.”¹⁹³

Threatening notices and illegal oaths also concerned land, and attempted to restore a previous equilibrium.

When land held in rundale was parcelled out to individual households, the resulting conflicts over who had been given what could be among the former partners, rather than between tenants and landlords. Ten perches of a new ditch were levelled on land in Kilglass parish in April 1836 because two of the former partners did not approve of the way in which it was laid out.¹⁹⁴ A stack of turf belonging to John Moran was burned down in Cloonfinlough parish in October 1836, prompting Blakeney to observe that Moran had taken land formerly held jointly, and that eviction proceedings had begun against his former partners, who were still in possession.¹⁹⁵ Lowrie reported that a cow shed and barn worth £60 were burned down at Killeglan, Taghmaconnell parish, in April 1837. The whole townland had been held collectively for many

years but after the expiry of a lease the landlord had directed that the tenants should be granted individual leases. The victim of the arson attack, Bryan Dolan, was “in comfortable circumstances” and had gained some of the best land, which was near his house.¹⁹⁶ John Leaheny was assaulted at his home in Kilronan parish in July 1839 and sworn to surrender his “choice division” of land to his partner.¹⁹⁷ The demise of rundale usually accompanied attempts by landlords to “improve” or “rationalise” their estates, signifying changes in customary social and tenurial arrangements, and leading to conflict. When the townland of Erra, occupied by forty to fifty families, fell out of lease in September 1837, two men proposed for the whole townland. Their proposal was followed by arson attacks on their turf and oats.¹⁹⁸

In March 1836 a threatening notice was posted on Gregory Carroll’s house in Bumlin parish warning him:

“Take notice Gregory Carroll to have nothing to do with Hanleys land or if you do you may mark the consequence as you have a supply without it.”¹⁹⁹

The writer was suggesting that the legitimate use of the land is to meet needs, rather than as a source of individual profit, and that Carroll already had enough to meet such needs.

In November 1835 an armed party of men forced its way into six houses in Kilglass parish and swore the occupants not to bid for the lands of any man who was evicted.²⁰⁰ The implication was that a solidarity was needed among the rural poor to dissuade landlords from evicting and thereby removing people from access to subsistence. The restructuring of social and

economic relations from above had the effect of enforcing a collective solidarity on the rural poor.

The maiming or killing of livestock continued to feature among the repertoire through which the customary code was enforced, including counter-theatrical and vengeful attacks on the land owner's own stock. Edward Hanly's sheep were houghed in June 1838 after he took land from which the previous tenant had been evicted.²⁰¹ A week later Michael Daly's cow and his cabbage garden were destroyed after he took a few acres of land at Curramore, Kiltoom parish, which had previously been held by someone else.²⁰²

Disguise continued to be used during conflict over land, though considerably less frequently, as when a party of men with blackened faces attempted to storm Jacob Martin's house near Boyle in February 1836.²⁰³

These apparently "pre-modern" forms and social identities could, however, conceal conflicts that are better explained according to the increased divergence between social classes. One example of an apparent neighbour dispute over land illustrates how such conflicts may be more usefully interpreted. At 2am on 18 December 1838 nine men assembled at John Hunt's house in Kiltullagh parish, scattering Hunt's oats, hay and a turf stack. Hunt recognised them as his nearest neighbours. All, including Hunt, were tenants of the Marquis of Westmeath, then in the process of demanding rent increases or eviction. Chief constable Carr reported that the tenants had combined against the Marquis to fight the rent increases and evictions that were to follow any refusal to pay. Hunt, however, had complied with the rent demand. The apparently pre-modern neighbour dispute, on investigation,

proved to be an example of emergent associational organisation, such as might be taken in an industrial context against a strike-breaker. The Marquis being beyond the reach of the non-payers' association, Hunt made a ready target. Indeed, while the Marquis might have abandoned (if he ever held) a sense of mutuality and obligation, Hunt might still be expected to share the other tenants' conceptions of justice, a fair rent and the right to subsist. Further, while the associational activity was legitimised by a customary consciousness, it concealed latent possibilities of "modern" conflicts.²⁰⁴ As James Scott put it:

"The rights being defended represent the irreducible material basis of class interest."²⁰⁵

The tactics described thus far in relation to land demonstrate the persistence of a custom-driven moral economy that involved disciplining members of the community according to traditional, shared mores through established tactics like the threatening letter, oath swearing and incendiarism. Scott has illuminated how a similar moral economy operated among the rural poor of south-east Asia. Such comparisons locate Irish agrarian conflict in a wider context of class relations in peasant societies. Scott has identified the characteristic themes of peasant protest as being that claims on their incomes are never legitimate when they infringe on subsistence minima, and that everyone should be guaranteed a subsistence niche. Scott adds that such "safety-first" principles underlie the technical, social and moral arrangements of the pre-capitalist agrarian order.²⁰⁶ The Irish agrarian economy was far from being a subsistence economy in this

period, but the peasantry undoubtedly enforced claims on the basis of the need to subsist.²⁰⁷ Cornewall Lewis, writing of the Irish peasant, anticipated Scott's observation:

"it is his wish to obtain some guarantee for his future subsistence which drives him to Whiteboy outrage."²⁰⁸

This need for the means of subsistence often meant attachment to land. Bartholomew Warburton, a resident magistrate in Ballinasloe, on the border of Roscommon and Galway, told the Lords' 1839 committee:

"the man who holds the Tenement does not care under what Circumstances he is put out, whether fairly or unfairly; ... he thinks he ought not to be put out."²⁰⁹

Scott's modernizing narrative has described similar processes in places as far from Ireland as Burma and Vietnam. It is apparent that Thompson's notion of a moral economy, applied originally to food riots in eighteenth century England, has explanatory power beyond its initial application.

The response of peasants to developments like the ending of rundale arrangements might be seen simply as a conservative reaction to the modernising of landlords. However, an insistence on placing such conflicts in a schematic modernization framework is misplaced. While formally traditional methods may have been used, these could have different contents. Smyth has suggested that popular ideology in Ireland from the 1790s was a compound of custom and the proselytising of élites through newspapers, sermons and broadsheets. This grafted Painite and "half-digested French principles" on to customary consciousness.²¹⁰ Garvin has noted that "secret societies ...used agitation, intimidation and a primitive form of political

mobilisation to further their interests.”²¹¹ However, where nationalism may have been the political trajectory taken by the Ribbon networks supported by publicans, shopkeepers and strong farmers, the evidence from the countryside suggests an embryonic repertoire of class affiliation. In July 1852 a bailiff and supporter of the Conservative candidate in a forthcoming election was presented with the ear of a horse and instructed to give the ear to the candidate, Pennefather Lloyd.²¹² Here a “traditional” tactic was deployed in an electoral context. Peter Burke has observed in relation to popular culture that the meaning of a ritual might change while the form remained more or less the same.²¹³ Indeed, Longworth noted that traditionalism operated in favour of Pugachev’s revolt.²¹⁴ Thompson’s observation that plebeian culture took conservative forms but that its meanings were not necessarily so, creating the apparent paradox of a rebellious traditional culture, is highly significant here.²¹⁵ The sanctions deployed within plebeian cultures, such as intimidation and shame, may have been conservative in form, but particularly at transitional junctures they could prefigure associational forms, loyalties and solidarities considered “modern” (Luddism was an English case in point).²¹⁶ In this significant sense, a historiography of modernization is an inadequate explanatory model for agrarian conflict, which combined the traditional with the rebellious, the pre-modern with the modern and the parochial with the cosmopolitan. Tactics were adapted and transformed as direct conflict with land owners and representatives of the state became more common. The specific circumstances of illegality, severe penalties on conviction, and the early development of a professional police force to deal with agrarian disturbance, meant that many such actions could be no more

than counter-theatrical demonstrations of class antipathy. For example, Edward Mills of Fairymount, the county's former high sheriff, died in 1829. The Roscommon and Leitrim Gazette reported bitterly that as his body was taken through Roscommon town on 20 February a "rabble hooted and treated it disrespectfully."²¹⁷ However, these actions may also have been designed to have an intimidating effect on the object, such as when stones were flung through the gatehouse windows at Castle Tenison, seat of a major landlord, early in 1836.²¹⁸ In April 1836 a former tenant of Alexander Lynch's near Athlone presumably gained some cathartic delight, though not reinstatement, when he burned down the unoccupied house he had been evicted from two months earlier. Chief constable Alexander Lowrie observed of Lynch:

"This Gentleman, I am informed has used some severity with his tenants, by ejecting some, and raising the Rents of others."²¹⁹

Curtis reported a similar case shortly afterwards near Croghan. Dominick Breheny was suspected of burning down his house the night after his possessions were sold at auction under a court order for rent arrears, "and nothing but the walls left him & he was orderd to quit & give them up to his Landlord".²²⁰ Between 4 and 5am one November morning in 1836 forty-eight window panes were broken in Clarissa Masterson's house at Moss Hill in the half parish of Clonaff, her son telling Carr that "his mother had processed several of their immediate neighbours for con acre rent, who might have been induced through revenge to have committed the act".²²¹ Shots were fired into the glebe house of Kilgefin parish after the Rev W Beech took land at Carroward in March 1842.²²² Direct action was taken against Edward

Kelly, a landlord who had evicted a tenant. Kelly's house at Corramore, Kiltoom parish, was set on fire.²²³ In January 1843 John Waldron was threatened directly over his conacre rent demands.²²⁴ Cattle sheds and stock worth £300 belonging to Archibald St George in Cam parish were burned in April 1847.²²⁵

The co-existence of the "modern" and "pre-modern" were evident in August the same year when the thatch of Eleanor Egan's house in Creeve parish was set fire to, suspicion surrounding two men who were engaged in a law suit with Egan over the house.²²⁶ The presence of the "modern" world of commerce in the lives of "pre-modern" peasants was demonstrated when a gang of men visited Bridget Carty in Ardcarne parish, demanding money she had got at the agricultural bank. The visitors were wearing their coats turned inside out and had their faces blackened.²²⁷

Three roods of potatoes belonging to Bartholomew Moran were destroyed in July 1837 after he took lands in Ardcarne parish from which tenants had been evicted in May. However, this example shows how apparently straightforward cases of disciplining members of the same pre-modern community concealed class antipathies, for Moran was a driver. The letting of land to this man in particular would therefore have compounded the wrong of evicting and re-letting.²²⁸ In November the same year Moran was again the object of attack, when a cow and a bull of his were poisoned.²²⁹ However, the whiteboys had still not finished with Moran and they set fire to his house in May 1839, two years after he had been given the house and ten acres from which the former tenants had been evicted for non-payment of rent.²³⁰ In December 1839 oats belonging to Moran were scattered, chief

constable Reed reporting that “the only motive that can be assigned is, that Moran is a caretaker and driver to Mr Beggs, who has some property in that part of the country.”²³¹

The memory of long-term occupation of land legitimised the possession of it among the rural poor, leading to conflict. Around a dozen men visited Bryan Lennon and Thomas Gallagher one evening in February 1839 and swore them to surrender the lands they had taken to Bryan Reilly and Mary Tully, by whom it was formerly held.²³² A threatening notice was delivered to John Lavender in Cloonfinlough parish, warning him to have nothing to do with eviction proceedings planned by the Balfes, for “to toss any person out of his Fathers Land where he was Bred and Born, you will rue the day.”²³³ Rent arrears were not seen as reasons for evicting someone. The subsistence need for land from which to derive food was perceived as a right that preceded any claims made on the peasant by land owners, or by the state. A notice sent via Carrick on Shannon post office (note here the “modern” means for conveying an apparently “traditional” form of admonition) to a landlord near Keadue threatened:

“Will Loyd I hear what you have a mind to do, but look before you leap Loyd. Loid you say that you will dispossess a widow and six orphans of a piece of land they hold in Culbalkin and for which they are paying rent these twenty years ... if you have anything to do with this honest woman that you will not live to see next Christmas day ... Take notice of what I have said to you for by all the Tories in great Brittain and Ireland you will be made a riddle of ... I am no enemy to my queen or country”.²³⁴

The writer displayed the previously-noted rhetoric of loyalty, but at the same time an undisguised antipathy towards this particular landlord. Such a notice combines the formally traditional tactic of the threatening letter with an awareness of cosmopolitan politics and a memory of customary rights that had been enjoyed by the widow for twenty years. Its avowed loyalty may be rhetoric designed to legitimize it among waverers or faint-hearts, but it also suggests that the rural poor did not have a straightforward conception of such conflict being underpinned by national oppression, nor that their problem was “pre-modern.”

In the case of some landlords, it may not be too difficult to discern why this antipathy was felt. Seven men went to Patrick Byrne’s house in Stoke Park, Kilmore parish, at 1am on 28 April 1838. The reporting chief constable said:

“It appears Mr Hogg the Land Lord wishes to dispossess said Byrne. In my opinion the said party was collected by Mr Hogg to dispossess said Byrne by force.”²³⁵

This was the same Hogg whose house had been attacked in September 1835 and who was to appear before the Devon Commission in Roscommon town, advocating recognition of tenant improvements.²³⁶ The Roscommon and Leitrim Gazette had described Mr Hogg, a member of a local Brunswick Club, as an “indulgent” landlord.²³⁷

Other people facing eviction levelled their homes, rather than surrender them to the landlord, constable James Sheron reporting such an instance at Kilbride, in Kilmore parish in March 1839.²³⁸

Protesters shot into a barn and left a threatening notice for a landlord named James Tumblety after his rent increases set a precedent. The notice warned Tumblety he would not receive the increase:

“you are the means of Riseing land in Taughmaconnell their was no land any higher than one pound an acre, until you put it thirty shillings”.²³⁹

The collective action of tenants against landlords was illustrated in May 1840 when two men serving eviction notices on 40 tenants of two absentee ladies named Newcomen in Lisanuffy parish had to take refuge from a crowd of boys and women pelting them with stones. The men were chased into a house and the processes taken and torn up.²⁴⁰

Richard Crotty of Mount Plunket received three letters in July 1840 warning him against evicting tenants. One letter told Crotty

“You tirant monster your death is decided on by the Dublin Society You are worse than an Orangeman You are without religion and no feeling for the poor, there are twenty five of us the lot fell on to do your job.”²⁴¹

In the same month a notice was found posted on an uninhabited house at Slattaghmore in Kilglass parish, warning Patrick Balfe’s bailiff not to continue sending people to jail at Mr Balfe’s suit, he “having ... assisted in the arrest of Persons Decreed, for Rent due ... and who had been committed to jail for non-payment.”²⁴² Oats belonging to the same bailiff, Peter Derwin, were set alight the following month. He was also in conflict with tenants of Mr Balfe’s on the townland of Knockhall, who had also been processed for rents due and withheld, the tenants claiming Mr Balfe was no longer the owner.²⁴³

Within the stream of attacks on new occupiers, on bailiffs, on agents and on landlords, it is possible to discern the coalescing of a class instinct derived from earlier community loyalties and a customary consciousness which was at odds with the rights of property. This emergent instinct, the best word to describe the developing consciousness of class, was a consequence of the changes occurring in the ordering of social and economic relations in the first half of the nineteenth century.

The antipathy towards landlords reached such a level that agents like William Gorman petitioned for police protection in March 1841 to carry out evictions against his master's tenants in Kiltoom parish. The plea elicited an interesting response:

"I am directed by His Excellency to inform you that the Constabulary cannot be allowed to go with you, but a party will be directed to go near the place, to be in readiness in case of a breach of the peace."²⁴⁴

This response reveals the theatre of the rulers. A guise of impartiality concerning the private business of landlord and tenant was adopted, but the police presence nearby would ensure that Gorman's work was done. The 1836 constabulary act had been formulated with this in mind. The police were not thenceforth to be used to "levy tithe or to collect rent by distress", in accordance with Peel's vision of "a stipendiary police acting ... under stipendiary magistrates".²⁴⁵ Broeker has described this development as a "tacit admission that government solely in the interests of the ascendancy was no longer feasible."²⁴⁶ Gorman may have had good reason for requesting police assistance. Bryan Fallon was assaulted when he went to serve eviction processes in Kilbride parish that December.²⁴⁷ Denis Mahon

wrote directly to the under secretary, Edward Lucas, in March the following year, interceding for two bailiffs who wanted protection while they executed processes for non-payment of rent in the Strokestown area.²⁴⁸ Martin Mulligan, who was agent and bailiff to Mrs Anne Lyster of Athleague, was beaten after he distrained livestock in lieu of 18 months' rent that was due from tenants at Fairymount in July 1842. This was the same man who had been beaten for his services to the Lyster family in May 1839 after prosecuting people who removed wood from the Lysters' woods. The animals had been taken from him.²⁴⁹ At Stonepark, Kilronan parish, in December 1842 Edward Powell was threatened in order to prevent him serving eviction notices.²⁵⁰

In the 1840s rents and availability of conacre gardens became a major issue to labourers. In 1839 the Lords were told that tillage was being turned into pasture to send cattle to markets in Dublin and Liverpool.²⁵¹ This suggests that the growing need to feed cities was affecting the way agriculture was organised in Roscommon, leading to conflict over land. In October 1842 five people were sworn no to pay more than £2/10s per acre for conacre at Tullyvarran, Lisanuffy parish, but the following month six persons were sworn not to pay more than £3 per acre on the same townland.²⁵² However, at Rahara, a few miles to the south, persons paying more than £5 per acre were threatened, while in Cloonfinlough parish three oaths were administered to pay no more than £6 per acre.²⁵³ There were also continued threats against those who took land from which others had been evicted or persons who canted. It is apparent that disciplining members of the same group remained a significant whiteboy tactic, despite threats to

individual farmers about their prices, or general notices posted for the attention of landlords, farmers and agents.²⁵⁴

Actions against landlords who demanded, and tenants who paid, what were considered excessive prices for conacre, prompted a meeting of the county's magistrates on 7 February 1844. They noted that disturbance was prevalent in the central part of the county. The magistrates added that Mr Irwin (one of their number) had been fired at, a man named Brock had been murdered, Mr Malley's 91 sheep had been killed and he had been shot at, Mr Balfe and his horse had been shot, Mr Blakeney's horse driven off the field and his ploughman threatened with death and various other crimes. Government intervention was demanded.²⁵⁵ Resident magistrate David Duff wrote to Lucas explaining that "the outcry is against the high rent demanded for conacre potatoe land which is let for from 5 to £9 per acre no manure with it ... Mr Balfe who was shot charged as high as £12 per acre". Duff described the situation as "the conflict between Landlord & Tenant & so far as I have seen the people are in the greatest poverty."²⁵⁶ His judgement was confirmed by John Davis, a landlord, who swore to Duff he was afraid to visit his lands to demand rent after serving notices to quit on several tenants.²⁵⁷ Another landlord described peasants assembling to turn up pasture, shooting at a gentleman and maiming his cattle.²⁵⁸ In March 1845 Duff discovered that labourers were being charged £10 for unprepared conacre and a further £4 for preparation.²⁵⁹ Sixty labourers working for Arthur O'Connor near Castle Plunket met the same month and set conacre rates of £7 per acre.²⁶⁰ A labourer was reported as saying he would pay a reasonable price for conacre to ward off starvation.²⁶¹ It is apparent that the practical need for land to grow

subsistence potatoes was paramount, but that “Molly Maguire” generalised from such experiences, while taking specific actions over conacre rents. Michael Burke led a campaign over conacre in Cloonygormican parish and was imprisoned. He sent a striking memorial to the Lord Lieutenant appealing for clemency. Where most such memorials are the grovelling work of frightened men, Burke’s was most unapologetic. He said he had only wanted “potato ground at fair valuation”, but then launched a general attack on landlordism:

“the poor of this county is in the State of death by the Cruelty of the Landlords – and Agents, Middlemen and stock masters ...I mean the graziers who always make it appear to the Government contrary to the welfare of Ireland or the unhappy state of the poor who lies in oblivion – in hunger & threat, neighthier Clothing or food or ahabitation to Shelter them from the inclemency of the weather - or - but poor huts with torrents of rain all through and they always ... at the point of the sword at time England was in need”.²⁶²

Duff reported that Burke had named himself Captain and had called meetings to dig up pasture, saying that he had the authority of the government. People believed he had been commissioned to let lands by the Lord Lieutenant, the Queen and O’Connell. Burke had proclaimed that every labourer was entitled to five acres and more if he wanted. His proclamation said:

“A proclamation of distress as appears in the Townland of Bushfield and the adjoining Townlands. For the Hon^{bl} James Nolan Esq.^r occupier

Sir,

You are required to take your poor into consideration as to comply with their cry of distress so far as to allow the Potatoe ground at fair valuation”.

Burke then prescribed dates of payment and amounts to be paid, telling Nolan to accept what the labourers could pay, and concluding:

“God save our sovereign Lady the Queen. Price by the acre 6£.”²⁶³

Despite the narrow geographic extent of Burke’s campaign, the modest demands and the proclamations of loyalty, there are some striking features such as the openness of the meetings, which were attended by 300 people, as well as the degree of political generalisation and the consciousness of conflict between landlords and tenants.²⁶⁴ He also employed a very familiar oppositional discourse, of the labouring classes being expected to fight wars on behalf of their rulers and subsequently seeking a reciprocity when they needed assistance. In the terms suggested by Antonio Gramsci, Burke may be seen as an “organic intellectual” of the rural labourers. His story should not be dismissed as insignificant, for there were undoubtedly many more Burkes leading local and regional struggles. The significance of these people was, as Scott put it, that “the residue of local initiatives may form the potential nodes of class leadership and organization in later periods.”²⁶⁵ Burke was convicted at the summer assizes in 1845 of delivering a threatening notice to Major Mahon’s herdsman and was sentenced to seven years’ transportation.²⁶⁶

Such campaigns could be effective. A Mr Hudson, who lived three miles from Roscommon, could find no-one to work for him and all his conacre tenants gave up their lands after he took a farm which had been proposed for

by others. Mr Hudson was a gentleman whose family had lived in the area for a hundred years.²⁶⁷

The assassination of Mahon was only the most celebrated example of the increased prevalence of direct conflict with landlords or their agents. The event afforded some satisfaction to those who warned James Fleming:

“Sir, This serves to give you notice that you are a marked man in the County, and also to let you know that if you attempt to demand any rent from youre own tenant, or the Reverend Barre’s tenants, you will meet with the fate of Major Mahon and have youre house burned over youre head”.

Notices were served on Marcus McCausland and his wife. Mr McCausland was told:

“the cries of the Starved and Desolated have Reached the Heavens ... you will Share in the same Fate as y^r. Kindsman the Demon Major Mahon ... there is a fund at present formed in this Country for shooting Opressors”;

and his wife was warned:

“unless Mr McCausland becomes a better landlord in this country he will share in the same fate as the Demon Major Mahon did There are Resolutions in this Country to take down all the Tyranizeing Landlords.”²⁶⁸

McCausland had inherited a part of the Mahon estate some years earlier and was a close relative of the Major. John Ross Mahon, of Dublin agents Guinness and Mahon, was his agent.²⁶⁹

A Kerry landlord reported his Roscommon agent saying that all the tenants there had sworn not to pay a penny in rent.²⁷⁰ Furthermore, Dudley Persse's Roscommon agent could not persuade tenants there to pay the rent, even though the agent claimed they had ample means. Mr Persse had reduced their rents from 23 shillings an Irish acre to 18, and offered to cancel the arrears and return the distrained cattle of those who surrendered possession of their holdings. However, none seemed inclined to do so. Mr Persse believed an armed conspiracy existed to protect defaulters, and that any evicting landlord would be killed.²⁷¹ Such demands should not be seen as evidence of a desire to turn the world upside down, but suggest a decline in any belief that it might be possible to return landlord and tenant relations to a former condition of reciprocity and the beginnings of organization to respond to those changed circumstances. This decline accompanied the increasing incidence of direct threats to landlords and their agents. It should be acknowledged, however, that attempts to return to an imagined or real equilibrium that pre-dated the disturbance continued to be a mechanism for legitimizing struggle and conflict.

Among the first Molly Maguire notices was one posted in Castlerea in March 1845. It coincided with a large and tumultuous daylight assembly at Castle Plunket to turn up pasture. Resident magistrate Wray reported:

"I found a very violent & turbulent spirit among the people and several of them using the most inflam'y language, particularly as regards the Police, and a determination to dig up the ground regardless of all consequences."

Wray confronted the gathering and persuaded the people to disperse but they told him that if Mr Macdonough would not consider their wants, they were determined not to starve and might as well be shot. The whole crowd, numbering about 1,000, resolved to meet on St Patrick's day to show Macdonough what they could do.²⁷²

Rev John Lloyd of Smith Hill was shot dead on the way home from conducting a service in his parish church at Aughrim in November 1847. The assassination, two miles from Elphin, was attributed to Mr Lloyd's eviction of some tenants for rent arrears the previous month. Edmond Blake observed that "there appears to be a regular organised system of Assassination got up against the Landlords of this County."²⁷³ The previous year a deputation of Lloyd's workers had asked him for wages of one shilling a day, which he had refused.²⁷⁴ A magistrate named William Daniel survived an assassination attempt after he attempted to collect arrears he had bought with some land at Kilcorman.²⁷⁵ In January 1846 George Knox, the agent for crown lands in the area, received a notice ordering him to surrender the agency. The familiar demand for conacre land was also made. Some of Knox's own pasture land was turned up.²⁷⁶ Land was not Molly's only concern. Labourers engaged to work on a scheme to render the river Boyle navigable from Lough Key to the Shannon went on strike after two men said they could no longer pump water without assistance. Molly Maguirism was reported to be behind the dispute.²⁷⁷ Indeed, a printed notice was posted on a Catholic church in Carrick and circulated extensively. It attacked landlords, who cared less for Molly's children than their dogs, and summoned Molly's family to action:

“it now lies with yourselves my dear children, not to starve in the midst of plenty”.

The notice also prescribed rules allowing landlords “fair value”, no evictions unless two years in arrears, assistance to good landlords to collect rents, no night meetings or arms raids, no confrontations with the police, and “no distinction to any man, on account of his Religion, his acts alone you are to look to ... let bygones be bygones”.²⁷⁸ This notice is noteworthy for a number of reasons. First, the very fact that it was printed reveals a degree of organisation. Thompson noted that in an agrarian context the anonymous letter remained significant but that elsewhere in English plebeian culture the radical or Chartist printing press replaced it.²⁷⁹ By 1845 Irish agrarian rebels’ texts had found their way into print. The existence of a printed Molly Maguire notice is a particularly significant example of the way in which class awareness developed on foundations of Irish tradition, and of the combined and uneven consciousness of the Irish rural poor. Second, Molly’s notice prescribed general reforms to the conduct of landlord and tenant relations in the tenants’ favour. These included radical but concrete reforms, which were neither millenarian nor revolutionary. Third, it was informed by an ideology of fraternity and disregard for religious affiliation that had been removed from opposition politics over the fifty years since 1798. It looked to a harmonious future, free from such distinctions. This suggests that an alternative conception of politics to confessional O’Connellite nationalism was forming out of the customary practices of Irish popular culture, as those traditions increasingly became identified with only one social group, the rural poor. Thompson noted the emergence of “a plebeian Painite underground culture”

by 1800 in England.²⁸⁰ The story of agrarian rebellion in County Roscommon was of the development of an underground culture of class antagonism, in the early nineteenth century appropriating Jacobin emblems and later influenced first by radicalism and then by trade unions and Chartism, all grafted on to Irish traditions. It would be difficult to ignore the social dimension of Chartism that must have mattered to the Irish poor in England and Ireland, since informal links were made official when a confederacy was established in 1848.²⁸¹

The Molly Maguire disturbances may be seen as the maturation of this phase of agrarian conflict, when overt conflicts between self-conscious classes became more or less open and the hostility approached hitherto unknown levels. Landlords who were the owners of estates were the victims, as were the substantial farmers they let their lands to. The number of intermediate layers in the social pyramid of rural Ireland was not so significant as the relations between immediate landlord and tenant. This frequently became a direct relationship between owner and occupier as the first half of the nineteenth century progressed, and prominent persons like Mahon increasingly became targets. An armed party approached two gentlemen riding in a gig near Frenchpark and handed a threatening notice to Arthur Irwin, who was walking with the gig party. Many people were watching and none assisted. The gentlemen gave chase and one of the armed men was drowned after he plunged into a river while trying to escape.²⁸²

I have suggested that patterns of conflict in the Roscommon countryside evolved as the nineteenth century proceeded. In addition, while

the language of custom may have been the legitimizing discourse behind agrarian and other disturbances, there is also much evidence that this language, (and the forms through which conflicts were articulated), was being strained by the other changes affecting social, economic and political relations. Political is used here not in the sense of the “high” politics practised by such as the O’Conor Don and Lord Lorton, but the popular politics of the rural poor. That is not to say different discourses could not co-exist, and change. The motifs of Paine and France, expressed along with millennial aspirations, gave way to class antagonism and developing organisation. Gibbons acknowledges that “abstract political ideas” were present in threatening notices but suggests they played a minor role.²⁸³ I am persuaded that the pervasiveness of the modernization approach has led to the downplaying of the extent of political and class consciousness among the rural poor. Historians have not found evidence of embryonic political and class awareness because they have not expected to.

Change may be discerned in a notice posted just outside Roscommon in 1830. The writer had not moved from general statements of the need for change, which had their roots in millennial aspirations and which had no clear organisational vehicle or programme for achieving such change. However, the fact that such general statements were being made at all demonstrates that the consciousness of the rural poor was not limited by parochial, family or confessional identities. The notice proclaimed:

“General Notice to the people of Ireland to be firmly united together without any distinction whatsoever in either church or creed but true and Loyal to each other oppressing Land Lords and Clergy tythes and

taxes all overbearing men of Ireland be ready when called on and throw off the yoke which we are long under God Save the King."²⁸⁴

Despite the syntax and punctuation, the writer's meaning was plain. The sentiments echoed French notions of universal fraternity, not unlike those of 1798. What makes these expressions so interesting, however, is that this notice was posted a time when the "common name of Irishman" espoused by the United Irishmen was being abandoned for confessional solidarity. It suggests a popular politics that did not have to follow the lead of elite discourses of confessional identity, whether derived from O'Connell on one hand or Musgrave on the other.

However, O'Neill assumed that the "political movements of the 1820s and 1830s ... successfully enshrined Catholic nationalism as the primary loyalty in Irish rural society".²⁸⁵ Smyth has also suggested (albeit for a slightly earlier date than covered in this study) that the "most meaningful" class demarcation divided a "broad popular category" from the landed gentry and aristocracy.²⁸⁶ This model would bury the class conflicts that racked Ireland in the half century before the famine (which I have revealed in the case of one county) in a discourse of national oppression and resistance. Such views are inconsistent with my findings. Before the famine there existed a powerful alternative discourse of lower class antagonism to landlords and the state with organic roots among the rural poor, which was nourished by an ideological interchange with cosmopolitan oppositional discourses. This also involved direct and no less intense class conflict with Catholic landlords and agents, and conflict with the Catholic clergy, where they opposed the perceived interests of the rural poor. In March 1846 a farmer named Kean at

Annagh, near Strokestown, was sworn to surrender a tenancy he had held for 17 years. The Roscommon and Leitrim Gazette observed:

“So much for the stability of mob-popularity. There could not have been a more violent Repealer at the time of the monster meetings than Mr Kean.”²⁸⁷

A qualitatively similar, although more violent, incident was recounted to the Lords committee of 1839 by the crown solicitor in Tipperary. Charles O’Keefe, a Catholic, O’Connell supporter and land agent was murdered for evicting someone for rent arrears on his master’s behalf and then taking land from which a man had been evicted.²⁸⁸ However, the divisions within the Catholic population revealed by these events were consistent with the view of agrarian organisation taken by the leader of nationalist Ireland. O’Connell stayed over night at Boyle the previous October. On his way there from Carrick he had stopped his carriage and made an impromptu speech, emphasising that Repeal would be granted if Molly Maguirism and Ribbonism were abandoned.²⁸⁹ The success of the monster meetings as an organisational tactic must be acknowledged, but there was an independent political impulse among the rural poor that could, at times, co-exist with O’Connellism and at other times supplant it among the rural poor. Just as the Catholic Committee had not controlled the Defenders, O’Connell’s opposition to agrarian organization did not lead to its being abandoned.²⁹⁰ Class consciousness did not come in neatly labelled packages, but that does not mean that it was not class consciousness, albeit at an embryonic level. An independent political impulse was also present in Swing, when the labourers claimed to have been misled by Radicals into believing place men, taxes and

an unreformed parliament were the root of their problems when in fact their problems were rather more concrete.²⁹¹

Another paper submitted to the Castle by Warburton from an adjoining county is also striking. It was entitled the "Objects of the Carrigallen Trades Political Union" and espoused support for the king in accomplishing parliamentary reform against "a faction". This was 1832. At exactly the same time in England the reform campaign had generated "agricultural Political Unions" which combined political demands with economic muscle.²⁹² This resemblance is too striking for the Carrigallen notice to be dismissed as the isolated organic progeny of Irish agrarianism. The notice aimed to unite rich and poor well-wishers, although only the "manufacturing, commercial and agricultural classes" had a right to join, to seek repeal of the union and "promote the interest and better the condition of the industrious and working classes".²⁹³ The stated aim of repeal should not lead to the conclusion that the document is a nationalist one. Rather, it demonstrates an awareness of what was distinct about Ireland and the perceived disabilities suffered by the working poor under the Union. There is none of the familiar rhetoric of oppressed Gaeldom more usually associated with nationalism from this period forward. Instead it is conscious of class differentiation, which is demonstrated through the exclusion of some from the right to join. Similarly, when Lord Clonbrock's agent wrote from Ahascragh (just over the border in County Galway) about forthcoming repeal meetings in Roscommon, he observed that it was:

"contrary to wishes of ... most men of property of all denominations."²⁹⁴

Some serious attempt at providing an associational framework for the pursuit of class interests was being made. Another example from around the same time had a more specifically Irish inflection, purporting to be a resolution from "Terry and his mother". It provides evidence of a process described by Rudé whereby "traditional beliefs might, instead of becoming abandoned, be transformed and adapted to meet new needs".²⁹⁵ It outlined detailed frameworks for the setting up of parish committees plus delegate meetings for every twelve parishes. The document solemnly proclaimed that "private picques and anomosities shall not in future disgrace the systim" which would prevent "persons coming clandestinely by their neighbours place". The delegates should have patriotic principles and the main object was to struggle for the reduction of conacre and rack rents (it should be recalled that "patriotic" could have a number of inflections, including a discourse claiming that the labouring people were the true partriots). No notice would be served unless there was absolute conviction of the justice of the case or without a superior's clearance. Minimum wages (and maximum conacre rents) were set with an instruction to quit the job if the member couldn't get that amount. The resolution concluded:

"we can no longer Exist under the yoke of our Landlords and Employers."

The sanctions for breaking this resolution were that the person would "fall into the hands of our noble sharp shooters".²⁹⁶ The resolution clearly referred to family and private disputes, but distinguished them from the "legitimate" collective struggle it aimed to pursue. The comprehensive prescriptions for rents and wages are evidence of a consciousness that was able to make

general conclusions about the need for working people to pursue collectively held interests, and it identified the enemies of those working people precisely as the landlord and employers. That such sentiments were generally current is suggested by a report from the county in 1843 that reported an overheard conversation in which “it was observed that it would be good – to rid the County of Tyrant Landlords.”²⁹⁷ They were also sentiments that were shared across a wide geographic area. In March the same year fires were lit in the county and in Mayo and Sligo to celebrate the acquittal of persons charged with whiteboy offences in Roscommon. This suggests at least a regional dimension to these organisational efforts. O’Neill has suggested that the period between the end of the wars and the famine saw a change in the quality of conflict:

“Participation of some members of the peasantry in such supra-local agitation suggests the beginning of a qualitative change in the nature of peasant protest and the level of political mobilization.”²⁹⁸

Similar sentiments to those advocated by “Terry and his mother” appeared in a Molly Maguire notice that accompanied the mass assembly to turn up Macdonough’s grazing land in Baslick parish. The resident magistrate found a “turbulent spirit” among the crowd of 1,000, especially against the police. The confrontation was also notable because it was in daylight, undisguised. It specifically referred to the encroachment of commercial economic pressures:

“see before your eyes all the fine lands of that parish - to see the produce sent off every year without ... getting a mouthful of these in any form or even a days work ye are asleep but I will waken ye ... when they will give ye no Conacre, I’ll let them know that might is not

always right – if ye fail ye deserve to starve or worse if such could be

...

_____ your Countrys regenerator

Molly Maguire.”²⁹⁹

“Molly” generalised about relations between landlords and tenants from the specific experiences of the enormous pressure on conacre. There is also a hint of vanguardism in the notice. That ability to generalise the experience of the labourers was evident from the size of the crowd that turned up a few days after the assembly of 1,000 people on Macdonough’s land near Castlerea. This time around 3,000 people assembled at Ballintober, about five miles distant, with the intention of turning pasture into conacre. No land was dug up after the crowd agreed to give the landlords, a Mr Dignan and Lord Hartland, a chance to respond to their demands.³⁰⁰ Such an incident appears more like the negotiation of contested rights between different classes that is usually associated with “modern” class organisations like trade unions. Similarly, around 3,000 people had gathered at Crossna in September 1837 to send a deputation to Tobias Peyton, claiming that tithe collection was causing rebellion.³⁰¹ Thompson suggested that rural custom and ritual, because of its oral transmission, was unrelated to trade union oaths and ceremonies.³⁰² He believed that Luddism drew on Irish tradition but that unions drew on masonic and craft traditions.³⁰³ However, the notices of “Terry and his mother” and “Molly Maguire” are from an Irish tradition, but with significant additions. While archaic forms persisted, new layers of meaning and new ways of articulating meaning (often borrowed) were

heaped on top of old traditions, not supplanting them but adding additional languages to the repertoires of agrarian rebels.

It should be noted that part of the development of a class identity among the rural poor was the insistence of élites in defining them as separate. Representatives of the state, too, did not possess a “pure” consciousness. Blakeney’s anxiety about the removal of Roscommon market is an example of an élite perspective that was not necessarily singularly antipathetic to the peasantry or to custom, and there were a number of instances when resident magistrates and police officers expressed anxiety about poverty and the insensitivity of landlords. The correspondence of magistrates like Duff is in contrast with the more commonly encountered attitudes of colleagues like Thomas Conry. Conry, it may be recalled, was Mahon’s agent. In his capacity as a magistrate he ordered police protection for bailiffs working on the Strokestown estate and expressed the prevailing élite view of the correct relations between the land owners and the mechanisms of the state:

“If life and property is not to be protected by the police what use are they or what more necessary duty can they perform.”³⁰⁴

An agent named Bentley, of Ballinastruve House near Strokestown, wrote:

“it is in contemplation amongst those barbarians in the event of my going thither [a planned journey to Roscommon town] during the sitting of the Grand Jury, which was my intention, to have me and my sub agent stopt on the road, and either threatened into á total forbearance of all further proceedings, or perhaps our lives sacrificed on the spot.”³⁰⁵

Bentley's dislike of the rural poor can not simply be attributed to obsessive suspicion. Thomas Jordan of Strokestown wrote in 1843 to the Lord Lieutenant that:

“Sistim business is got to such a hight in this Nighbourhood the hold nightly meetings and assemblies”.³⁰⁶

Jordan's spelling and grammar suggest he was an uneducated man and not a member of a local élite. He was therefore likely to know the extent of whiteboy organisation. His evidence is less likely to be tainted by imagined conspiracy theories, although he may have had other unknown agendas. Anthony McDonnell of County Mayo described how the Rockite disturbances of 1831 were being repeated in 1844 under the leadership of “Captain Smart”. His brother, an agent in Roscommon, had been ordered not to collect rents, his herds and labourers had been sworn not to work for him and “the persecution is now revived under the mandate of ruler Smart.” McDonnell's son was a farmer near Castlerea and a mob came to his home one night when he was not in. They beat his herdsman “on the rage of disappointment at missing him”.³⁰⁷ While the conclusions drawn by the county Grand Jury:

“We are satisfied that a most wide spread conspiracy exists ... arms & money collected by the disaffected, committees of assassination are regularly organised and supplied with fitting instruments to carry out their orders”,³⁰⁸

may appear overstated, there is enough evidence to suggest that their fears were well founded. County Roscommon had reached a heightened pitch of agrarian class conflict on the eve of the famine.

Writing of the inhabitants of early nineteenth century Irish townlands in his study of the crown lands at Ballykilcline in County Roscommon, Robert Scally has suggested that they were “insulated to a startling degree for Europeans from up-to-date knowledge of the outside world”.³⁰⁹ Contrarily, I have suggested that the world of the Irish peasant was, from the late eighteenth century onwards, not so parochial and enclosed as often supposed. While it has been acknowledged that the English countryside during this period was not isolated, it remains widely believed that the Irish countryside remained virtually insulated within a shell of confessional, cultural and national antipathy towards the Ascendancy.³¹⁰ The *élite* world of Brunswick Clubs organised by Lorton and electoral politics contested by people like Lorton and *élite* nationalists was transmitted from London and Dublin to places like Roscommon along clear lines of communication which have become historians’ sources – police reports, newspapers, parliamentary enquiries.³¹¹ Although the transmission of non-*élite* culture is obscured by illiteracy, a lack of written texts and a language barrier, it should not be assumed that it remained a consciousness that was dependent on *élite* patronage and leadership. It may also be that in Ireland the hedge school masters, or other intermediaries like the itinerants considered in the previous chapter, performed the role of the semi-literate conduits of written texts from *élite* culture to the townlands’ inhabitants that Peter Burke has identified across Europe.³¹² Roger Wells has identified a “radicalised, rural plebeian culture” emerging from English beer shops in the mid-1830s, accompanied by a radical press and presenting a contrast with Ireland, where the radical press was in the hands of bourgeois nationalists (such as Tully of the

Roscommon Journal).³¹³ It has been necessary to uncover Irish rural plebeian radicalism in the fragmentary evidence provided by threatening notices and a careful examination of élite sources. While the emblems of Paine and France formed part of the libertarian imagery deployed in agrarian collective action in the early part of the century, they were displaced as time went on by a diction appropriated from other cosmopolitan developments. The 1839 Lords' enquiry heard that minute books of the proceedings of "Ribbon" societies were kept, although the names of members attending were not recorded in case of discovery. Likewise, they had printed forms and regulations, membership tickets and operated as "fraternal societies". This evidence may appear more connected to the urban proto-nationalist conspiracy some have distinguished from agrarianism, but it has been seen that such organisations were decidedly mutable. It will be recalled that agrarian conflict in the second decade of the century in Roscommon was habitually labelled Ribbonism, even though it bore little relation to urban lower-class nationalism. A paper entitled "Obligations of the Fraternal Society" was read to the 1839 Lords committee, swearing allegiance to the king (it presumably dated from before his death).³¹⁴ Such papers demonstrate how different traditions might be synthesized in a combined and uneven plebeian consciousness. The presence of radicalism in Boyle has already been noted, and there are further clues about the fusion of agrarian conflict and popular plebeian politics. The Roscommon Journal reported extensively the Captain Swing movement in south-east England in the autumn of 1830. Headlines from October to December spoke of the "Disturbed State of England" and, significantly, "Captain Rock in England".³¹⁵

That a newspaper proprietor should discern a connection between English and Irish agrarian disturbances is perhaps not surprising. However, historians have generally failed to make such a connection, whether determined to find in Ireland pure oppressed Gaels or parochial peasants incapable of seeing beyond their neighbours' coveted acres. The Roscommon Journal also reported extensively the trials of the Chartists in Birmingham in August 1839.³¹⁶ The subscribers to these newspapers may have been predominantly members of local élites, but it is unsustainable that the whiteboys were unaware of Swing or Chartism, just as they were evidently aware of (and supported) Reform in 1832. This has significant ramifications for both the nationalist and modernization historiographies of agrarian conflict. The loyal Catholic parish priest from Roscommon town, Rev Madden, and others, noted that seasonal migrants brought weapons back from British cities with them, as well as an ideology that connected with Irish traditions of collective conflict. Such interfaces with the cosmopolitan world encouraged the growth of organic leadership of the rural poor like Michael Burke's in Cloonygormican (a more substantial instance is Zapata in Mexico, where it might also be noted that such movements took place after "national liberation" had failed to deliver reforms that were meaningful to the minifundia peasants).³¹⁷ In Ireland this leadership never became more significant than local leaders like Burke, although these matters inevitably prompt speculation on what might have happened if the great famine and mass emigration had not intervened. At the very least, Lalor's schemes for peasant proprietorship would have been complicated by the existence of major social divisions among the peasantry. A correspondent named C McArthur of Carrick on

Shannon wrote to the Castle in April 1845 to warn that the peasants would obtain more weapons in England during the harvest and that the “better class of persons” would be at their mercy.³¹⁸ Madden wrote to the Castle in 1839 that three men from the town had returned from England and organised the peasantry “under the Chartist system”, as well as returning with the hardware of collective violence. Many had been sworn in at pubs and their local leader, James Hanly, was in contact with co-conspirators in Birmingham. He also possessed the papers, rules and regulations of the system.³¹⁹ The Journal proprietor, Charles Tully, warned readers in January 1843 that the Chartists were trying to entrap Irish peasants into “their wicked associations” through opposition to the poor rates.³²⁰ It is questionable whether the labourers and cottiers were otherwise so innocent of levelling instincts as Tully appeared to believe. His opposition to lower class associational organisation resonates with a familiar fear of the labouring poor organising for themselves. It was also believed, quite plausibly, that Irish traditions had been exported to the “manufacturing districts” of England with migrants.³²¹ In Manchester, for example, Luddism had been added to a Painite radical group “with an ebullient Irish fringe.”³²² Historians of nineteenth century England have written of the influence of Irish traditions on English lower class organization. The close relations between Irish conspiracy and Chartism in England have been explored, but only in the nationalist dimension, connected with confederacy and ribbonism.³²³ No account has been available of the impact of the social dimension of Chartism on Irish agrarian combinations. The 1831 select committee was told that Irish peasants who had been to England and seen the way English labourers were fed and clothed had returned with trade

union ideas. They said English labourers' practice "was to swear to be true to each other, and join to keep the people upon their ground."³²⁴ No doubt, symbiotic exchanges such as these occurred between Irish and English workers, suggesting the manufacturing cities of England had become a crucible where traditions of agrarian rebellion, working class organisation and politics were blended, producing a highly combustible mixture. These exchanges led in Ireland to a rich fusion of egalitarian notions, a nascent class consciousness and an assertion of a need for general political change. National policies, rather than the failures of individuals to obey the moral economy, were increasingly a focus for organisation.³²⁵ A witness from Ballinasloe, on the border of Roscommon and Galway, articulated the muddled nature of these political thoughts when he told the Lords:

"the poor People fancy they should be much better off if there was a Change of Measures in some Way."³²⁶

He had previously seen assemblies carrying banners proclaiming:

"Half Rent, no Tithes, no Taxes, and certain Rates of Wages".³²⁷

The idea of an Irish agrarian combination meeting during daylight and carrying banners proclaiming political demands should no longer be surprising. The notion that Irish agrarian rebellion remained definitively secret, nocturnal, parochial and "pre-modern" must be abandoned.

NOTES

¹ It may be recalled that David Fitzpatrick asserts, "the unsystematic character of the outrage reports renders statistical analysis inadmissible." D. Fitzpatrick, 'Class, family and rural unrest in nineteenth century Ireland', in PJ Drudy (ed) Ireland: land politics and people, (Cambridge, 1982), pp37-75, quoted at p44.

² OR 1835/7, Thomas Blakeney, chief constable, Strokestown, to George Warburton, inspector of constabulary, Connacht, 15 Jan 1835.

³ OR 1835/10, enclosed with letter from Blakeney to Warburton, 20 Feb 1835.

⁴ OR 1835/20, Blakeney to Warburton, 25 Mar 1835.

⁵ RJ, 30 Jan 1830.

⁶ HL 1839, p302, evidence of Captain Samuel Vignoles.

⁷ OR 1835/22, Robert Curtis, chief constable, Boyle, to Warburton, 13 Apr 1835.

⁸ OR 1837/145, Frederick Carr, chief constable, Castlerea, to W Miller, deputy inspector general of police, 13 Nov 1837

⁹ OR 1840/30151, chief constable John Daly, Elphin, to James Shaw Kennedy, inspector general of police, 3 Dec 1840.

¹⁰ SJ Connolly, Priests and People in Pre-famine Ireland 1780-1845, (Dublin, 1982), pp 272, 239.

¹¹ OR 1845/6723, constable Robert Buskerville to Carr, 17 Mar 1845.

¹² MR Beames, Peasants and Power, (Brighton, 1983), p144.

¹³ S Clark and JS Donnelly jr, 'The Tradition of Violence: Introduction', in S Clark and JS Donnelly jr (eds), Irish Peasants: Violence and Political Unrest, 1780-1914, (Manchester, 1983), pp25-35.

¹⁴ RJ, 20 Mar 1845.

¹⁵ OR 1846/9631, David Duff, resident magistrate, Roscommon, to under-secretary, Richard Pennefather, 21 Apr 1846.

¹⁶ RLG, 16 May 1845.

¹⁷ OR 1848/41, resolutions of Roman Catholic parish priests of Lisanuffly and Cloonfinlough, 9 Jan 1848.

¹⁸ OR 1848/443, MC Browne, Roscommon, to under-secretary, Thomas Redington, 31 July 1848.

¹⁹ RJ, 17 Apr 1830; John Moran was hung for shooting at the Rev Edward Day, and in a dying declaration given to Madden said he had been foolishly addicted to night meetings and illegal associations.

²⁰ OR 1849/412, JA Kirwan, Boyle, to Thomas Redington, 8 Nov 1849.

²¹ CSORP 1828/W108, information of Thomas and Johnston Morton, enclosed with letter from Warburton to Lord Lieutenant, HW Paget, Marquis of Anglesey, 22 Nov 1828.

²² OR 1836/103, Curtis to Miller, 5 Oct 1836.

²³ OR 1836/112, Curtis to Warburton, 28 Oct 1836.

²⁴ OR 1837/64, Curtis to Miller, 3 June 1837.

²⁵ OR 1841/1077, information of John Maguire, enclosed with letter from Daly to inspector general, 26 Jan 1841.

²⁶ OR 1835/51, Curtis to Warburton, 17 Dec 1835.

²⁷ OR 1836/16, William Galbraith, sub-inspector of constabulary, Connacht, to Thomas Drummond, 14 Feb 1836.

²⁸ OR 1836/60, Edward Sparling, chief constable, Roscommon, to Galbraith, 9 May 1836.

²⁹ OR 1837/149, James Reed, chief constable, Boyle, to Miller, undated, Dec 1837.

³⁰ OR 1836/106, Blakeney to Warburton, 10 Oct 1836.

³¹ OR 1837/96, Blakeney to Miller, 7 Aug 1837.

³² OR 1839/1000, Sparling to Miller, 21 Feb 1839.

³³ OR 1839/9728, John Blake, resident magistrate, to inspector general of police, 17 Nov 1839.

- ³⁴ OR 1840/10689, James Reed, chief constable, Boyle, to inspector general of police, 11 June 1840.
- ³⁵ OR 1842/8847, outrage report, 15 May 1842, Crossna, Ardcarne parish.
- ³⁶ OR 1852/60, Blakeney to Carr, county inspector, 1 Mar 1852.
- ³⁷ OR 1842/8847, outrage report, 15 May 1842, Crossna, Ardcarne parish.
- ³⁸ SC 1825, p419, evidence of Rev Thomas Costello.
- ³⁹ OR 1837/21, J Ireland, Castlebar, to Drummond, 2 Apr 1837.
- ⁴⁰ OR 1842/9591, outrage report, 25 May 1842.
- ⁴¹ OR 1843/1723, outrage report, 20 Jan 1843.
- ⁴² OR 1850/3, John Duckworth, resident magistrate, Boyle, to unnamed, Dublin Castle, 10 Jan 1850; OR 1851/1, Duckworth to unnamed, Dublin Castle, 31 Dec 1850.
- ⁴³ OR 1845/29807, letter from Blake to under-secretary, Richard Pennefather, 28 Dec 1845.
- ⁴⁴ For example T Bartlett, 'An end to moral economy: the Irish militia disturbances of 1793', in CHE Philpin (ed), Nationalism and Popular Protest in Ireland, (Cambridge, 1987), pp191-218, at p218, quotes a letter from Captain James Plunkett to Lord Minto, 28 Sep 1800, recalling a time when "they would fight at fairs until they got bloody heads and afterwards drank and were friends, but now murder and depredation is become the order of the day."
- ⁴⁵ SC 1824, p113, evidence of Major Richard Willcocks.
- ⁴⁶ OR 1836/2, Blakeney to Crossley, 1 Jan 1836.
- ⁴⁷ OR 1836/8, Curtis to Warburton, 26 Jan 1836.
- ⁴⁸ OR 1835/45, Curtis to chief secretary, 9 Apr 1836; Thomas Lloyd JP to Drummond, 9 Apr 1836. Name of suspect given as Bertrige in another manuscript letter.
- ⁴⁹ OR 1836/51, Carr to Warburton, 8 Apr 1836.
- ⁵⁰ OR 1836/91, Galbraith to Miller, 17 Aug 1836.
- ⁵¹ OR 1837/124, Blakeney to Miller, undated, Oct 1836.
- ⁵² OR 1838/11, M Knight, chief constable, Athlone, to inspector general of constabulary, 3 Feb 1838.
- ⁵³ OR 1838/19, T Johnston, chief constable, Elphin, to inspector general, 14 Feb 1838; OR 1838/17, letter from Blakeney to inspector general, 1 Feb 1838, describing the abduction of Bridget Cox in Kilbride parish, who swore to marry Michael McDermott but instead married another on the same day; OR 1838/18, Johnston to inspector general, 10 Feb 1838; OR 1838/16, Blakeney to Arthur Crossley, chief constable, Elphin, 8 Feb 1838.
- ⁵⁴ OR 1840/2857, Daly to James Shaw Kennedy, 19 Feb 1840.
- ⁵⁵ OR 1840/16201, Blakeney to James Shaw Kennedy, 11 Sep 1840.
- ⁵⁶ OR 1836/7, Galbraith to Warburton, 10 Jan 1836.
- ⁵⁷ OR 1836/61, Curtis to Galbraith, 12 May 1836.
- ⁵⁸ OR 1837/70, enclosed with letter from Sparling to Warburton, 19 June 1837.
- ⁵⁹ OR 1837/136, Johnston to Warburton, 25 Oct 1837.
- ⁶⁰ OR 1840/17103, enclosed with letter from Blake to inspector general, 2 Oct 1840.
- ⁶¹ OR 1837/140, Sparling to Miller, 28 Oct 1837.
- ⁶² EP Thompson, Customs in Common, (London, 1993), p110.
- ⁶³ OR 1839/8617, enclosed with letter from M Knight, chief constable, Athlone, to inspector general, 4 Oct 1839.
- ⁶⁴ SC 1839, p239, evidence of Sir Francis Hopkins.
- ⁶⁵ H Landsberger, "Peasant unrest: themes and variations", in H Landsberger (ed) Rural Protest: Peasant Movements and social change, (London, 1974), pp1-64.
- ⁶⁶ JW O'Neill, Popular Culture and Peasant Rebellion in Pre-Famine Ireland, unpublished PhD thesis, (University of Minnesota, 1984), p1.
- ⁶⁷ JS Donnelly jr, Landlord and Tenant in Nineteenth-Century Ireland, (Dublin, 1973), p27.
- ⁶⁸ EJ Hobsbawm, 'Social Banditry', in H Landsberger (ed), Rural Protest: Peasant Movements and Social Change, (London, 1974), pp142-157, quoted at p143.
- ⁶⁹ A de Tocqueville, Alexis de Tocqueville's Journey in Ireland, E Larkin (trans and ed), (Dublin, 1990), p21.
- ⁷⁰ OR 1835/49, Blakeney to Crossley, 19 Dec 1835.
- ⁷¹ CSORP 1833/84, Alexander Lowrie, chief constable, Athlone, to George Warburton, 13 May 1833.
- ⁷² CSORP 1828/W35, enclosed with letter from Warburton to William Gregory, 25 May 1828; CSORP 1828/W89, Robert Atkinson to Warburton, 21 Oct 1828.

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- ⁷³ OR 1838/86, T Johnston, chief constable, Elphin, to deputy inspector general of police, 30 Aug 1838.
- ⁷⁴ CSORP 1831/W38, Warburton to Lt Col Dorset, 10 Mar 1831.
- ⁷⁵ OR 1836/47, chief constable Frederick Carr, Elphin, to sub-inspector William Galbraith, 5 Apr 1836.
- ⁷⁶ OR 1838/108, Blakeney to Miller, 1 Dec 1838.
- ⁷⁷ SC 1839, p166, evidence of HW Rowan.
- ⁷⁸ CSORP 1833/64, gun battle between revenue police and country people over the seizure of illicitly distilled spirits near Ballaghadereen reported in letter from unnamed police officer, dated 17 July 1833.
- ⁷⁹ OR 1840/19405, enclosed with letter from Reed to inspector general of police, 27 Nov 1840.
- ⁸⁰ RLG, 23 Feb 1828.
- ⁸¹ CSORP 1832/1674, James Reed, chief constable, Boyle, to Warburton, 1 Sep 1832, including copy of threatening notice sent to Glynn.
- ⁸² J Smyth, The Men of No Property, (London, 1992), p34.
- ⁸³ Smyth, p3.
- ⁸⁴ Resistance to technological advance in England during 1802 displayed similar properties. See AJ Randall, 'The shearmen and the Wiltshire outrages of 1802: trade unionism and industrial violence', Social History 7 (1982), pp 283-304.
- ⁸⁵ OR 1835/4, Blakeney to Warburton, 20 Jan 1835.
- ⁸⁶ OR 1835/6, Warburton to under-secretary, Sir William Gosset, 13 Feb 1835.
- ⁸⁷ OR 1835/7, letter from Blakeney to Warburton, 15 Jan 1835; OR 1835/14, Crossley to under-secretary, 18 July 1835.
- ⁸⁸ EP Thompson, The Making of the English Working Class, (London, 1980 edn), p603.
- ⁸⁹ OR 1835/19, Blakeney to Warburton, 17 Mar 1835.
- ⁹⁰ OR 1835/22, Lowrie to Warburton, 1 Apr 1835; OR 1835/22, William Galbraith, sub-inspector, Strokestown, to Warburton, 7 Apr 1835.
- ⁹¹ OR 1836/7, Galbraith to Warburton, 8 Jan 1836.
- ⁹² OR 1837/37, Robert Curtis, chief constable, Boyle, to Warburton, 21 Mar 1837.
- ⁹³ EP Thompson, 'Eighteenth century English society: class struggle without class?', Social History 3 (1978), pp133-165, quoted at p157.
- ⁹⁴ OR 1837/107, Edward Sparling, chief constable, Roscommon, to Miller, 7 Sep 1837.
- ⁹⁵ OR 1836/10, Carr to Warburton, 2 Feb 1836.
- ⁹⁶ OR 1836/34, Blakeney to Galbraith, 28 Feb 1836.
- ⁹⁷ OR 1836/40, Carr to Warburton, 1 Mar 1836.
- ⁹⁸ OR 1836/116, Lowrie to Miller, 1 Nov 1836.
- ⁹⁹ OR 1836/119, Sparling to Miller, 17 Nov 1836.
- ¹⁰⁰ OR 1837/65, Sparling to Miller, 5 June 1837.
- ¹⁰¹ OR 1837/74, Blakeney to Miller, 20 June 1837.
- ¹⁰² OR 1837/92, Blakeney to Miller, 21 July 1837.
- ¹⁰³ OR 1836/128, Blakeney to Miller, 4 Jan 1837.
- ¹⁰⁴ OR 1839/1034, MN Knight, chief constable, Athlone, to Miller, 22 Feb 1839.
- ¹⁰⁵ OR 1839/9389, Reed to inspector general, 13 May 1840.
- ¹⁰⁶ OR 1837/103, Curtis to Miller, 29 Aug 1837.
- ¹⁰⁷ OR 1838/69, enclosed with letter from Knight to Warburton, 18 June 1838.
- ¹⁰⁸ OR 1836/21, letter from Curtis to Warburton, 23 Feb 1837.
- ¹⁰⁹ OR 1845/29385, David Duff, resident magistrate, Roscommon, to chief secretary, Sir Thomas Freemantle, 26 Dec 1845.
- ¹¹⁰ OR 1846/7267, B Keon to O'Connor Don, 18 Mar 1846.
- ¹¹¹ There are many instances of such attacks, usually following a similar pattern to those described. See, for example, OR 1838/7, OR 1838/10 and OR 1838/41 for examples of a "rescue" of livestock from a pound, an attack on bailiffs protecting goods seized to pay a debt and the swearing of men not to serve processes.
- ¹¹² JS Donnelly jr, 'The Rightboy Movement, 1785-1788', Studia Hibernica (Ireland) 17-18 (1977-1978), pp120-202.
- ¹¹³ G Broeker, Rural Disorder and Police Reform in Ireland, 1812 – 1836, (London, 1970), p193.

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- ¹¹⁴ SR Gibbons, Rockites and Whitefeet, Irish Peasant Secret Societies, unpublished PhD thesis (University of Southampton, 1983), p62.
- ¹¹⁵ C Tilly, Popular Contention in Great Britain, 1758-1834, (London, 1995), p48.
- ¹¹⁶ For example, OR 1845/23471, G Lloyd JP to under-secretary, 22 Nov 1845. Lloyd emphasized that arms raids were taking place in daylight; OR 1846/18789, letter from Gerard Barry, resident magistrate, Athlone, to under-secretary, 18 June 1846. Barry reported an attack on the house of a gentleman farmer in the early afternoon, noting that the attackers were "in no way disguised".
- ¹¹⁷ OR 1846/7267, Mrs Keon to the O'Connor Don, 18 March 1846.
- ¹¹⁸ OR 1847/768, George Lloyd to under-secretary, 29 Nov 1847.
- ¹¹⁹ OR 1837/101, enclosed with letter from Curtis to Miller, 28 June 1837.
- ¹²⁰ OR 1838/34, Sparling to Miller, 24 Mar 1838.
- ¹²¹ OR 1838/41, Blakeney to Miller, 4 Apr 1838.
- ¹²² OR 1838/55, Reed to Miller, 15 Feb 1838.
- ¹²³ OR 1838/84, Reed to Miller, 2 Aug 1838.
- ¹²⁴ OR 1841/1077, Daly, Elphin, to inspector general of police, 26 Jan 1841.
- ¹²⁵ OR 1842/20041, undated memorial of Sharkey to Lord Lieutenant, autumn 1842.
- ¹²⁶ OR 1845/22049, undated memorial of Michael Egan, autumn 1845.
- ¹²⁷ OR 1840/13775, John Blake, sub-inspector, Roscommon, to inspector general, 31 July 1840,
- ¹²⁸ OR 1840/14421, letter from M'carty Colclough, chief constable, Athlone, to inspector general, 11 Aug 1840.
- ¹²⁹ CSORP 1832/501, Warburton to Gosset, 12 Mar 1832.
- ¹³⁰ CSORP 1834/25, Warburton to Gosset, 20 Jan 1834; Robert Grace to Warburton, 3 Apr 1834; Robert Grace to Warburton, 16 Apr 1834.
- ¹³¹ OR 1836/80, Blakeney to Miller, 7 Aug 1836.
- ¹³² OR 1837/46, Curtis to Warrburton, 10 Apr 1837.
- ¹³³ OR 1837/70, Sparling to Warburton, 19 June 1837.
- ¹³⁴ OR 1837/93, Blakeney to Warburton, 17 July 1837.
- ¹³⁵ OR 1837/109, 110 and 112, Curtis to Miller, 13 Sep, 12 Sep and 19 Sep 1837 respectively.
- ¹³⁶ OR 1837/114, 115, 116; Curtis to Miller, 24, 25 and 26 Sep 1837.
- ¹³⁷ OR 1837/117, Warburton to Viscount Morpeth, 25 Sep 1837
- ¹³⁸ OR 1841/5079, outrage report, 8 Apr 1841.
- ¹³⁹ OR 1842/2567, outrage report, 10 Feb 1842.
- ¹⁴⁰ OR 1837/128, enclosed with letter from Curtis to Warburton, 11 Oct 1837.
- ¹⁴¹ OR 1837/131, Carr to Warburton, 15 Oct 1837, reporting incident three weeks earlier.
- ¹⁴² OR 1838/59, Sparling to Miller, 18 May 1838.
- ¹⁴³ OR 1838/83, Sparling to Miller, 4 Aug 1838.
- ¹⁴⁴ RLG, 20 Dec 1845.
- ¹⁴⁵ OR 1837/80, Sparling to Miller, 28 June 1837.
- ¹⁴⁶ OR 1837/85, Sparling to Warburton, 8 July 1837.
- ¹⁴⁷ M Hildermeier, "Agrarian social protest, populism and economic development: some problems and results from recent studies", Social History 4 (1979), pp319-332, p331; considers the "mixture of backward-looking and progressive forces" as "typical".
- ¹⁴⁸ OR 1835/47, Blakeney to Crossley, 7 Dec 1835.
- ¹⁴⁹ OR 1835/52, Blakeney to Crossley, no date, December 1835.
- ¹⁵⁰ OR 1836/85, Curtis to Miller, 11 Aug 1836.
- ¹⁵¹ OR 1836/88, Curtis to Miller, 13 Aug 1836.
- ¹⁵² OR 1836/92, Sparling to unnamed, Dublin Castle, 19 Aug 1836.
- ¹⁵³ OR 1837/62, Curtis to Miller, 26 May 1837.
- ¹⁵⁴ A Booth, "Food Riots in the North-West of England", Past and Present 77 (1977), pp84-107.
- ¹⁵⁵ EP Thompson, Customs in Common, (London, 1993), p287.
- ¹⁵⁶ OR 1839/4577, Reed to inspector general, 23 June 1839.
- ¹⁵⁷ OR 1839/4703, Reed to inspector general, 28 June 1839.
- ¹⁵⁸ OR 1839/6387, Reed to inspector general, 19 July 1839.
- ¹⁵⁹ OR 1839/7577, Reed to inspector general, 28 August 1839.
- ¹⁶⁰ OR 1839/6650, Carr to inspector general, 26 July 1839.

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- 161 OR 1838/106, Reed to Miller, 24 November 1838.
- 162 OR 1845/14169, information sworn by Michael Skeffington, Boyle Petty Sessions, 1 July 1845.
- 163 OR 1839/3657, William Irwin, sub-constable, Roscommon, to inspector general, 21 May 1839.
- 164 OR 1837/72, Curtis to Miller, 20 June 1837.
- 165 RLG 19 Apr 1839.
- 166 OR 1840/10393, Reed to inspector general, 3 June 1840.
- 167 OR 1840/10689, Michael Middleton, chief constable, Roscommon, to inspector general, 5 June 1840.
- 168 OR 1850/9, outrage report, John Duckworth, resident magistrate, Boyle, 10 January 1850.
- 169 OR 1837/68, Dennis O'Connor to Lord Lieutenant, 27 May 1837.
- 170 OR 1837/108, Sparling to Miller, 10 Sep 1837.
- 171 OR 1839/4, Sparling to Miller, 22 Jan 1839.
- 172 OR 1839/3756, Irwin to inspector general, 24 May 1839.
- 173 OR 1840/13615, Blakeney to inspector general, 29 July 1840.
- 174 OR 1839/7450, Reed to inspector general, 26 Aug 1839.
- 175 OR 1837/125, Blakeney to Miller, 1 Oct 1837.
- 176 OR 1848/605, information of John Loughan, 10 Nov 1848.
- 177 RLG, 4 Oct 1845.
- 178 SC 1831, p37, evidence of William Despard.
- 179 CSORP 1829/W40, Warburton to Gregory, 23 Apr 1829.
- 180 RLG, 20 Dec 1828; RJ, 20 Dec 1828.
- 181 OR 1837/123, Curtis to Miller, 4 Oct 1837.
- 182 OR 1843/8650, undated outrage report, 1843; OR 1843/7059, for example: a notice posted at Carrownaskagh, near Strokestown, 9 Apr 1843.
- 183 OR 1843/8729, outrage report, 1 May 1843.
- 184 OR 1845/10413, C Harrison to unnamed, Dublin Castle, 15 May 1845.
- 185 OR 1847/38083, George Knox, Roscommon high constable, to chief secretary, 1 Jan 1847.
- 186 CSORP 18330/W46, Warburton to Gregory, 3 May 1830.
- 187 CSORP 1834/25, Carr to Galbraith, 20 May 1834.
- 188 OR 1835/22, Lowrie to Warburton, 1 Apr 1835.
- 189 OR 1835/30, Sparling to Warburton, 21 Sep 1835.
- 190 OR 1835/50, Curtis to Warburton, 20 Dec 1835.
- 191 OR 1837/48, Lowrie to Miller, 14 April 1837.
- 192 OR 1837/90, Lowrie to Miller, 19 July 1837.
- 193 OR 1838/36, Sparling to Miller, 26 Mar 1838.
- 194 OR 1836/47, Blakeney to Galbraith, 12 April 1836.
- 195 OR 1836/107, Blakeney to Warburton, 17 Oct 1836.
- 196 OR 1837/47, Lowrie to Warburton, 10 Apr 1837.
- 197 OR 1839/4948, Alexander Henderson, constable, Boyle, to inspector general, 3 July 1839.
- 198 OR 1837/121, Sparling to Miller, 1 Oct 1837.
- 199 OR 1836/38, enclosed with letter from Blakeney to Galbraith, 24 Mar 1836.
- 200 OR 1835/44, Galbraith to Warburton, 7 Nov 1835.
- 201 OR 1838/73, Blakeney to Warburton, 21 June 1838.
- 202 OR 1838/72, constable David Smyth, Athlone, to Miller, 25 June 1838.
- 203 OR 1836/18, Curtis to Arthur Crossley, magistrate, 16 Feb 1836.
- 204 OR 1838/114, Carr to Miller, 27 Dec 1838.
- 205 J Scott, "Hegemony and the peasantry", Politics and Society 7 (1977), pp267-296, quoted at p280.
- 206 JC Scott, The Moral Economy of the Peasant. Rebellion and Subsistence in Southeast Asia, (New Haven and London, 1976), p105.
- 207 MR Beames, Peasants and Power, (Brighton, 1983), p4.
- 208 G Cornwall Lewis, On Local Disturbances in Ireland, (Cork, 1977 edn), p253.
- 209 SC 1839, p 746, evidence of Joseph Tabuteau.

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- ²¹⁰ J Smyth, The Men of No Property. Irish Radicals and Popular Politics in the Late Eighteenth Century, (London, 1992), p3.
- ²¹¹ T Garvin, 'Defenders, Ribbonmen and Others: Underground Political Networks in Pre-Famine Ireland', in CHE Philpin (ed), Nationalism and Popular Protest in Ireland, (Cambridge, 1987), pp219-244, quoted at p220.
- ²¹² OR 1852/157, J Kirwan, resident magistrate, Boyle, to unnamed, Dublin Castle, 8 July 1852.
- ²¹³ P Burke, Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe, (Aldershot, 1994 edn), p21.
- ²¹⁴ P Longworth, 'The Pugachev Revolt: the last great Cossack-peasant rising' in HA Landsberger (ed), Rural Protest: Peasant Movements and Social Change, (London, 1974), pp195-256.
- ²¹⁵ EP Thompson, Customs in Common, p9.
- ²¹⁶ Thompson, The Making, p594.
- ²¹⁷ RLG, 28 Feb 1829.
- ²¹⁸ OR 1836/17, Curtis to Galbraith, 14 Feb 1836.
- ²¹⁹ OR 1836/52, Lowrie to Galbraith, 17 Apr 1836.
- ²²⁰ OR 1836/53, Curtis to Galbraith, 18 Apr 1836.
- ²²¹ OR 1836/118, Carr to Miller, 3 Nov 1836.
- ²²² OR 1842/5087, outrage report, 20 Mar 1842.
- ²²³ OR 1842/23727, outrage report, 17 Dec 1842.
- ²²⁴ OR 1843/1373, outrage report, 21 Jan 1843.
- ²²⁵ OR 1847/337, Gerard Barry, resident magistrate, Athlone, to Thomas Redington, 15 Apr 1847.
- ²²⁶ OR 1836/97, Carr to Miller, 24 Aug 1836.
- ²²⁷ OR 1836/103, Curtis to Miller, 3 Oct 1836.
- ²²⁸ OR 1837/94, Curtis to Warburton, 1 Aug 1837.
- ²²⁹ OR 1837/148, Curtis to Miller, 6 Nov 1837.
- ²³⁰ OR 1839/3257, James Reed, chief constable, Boyle, to inspector general, 4 May 1839.
- ²³¹ OR 1839/10542, Reed to inspector general, 20 Dec 1839.
- ²³² OR 1839/1433, Blakeney to Miller, 5 Mar 1839.
- ²³³ OR 1839/4075, Blakeney to inspector general, 8 June 1839.
- ²³⁴ OR 1837/134, enclosed with letter from Curtis to Warburton, 23 Oct 1836.
- ²³⁵ OR 1838/45, Johnston to Miller, 29 May 1838.
- ²³⁶ Devon Commission, part 2, p348, evidence of Godfrey Hogg.
- ²³⁷ RLG, 7 Mar 1829.
- ²³⁸ OR 1839/1726, chief constable James Sheron, Elphin, to inspector general of police, 21 Mar 1839.
- ²³⁹ OR 1840/4111, Sheron, Athlone, to inspector general, 11 Mar 1840.
- ²⁴⁰ OR 1840/9933, Blakeney to inspector general, 26 May 1840.
- ²⁴¹ OR 1840/12539, John Blake, sub-inspector of police, Roscommon, to inspector general, 8 July 1840.
- ²⁴² OR 1840/13615, enclosed with letter from Blakeney to inspector general, 29 July 1840.
- ²⁴³ OR 1840/15487, Blake to inspector general, 27 Aug 1840.
- ²⁴⁴ OR 1841/3575, deposition of William Gorman, 20 Marh 1841, and reply from Dublin Castle, signature illegible.
- ²⁴⁵ G Broeker, Rural Disorder and Police Reform in Ireland, 1812 – 1836, (London, 1970), pp222, 198.
- ²⁴⁶ Broeker, p234.
- ²⁴⁷ OR 1842/1791, outrage report, 21 Dec 1841.
- ²⁴⁸ OR 1842/3981, Denis Mahon to Edward Lucas, 4 March 1842. Unfortunately there appears to be no record of the outcome of this request.
- ²⁴⁹ OR 1842/17533, memorial of Martin Mulligan to Lord Chief Justice, Dublin, pleading for a guard while he executed distress warrants, 7 Sep 1842.
- ²⁵⁰ OR 1842/23309, outrage report, 17 Dec 1842.
- ²⁵¹ HL 1839, p1038, evidence of Tomkins Brew.
- ²⁵² OR 1842/20511, outrage report, 20 Oct 1842; OR 1842/21427, outrage report, 7 Nov 1842.
- ²⁵³ OR 1842/23797, outrage report, 25 Dec 1842; OR 1843/5729, outrage report, 10 Mar 1843.

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- ²⁵⁴ For example, a notice posted at Carrownaskagh, reported on 9 April 1843, OR 1843/7059, warned any "persons ... who do not let land cheap".
- ²⁵⁵ OR1844/3179, resolution of Roscommon magistrates, 7 Feb 1844.
- ²⁵⁶ OR 1844/3549, David Duff, resident magistrate, to Lucas, 22 February 1844.
- ²⁵⁷ OR 1844/4355, undated letter from Davis to Duff.
- ²⁵⁸ OR 1845/3339, G Lloyd, Croghan, to under secretary, 18 Feb 1845.
- ²⁵⁹ OR 1845/5317, Duff to Lucas, 15 Mar 1845.
- ²⁶⁰ OR 1845/6963, information of Michael Dier, 27 Mar 1845.
- ²⁶¹ OR 1845/10145, report of Roscommon Petty Sessions, 17 Mar 1845.
- ²⁶² OR 1845/11481, memorial of Michael Burke to Lord Lieutenant, 22 Mar 1845.
- ²⁶³ OR 1845/6055, Duff to Lucas, 23 Mar 1845.
- ²⁶⁴ OR 1845/16805, Duff to Lucas, 6 Aug 1845.
- ²⁶⁵ JC Scott, The Moral Economy of the Peasant. Rebellion and Subsistence in Southeast Asia, (New Haven and London, 1976), p207.
- ²⁶⁶ OR 1845/15015, Wray to Lucas, 13 July 1845.
- ²⁶⁷ OR 1846/8863, Duff to Richard Pennefather, 14 Apr 1846.
- ²⁶⁸ OR 1847/736, threatening notice to James Fleming, 14 November 1847; OR 1847/735, threatening notice to Mr McCausland, undated, and to his wife.
- ²⁶⁹ OR 1847/735, Marcus McCausland to William Sommerville, 29 Nov 1847.
- ²⁷⁰ OR 1845/22867, undated letter from Kerry landlord, name illegible.
- ²⁷¹ OR 1847/688, statement of Dudley Perse, Co. Galway, regarding Roscommon tenants, 31 Oct 1847.
- ²⁷² OR 1845/5001, HB Wray, resident magistrate, Castlerea, to Lucas, 14 Mar 1845.
- ²⁷³ OR 1847/760, Edmond Blake, resident magistrate, to Thomas Redington, 29 November 1847.
- ²⁷⁴ RLG, 16 May 1846.
- ²⁷⁵ OR 1848/609, outrage report 11 Nov 1848.
- ²⁷⁶ RLG, 24 Jan 1846; 31 Jan 1846. The story of Knox and the Crown estate at Ballykilcline is told by Robert Scally, The End of Hidden Ireland, Oxford 1995.
- ²⁷⁷ RLG, 21 June 1845.
- ²⁷⁸ RLG, 5 July 1845.
- ²⁷⁹ EP Thompson, 'The Crime of Anonymity', in D Hay et al (eds), Albion's Fatal Tree, (New York, 1975) pp255-308.
- ²⁸⁰ Thompson, Anonymity, p295.
- ²⁸¹ JC Belchem, 'English Working Class Radicalism and the Irish, 1815-1850', in S Gilley and R Swift (eds) The Irish in the Victorian City, (London, 1985), pp78-93.
- ²⁸² OR 1846/12347, John Duckworth and Morgan Crofton, JPs, to under secretary, 23 May 1846.
- ²⁸³ Gibbons, p210.
- ²⁸⁴ CSORP 1830/W103, copy of notice posted at Mohill market place, County Leitrim, enclosed with letter from Warburton to Gregory, 14 Nov 1830.
- ²⁸⁵ O'Neill, pp375-6.
- ²⁸⁶ Smyth, p7.
- ²⁸⁷ RLG, 14 Mar 1846.
- ²⁸⁸ SC 1839, p829, evidence of John Cahill.
- ²⁸⁹ RLG, 18 Oct 1845.
- ²⁹⁰ Smyth, p76.
- ²⁹¹ EJ Hobsbawm and G Rudé, Captain Swing, (London, 1985 edn), p43.
- ²⁹² R Wells, 'Social Protest, Class, Conflict and Consciousness in the English Countryside, 1700-1880', in M Reed and R Wells (eds), Class, Conflict and Protest in the English Countryside, 1700-1880, (London, 1990), pp121-214.
- ²⁹³ CSORP 1832/1247, enclosed with letter from Warburton to Gosset, 23 July 1832.
- ²⁹⁴ OR 1843/9125, letter from Lord Clonbrock's agent, Ahascragh, 15 May 1843.
- ²⁹⁵ G Rudé, The Crowd in History, 1730-1848, (London, 1964), p234.
- ²⁹⁶ CSORP 1832/1479, "resolution" of Terry and his mother dated (erroneously?) 29 July 1831. Located in County Roscommon correspondence but with no place stated, possibly Leitrim or Galway.
- ²⁹⁷ OR 1843/1995, anonymous information, 31 Jan 1843.
- ²⁹⁸ O'Neill, p333.

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- ²⁹⁹ OR 1845/5001, copy of notice enclosed with letter from Wray to Lucas, 11 Mar 1845.
- ³⁰⁰ OR 1845/6017, letter from Wray to Lucas, 25 Mar 1845.
- ³⁰¹ RLG, 23 Sepr 1837.
- ³⁰² Thompson, Customs in Common, p525.
- ³⁰³ Thompson, The Making, p557-558.
- ³⁰⁴ OR 1846/11349, Conry to Sir Richard Pennefather, 8 May 1846.
- ³⁰⁵ OR 1844/4263, G Bentley, Strokestown, to unnamed, Dublin Castle, 19 Feb 1844.
- ³⁰⁶ OR 1843/277, Thomas Jordan to De Grey, 11 Jan 1843.
- ³⁰⁷ OR 1844/4557, memorial of Anthony McDonnell, Palmfield, Mayo, undated, 1844.
- ³⁰⁸ OR 1845/15147, resolution of Roscommon Grand Jury, undated, July 1845.
- ³⁰⁹ Scally, p7.
- ³¹⁰ RWells, 'Social Protest', p127.
- ³¹¹ See RLG 4 Oct 1828 for a report of the foundation of a Brunswick Club in Boyle.
- ³¹² Burke, p63.
- ³¹³ Wells, 'Social Protest', p191.
- ³¹⁴ SC 1839, evidence of HW Rowan, pp172, p161; evidence of William Fausset, magistrate, County Sligo, pp198-199.
- ³¹⁵ See RJ, 30 Oct 1830, 13 Nov 1830, 4 Dec 1830, 18 Dec 1830.
- ³¹⁶ For example, RJ, 10 Aug 1839.
- ³¹⁷ G Huizer and R Stavenhagen, 'Peasant Movements and Land Reform in Latin America: Mexico and Bolivia', in H Landsberger (ed), Rural Protest: Peasant Movements and Social Change, (London, 1974), pp378-409, p383.
- ³¹⁸ OR 1845/8705, C McArthur, Carrick-on-Shannon, to unnamed, Dublin Castle, 13 Apr 1845.
- ³¹⁹ OR 1839/7398, information of Rev Madden, undated, Aug 1839.
- ³²⁰ RJ, 18 Jan 1843.
- ³²¹ HL 1839, p292, evidence of John Wright, former chief constable.
- ³²² Thompson, The Making, p651.
- ³²³ See, for example, JC Belchem, 'English Working Class Radicalism and the Irish, 1815-1850', in S Gilley and R Swift (eds) The Irish in the Victorian City, (London, 1985), pp78-93.
- ³²⁴ Cornewall Lewis, p90, quoting evidence of Rev Nicholas O'Connor to select committee.
- ³²⁵ Early nineteenth century food riots in Manchester had taken a similar direction. See J Bohstedt, Riots and Community Politics in England and Wales, 1790-1810, (London, 1983), p92.
- ³²⁶ SC 1839, p728, evidence of Captain Bartholomew Warburton.
- ³²⁷ SC 1839, p727, evidence of B Warburton.

Chapter 7

Conclusion: the secret Ireland

I have used EP Thompson's concept of a moral economy to reconsider Irish agrarian protest. Acknowledging that Irish traditions and circumstances affected the way repertoires of rebellion were constituted and played out, it is nevertheless apparent that Irish agrarian conflict resonates with similar legitimising customary attitudes as English price-fixing riots. However, my account of collective conflict in Roscommon also suggests that Irish agrarian unrest can not simply be placed on a linear continuum of modernization. This is in contradistinction to the "history from below" of Hobsbawm and Rudé, for example. The "linguistic turn" in English social history writing may have appeared to liberate historians from orthodox economic determinism and allow for human agency in the making of history. I want to argue that Thompson's conceptualization as a "moral economy" of the cultural milieu in which the crowd functioned provides a version of materialism that allows for agency and contestation of identity, without removing a conflictual model of collective identities. Thompson did suggest that class could happen in cognition before the development of institutional expressions of class.¹ In insisting on the significance of class, Thompson remained within a materialist conceptual convention that has

been dismissed as determinist, caricatured as reducing history to a linear narrative of the development of productive forces. This sustained attack on Thompson's approach by the historians of the linguistic turn must be considered. Further, historical materialism as a theoretical approach has been questioned. Before considering these two general issues, however, it is necessary to recapitulate some of the heterodox findings that have been elaborated in the preceding chapters.

First, it is apparent that the notion of a "moral economy" might be extended to explain acts of collective agrarian protest, resistance and rebellion in Ireland in the late eighteenth and first half of the nineteenth century. The customary outlooks of the rural poor in Ireland, while distinctively Irish, demonstrated certain features of the concept as Thompson used it. The relevance of the moral economy has been shown through this examination of conflict in County Roscommon, dispelling the notion that price-fixing and other forms of collective action associated with the moral economy were unknown in Ireland. The price of provisions, wage rates, clerical duties, tithe impositions and poor rates, for example, have been considered, as well as rents and access to land. Bartlett maintains the notion that the focus of violence in Ireland was on land, but acknowledges that "the legitimization of that violence was common to both countries".²

Second, the term "moral economy" does not necessarily imply one-sided deference and acceptance of the rulers' understanding of the terms of their rule. Thompson was careful to assert that although customary outlooks were formally backward looking, they contained within them the

embryo of a mutated collectivity, as “discrete and fragmented elements of older patterns of thought become integrated by class”.³ This was the basis of what I have called a paradoxical consciousness. It was apparent in the mid-eighteenth century Whiteboy and Rightboy movements. Rightboys marched under banners to join Protestant churches, their bands playing the White Cockade to show *loyalty*.⁴ The Whiteboys were capable of proclaiming loyalty to Queen Sive and George III.⁵ While these paradoxes demonstrate the absence of a monolithically nationalist consciousness, others demonstrate a consciousness that upsets the linearity of explanations of agrarian violence as “pre-modern”. O’Neill suggested that Irish agrarian collectives relied on “outmoded appeals to the moral economy which both the rulers and ruled had shared”.⁶ However, I have discerned a number of features of agrarian conflict which suggest a combined and uneven consciousness, like the one which can proclaim loyalty to Ireland and the Crown. Bric has suggested that the Rightboys could not be characterised merely as a pre-industrial crowd, clinging stubbornly to a past of protectionist legislation as their rulers abandoned it.⁷ Just as EP Thompson discovered the inadequacy of notions of economic progress and backwardness in considering English upland weaving communities in the early nineteenth century, so I have suggested a re-evaluation of Irish agrarian collectives.⁸

Thompson, as I have noticed, suggested that “we may see Luddism as a moment of *transitional* conflict. On the one hand, it looked backward to old customs and paternalist legislation which could never be revived; on the other hand, it tried to revive ancient rights in order to establish new

precedents.”⁹ The agrarian conflicts of pre-famine Ireland might be profitably reinterpreted in a similar way. Hobsbawm and Rudé claimed that the organisation of Swing was “entirely traditional” but Tilly has noted that while the Swing events might look “like a fragment of another world”, because of their justification by reference to time-honoured rights, there were evident connections to national politics.¹⁰ By incremental mutations, customary forms like the shaming ritual merged into disciplined demonstrations.¹¹ Thompson noted that the English working class between 1790 and 1840 was not simply “made” by the industrial revolution but brought with it legacies and traditions from Paine, Methodism and the legend of the free-born Englishman. Indeed,

“The factory hand or stockinger was also the inheritor of Bunyan, of remembered village rights.”¹²

This assessment appears to be somewhat at odds with Thompson’s assertion that the rituals of trade unionism grew out of different traditions to the rough music of peasant and proto-industrial communities,¹³ but in the Roscommon context I have shown that cosmopolitan discourses (Painite, French, Reform and Charter, for example) were imported and grafted on to the “indigenous ingredients” of the native tradition, thus shifting the repertoires of rebellion.¹⁴ Peter Burke has noted that “the political education of the common man” took place when political consciousness among European peasants “was suddenly transformed following the French Revolution”.¹⁵

The incremental changes in repertoires of collective action are highly significant in demonstrating responses to structural changes. O’Neill has

suggested that after 1815 peasant concerns ceased to be exclusively agrarian, and agitations became “supra-local”, suggesting a qualitative change in the nature of peasant protest and the level of political mobilization.¹⁶ Captain Rock operated from Cork to Larne, according to the Roscommon and Leitrim Gazette.¹⁷ Other agrarian movements evidently covered regions, rather than being merely local. Where the movements are unrelated (and I have emphasized the caution that must be exercised over claims such as the Gazette’s), there can be little doubt that the similarities in manifestations of conflict suggest a broader significance.¹⁸ Writing of England, Tilly suggested changes in repertoires occurred as a result of structural changes involving a great concentration of capital, a substantial augmentation and alteration of the national state’s power, and struggles in response to those changes.¹⁹ Ritual humiliation and violence declined as public meetings and associations prevailed.²⁰ In relation to Ireland, demographic and economic change, especially integration into the UK’s free internal market, had powerful effects on relations between land owners and occupiers, on land use and on emigration. Imported repertoires increasingly supplemented traditional ones. I have noted that in 1821 Rockites in Kilkenny carried banners demanding “no taxes, no tithes, 60 per cent reduction in rents”, while ten years later “Ribandmen” in Cavan carried banners demanding “Half Rents, no Tithes, no Taxes and certain Rates of Wages”.²¹ The demands themselves are significant, but so are the forms in which they were expressed. Banners, placards and mobilising slogans are considered part of the modern associational repertoire, yet they were appearing in rural Ireland when such activities were supposedly

unknown. Nocturnal meetings, disguise and threatening notices had not been displaced, but other tactics were supplementing them. Nor do these demands merely look back for the restoration of a previous equilibrium.

These changes also demonstrate the ways in which ideas of community norms were replaced by horizontal collectivities, as land owners and farmers attempted to respond to change through “private gain at the expense of the community”, and as “improvement” displaced laxity as the predominant ethos of landlordism.²² It might be observed that:

“The old and newer modes of production each supported distinct kinds of community and characteristic ways of life. Alternative conventions and notions of human satisfaction were in conflict with each other.”²³

The additions to the repertoires of collective conflict signify a redefinition by the peasant of the people “whose motives and interests he understands ... with whom interaction and understandings are possible on the basis of common premises”.²⁴ Scott has also suggested that in the processes of widespread structural change, the legitimacy of landlords as a class may be questioned, by means of a formally backward-looking focus on their non-compliance with their obligations.²⁵

It is not possible in this work to rehearse fully the arguments for and against historical materialism or metanarratives, but there is a need to provide some justification, given the criticisms of the Thompsonian approach by advocates of what has been known as the “linguistic turn” in social history writing. A discussion of this will lead finally to a

reconsideration of the historiography that has placed Irish agrarian unrest in a national conflict duality.

The proponents of the “linguistic turn” and the subjectivism associated with postmodernism in English social history have had much to say about determinism, themselves substituting a new determinism for the variety Thompson stands accused of. The historian most closely associated with this critique of Thompson is Patrick Joyce. Joyce’s Visions of the People was prefaced by a frontal assault on Thompson’s insistence that there were social processes that tended to unite and disunite people on the basis of an experience of a class position. He has asserted:

“Class is therefore increasingly, and rightly, seen less as objective reality than as a social construct, created differently by different historical actors. The seemingly simple recognition that the category of “experience” (out of which historians such as EP Thompson argue comes class consciousness) is in fact not prior to and constitutive of language but is actively constituted by language, has increasingly been recognised as having far-reaching implications.”²⁶

It will become apparent that this approach may be used to reduce the history of Irish agrarian conflict to a conflict of national identities, consistent with nationalist explanations. The distinction might be summarised as a conflict between “materialist” and “linguistic” explanations of social processes.

Joyce's centring of language indicates the direction he is taking. Thus he swiftly substitutes one determinism for another, without paying the same attention to contested identities as those historians he condemns as determinist. For it is doubtless the case that individual subjects speak "different, overlapping and often competing 'discourses'," rather than possessing a monolithic consciousness.²⁷ Thus a Moldavian farm labourer may say the Jewish leaseholder is his oppressor because the leaseholder is Jewish, a leaseholder or both.²⁸ A Roscommon cottier may say the Protestant middleman is his oppressor because the middleman is a Protestant, a middleman or both. Competing discourses are born in the plurality of social relations.

Further, the meaning of language can also be contested. For example, Joyce suggests that class conflict is not evident in the looser terms he discovers in use among English working people, a language of contrasts between the rich and the poor. He makes this claim on the basis that the rich/poor distinction is moral, not economic.²⁹ The mechanical separation of the discursive practice through which the distinction between rich and poor is made and the "economic" source of that distinction, is constructed entirely by Joyce, not the people whose practices he is considering, who may well have articulated economic distinctions in moral terms. When the discursive practices of working people do not fit and indeed appear unquestionably to be languages of class, they are dismissed as the "spurious facticity" of "popular common sense".³⁰ To allow contestation would be to allow a dialogic view of language.³¹

As Kirk has pointed out, Joyce, along with another proponent of the “linguistic turn”, Gareth Stedman Jones, appears to be saying that there is no reality beyond language and discourse.³² Joyce asserts that “the events, structures and processes of the past are indistinguishable from the forms of documentary representation, the conceptual and political appropriations, and the historical discourses that construct them”.³³

Such assertions lead to major epistemic questions, which need to be acknowledged briefly. Joyce and Stedman Jones’s emphasis on language recreates historical practice as a self-referential activity with no greater claim to discovering the past than the novel. This is a reasonable claim only if language does constitute, rather than mediate the relationship between human agency and structures. Thus Richard Price notes:

“The postmodernist approach to history rests upon a conception of history that reduces it to another form of literary fiction.”³⁴

The idea of the determining status of language can not be sustained. While the representation of something may be the starting point for an enquiry into it, it can not precede or originate that something.³⁵ Joyce would not presumably deny that there had been a material past, so the critical question is how to characterize the relationship between language and that past. While the presence of class structures is not dependent on their registration in language, the study of language may be one element in a wider framework “which embraces agency and structure, saying and doing, the conscious and the unconscious, and the willed and unintentional consequences of individual and social action and thought.”³⁶

The connection between consciousness and action was made by Gramsci, when he described "the co-existence of two conceptions of the world, one affirmed in words and the other displayed in effective action".³⁷ People may have consciousnesses which are submissive and subordinate, but in their relations to structures they are pushed into collectivities which act according to a praxis of collective interests. Gramsci went on to describe these conceptions as two theoretical consciousnesses, or one contradictory consciousness. One is implicit in activity and the other made explicit verbally. The verbal consciousness may even directly contradict the practical consciousness, as it is often absorbed as a result of subordination to another group.³⁸ This can be seen in the appropriation by Roscommon peasants of languages and symbols of authority, not only in attempts to order their understanding of the circumstances they lived in, but also when trying to re-order that world.

There may be many different conceptions of the world affirmed in language at different times by the same subject, for example when, as I noted earlier, confession and class intersect. It is these discourses existing within the verbalised consciousness that can be equated with the "paradoxical consciousness" of the Roscommon agrarian rebel. Peter Burke has enumerated five discourses of perceived wrongs in the popular culture of early modern Europe. They are fatalist, modernist, traditionalist, radical and millenarian.³⁹ Burke suggests that these attitudes are points on a continuum. The moral economy may correspond most closely to the "traditionalist" attitude, but it has been established that "tradition" could frequently be put to radical uses, legitimising new demands. In the context

of significant structural change at the end of Burke's period of study of early modern Europe, the interaction of the two theoretical consciousnesses may shift incrementally under the increased significance of the practical consciousness, revealing new repertoires of action and new collectives.⁴⁰ In his study of English collective action, Tilly has identified that struggle itself, that is human agency, affects how those struggles eventuate.⁴¹ This is far removed from the structural determination that Joyce identifies with "materialism". This is not to say that there is no element of determination within materialism, merely that it also accounts for the capacity of human agency to affect outcomes and structures. It will be necessary to return to this consideration when discussing metanarratives, modernization and the capacities of an agricultural population to act collectively.

Without an account of structure, neither Joyce nor Stedman Jones can adequately account for historical change. So neither attempts to do without an account of structure. Joyce acknowledges that "quite simply factory production had irrevocably strengthened its hold on older forms of production and many of the views and practices associated with the older forms no longer made sense to workers."⁴² Stedman Jones describes how, at the end of the Napoleonic wars, "radicalism found itself forced to stretch its vocabulary to encompass new sources of distress and discontent within its terms". A few years further on, the old radical image of placemen, sinecurists and fundholders had been displaced by "something more sinister and dynamic – a powerful and malevolent machine of repression, at the behest of capitalists and factory lords".⁴³ Joyce does see the problem, on another occasion writing:

“There are instances ... that have social contexts essential to their meaning, but no underlying structure they are expressing.”⁴⁴

Here, Joyce has used an Althusser-derived caricature of historical materialism to ignore the critical factor of human agency in affecting outcome. In this caricature, human activity can only express determining structures, rather than affect the eventuation of structures.

The charge of determinism laid at Thompson's door is closely related to the way in which historians writing from materialist perspectives have been associated with the construction of metanarratives. This is made explicit by Keith Jenkins, among whose favourite examples of metanarrative is “Marx's drama of the forward march of human productive capacities.”⁴⁵ It should be manifest that human productive capacities have, within recorded history, “marched forward”, despite long periods of stagnation. Thompson's historical materialism makes room for an account of agency, an introduction of contingency to the historical process. There is not necessarily an immediate and direct link between social being and social consciousness. The links in the chain of historical materialism are transmitted through inherited traditions and cultures, although “class relations have rôles intrinsic to the system and cannot transcend it”.⁴⁶ Thus Thompson's materialism requires both agency and structure and historical outcomes are not determined by economic positions.

This is not to say that there is no directionality in the development of the productive forces, only that there is no inevitable outcome. However, as Tilly has noted, economic circumstances profoundly affect the structural

capacities of human agency, and these must be acknowledged when considering the capacity for collective action of the rural poor in County Roscommon. As Tilly suggests:

“Over the longer run ... transformations of the economy shaped not only the grievances on which ordinary people were prepared to act but also their capacity to act collectively.”⁴⁷

The activity of these agrarian collectives displays the significance of agency. Any social formation may, in the totality of its production relations, have a number of different modes of production. While factory production was, in the period under study here, beginning to predominate in parts of England, the productive relations in which Roscommon peasants participated were generally of a different sort. Roger Wells has speculated how far rural evidence may be useful in extending Thompson's view of class formation.⁴⁸ In so far as Thompson's key criteria of consciousness of an identity of interests against employers and rulers are satisfied, it is surely useful. There does, however, appear to be an ambiguity in Thompson's apparent conflation of class and consciousness of class in defining class as an awareness of identity of interests against another group. Thompson acknowledges that this is “largely determined by the productive relations into which men are born – or enter involuntarily”, but suggests that even if “the experience appears as determined, class-consciousness does not.”⁴⁹ There must therefore be structures which place people in the relationships of class, which they experience. To say this is not to place consciousness in a pre-determined relationship to that experience, or to conflate the two. The problem is dispelled as long as consciousness of class and class

consciousness in the sense of a consciousness of interests are not confused. However, what is most interesting is how the cultural and rebellious traditions frequently associated with different kinds of productive relations could be cross-fertilised, as I have shown, resulting in transformed languages and repertoires of dissent and rebellion. Thus Irish agrarian rebels could appropriate languages not only of formal judicial authority in threatening notices, but also of primitive associational forms. Not only did they post notices and assemble at night in disguise, they also marched openly by day, bearing placards proclaiming political demands.

This is at odds with a number of accounts of peasant rebellion, which have tended to view such events as pre-modern. They have therefore been inclined to interpret agrarian protest and collective action in ways that have been limited by expectations of the kind of forms protest might take in particular modern or pre-modern circumstances. As I have noted, Tilly made this view explicit in a 1969 essay:

“Reactionary disturbances ... center on rights once enjoyed but now threatened, while modern disturbances center on rights not yet enjoyed but now within reach.”⁵⁰

Tilly suggested in 1978 that collective action in Europe tended to move from the local to the national, from the reactive to the active and from the communal to the associational.⁵¹ O'Neill views the increasing separation of élite and popular culture in Ireland as a symptom of this process:

“As the gentry adopted values and pastimes more characteristic of the modern world, and as they came to view their estates more rationally and instrumentally, the familiar sort of relationship which

had existed between them and the peasantry under the old order deteriorated.”⁵²

Chirot and Ragin's study of România suggests that, under the impact of modernisation, there is an “optimal” period for peasant rebellion, before peasant traditions and solidarities are destroyed.⁵³ Huizer and Stavenhagen's study of Mexico and Bolivia suggested that political consciousness only developed among the peasantry as a result of exposure to modernising influences.⁵⁴ In a study which attempts to reconcile signs that peasants were not limited to local, primitive rebellion to the concept of modernisation, Hildermeier suggested that “primitive rebels” could make a leap to being “modern revolutionaries”.⁵⁵ The modernisation theory is apparent in Stavenhagen's assertion that all over the world “new mechanisms of social integration” displaced “integrative mechanisms based on kinship, locality and primary relations”.⁵⁶ The enemies of Hobsbawm's primitive rebels were those outsiders, foreigners, lawyers, dealers and money-lenders who upset “traditional” peasant life.⁵⁷ Wolf considers that the transformation of agriculture into an economic enterprise aimed at economic output rather than subsistence was critical in this process. However, he did note that caution should be exercised in drawing up an evolutionary scale in these matters, saying the pre-modern and modern could co-exist.⁵⁸ As has already been suggested, Hobsbawm and Rudé's study of Captain Swing also uses a strictly linear model for the development not only of economic forces but also the kind of struggles that could be precipitated by such developments. For Rudé, new notions of natural wages and prices replaced old notions of just prices and wages

that had been sanctioned by custom.⁵⁹ Scott has acknowledged some relationship between modern and pre-modern collective action in the formative potential of local collective actions.⁶⁰ Analysing mediaeval Europe, Rodney Hilton has shown that peasants were not an “undisciplined or easily dispersed mob”.⁶¹ Scott has asserted that “peasant social structure, values and organization ... are not nearly so atomistic and amorphous as Marx assumes”.⁶² However, none of these views entirely escapes from a linearity which precludes the co-existence of “modern” and “pre-modern” forms of culture and popular politics.

Thompson was acutely aware of this problem, asserting that class relations were processes, not static relationships to particular configurations of the forces of production. There is no contradiction between this and the materialist assertion that in any specific case the relations of production are critical to an understanding of class.⁶³ Thus new assertions based on changing production relations may be perceived within a rebellious traditional culture as no more than the assertion of customary use-rights.

These relations of production do appear critical. As Tilly has noted, structures fundamentally affect the capacities of groups for action. Although Scott and Hilton have noted a greater capacity for peasant collective action than has sometimes been acknowledged, the desired outcomes of these actions should not be inferred as the same as those of proletarian associations. Roscommon whiteboys were able to appropriate some of the languages and associational forms of urban workers and cosmopolitan political movements, but their organic intellectuals like Michael Burke were

unable to lead them further than regional mobilisation or for demands that were ultimately structured by the life conditions of the basic unit of production in the mid 19th-century Irish countryside, the family farm or conacre plot. These included a piece of land to provide economic security, or the regulation of rents, prices and wages. In this sense they created qualitatively and politically the kind of associational forms that Cornwell Lewis described as a “vast trades union of the rural poor”, but little more.⁶⁴ Thus the class consciousness attained by Roscommon agrarian rebels was a trade union, rather than a political consciousness. Thompson’s work on “class society without class” is of critical importance here. Writing of “the mob” in eighteenth century England, Thompson suggested:

“The mob may not have been noted for an impeccable consciousness of class, but the rulers of England were in no doubt at all that it was a horizontal sort of beast”.⁶⁵

I have shown how élite sources tended to assume vertical Irish identities, unlike Thompson’s “rulers of England” in relation to the English mob, but I have also demonstrated the “horizontal” consciousness of the rural poor in County Roscommon. Thus this nascent self-consciousness of Roscommon agrarian rebels should not be tested against proletarian class indicators like, for example, degrees of workplace organization. The proceedings of the select committee investigating disturbances in counties Monaghan, Armagh and Louth in 1852 are an appropriate place to conclude the chronology of my investigation. For it was then that demands for peasant proprietorship were discussed.⁶⁶ It should be remembered that the famine and mass emigration were having a rapidly homogenizing effect

on rural social structures in which the numbers and proportions of cottiers and labourers to farmers were falling rapidly. Edward Golding, a magistrate from Armagh, said that conacre had been “done away with completely”.⁶⁷ Nevertheless, the demands for proprietorship indicate the trajectory of peasant movements.

Peasant proprietorship, rather than agrarian combination by the rural poor, is much more easily reconciled with Marx’s well-known characterisation of the peasantry as profoundly atomistic, “much as potatoes in a sack form a sack of potatoes”.⁶⁸ The political guidance of another class was deemed necessary to overcome the tendency to individualism inherent in peasant proprietorship.⁶⁹ Marx’s characterisation of the French peasantry in The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte as incapable of independent collective political action seems borne out by the affiliation of Irish peasants to O’Connellism during periods when the “practical consciousness” of collective mobilisation was ebbing. Clark and Donnelly suggested that while it is not clear that external leadership was required for peasant movements, their political aspirations were limited by O’Connellism.⁷⁰ However, given the calamity of the great famine and the absence thereafter of organised labourer and cottier movements, the question was never tested further in Ireland. It would be projecting later conceptions of class antagonisms back on to agrarian class distinctions to claim that the “territorial imperative jostled confusedly with class criteria of community, anticipating in microcosm the relationship of nationalism and socialism in later generations.”⁷¹ Hildermeier suggests that the integrative processes of economic change removed some of the parochial limitations

on peasant organisational capacities, enabling the emergence of an “agrarian populism” that contests the validity of Marx’s approach and “displays a typical mix of backward-looking and progressive forces”.⁷² This is both to overstate the case and to reduce it to a reflex of economic development, a tendency among all the accounts constructed in a modernization paradigm, which make direct connections between the development of economic forces and available repertoires of collective action. Agency and consciousness, informed as they were by cosmopolitan developments, stretched the limits of the structural capacities of Irish peasants in the pre-famine decades in ways previously largely unexplored by historians, hence the ruling élite’s preoccupation with policing and order in Ireland. But they alone never threatened widespread social and political upheaval. Scott and Hildermeier’s views of the capacity of peasant movements to generate organically an independent politics that is capable of challenging for state power do not seem borne out by twentieth century events in, for example, Cuba and China, where exogenous social groups like intelligentsia provided political generalisation and leadership for peasant populations.

In Ireland, according to Jim Smyth, at the same time as the English working class was being made, “lower class solidarity and collective awareness found expression through opposition to the ascendancy, religion and an as yet inchoate nationalism”.⁷³ I have demonstrated that the hegemony of nationalism was anything but as complete and uncontested as Smyth seems to suggest. It only remains to examine the ways in which

the assumptions of Thompson's critics help breathe new life into the nationalist account of a homogenous Gaelic peasantry oppressed by Saxon landlordism.

It is evident that if, as the proponents of the "linguistic turn" suggest, there is no past independent of the discourses which construct it, any narrative of the past may be as valid as another. This accords the same significance to constructions of the past by historians and novelists and allows the kind of narratives of Irish history practised by writers like Sullivan, O'Brien and O'Hegarty, or the teaching proffered by the Christian Brothers, as much importance as empirical historical enquiry. The relativism and absence of external referents in the postmodern approach are especially prone to the mythologies of the nation, because they allow the construction of such imagined communities as much significance as evidence derived from a close inspection of sources.⁷⁴ In this way the "linguistic turn" coincides with conservative accounts of nationality and ethnicity as self-evident, fundamental categories, totalizing conceptions of identity that disallow alternative discourses.⁷⁵ They can not explain the apparent paradoxes of loyalty to Queen Sive and George III, or the singing of the *White Cockade* to demonstrate loyalty, nor antagonism to the Catholic clergy and Catholic landlords. A continuous interrogation of the sources and close attention to the language in which they were constructed has revealed another account of whiteboyism. The close examination of Irish agrarian conflict that I have pursued reveals enormous cracks in the gloss of national oppression discourses.

Accounts of peasant collective action in colonial settings also reveal the widespread difficulties in “national liberation” accounts of agrarian unrest. French officials in Vietnam reported that communal lands had fallen into the hands of local notables and mandarins, “abuses which belong in the category of those committed by the natives against their own compatriots”.⁷⁶ More generally, Alexandrov suggested that the aim of the rural poor is a more equitable social, political and economic order, not just the expulsion of the occupying power.⁷⁷

The question of a continued loyalty to the descendants of dispossessed land owners is also raised by Scott, who noted that “dynastic pretenders” provided ready leadership in Nghe Tin province, Vietnam.⁷⁸ On his travels in Ireland de Tocqueville discerned the memory of dispossession “as a vague instinct of hatred against the conquerors”. One man told him that O’Connell was descended from a family who suffered confiscation after the Boyne.⁷⁹ Despite the deference and paternalism that appears to have characterised relations between the dispossessed Gaelic aristocracy and the descendants of their peasant kinsmen and tenants, (which, it should be remembered, was also characteristic of the relations between land occupiers and their new lords), it should not be assumed that such vertical ties persisted or were still widespread until the time of de Tocqueville’s journey in the mid-1830s. The perpetuation of the memory of estate forfeiture was by people such as the farmers who were said, in evidence to the 1824 select committee, to entertain hopes of recovering those estates their ancestors had lost.⁸⁰ Russell’s catechism had involved “dividing the ancient estates among the descendants of those ancient Irish

families, who were pillaged by English invaders".⁸¹ It seems that de Tocqueville and others gained their impressions from members of a new Catholic élite that was re-emerging, according to Whelan, from among the descendants of those who had been dispossessed in the seventeenth century. Whelan suggested that "almost invariably" such families assumed political rôles which could be traced after the confiscations through Jacobite, Catholic Committee, United Irishmen, Tithe, O'Connell and Young Ireland phases.⁸² However, the critical point here is to recall Whelan's description of the disengagement of such people from popular culture in the last quarter of the eighteenth century, so that the ties with popular culture snapped, leading to a more formal relationship, exemplified by the provision of private pews in chapels.⁸³

This disengagement may be seen now as the opening of a window through which Painite, Radical and Chartist notions blew in to Ireland during the half century before the famine. This is not to say there was never an overlap. The case of the United Irishmen is the most obvious example. Their relationship with the Defenders and the difficult question of the relations between nationalist political networks and agrarian radicals in the half century after 1798 is evidence of this. Whelan has suggested that Defenderism was strong in areas like Roscommon, where the parliamentary representation was decidedly anti-Catholic.⁸⁴ However, Tom Garvin has observed that, away from Ulster, Defenderism had a levelling content and that if, later, Ribbonism was partly an attempt to capture or head off the forces of social unrest and channel them for communal purposes, then it is significant that such unrest occurred where Ribbonism

was weak.⁸⁵ These apparently conflicting assessments may reflect continued uncertainty about the nature of Defenderism away from Ulster, although Whelan's observations may partially account for the sectarianism of some Roscommon secret society oaths. Beames distinguished the lower class nationalism of the Ribbon societies from the bourgeois United Irish or Young Ireland versions, particularly in the confessional nature of its catechisms. An analysis of the occupations of a number of Ribbonmen arrested in Dublin in 1822 shows a predominance of shoemakers, publicans and farmers. Indeed, Beames finds little connection between Ribbonism and peasant disturbances, suggesting that Ribbon conspirators opposed agrarianism.⁸⁶ I have suggested that sectarian and nationalist manifestations (such as the Ribbon oath to wade three leagues in Orange blood) of secret society activity in Roscommon may have been associated with people such as publicans, shopkeepers, artisans, minor leaseholders and other aspiring non-élite Catholics. Beames suggests that whiteboyism did not share their primitive religious nationalism.⁸⁷ However, I have also taken pains to disavow any notion of a monolithic consciousness that could be said to be the property of a whole social class, and it is evident from attendances at O'Connell's mass meetings that élite nationalism must have provided some pole of political attraction for non-élite Catholic whiteboys as well as the Ribbon conspirators. The relationship between the two forms of mobilization remains obscure, although it may be suggested that abstract desires and hopes for liberty were transferred on to O'Connell and possibly Ribbonism in a context of

agrarian defeat. From the perspective of the élite Catholics, peasant organisational networks could be used to muster support at elections.⁸⁸

I have demonstrated in detail that whiteboyism cut straight across the familiar confessional component of nationalism. Bartlett reports on a 1794 discussion of this problem:

“The peasants no longer confide in their clergy, they suspect them and they are also of the opinion that their gentry have abandoned them; thus a great mass of uninformed men are for the first time thrown to depend on themselves ... the peasants are binding themselves on oath to protect each other.”⁸⁹

It seems that, as O’Farrell has suggested:

“popular rebellious elements ... were too remote from their nominal religion ... and too opposed by its ministers to entertain any notion of setting their protests in a religious context.”⁹⁰

James O’Neill’s remark that historians should not insist on a display of “class consciousness” and modernity before recognising plebeian movements for what they were is most apposite. O’Neill also acknowledged that Irish peasants demonstrated an ability to organize independently on “quite a large scale”.⁹¹ Unfortunately, O’Neill’s assessment of pre-famine whiteboyism collapses into a familiar nationalist discourse. He identifies the authority of the village priest as a critical factor in the emergence of Catholicism as a solidarity mechanism at the base of nationalism, which was “enshrined” in the 1820s and 1830s as the “primary loyalty” in Irish rural society.⁹² This does not accord with the evidence I have adduced. O’Connell admitted that disturbances would not

disappear with the granting of emancipation because of the “double oppression” suffered by the rural poor.⁹³ De Tocqueville asked Edward Nolan, bishop of Kildare and Leighlin, about whiteboyism and was told of a Whitefeet leader. On being reprimanded by a priest for his activities, the man had replied:

“The law does nothing for us, we must save ourselves. We are in possession of a little bit of land which is necessary to our and our families’ survival. They chase us from it, to whom do you wish we should address ourselves? We ask for work at 8 pence a day, we are refused – to whom do you want us to address ourselves? Emancipation has done nothing for us. Mr O’Connell and the rich Catholics go to Parliament. We are starving to death just the same.”⁹⁴

It is difficult to retain a sense of how unknown and contingent future social and political developments in rural Ireland must have been in the half century before the famine, and how contested the hegemony of confessional nationalism was. I have traced how agrarian rebels contested that hegemony, justifying collective defiance by tradition and custom, freely importing and adapting class discourses and actions. The Irish agrarian rebel who described the “murdered patriots of Manchester” may have been talking of the United Kingdom or of a parallel patriotism. The available text does not reveal which he meant. What it reveals (which is as significant as whether he conceived of Ireland as a separate nation) is the same understanding of patriotism as among the nascent English working class, embodied in a consciousness of class.

Through an examination of texts concerning collective conflict I have suggested new ways in which historians might profitably re-examine agrarian conflict, ways which must be located outside the monolithic identities of confession and ethnicity which have dominated Irish historiography. I have suggested that, in particular concrete circumstances “identities” were not given by the texts of O’Connell, Davis or Tone, but increasingly by a familiarity with a challenge to extend democracy, a challenge mounted simultaneously through the legitimising power of tradition and the first stirrings of a new identity.

Robert Scally’s work on the townland of Ballykilcline, in County Roscommon, demonstrates the ways in which the legacy of nationalist historiography lingers. In The End of Hidden Ireland, Scally writes about the destruction of Corkery’s Ireland by the twin evils of eviction and emigration, words that have been touchstones for a nationalist historiography of Ireland. However, the result is to return to Corkery’s The Hidden Ireland of a shared culture, the unity of rich and poor Gael and the writing of historical discourse for the purpose of nation-building. I have examined a secret Ireland, which has been obscured from view by the legends of the hidden Ireland.

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- ³⁰ Joyce, End, p85.
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