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**POLITICS AND SOCIETY IN WESTMEATH, 1815-35**

**by**

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POLITICS AND SOCIETY IN WESTMEATH, 1815-35  
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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this thesis is to trace and evaluate the course of governance and law enforcement in Westmeath from the end of the European wars to the accession of Queen Victoria.

Politics in the county took a new and highly volatile direction. The Roman Catholic bishops and clergy were a major influence on the new middle classes. The Church of Ireland, never more than a shadow organisation, was in retreat from its civil responsibilities. The conflicts arising from the religious rivalries of the period form a significant part of the thesis.

The rapid growth of the population of the county was the defining factor in the agrarian warfare of the period. The brutal competition for land at any price, the colonisation of the marginal hill and bog land, the uncontrolled sub-division of small holdings, the dearth of industrial employment, were all central factors in the argument that Westmeath did not possess the social or economic structure to enable the county to modernise itself

Violent disorder, fuelled by alcohol, was an integral component of life in Westmeath. The influence and activities of local secret societies must form a central theme of any work on the period. The conclusion drawn is that while such organisations did exist, their aims and objectives were concentrated on local agrarian issues. They had no central command or control.

The violence of the countryside and the overspill of chaos into the towns was, I argue, grounded firmly in the socio-economic conditions resulting from an evil land system and a weak administration which would take the rest of the century to resolve.

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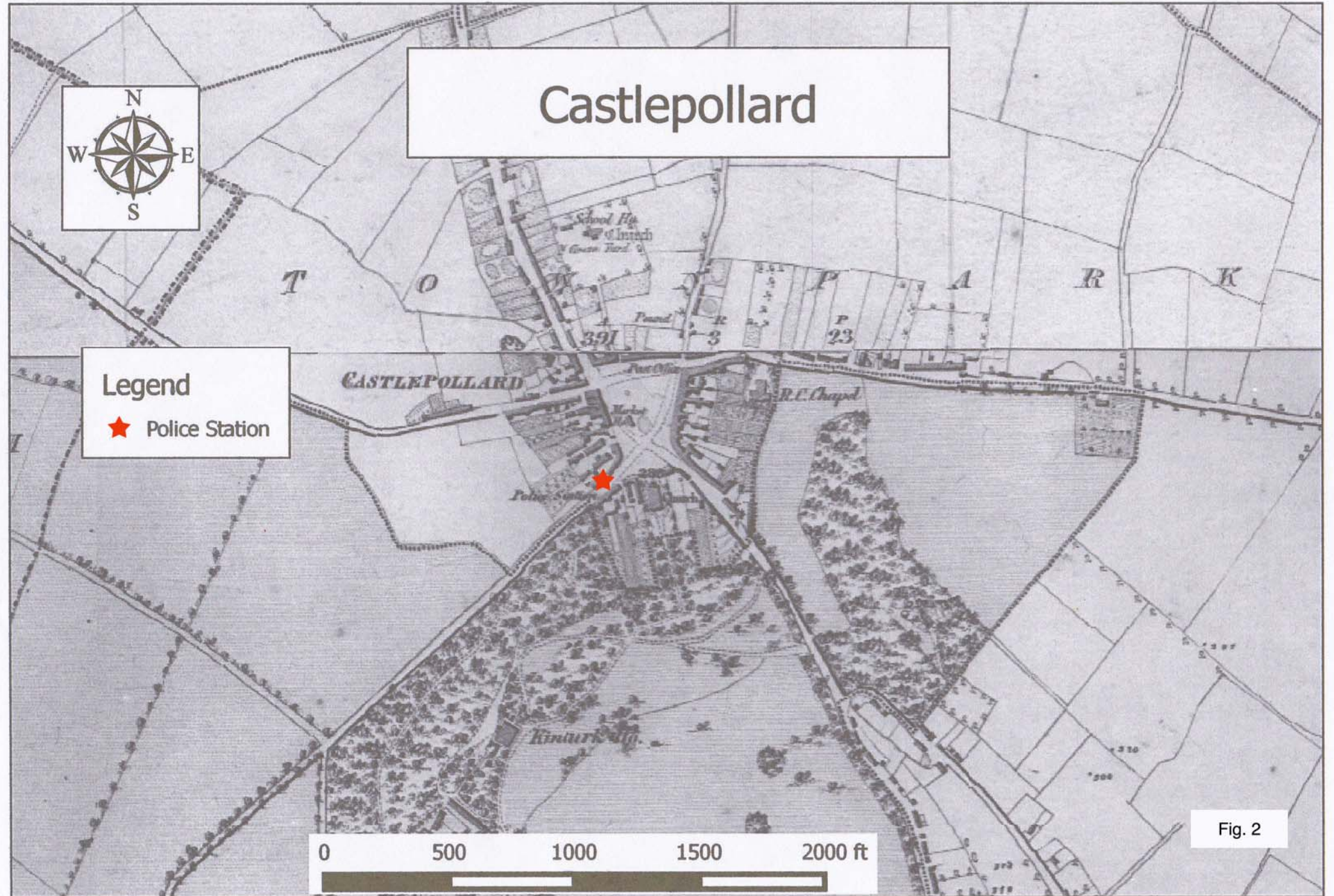


Fig. 2



# Rochfort Demesne and Police Station



## Legend

★ Police Station

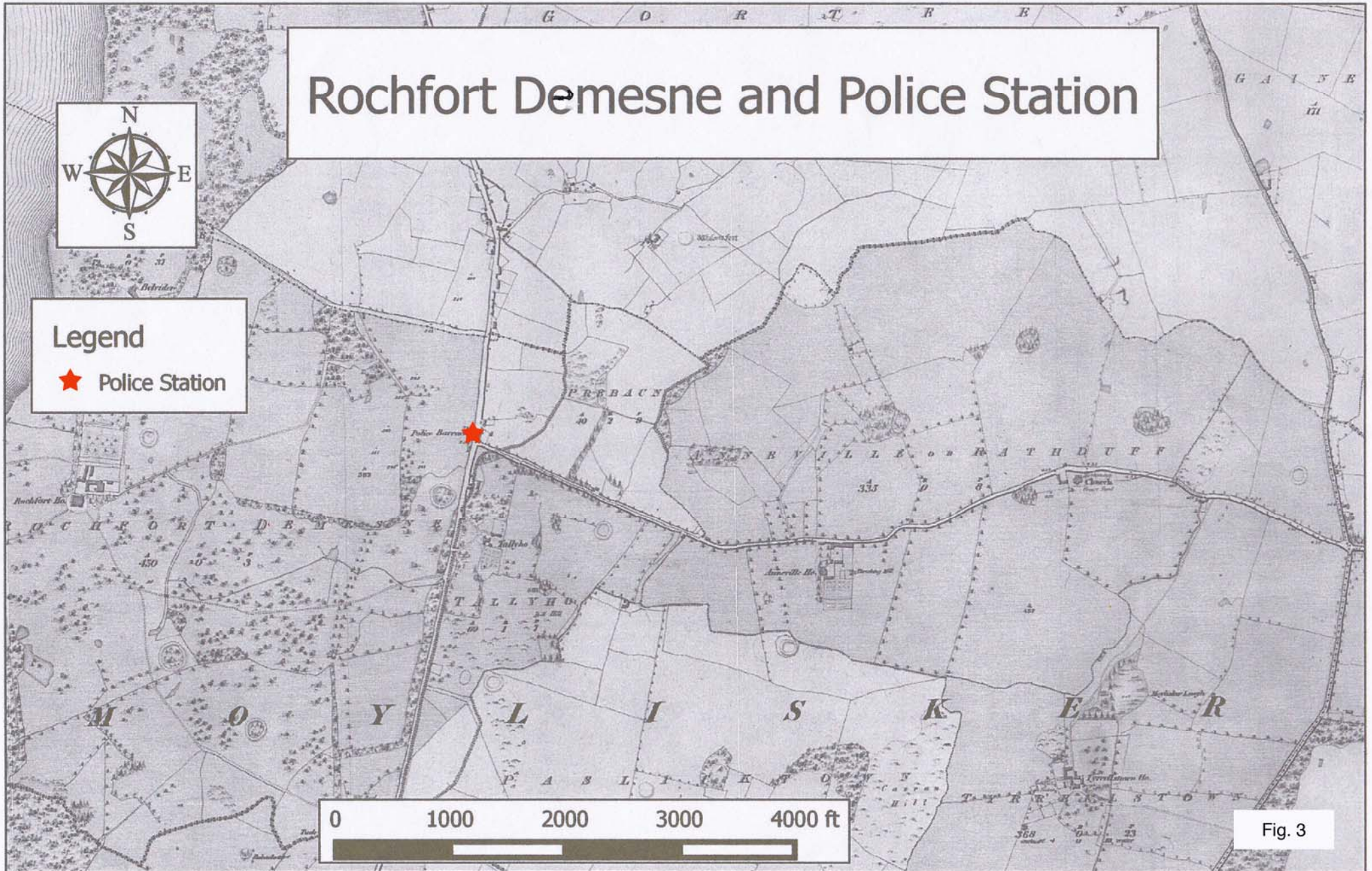





Fig. 3



# COUNTY WESTMEATH POLICE STATIONS

**LEGEND**

-  POLICE STATIONS
-  COUNTY BOUNDARY
-  ROYAL CANAL

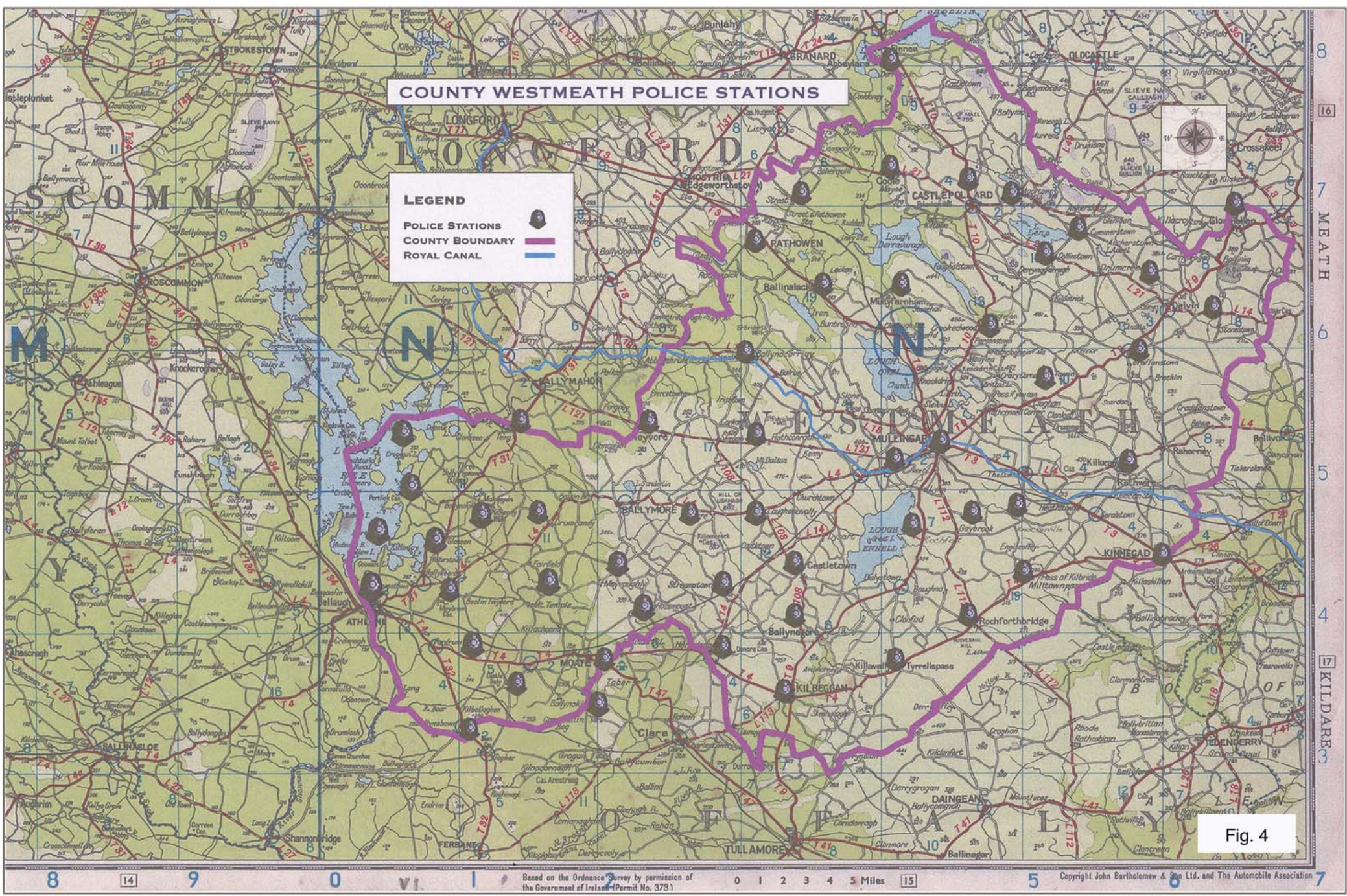


Fig. 4

Based on the Ordnance Survey by permission of the Government of Ireland (Permit No. 373)

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## INTRODUCTION

The aim of this thesis is to trace the course of governance and law enforcement methods in County Westmeath during the period from the end of England's European wars in 1815 to the accession of Queen Victoria in the 1830s. The county is taken as the basis of a case study, Westmeath being a self-contained political entity. The method to be employed is chronological and thematic. The reason for the selection of this period must first be outlined. In the fifteen years since the Union the administrative system had been overhauled.<sup>1</sup> The new relationships between Dublin Castle and London had settled into place and the country was experiencing some belated modernisation. Industries based on agriculture such as flour milling, distilling, wool and flax workings appeared in Westmeath, promoted by a new middle class of merchants.<sup>2</sup> Many of these were of Quaker origin and they brought a new probity and paternalism to the business life of the county.<sup>3</sup> The ranks of the middle classes were increasingly augmented from below by Catholic farmers and shopkeepers, supported and encouraged by a resurgent clergy.

The landed proprietors dominated the social, political and law enforcement life of the county in the early nineteenth century. They were still the main employers. The large landowner, between his main seat and his various fishing and shooting lodges, had a staff ranging from the land steward at the top of the hierarchy to the scullery maid at the bottom. Through their monopoly of the grand jury and the magistracy, the landed interest controlled every strand of society.<sup>4</sup> They are central to this study.

The Church of Ireland also played an important role in the life of the county. While it represented a minority of the population, it was a powerful body in politics and could exert an influence far in excess of its numbers on government. The project will

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<sup>1</sup> R.B. McDowell, 'The Irish executive in the nineteenth century' in *Irish Historical Studies*, lix, 5 (1955), p. 264.

<sup>2</sup> Cormac Ó Gráda, 'Industry and communications, 1801 – 45' in W.E. Vaughan (ed.), *New history of Ireland*, v. (Oxford, 1998), p. 146, mill building and modernisation.

<sup>3</sup> Richard S. Harrison, 'Irish Quakers in flour milling' in Andy Bielenberg, *Irish flour milling: a history, 600 – 2000* (Dublin, 2003), p. 88.

<sup>4</sup> Grand jury books, Westmeath, 1730 – 1898, Westmeath County Library, Mullingar.

examine the workings of some local parishes to elucidate the role of the church vestry in the administration of the county.

The thesis will trace the development of the agencies of law enforcement in the county and herein lies the main research question to be addressed – the significance of social class in the workings of the local magistracy, petty sessions and assize courts, together with the methods and relationships which shaped the enforcement of law and order in the county. The locally raised, part-time yeomanry and militia units were an integral part of the governance and control of the county since the Union and their operations are central to the narrative. The introduction of a civilianised force, more policemen than soldiers, was a new and radical departure from the military solutions of the early years of the Union. The project will examine the role of the Peace Preservation Force from 1814 and the county constabulary from 1824 in the growing lawlessness among the rural population.

The police barracks was a new and highly effective element in the enforcement system. The constables, who were always from outside the county, were highly trained professionals. R.B. McDowell notes that they were carefully recruited, of good farming stock, drilled on military lines, clothed in a uniform resembling that of the Rifle Brigade.<sup>5</sup> Operating from small isolated bases and having good intelligence on the tumultuous society around them they formed an important part of the county's enforcement.

The primary sources available for this study are quite extensive. The papers of the Boyd Rochfort, Smyth and Levinge estates provide useful background material on rentals and estate management. The vestry books of the Church of Ireland are available on microfilm in the National Archives. They contain the tithe records for every parish in the county for the period under review. This is a very valuable and revealing source, showing the extent of Catholic compliance with the tithe collection system. The Chief Secretary's Office records for County Westmeath are very fragmentary for the period of this study and are much more comprehensive from the famine period onwards. Although it covers a later period, Richard Griffith's General

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<sup>5</sup> R.B. McDowell, 'Administration and public service in Ireland, 1800 – 70' in Vaughan (ed.), *New history of Ireland*, v, p. 552 .



Valuation is a useful source, as it is based on his ongoing surveys since the 1820s. George Cornwall Lewis attempted to explain the problems of Ireland, having toured the country in 1836. His account, though highly simplistic, is an informative contemporary source. Samuel Lewis surveyed every parish in the county in the mid-1830s and his information is first-hand and useful. The Ordnance Survey six-inch map of the county, published in 1838, is the basic geographical source for the project, while the *Irish Historic Towns Atlas* covering Mullingar and Athlone provides additional valuable information.

Parliamentary select committees are an unrivalled source of primary information for the period under review. The members, especially the chairmen, were, from the tone of their questions, extremely well informed on the subject under their scrutiny. The perilous condition of Ireland was a perennial feature of the work of select committees and witnesses were examined in detail. Experts on local conditions, such as the engineers, Richard Griffith and Alexander Nimmo, appeared at several of these committees. Their evidence, together with the testimony of other specialists, provided a substantial body of first-hand information which would otherwise be lost to posterity. The project has gleaned considerable detail from this source. Parliamentary bills merely distil the results of the committee's deliberations into proper legal forms and are therefore of limited use, serving only as footnotes. The evidence of two witnesses to a select committee of 1825 proved particularly useful. The duke of Leinster and the marquis of Westmeath displayed in their testimony the varying degrees of success of local magistrates in the management of their counties.<sup>6</sup>

The effect of destitution and neglect among the lower classes in Westmeath society is a recurring theme in this work. It is not possible to determine and separate the various patterns of crime without a detailed survey of the physical landscape of the county. The stark contrast between the exotic woodland plantations inside the demesne walls and the treeless farmland outside is dealt with at length. The demographic overspill of population up to and beyond the marginal rough pastureland of the hill country was a constant source of agrarian agitation as desperate men seized on every available acre. The bridge at Athlone might not appear, at first reading, to

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<sup>6</sup> *Select committee of Lords on disturbances in Ireland in districts subject to the Insurrection Act*, H.C. 1825 (200) vii. 501.

be a major factor in the narrative of law and disorder in the county. However, during the early nineteenth century it was a focal point of both control and disturbance at the western portal of Westmeath. The continuous exodus of ‘Connachtmen’ trekking to the Liverpool boat, the constant stream of cattle drovers and their herds, as well as various salesmen, mendicants and vagrants, were always a potent mixture and a continuous source of concern to the authorities.<sup>7</sup> Thus, the bridge of Athlone has its place in this project.

It is of course, impossible to ignore the high politics of the 1820s and 1830s and their effects on the class structure of the county. The general election of 1826 united the Catholic majority under the direction of O’Connell and his lieutenants. Emancipation was still three years away and the contest in Westmeath was fought by three Protestant landowners, one of whom was of a liberal persuasion. He took one of the two available seats. This election was an ideal opportunity for the local newspaper to contribute its share to the fraught atmosphere of that singular event – a contested election. The *Westmeath Journal* had been published since the 1770s and was a pillar of the Protestant ascendancy in Mullingar. The editor in the 1820s, Kidd, was a very forthright upholder of the Established Church, the conservative interest in politics and the rights of property. His coverage of events in the county was, therefore, highly coloured and one-dimensional. He is still, however, a very reliable source. His reporting and editorials are indispensable in any account of the period and *The Journal* is one of the main primary sources for the project. The Mullingar branch of the county library has microfilm copies of the *Journal* from 1823 to its replacement by the *Westmeath Guardian* in 1835. The paper has not been digitised into individual clippings in the style of on-line newspaper sources and the reader must trawl through each issue in full, resulting in a much deeper understanding of the period. The scarcity of police reports and the lack of reliable local secondary sources, therefore, leave the *Westmeath Journal* as the outstanding primary source for this work.

The disturbed state of the county was a constant theme in the local press. The established legal system contended with an older, more brutal communal code of law

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<sup>7</sup> Maura Cronin, *Country, class or craft? the politicisation of the skilled craftsman in nineteenth-century Cork* (Cork, 1994), on the tramping artisan, travelling the country in search of work

and punishment. The urban-rural division in the pattern of crime is very apparent in the weekly reporting. The agrarian outrages were covered in detail. Intimidation, house burning and murder were all part of the country scene but when rioting broke out at a fair in town, country people were invariably blamed. The ready availability of cheap whiskey is a sub-theme which appears in several chapters as a major contributory factor, and which the *Journal* never failed to emphasise.

The general history of Ireland in the early nineteenth century has been comprehensively covered. The *New history of Ireland* under the editorship of W. E. Vaughan incorporates the work of S. J. Connolly, Cormac Ó Gráda, Oliver MacDonagh, T.W. Freeman *et al.* It is a highly informative and reputable reference source on the period.<sup>8</sup> Galen Broeker's work on rural disorder is contemporaneous with this thesis and is therefore useful.<sup>9</sup> Samuel Clark and James Donnelly are essential authorities on social unrest.<sup>10</sup> D. George Boyce provides a masterful overview of the century.<sup>11</sup> K. Theodore Hoppen produced an insightful work on the shifting relationships between the constituent segments of the rural community.<sup>12</sup> Allan Blackstock's book on the yeomanry is the standard work on the force.<sup>13</sup> Ruth Delany has dealt with the construction and management of the inland waterways in several works and she is an unrivalled authority on the canals.<sup>14</sup> Michael Beames and Tom Garvin provide valuable insights into the popular protest movements and clandestine organisations in Munster.<sup>15</sup> Joseph Lee initiated a new approach to the theme of secret societies in the 1970s and his seminal work on Ribbonism is indispensable.<sup>16</sup> David Dickson and Ian Dalton survey Protestant society in Cork. Their researches are a useful guide to similar communities in the midlands.<sup>17</sup> Maura

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<sup>8</sup> Vaughan (ed.), *New history of Ireland*, v.

<sup>9</sup> Galen Broeker, *Rural disorder and police reform in Ireland, 1812 – 1836* (London, 1970).

<sup>10</sup> Samuel Clark, *Social origins of the Irish land war* (Princeton, 1979); Samuel Clark and James S. Donnelly (eds), *Irish peasants: violence and political unrest, 1780 – 1914* (Madison, 1983).

<sup>11</sup> D. George Boyce, *Nineteenth-century Ireland: the search for stability* (Dublin, 1990).

<sup>12</sup> K. Theodore Hoppen, *Elections, politics and society in Ireland, 1832 – 1922* (Oxford, 1984).

<sup>13</sup> Allan Blackstock, *An ascendancy army: the Irish Yeomanry, 1796 – 1834* (Dublin, 1998).

<sup>14</sup> Ruth Delany, *Ireland's inland waterways* (Belfast 1988); *Ireland's Royal Canal, 1789 – 1992* (Dublin, 1992).

<sup>15</sup> Michael Beames, *Peasants and power: the Whiteboy movements and their control in pre-famine Ireland* (Brighton, 1983); Tom Garvin, 'Defenders, Ribbonmen and others: underground political networks in Ireland' in *Past & Present*, 96. (1982).

<sup>16</sup> Joseph Lee, 'The Ribbonmen' in T. Desmond Williams (ed.), *Secret societies in Ireland* (Dublin, 1973).

<sup>17</sup> Ian Dalton, *Protestant society and politics in Cork, 1812 – 1844* (Cork, 1980); David Dickson, *Old world colony: Cork and south Munster, 1630 – 1830* (Cork, 2005).



Cronin's study of the skilled craftsmen of Cork covers a hitherto neglected subject.<sup>18</sup> None of these works, however, devote much attention to the location of this enquiry, the county of Westmeath and local history projects in the area concentrate on the later period of Fenianism, land wars and ranch wars.

Two serious riots are examined in detail, one at a country fair in Westmeath, the other at a tithe sale in Wexford. These events, taken together, exemplify the discordant state of the country in the aftermath of Emancipation and the growth of influences that had lain dormant since the Union. The Castlepollard riot resulted from heavy-handed policing. The Newtownbarry affray was a tithe riot, which, because of the decisions of a yeomanry commander, mushroomed into a massacre. The involvement of the Catholic clergy in rural agitation during the 1830s is another sub-theme worthy of examination: they figured prominently in the Castlepollard event.

The Royal Canal brought Westmeath into the modern, industrial world but the proprietors were confronted by the same ancient laws of precedence, control and custom that had beset all their predecessors. The company records have survived and they form the basis of the account of the law and disorder on the canal line. They detail the daily workings of the canal, including reports of violent incidents on the line and the demands of the Board for protection, addressed to Dublin Castle.<sup>19</sup>

Chapter one deals with the hierarchy of the law and order administration in the county, including the landed gentry, the grand jury which they controlled, the military and police units who enforced the law, and the Church of Ireland. Chapter two outlines the methods of enforcement and the development of policing policy, together with a description of the physical landscape of the county. The emergence of new political forces and the mobilisation of the middle classes among the Catholic population form the basis of the chapter. The growing disorder in the towns and the countryside is the subject of chapter three. The landed gentry and the military contributed to the disturbances of the period and their depredations are described and analysed in this chapter. Chapter four examines the prevailing opinion in official

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<sup>18</sup> Cronin, *Country, class or craft?*

<sup>19</sup> M.R. Beames, 'The Ribbon Societies: lower-class nationalism in pre-famine Ireland' in *Past & Present*, No. 97 (Nov. 1982), p. 129, for the influence of Ribbonism on the canal and the towns on its route.

circles that the county was in a tranquil and settled state in 1830. Efforts by improving landlords to promote local industry and the effects of near-famine conditions on the rural populace are detailed, together with the looming tithe troubles. Chapter five presents a comparison between two riots which, taken as prime examples of the law-and-order problem in Ireland, exemplify the basic argument concerning the tithes; that violence was random, endemic and, while the old regime remained in place, incapable of solution. Chapter six takes the story into the industrial age, with a description and examination of the Royal Canal Company and its difficulties in running a modern transport business through a disturbed and unruly rural world. The chapter also examines the efforts of the landed classes to carry on their social lives in isolation from the mayhem which surrounded them.

## CHAPTER 1: WESTMEATH SOCIETY IN 1815

This chapter sets out to introduce the principal elements of law and governance in the county during the period under review. The governance of County Westmeath in the early 1800s was dominated by about twenty families. They came from the landed gentry of the county, generally but not exclusively members of the Established Church. The members of parliament, the grand jury and the magistracy of the county had been in the exclusive control of this elite group for more than a century. The grand jury records from 1730 list the members for the lent and summer assizes in each year. When the names are compared there is a striking continuity over the century.<sup>1</sup> Smyths of Barbavilla, Levingses of Knockdrin Castle, Handcocks of Moydrum Castle, Rochforts of Belvedere, Pakenhams of Tullynally Castle and Chapmans of Killua Castle, controlled the political life of the county in the reign of George I. They were all still in the forefront a hundred years later. Public expenditure on road and bridge building and the courts were among their responsibilities as the guardians and governors of the county.

The first members to represent the county in the parliament in London after the Union in 1801 were William Smyth of Drumcree and Gustavus Hume Rochfort of Belvedere while William Handcock represented the borough of Athlone.<sup>2</sup> Chapmans, Tuites, Pakenhams and Nagles monopolised the two county seats for the next forty years. The control exerted by the local Big House was somewhat disturbed with the appearance of John O'Connell, a son of the Liberator, as member for Athlone in 1837. This was the first sign of a fracture in the monolith of upper class domination in Westmeath. The borough of Athlone appears to have been a most secure entry point for political interlopers; John F. Turner of Leicestershire held the seat from 1807 to 1812 and David Ker, noted in the grand jury book as a brother of a marquis, sat from 1820 to 1826. The compiler of the list of members pointedly inserted Turner's

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<sup>1</sup> Grand jury book , Westmeath.

<sup>2</sup> Brian M. Walker (ed.), *Parliamentary election results in Ireland, 1801 – 1922* (Dublin, 1978), pp 5 - 6.



address and Ker's antecedents in the record in the grand jury book.<sup>3</sup> Neither name featured in the county records before or since – it seems that they were blow-ins who could take advantage of the antiquated electoral system in the borough constituencies. John Frewen Turner was, indeed, from Leicestershire. The borough seat had been offered to the government by the Handcocks in 1807 and Frewen Turner had been elected unopposed.<sup>4</sup> He was not a contributor to the debates, according to Hansard and it is unlikely that he ever appeared in Athlone.

David Ker was a landowner from County Down. The compiler of the grand jury book was wrong when asserting that he was a son-in-law of a marquis. He had in fact married a daughter of Robert Stewart, first marquis of Londonderry. The borough seat had again been put at the disposal of the government, there being, apparently, no suitable member of the Handcock family available.<sup>5</sup>

Three members were of the professional class; the rest were drawn from the landed gentry of the county. The grand jury was still staunchly allied to the Established Church. The towns of Mullingar and Athlone had no direct representation, although the Handcocks owned most of Athlone. Their grand jury member, Richard Handcock was also member of parliament for the town. The Lamberts, who represented Kilbeggan, had owned the town since the Cromwellian era. They held the appointment of excise collectors and in a town of distilleries and breweries this was always a very lucrative sinecure.<sup>6</sup>

Exceptions to the Church of Ireland monopoly on the grand jury were the Dease family of Turbotstown and the Nugents of Donore. The Deases had clung to their small estate while refusing to abandon their Catholic religion. This was due to their strategic alliances with the Pakenhams, earls of Longford, whose massive landholding in the north of the county overshadowed their 290-acre farm adjoining the Pakenham

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<sup>3</sup> Grand jury book.

<sup>4</sup> R.Thorne (ed.), *The History of Parliament: The House of Commons 1790 – 1820* (London, 1986), available at <http://historyofparliamentonline.org>

<sup>5</sup> D.R. Fisher (ed.), *The History of Parliament: The House of Commons 1820 – 1832* (Cambridge, 2009) available at <http://historyofparliamentonline.org>

<sup>6</sup> Andy Bielenberg, *Locke's distillery: a history* (Dublin, 1993), p. 12.

seat at Tullynally castle.<sup>7</sup> Their representative on the grand jury was Gerald Dease. The Nugents had always maintained outposts on both sides of the religious divide.<sup>8</sup>

Another family, the Chapmans of Killua had been landlords in Westmeath since the reign of Queen Elizabeth I. The first adventurer of their line in Ireland was a connection of Sir Walter Raleigh and it has ever since been alleged that they owed their estates to his influence with the queen.<sup>9</sup>

The centre of the county, around the fertile slopes of Lough Ennell and Lough Owel, was represented on the grand jury of the 1820s by John C. Lyons of Ledeston and Sir Richard Levinge of Knockdrin. The Lyons family were scientific innovators in their time and the Ledeston printing press was one of their enterprises.<sup>10</sup> The Levinge demesne was a popular summertime venue for English society.<sup>11</sup> Thomas F. Uniacke of La Mancha was an agent for the Rochforts. He was not a major landowner but acted as a middleman, attracting the attention of the banditti, local enforcers among the tenantry, by his methods in the management of his farms.<sup>12</sup> Fetherston Haugh of Carrick was an agent of the Belvedere estate. Francis Smyth did not appear on the record before or since. The high sheriff in 1830 was Robert Smyth of Gaybrook. The Smyths of Gaybrook, Barbavilla and Drumcree were prominent in the county for many generations. William D. Pollard represented the family patrimony of Castlepollard as did Richard Reynell of Reynella. Percy F. Nugent, from the Catholic branch, upheld the Nugent interest in north Westmeath.

Of the twenty-three names on the grand jury list for 1815 nine still appeared in 1830 and in the list of 1850 nine of the family names featured in the 1830 list were still there.<sup>13</sup> The grand jury book for Westmeath covers the period from 1730 until the abolition of the institution at the end of the nineteenth century. There is a sense of

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<sup>7</sup> Griffith's Valuation, townland of Turbotstown, parish of Mayne.

<sup>8</sup> Maurice R O'Connell (ed.), *The correspondence of Daniel O'Connell* (3 vols, Dublin, 1974), 3, letter 1281, George Nugent, Marquis Westmeath to O'Connell.

<sup>9</sup> Mark Bence-Jones, *A guide to Irish country houses* (London, 1988), Killua Castle, p. 172., Col. T.E. Lawrence, leader of the Arab Revolt in 1918, was an illegitimate son of Sir Thomas Chapman of Killua.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 183.

<sup>11</sup> *Westmeath Guardian*, 18 July 1878. The lord lieutenant of the 1870s, Earl Spencer spent a summer there.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 15 Oct. 1840, Report on attempted murder of T.F. Uniacke.

<sup>13</sup> Grand jury book, Westmeath.

continuity, of a regular, undisturbed routine about the record. K.T. Hoppen observed how ‘the more the detailed workings of individual political communities in Ireland were examined, the more striking and important seemed the gap between the local realities and the rhetoric of national politics’.<sup>14</sup> The rhetoric was being supplied by Daniel O’Connell and his supporters in various versions of the Catholic Association, which he established in the lead-up to Emancipation in 1829.

Law enforcement went through several transformations in the period from the 1790s to the 1830s. The Irish government banned the United Irishmen, a revolutionary party, in 1794. It was soon clear that the militia, made up of part timers, was heavily infiltrated by the United movement. The Yeomanry Force, under the direct control of the landed gentry and the higher professional classes, was instituted in 1796.<sup>15</sup> The government avoided the contentious problem of Catholic membership by the careful avoidance of issuing any directive on the subject; thus, the force was allowed to recruit as its local commanders pleased.<sup>16</sup> Some Catholic magnates participated. However, under active service conditions, the yeomanry were generally a divisive and unruly force. Allan Blackstock has defined the dilemma of attempting to suppress serious disturbances using locally raised amateur soldiers in the absence of regular troops or police: ‘where the yeomanry were weak they were vulnerable; where they were Catholic they were suspect and in the few areas where they were strong they were dangerous’. As Blackstock remarked, the problem was not getting the yeomen to fight, but getting them to stop.<sup>17</sup> The yeomen’s arms and equipment was kept in their homes and in areas where they were weak, they became targets for arms raids by disaffected elements.<sup>18</sup> Their Westmeath corps, commanded by Lord Longford, dispersed a gathering of would-be rebels at Wilson’s Hospital in the only major action of the rebellion in the county. Tom Pakenham recounts the ‘smart cavalry charge and a few volleys with which his predecessor scattered the rebellious peasantry.’<sup>19</sup> The Yeomanry Force was eventually stood down in 1834. By then the strength of the

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<sup>14</sup> Hoppen, *Elections, politics and society*, p. vii.

<sup>15</sup> Blackstock, *An ascendancy army*, pp 72 – 76.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 71.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 152.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, pp 247 – 8.

<sup>19</sup> Thomas Pakenham, *The year of liberty* (London, 1969), p. 324.

force in Westmeath had been reduced to four companies totalling eleven officers and 300 men, based in Ballinalack, Fore, Moate and Tyrrellspass.<sup>20</sup>

These units had been inactive for years and the returns quoted were made in 1833 when the future of the yeomanry was being thoroughly examined in London and Dublin. The Westmeath corps had no expense claims in that year. Their officers had a vested interest in maintaining a nominal strength for reasons of local prestige and, more particularly, to enable the rank and file to keep their weaponry at hand. The Westmeath yeomanry were, it seems, no great loss to the forces of law in the county. The Wexford corps, in contrast, had fifty-four officers and over eleven hundred men distributed in seventeen companies. The memory of strong Protestant farmers of Ninety-Eight lived on in that county. A loyalist historian of the rebellion argued that 'as a body they will never be surpassed for unqualified bravery and unbounded devotion'.<sup>21</sup>

The militia was a lower class organisation. Officers were still recruited from the gentry but quotas of enlistment were filled by ballot and places could be traded and substitutes employed, thereby lowering the standard of the other ranks. There were militia units in Westmeath but they were seldom called upon, mainly due to a lack of confidence in their abilities but also due to fears of their loyalty.<sup>22</sup>

The Peace Preservation Force was established at the end of the European wars in 1814. Although there was still one last battle to be fought at Waterloo in the following year, Peel, the chief secretary at Dublin Castle, determined that he would take advantage of the demobilisation of the armies to recruit a new force.<sup>23</sup> It was to be well trained, mobile and dedicated to the task of subduing the country. By the end of 1814 Peel was in his third year at the castle and at twenty-six he was the new face of tory modernism. His Peace Preservation Act and Insurrection Act were on the statute books. The Catholic Board, one of O'Connell's many organisations, was pressing for equal rights. The Catholics had been relieved of most of the impediments

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<sup>20</sup> *Return of effective yeomanry for 1834*, H.C. 1835 (168), xxxviii, 153.

<sup>21</sup> W.H. Maxwell, *History of the Irish rebellion in 1798* (London, 1866), p. 171.

<sup>22</sup> Blackstock, *An ascendancy army* p. 51; the Westmeath Militia planted a Liberty tree at Blaris camp, outside Lisburn during their first training camp in 1797.

<sup>23</sup> *Bill to appoint superintending magistrates and additional constables in Ireland*. H.C. 1813 – 14 (257), ii. 981; Peace Preservation Act, 54 Geo.111. c 131 25 July 1814.

of the penal laws in the 1780s but a residue of senior appointments in the government and the army were still the preserve of members of the Established Church. The oaths to be sworn on taking up a seat in parliament were deliberately set so that a Catholic or Dissenter was unable to comply, although he could still run for election. Emancipation, as O'Connell's campaign came to be known, had been promised during the Union debate but never implemented<sup>24</sup>. He could hardly have selected a more emotive topic for a mass – movement. Robert Peel was frightened by the aggressive stance of the new activists of O'Connell's group. What he called 'the violent party' was threatening civil disturbance.<sup>25</sup> Peel's new force was well paid, full-time and professional, with a well-defined command structure. Crucially, the senior officers were to be selected and appointed by the central authority at Dublin Castle; the local magistrates who had controlled the enforcement of law and order for a century were to be reduced to advising the chief secretary and appointing recruits. A new type of senior officer was introduced in the appointment of the resident magistrates, sometimes referred to as stipendiary magistrates.<sup>26</sup> They were generally recruited from the retired and redundant officers of the European wars. Their role was a dual one. They dealt with minor cases in court but also functioned on the ground as senior policemen. They possessed powers far above their official station; Peel had neatly cut out all middlemen in the reporting process by directing that all the resident magistrates report directly to his office. According to Connolly this was a definite break with the tradition of a self-policing community.<sup>27</sup> A perusal of the chief secretary's records of the period demonstrates the effectiveness of this policy. McDowell notes that reports are full and frank; local preferences and politicking, so long the bane of law enforcement, do not appear; regular reports from all over Ireland to Dublin Castle provide the government with a valuable means of feeling the pulse of the country.<sup>28</sup>

The direct line of communication between Dublin Castle and the local police chief can be seen in a report of 1826. The district inspector at Ballymahon, Major O'Donoghue, reported to the Chief Secretary's Office that, having received urgent

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<sup>24</sup> S.J. Connolly, 'Union government, 1812 – 23' in *New history of Ireland*, p. 49.

<sup>25</sup> Eric J. Evans, *Sir Robert Peel: Statesmanship, power and party* (London, 1991), p. 9.

<sup>26</sup> Connolly, 'Union government', in *New history of Ireland*, p. 59.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 64.

<sup>28</sup> McDowell, 'Administration & public service', p. 552.



requests from the Royal Canal Company, he required a strong military detachment to be stationed at Blackwater. The scale of intimidation and disturbance was so great that it was becoming impossible to conduct the navigation. His local constabulary, although they could point out the ringleaders, were outnumbered and helpless. O'Donoghue could not advance a solution to the predicament of the canal staff and barge contractors. He could only propose military action. His report has marginal notes, apparently by the undersecretary, William Gregory, with instructions on the deployment of the necessary troops.<sup>29</sup>

The new force could not be deployed until recruitment and training was completed but by 1816 it was in place in Westmeath. Peel intended that this should be a neutral organisation, only to be deployed to disturbed areas, to be paid for by the counties in which they served, unlike the yeomanry who served only in their home counties and whose pay came to be regarded as a sort of government pension.<sup>30</sup> The 'peelers', as they inevitably became known in rural Ireland, did not turn out as Peel intended. They were an exclusively Protestant force and soon took on the trappings of Orangeism.<sup>31</sup> By 1822 the force had been relegated to a minor place in the apparatus of peacekeeping by the establishment of the new county constabulary. There was to be one chief constable per barony, appointed by the lord lieutenant. Magistrates were to appoint constables and sub-constables by proclamation. Resident magistrates were to report all treason and sedition to the chief secretary at Dublin Castle.<sup>32</sup>

By 1835 the Peace Preservation Force was reduced to about 600 men, based in eight counties, as follows:

10	Magistrates
9	Chief constables
109	Constables
492	Sub-constables
620	Total plus 10 Horses <sup>33</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Chief Secretary's Office papers, C.S.O. O.P. 820/2, 14 Jan. 1826, National Archives of Ireland.

<sup>30</sup> Blackstock, *An ascendancy army*, p. 263.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> *Bill for appointment of constables and to secure the effective performance of the duties of their office*. H.C.1822 (536), vol. ii, 471.

<sup>33</sup> *Constabulary force employed in each county in Ireland on 1 Jan 1836*. H.C. 1836 (215), xlvii, 531.

As well as in the more disturbed counties of Tipperary, Limerick, Cork and Clare they were based in Louth, Queen's, Wicklow and Galway.<sup>34</sup> These counties bore the cost of their maintenance of £31,824 17s. 4d. It appears that Westmeath did not require their assistance, although the force was highly mobile and could be dispatched at short notice to any trouble spot. The county constabulary was by now firmly embedded in the apparatus of law enforcement and the returns for Westmeath for 1835 show the advances in civil policing that had transformed law enforcement in the country since Peel's time.

1 Resident magistrate

4 Chief constables (sub-inspector) 1<sup>st</sup> class

3 Chief constables (sub-inspector) 2<sup>nd</sup> class

50 Constables

222 Sub-constables

9 Horses

The cost of this force was £10,051 4s. 9d. of which £5,480 16s. 0d. was chargeable to the county.<sup>35</sup>

These returns contain notes on the inclusion of Peace Preservation Force numbers and costs in some counties. It is therefore likely that there was some overlap in the membership of both forces. Some of the younger members of the peace force would be qualified to serve in a regular police force. The Protestant ethos of the county constabulary was still well preserved in 1835 and the exclusively Protestant 'peelers' had no difficulty in obtaining the necessary recommendations from local magistrates. Westmeath was heavily policed in 1835. Fermanagh, a county in Ulster of comparable size and population, was covered by five chief constables, twenty-one constables and eighty-six sub-constables, a total of 112. They did not have a resident magistrate in the county. It seems that Fermanagh, with its strong Church of

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<sup>34</sup> *Select committee on disturbances in Ireland*, evidence of Richard Griffith, p. 224 – 228. H.C. 1825 (20) vii.1.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

Ireland tenantry, had no need of coercion. Their contribution to the cost of the constabulary was a meagre £2,224 7s. 4d.<sup>36</sup>

The military infrastructure of the county was centred on two modern well equipped bases. Athlone and Mullingar were garrison towns. The castle at the bridge of Athlone had been strategically important since Norman times and the river crossing was heavily fortified. The high ground on the westward side is still known as the Batteries, a massive artillery position built during the Napoleonic wars. The modern barracks was set on the riverbank upstream of the new bridge and was completed in 1813. Mullingar Barracks, set on a ridge overlooking the town, was completed and occupied within a month of Wellington's victory at Waterloo in the summer of 1815 hence it was named Wellington Barracks. These were substantial permanent facilities, with married quarters, playing fields, and canteens for other ranks, both wet and dry and mess accommodation as befitted the officer class of the time. The wet canteen served alcohol, no doubt to encourage the lower ranks to drink in barracks rather than risk the more dubious pleasures of the town. Mullingar could accommodate a ration strength of 39 officers and 990 men in its blocks and dormitories, according to Samuel Lewis, reporting in the mid-1830s.<sup>37</sup> He does not note the cavalry barracks which was located in the main street beside the town's only hotel. It would probably have fallen into disuse by then.

The role of the Established Church in the administration of the county must now be considered. The Church of Ireland formed one of the pillars of the governance of the country in the early nineteenth century. The civil parish was an integral part of the apparatus of local government. Every male landholder and householder in the parish was entitled according to law to be a member of the parish vestry, regardless of their religious persuasion. The election of the two churchwardens was held at Easter-time each year. They had civic responsibilities in the town and its outlying townlands, including street cleaning, lighting, control of vagrants and beggars, and the supervision of public houses.<sup>38</sup> The church vestry had its origins in the English system and it served its purpose admirably in the quiet and settled countryside of

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Samuel Lewis, *A topographical dictionary of Ireland* (Port Washington edn, 1970, original edn, London, 1837), p. 695.

<sup>38</sup> R.B. Anderton, *A practical treatise on the duties of church wardens* (London, 1824), p. 301.

England, with a compliant and largely peaceful population, most of them of the same religious faith. However, when transplanted into towns like Mullingar the vestry was a clumsy and unworkable instrument of government.

The vestry minute books for the parishes of Mullingar and Killucan have survived. They cover the period from 1700 to well into the twentieth century and they must be read and used with a good deal of caution. They portray a well-organised, dutiful group of local gentlemen, fulfilling all the requirements of the upkeep and repair of their church buildings. The Killucan meeting at Easter 1799 was a fraught occasion. The proceedings were dominated by a long discussion on the subject of pews. The result was a resolution – ‘resolved that it appears to this vestry that the seat erected by the late Mr. Dopping in the church of Killucan is attended with great inconvenience to the parishioners in darkening the church and rendering part of the gallery useless and that Mr. Dopping be requested either to remove it himself or to give his consent to its being done by the parish.’<sup>39</sup> The list of vestry members for 1823 under the Tithe Composition Act shows Mrs Anne Dopping owning 1182 acres in the parish for which her tithe applotment was £131 17s. 2d.<sup>40</sup> The Doppings would no doubt have considered themselves hard done by in the demolition of their ungainly pew. The 1823 list has twenty-five members with land valuations of over £10 and on close examination it appears that eight of them were Catholics. For the purposes of tithe collection religion was not a bar to membership of the vestry, although there is no indication that any of the eight farmers listed took any part in the proceedings.

The Westmeath regiment of the militia was financed by the parish of Killucan by a yearly levy of 9s. 2d. per militiaman. The annual meeting of the vestry struck a valuation varying from 11s. 4d. to 31s. 2d. per acre. The levy of 1807 amounted to £107 17s. 4d., a considerable imposition for a small rural parish.<sup>41</sup> The Killucan vestry was not to the forefront in fulfilling its civic responsibilities. Their expenditure in 1810 was recorded in the vestry book as follows: servants of the church £22 7s. 0d.; this would include wages for the clerk and the sexton, bread and

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<sup>39</sup> Killucan vestry minute book, 25 Mar. 1799. Representative Church Body Library.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 13 Oct. 1823.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 31 Mar. 1807. The militia cess for Mullingar in 1810 yielded only £11.1s.6d.

wine £7 0s. 0d., a child sent to the foundling hospital 16s. 3d, and repairs to the church wall £37 17s 2d.

There was a surplus of income in that year of £210 10s. 3d. In the next year they supplied a coffin and shroud for a pauper costing 16s. The main concern of the Killucan vestrymen was the building of a tower and spire on the church. It was resolved at a meeting in April 1809 to apply to the Board of First Fruits for a loan of £1000.<sup>42</sup> In 1810 a memorial to the Board explained that the building was very old and originally ill-built. This was hardly surprising; the original church dated from the fifteenth century. It had become dilapidated and dangerous. Eleven hundred pounds had already been spent, all subscribed by the parish, but due to a deficiency of funds the work could not be completed. The memorialist struck a note of desperation in his concluding argument; the congregation had increased so rapidly since the church was begun, and it being impossible to enlarge it, a considerable part of the congregation was without accommodation at divine service.<sup>43</sup> The proposed tower and spire would not have solved this pressing problem but it appears that the appeal had the desired effect as the following year's vestry account show an interest payment of £50 on the loan.

The parish of Killucan can be taken as a fairly typical example of a rural outpost of the Established Church in the 1820s. The local landlords, the Purdons of Lisnabin, the Darcys of Hyde Park and the Fetherston Haughs of Grangemore dominated the office of churchwarden. The rector was, it seems from the record, an outside contractor, with no civic functions. His role was to officiate at divine service, to conduct the ceremonies of weddings and funerals and to take his accustomed place in the social hierarchy of the parish. He might be a landlord in his own right but on the termination of his incumbency he evacuated the glebe house to make room for his successor.<sup>44</sup> He lived on his portion of the church rate – the name preferred in government circles for the tithe, and he paid a fee to the parish for the use of the church when he performed a wedding ceremony. The Killucan accounts of 1808

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<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 3 Apr. 1809.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 8 Oct. 1810.

<sup>44</sup> *Westmeath Journal*, 7 Aug. 1823, Notice of auction at Glebe House Mullingar, furniture and milch cow, property of Rev. H. Newland; 31 Mar. 1823, Notice of auction at Ardraccon House, Navan, the entire stock and household furniture of the late lord bishop of Meath.



show a payment of £11 6s. 10d.1/2d. from the rector, Rev. Wynne, for the use of the church for a wedding.<sup>45</sup>

The census returns for Ireland in the enumerations of 1821 and 1831 make no mention of the religious persuasion of the population. The Mullingar vestry book, however, records the number of children, Catholic and Protestant, in four parishes in 1805.<sup>46</sup> There were sixteen Protestant children in Killucan. This figure does not accord with the claims of the vestry five years later on the immediate danger of overcrowding in their church.<sup>47</sup>

In the absence of a state school network, the education of Protestant children was a serious issue in the county. Killucan had a schoolroom. There is no mention of a salary for the schoolteacher but the vestry meeting of 1804 was held in the schoolhouse.<sup>48</sup> There was a Charter school on a remote hillside overlooking Lough Owel at Bunbrosna. The inspector of prisons in 1807 was Forster Archer. While on his rounds in the county he inspected this school on 6 October. There were thirty-four boys registered but only twenty-five were in the school. The catechist had not appeared for two weeks and all but one of the pupils were deficient in catechism, although as Archer noted, they were tolerable in reading and writing. He observed that the boys were not carried to church, 'the master not being as attentive to this as he should have been.'<sup>49</sup> The local church is situated on an equally bleak hillside more than a mile from the school and transport would have been hazardous in those unsettled times. The county jail and the county infirmary met with his full approval.

While the vestry records provide some evidence on the education of Protestant children no such records are available to clarify the state of education for Catholics prior to the introduction of the national education system in 1832. D.H. Akenson has extracted statistics from the census returns to demonstrate the decrease in illiteracy, showing percentages of people over five years old who could neither read nor write –

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 1808.

<sup>46</sup> Mullingar vestry book, 1807, (R.C.B.L.)

<sup>47</sup> Killucan vestry book, 8 Oct. 1810.

<sup>48</sup> Killucan vestry book, 21 Apr 1804, (RCBL.)

<sup>49</sup> Jeremiah Sheehan, *Westmeath as other saw it* (Moate, 1981), p. 56, quoting a manuscript in the Hardwick Papers (MS 35920) British Museum.

53 in 1841; 39 in 1861; and 33 in 1871.<sup>50</sup> These are national figures but they would be representative of a midland county like Westmeath. A growing cohort of young men who could read newspapers and pamphlets were more likely to demand rights and privileges than their illiterate fathers. Michael Beames has shown the effects of the improvement in the education of the lower classes. He maintains that the Ribbon Societies lost influence as the newly educated Catholic masses transferred their allegiance to the more politically astute Repealers.<sup>51</sup>

The vestry records of Mullingar and Killucan parishes contain an occasional reference to their civil responsibilities. Killucan vestry met in March 1808 ‘for the purpose of appointing overseers for preventing the sale of spirituous liquor in public houses on the Sabbath Day (by act of 47<sup>th</sup> year of Geo: III),’<sup>52</sup> The subject of alcohol did not appear again in the minutes and although three overseers were duly appointed it would appear that only perfunctory observance of a directive from the diocese caused the vestry to comply. Mullingar vestry made some attempt to address the issue of begging in 1815. This was a year of hunger in the county. The wartime economy had benefitted Westmeath, with rising prices for cattle, horses, pigs and grain, but after the defeat of the French in 1814 prices collapsed.<sup>53</sup> To compound the crisis, 1816 was ‘the year without a summer’ due to a climatic event in some far-off corner of the planet, probably a volcanic eruption. The harvest was a disaster and there was a significant increase in mendicancy in the county. Fever was widespread and the county lacked the most basic medical services. The poor law and the workhouse were not in place for another twenty-five years and the church vestry was the only organisation that the executive in Dublin Castle could utilise in the crisis.<sup>54</sup> In November the vestry resolved:

Ist, that the town of Mullingar is infested with sturdy beggars from the parishes, counties, and even provinces, to the great annoyance of the public and injury to the real objects of charity in the parish.

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<sup>50</sup> D.H. Akenson, ‘Pre-university education’ in Vaughan (ed.), *New history of Ireland*, p. 536.

<sup>51</sup> Beames, *Ribbon Societies*, p. 60.

<sup>52</sup> Killucan vestry book, 19 Mar. 1808, (R.C.B.L.).

<sup>53</sup> Cormac Ó Gráda, ‘Poverty, population and agriculture’ in *New history of Ireland*, p. 108.

<sup>54</sup> Connolly, ‘Union government’ in *New history of Ireland*, p. 61

2<sup>nd</sup>, resolved that in order to remove these inconveniences the poor and meritorious objects of charity belonging to the parish shall be badged and licensed to beg.

3<sup>rd</sup>, resolved that the ministry and church wardens for the time being shall be and are hereby appointed to grant such badges and licenses.<sup>55</sup>

The next vestry in January 1816 made a list of thirteen local beggars who had been licensed and badged, three men and ten women. Only one, James Cormic of Chapel Lane, had an address, probably inserted to emphasise his proximity to the Catholic chapel and their inability to help him. The licensing strategy was based on the English system, developed over centuries of usage, whereby vagrants were apprehended and returned to their home parishes, to be dealt with and paid for by the local cess. As always, however, English solutions were a complete failure in the chaotic world of post-Union Ireland, and the civil parish of Mullingar retreated from its role as guardian of the public health and morals as the decade of reform of the 1830s approached. As in Killucan, the problems and politics of the allocation of pews in the church were the main topic at vestry meetings. There were irritable exchanges during the Easter vestry of 1814 when the members resolved ‘that taking into consideration the inconveniences under which the parishioners labour by the pretended owners of pews locking up the same and thereby crowding all the rest, do give our particular order that all such pews shall be forced open for the reception of parishioners attending divine service.’ It was also resolved that ‘Lord Blaquiere of Portloman be requested to put his pew in suitable repair, failing which such steps would be taken as the law directed.’<sup>56</sup> By 1821 the accommodation of parishioners at Sunday service had reached crisis point. A special vestry was held on foot of an order from the bishop of Meath, which may indicate a more general preoccupation with the pew problem. A list of thirty-six pews was laid out, with one open pew at the front, three gallery seats and two free seats at the rear. Thirty seats were allocated to the gentry and middle classes of the town in no particular order of preference.

There is a sense of unreality in the records of the Church of Ireland prior to 1830. It is possible to deduct from the layout and length of pews and gallery that the church in

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<sup>55</sup> Mullingar vestry book, 15 Nov. 1815, (R.C.B.L.).

<sup>56</sup> Mullingar vestry book 14 Apr. 1814, (R.C.B.L.).

Mullingar had a capacity of about 300. The visitation book for 1826 notes ‘the average number of attendants at public worship on Sundays 200 and at other times very few.’<sup>57</sup> It appears that the pressure on space shown in the vestry reports of 1821 had eased somewhat by 1826. The rural dean was required to survey the parishes and report on their condition to the diocese. In 1826 Rev. Chaworth Browne wrote a 500-word report. At first reading it appears to be a well structured if convoluted account of the state of the parish. However, when other similar visitation reports are compared it emerges that the dean used the same formula and wording for all his reports – a matter of ticking all the boxes, replete with obvious contradictions and inaccuracies. He confirms that the church is in good repair inside and out and then concludes: ‘the chancel of the church is not finished, the roof is defective and the walls constantly damp’.<sup>58</sup> There are thirty-five communicants, out of an average of 200 attendants. He further states that the glebe house is furnished and occupied by the incumbent; Rev. Robinson had been residing at his country seat, Annville, in the outlying parish of Moylisker since 1803, along with his wife, two children, fifteen servants and nineteen tenants.<sup>59</sup> Browne recorded that there were only three Protestant Dissenter families in the parish.<sup>60</sup> Samuel Lewis could report ten years later that ‘there are places of worship for Presbyterians and Wesleyan Methodists.’<sup>61</sup> It would appear that Browne was again attempting to manipulate religious statistics. It is unlikely that an influx of Dissenters had taken place in Mullingar between Browne’s estimate of 1826 and Lewis’s survey of 1837. The milling and linen industries were in decline; Dissenters generally followed these trades. It must be inferred, therefore, that they were an established part of the population of Mullingar at the time of Browne’s report but that he found it was not politic to admit their existence as a rival religious group. The Church of Ireland was under investigation in London during the spring of 1826, a distressing development for the clergy and office-holders of the diocese. A bill was before the Commons to consolidate and amend the law on church rates and while most of its thirty pages concerned the regulation of payment to parish clerks, residence of incumbents and duties of churchwardens there was a clause revoking a law from the time of George I which

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<sup>57</sup> Mullingar visitation book, 1826, (R.C.B.L.).

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Union of Moylisker, Kilbride and Enniscoffey, vestry minute book, May 1803 (R.C.B.L, D7/12/2/2, no. 33).

<sup>60</sup> Mullingar visitation book, 1826, (R.C.B.L.).

<sup>61</sup> Lewis, *A topographical dictionary*, Mullingar.

disallowed Protestant Dissenters from serving as church wardens.<sup>62</sup> The rural dean was well versed in the likely outcome of this new regulation. The non-residential status of the incumbent might also have attracted unfavourable notice.

The Church of Ireland came under increasing parliamentary scrutiny by the end of the decade. The argument in favour of abolition of tithes was about to be ignited by liberal elements in the Commons. The church had an extensive property portfolio, with benefices, glebes and farmland much in excess of its pastoral requirements. The clergymen, ministering to a scattered and unenthusiastic congregation, were not well placed to compete with their highly motivated Catholic counterparts. As J.C. Beckett has observed 'it seemed a waste of money to maintain four archbishops and eighteen bishops, with deans and chapters, and about 1400 clergy, to minister to about 800,000 people....'<sup>63</sup> The last vestiges of the civil role of the Established Church were dismantled with the legislation of 1826, providing for the election of town commissioners. Each town was to carry out a valuation of all its premises, a rate was set and collectors appointed. The members of the last vestry were entitled to membership but the whole rate paying population was to be included and entitled to be elected to the commission.<sup>64</sup>

In conclusion, this chapter has considered the social, political and law-enforcement aspects of life in Westmeath. During the decade of the 1820s the domination of the landed elites in the affairs of the county was never seriously threatened. Elections were still tightly organised formal confirmations of a well recognised *status quo*. The yeomanry and the militia still had their place in the military establishment, having been largely superseded in their civil responsibilities by a new type of police force. The army was still a massive presence. Ireland appeared to be a useful peace time billet for a large, under-employed military force between foreign wars. The role of the Church of Ireland has been examined in some detail and the first indications of strain in the monolithic structure of society in Westmeath which appeared in the church's retreat from reality have been highlighted.

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<sup>62</sup> *Bill to consolidate and amend law on church rates (Ireland)*. H.C., 1826 (256), ii, 335.

<sup>63</sup> J.C. Beckett, *The making of modern Ireland, 1603 – 1923* (London, 1966), p. 297.

<sup>64</sup> *Bill to make provision for the lighting, cleaning and watching of cities, corporate towns and market towns (Ireland)*. H.C. 1826 – 27 (452) i. 651.



## CHAPTER 2: NEW FORCES, NEW POLITICS: THE ELITES AND THEIR SOLUTIONS

This chapter examines the development of the police, the contrasting evidence of two of the great landed proprietors to a parliamentary committee on disturbances in the midland counties, and the physical lay-out of the county as the population expanded. The early manifestations of the drift of political power towards the Catholic majority are also examined.

Westmeath had been a centre of rural disturbance in the decade prior to 1830. With a population of 128,042, according to the census of 1821, pressure on living space and agricultural land in the county was mounting.<sup>1</sup> Richard, Marquis Wellesley was appointed viceroy in December 1821 and by April 1822 he reported to Peel, now home secretary, on the disturbed state of the country. The police chief in Mullingar, Major O'Donoghue had reported to him in some detail on seditious meetings:

The district is apparently tranquil but monthly meetings are regularly held by committees of two descriptions, one composed of a higher class (farmers) who receive delegates and communicate with similar meetings throughout the country; the others composed of desperate characters who endeavour to establish a system of terror, by violently assaulting all those who will not enter into their views.<sup>2</sup>

O'Donoghue had encountered the beginnings of a new and very effective system of local agitation, no longer confined to the lower classes, involving the strong farmers and the new middle classes, which was to form the basic structure of O'Connell's Catholic Association within the following year: this was a masterpiece of political strategy, according to S.J. Connolly.<sup>3</sup>

Several threatening notices had also been posted by the local agitators, signing themselves 'Captain Rock'. By November Wellesley was confronted by one of the

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<sup>1</sup> *Census Ire.*, 1821, abstract of population in Ireland, p. 1. H.C. 1822, 36), xiv. 737.

<sup>2</sup> *Papers relating to state of Ireland, extracts from dispatches, Wellesley to Peel*, p. 7. H.C. 1823. (423), xiv, 757.

<sup>3</sup> Connolly, 'Mass politics and sectarian conflict, 1823 – 30' in *New history of Ireland*, v, pp 84 – 85.

rural swindles which accompanied any attempt to compensate victims of outrage in the brutally acquisitive atmosphere of the times. There is a note of despair in his account to Peel on the subject of the burning of corn which had been appropriated for the payment of tithe.

It is a curious circumstance, however, in the character of these Transactions that, in several instances, the grain has been artfully Separated from the straw, and has been sold by the proprietor of the stacks for its full value; and that the same proprietor has destroyed stacks of straw by fire, with a view of recovering from the barony the full value of the corn already sold. The incendiary was, of course, undiscoverable....<sup>4</sup>

The Insurrection Act was enforced in disturbed baronies; proclaimed at the discretion of the lord lieutenant, it allowed for a wide range of prosecutions aimed at quelling rural agitation. Being out after dark was an offence; allowing dogs to stray and possessing any weaponry carried severe penalties on conviction. The Insurrection Act, introduced in 1807, was withdrawn in the county on 6 July 1822. It provided for the suspension of trial by jury in disturbed areas, sunset-to-sunrise curfews and, in 1814, the appointment of a specialist police force.<sup>5</sup> A report from the clerk of the peace in Mullingar laid out the results of the act. It appears from this list that the new regulations were of little use in quelling unrest in Westmeath.<sup>6</sup>

No.	Name	Guilty	Acquitted	Crime	Sentence
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<sup>4</sup> *Wellesley to Peel, Ribbonmen and disturbances in Ireland*. H.C.1823 (180), xvi. 605. Copies of dispatches, from the lord lieutenant in Ireland to Mr. Secretary Peel 26 Nov. 1822.

<sup>5</sup> Connolly 'Union government' in *New history of Ireland*, p. 59.

<sup>6</sup> *Return of persons tried under Insurrection Act in Westmeath*. H.C.1823 (336), xvi. 705.

1.	William Kelly	Yes	Being out of his house at night and plotting
2.	William Heney	Yes	“
3.	Owen Conoghton	Yes	“
4.	Denis Horan	Yes	Having concealed parts of arms in his house
5.	John Rooke	Yes	Out of his house at night and rioting
6.	Thomas Dobyne	Yes	“
7.	John Dalton	Yes	“
8.	Laurence Crosby	Yes	“
9.	Michael Coghlan	Yes	“
10.	Michael Geoghegan	No	Writing a threatening letter Transported Seven years

Five baronies were proclaimed: Delvin on 5 August 1820, Clonlonan and Fartullagh on 20 January 1821, Drumraney and Kilkenny West on 2 May 1822, the last two just four days before the withdrawal of the act. The report as printed for the House of Commons also included a detailed account of the additional costs of policing the county during this disturbed period. Salaries for the chief magistrate, O'Donoghue, three chief constables, clerks and constables came to £5,460. The officers were paid lodging allowances, having been 'removed' into the county. There was a wide variation in the salary structure, the chief magistrate receiving £700 per annum, the chief constables £150 and the constables £35. The constables had a lodging allowance of 1s. 6d. per week. Twenty horses were allowed 1s. 8d. per day each for forage. The total cost of the operation was £7491 16s. 4d. It would appear from the conviction rate that the policy of coercion in Westmeath had been a failure and the security apparatus in the county was overdue to undergo a thorough transformation.

The new constabulary act became law in August 1822 and initiated the most significant development in the enforcement of law and order since the Union.<sup>7</sup> The Peace Preservation Force had been used as a rapid response group, rushing to quell disturbances in lawless areas. This new force was to be a permanent police establishment, properly trained in police work, well armed and equipped. The act specified that the command structure would ensure central control. Resident magistrates were to be justices of the peace as well as senior policemen. They were to report directly to the Chief Secretary's Office monthly and to ensure that all treasonable and seditious movements were reported and monitored. The higher ranks were to be appointed by Dublin Castle, although the local magistrates retained the appointment of the junior ranks.

This new force took some time to recruit, train and put in position, but by 1824 the act was in force in Westmeath. By 1826 the county constabulary had eight chief constables, sixty-four constables, and one hundred and seventy eight sub-constables. The most important strand of the new strategy for policing the county was not the strength of the force but its distribution on the ground. The previous development policy of concentrating manpower in a few centres was abandoned. In its place the policy was to distribute the force in small packets covering the whole county. Within four years a complete network of interlocking and interdependent posts was established.<sup>8</sup> Eight chief constables were based in strategic locations at Loughnavalley, Moate, Glasson, Kilbeggan, Mullingar, Ballinalack, Castlepollard and Tyrrellspass [see map]. The constable and sub-constables occupied fifty-three separate constabulary barracks, the smallest post having one constable and two or three sub-constables. Mullingar had one and thirteen and Kilbeggan had one and eight but the standard strength of a village barracks was one and three. The smallest barrack posts were located at rural crossroads and hamlets. However, they had one characteristic in common; they tended to be located close to the gates of the demesnes of the local gentry. Thus, the barracks of Rochfort, just three miles from Mullingar,

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<sup>7</sup> Geo. IV, c. 103 (1 Aug. 1822).

<sup>8</sup> *Return of constabulary police in Ireland and all expenses incurred*. H.C. 1830 (498), xxix.269; see map, p.vii.

was very strategically positioned between the front gates of Belvedere House and Rochfort House on the shore of Lough Ennell.<sup>9</sup>

Two select committees of parliament in London examined the Irish problem during June and July of 1825, a commons committee chaired by Viscount Palmerston and a lords committee headed by Earl Harrowby.<sup>10</sup> The witnesses, mostly from Munster, were examined by both committees on the nature and extent of disturbances in areas which came under the Insurrection Act. The two witnesses who represented the province of Leinster made entirely different presentations on the state of their counties. Augustus Fitzgerald third duke of Leinster presented the case for Kildare and the marquis of Westmeath dealt with his home county and also Roscommon where he had large estates.

The duke displayed a complete and intimate knowledge of the county of Kildare.<sup>11</sup> He was dismissive of the Insurrection Act as applied. He complained that the greater part of his estate was proclaimed at a time when the people were peaceful and tranquil. He had been out of the country and only heard of the proclamation on his return. When the chairman suggested that he could have complained to the lord lieutenant, Leinster replied that such a protest would be useless. He admitted that some houses had been burned and there was an unfortunate murder at a fair. Two or three had been hung. However, the new police force had been in place since May of 1823 and their presence had produced an immediate effect. The duke had no great opinion of the Peace Preservation Force. They were, he declared, 'the worst description of men.' They were not fit and did not act together. He explained that he controlled the petty sessions held every Monday at Celbridge, impressing on the committee that he was the main convenor and that magistrates who were negligent would be dismissed. Between himself and a few strong farmers they could settle half of the private quarrels and disputes that arose.

The duke was equally masterful in dealing with the question of landlord and tenant relations. He instanced a recent case when the subject of subletting was raised. The

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<sup>9</sup> Ordnance Survey, 6- inch, Westmeath, Sheet 26. See Map.

<sup>10</sup> *Select committee on disturbances in Ireland*, Harrowby; H.C. 1825 (20) vii.1, *select committee on disturbances in Ireland*, Palmerston. H.C. 1825 (200) vii. 501.

<sup>11</sup> *Select Committee on disturbances in Ireland*, Harrowby, p. 200. H.C. 1825 (200) vii. 501.



lease of a five hundred acre farm had fallen in. He had four tenants on the farm and one of these had five sub-tenants. These constituted a major obstruction to any new arrangement. He paid them £10 each 'and got rid of them'. On the question of cottiers and labourers he was not so forthcoming, agreeing that there were a great many more all over the farm. The committee did not press him on the fate of these lower orders. His agent had no difficulty in collecting rents, his estate having big farms. There was not opposition or bad spirit and he had the necessary ejectments go on without any trouble. Relations with the very small Protestant population and their Catholic counterparts were good; there was very little party feeling. On the question of Orange lodges he could state that there were none that he knew of in Kildare. The nearest he had heard of was in Edenderry. Being himself a leading member of the Freemasons, the duke would have been an authority on such societies.<sup>12</sup>

Leinster concluded his evidence with a recitation of his methods of control together with some caustic comments on the military and the magistracy. Too many magistrates were sending private reports to Dublin Castle. There is a bitter edge to his verdict that 'some of them make a trade of it.' The proclamation of the county would have involved the calling-out of militia and yeomanry units with all the expenses of their commissariat, as well as well paid employment for officers, of whom several would also be magistrates. The duke, as the biggest landowner in the county, would have to pay an extra cess for all this extra security and his evidence should be viewed in this light. He concluded his evidence with a resounding declaration on the use of the military. He had no use for military force. Instead he had his own methods – 'I would go down at any time of the day or night into all the alehouses and with this umbrella turn the people out if there is any riot in the alehouses.'<sup>13</sup>

George Nugent, marquis of Westmeath, commenced his evidence to the lords with a rather mournful assessment of the state of his county.<sup>14</sup> Westmeath was in a state of great disturbance, 'principally due to the alienation of the mass of the people, as to their affections, from the state....and from the existing government of the country'.

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<sup>12</sup> *Westmeath Journal*, 3 Jan. 1823. Meeting of Freemasons at Morrisons. duke of Leinster, Grand Master, dedication of the new Masonic Hall.

<sup>13</sup> Select committee on *disturbances in Ireland*, pp 200-204, H.C.1825 (200) vii. 501.

<sup>14</sup> *Select committee on disturbances in Ireland*, p. 228. H.C. 1825 (200) vii. 501.

While this was probably as fair an estimate of the situation as their lordships were likely to receive during this inquiry it would not have fitted comfortably with the opinions of the other witnesses, most especially the duke of Leinster. The marquis was a Protestant, his grandfather having converted in the mid-eighteenth century to save his estates.<sup>15</sup> He was an extensive landowner, a magistrate and a deputy lieutenant but he was also a member of a Catholic dynasty, which traced its ancestry back to Strongbow's time.

On the question of sub-division of land the marquis told the committee that it was one of the great evils of the time. The practice of creating forty-shilling freeholders was placing land of no value in the hands of paupers in order to obtain a vote on behalf of the proprietors. He warned of the dangers of a 'superabundant population' and the oppression of the tenantry by middlemen. The laws of landlord and tenant were so arcane that the proprietors had nothing to do with their estates. There were many hundreds on his estates living in miserable circumstances and he was completely prevented from performing the requisites and obtaining the christian names of persons who might change their names once a week. It appears that the marquis was in some difficulty in the management of his much sub-divided estates. An accurate rent book would be a rarity in such a chaotic landholding system. The peasantry of Westmeath and Roscommon were not, it seems, comprised of the docile well-managed tenantry of the duke of Leinster.<sup>16</sup>

The marquis had strong opinions on the magistracy; he could sympathise with the lord chancellor who was forced into making unsuitable appointments, but many improper appointments had crept in. He had to deal with ignorant and insufficient men. One magistrate in his own area had been appointed although he could barely write his name. Great mischief had been caused due to the irregular appointment of sub-sheriffs. They took bribes from both sides in civil actions; they held double appointments, acting 'behind the curtain' as attorneys and earning high fees.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Maurice R. O'Connell (ed.), *The correspondence of Daniel O'Connell* (3 vols, Dublin, 1974), iii, letter no. 1281, from Westmeath to O'Connell, 21 Jan. 1826. O'Connell acted for Westmeath in a court case.

<sup>16</sup> Address of a loyal and grateful tenantry, to the earl of Offaly, grandson of the duke, on reaching his majority, 16 Aug. 1872. On display at Carton House.

<sup>17</sup> *Memorial of prisoners in Enniskillen Gaol charged with Macken murders, complaining of sub-sheriff*. H.C. 1830 (150) xxvi. 301, for an account of similar 'jobbery' in Fermanagh.

On one subject at least Westmeath and Leinster were in agreement: the matter of private information being transmitted to Dublin Castle by magistrates. As the marquis put it: ‘every magistrate writes his own story up to the Castle. It is hard for the government to know who to believe’. His final contribution to the inquiry struck a note of optimism. The petty sessions, since their inception, had been of great service in pacifying the populace. He had never seen anything equal to the anxiety of the people to attend, and their gratitude for the manner in which their complaints were dealt with. He recommended that magistrates should be required to attend petty sessions and desist from dispensing ‘hall door justice’ at their own residences, a proposal that would have been supported by the duke.

The *Westmeath Journal* reported on a meeting of magistrates at Naas on the last Saturday of May 1823 which may be taken as an example of the dilemma facing the forces of law and order in the midlands<sup>18</sup> The new constabulary, according to Leinster’s evidence to the select committee, was established in Kildare during that month but in its start-up phase was not yet effective. The meeting, of thirty magistrates, agreed to memorialise the lord lieutenant to have four baronies placed under the insurrection act. Divisions appeared among the members. They all agreed that the county was in a terrible state, requiring constant vigilance and it was determined to hold a special session every fortnight. One member, Rev. Mr. Browne gave instances of outrages and illegal meetings of large bodies of people. He was opposed by two members, Sir William Macartney and John Cassidy, who explained that these meetings were only football matches, innocent recreations that had been practiced since time immemorial. Lord Cloncurry, a prominent member of the Kildare nobility, echoed the sentiments of Lord Westmeath to the disturbances committee. He lamented the general hostility to the law but he attributed the causes of the disturbances not to the people but to the injustices and misery they suffered. He told the members that if they continued to uphold the severe system without enquiring into what made it necessary, then they should put the whole county under the act. The methods of the Peace Preservation Force and their rapid response tactics merely drove disaffected people out of their districts and into hitherto quiet baronies.

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<sup>18</sup> *Westmeath Journal*, 5 July 1823

He was himself left without a constable in his own barony. Other members, while agreeing that the lower orders were directed by conspiracies worse than anything the country had ever suffered, resorted to the theme of the evils of idleness. If the same expense as was incurred in extra policing were to be directed to useful employment of the poorer classes, then peace would be restored. The absence of proprietors was one of the reasons adduced at the meeting as a cause of widespread insubordination.

It is unlikely that the duke of Leinster attended the meeting at Naas. His presence was not noted in the report and had he been there he would certainly have made his presence felt when the unanimous resolve was tabled on the proclamation of four of his baronies. The remark regarding absentee proprietors was probably a barb directed at his absence. Those sections of the county magistracy who in the duke's opinion made a trade of sending lurid and misleading 'private information' to the Castle were leading members of the coercion party at the meeting.

The sectarian nature of violent crime was not discussed at the Naas meeting but the editor of *Westmeath Journal* ensured that this was remedied. He printed a report of a letter to the *Evening Mail*, together with his commentary, in the same column as the Naas report.<sup>19</sup> An innocent young man, Hill, returning from the fair of Killeel, having called to a public house for a pint of porter, was dragged out and brutally beaten to death by a number of ruffians. No motive was ascertained except that he was a Protestant. Thirteen men were lodged in Naas gaol to stand trial. The editor lamented the lack of coverage of this atrocity in the Dublin newspapers – the *Evening Mail* excepted: 'if this had been an Orange outrage how soon the empire would have known of it.'

By the end of the 1820s the landscape of the county of Westmeath had taken on a very unnatural appearance. The ground enclosed by the demesne walls of the county gentry was well covered by trees and shrubbery, while the surrounding countryside was stripped of all vegetation. Mitchell and Ryan describe the landscape in stark terms: 'the paradoxical situation that while the landscape in the immediate vicinity of the estates was getting more densely crowded with trees, many of them exotic, the

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

general countryside was getting barer and barer as the rising population was getting more desperate for fuel.’<sup>20</sup> There were indications that a general scarcity of good timber prevailed in the United Kingdom in the nineteenth century. There were anxious enquiries in parliament about the transport of timber as deck cargo from Canada, resulting in the loss of ships at sea, an indicator of the scarcity of good timber.<sup>21</sup> In January 1823 Lord Kilmaine was advertising 19 lots of the best timber to be sold at his estate of Gaulstown. Applications were to be made to his lordship.<sup>22</sup> A month later Gustavus Rochfort had a fine selection of mature timber for sale at Rochfort Demesne.<sup>23</sup> The Levings of Knockdrin Castle were also in the market with detailed lists of various choice lots. The notice in the *Journal* of 23 January 1823 betrays the real reason for this sudden spurt of timber sales among the gentry of Westmeath. Timber was for sale in the demesne of Belvedere, about four hundred trees, lately blown down, applicants to pay cash to the steward, John Smith of Carrick. The winter had been very stormy and their lordships were probably taking advantage of the abysmal fuel situation outside their walls to earn some ready cash with no outlay on their own behalf, providing no extra employment to the peasantry. Lord Castlemaine of Moydrum Castle made a great virtue of allowing his tenantry into the forestry around his residence to gather firewood. The Royal Dublin Society had been offering premiums since the 1730s for planting to revive the surviving native woods. By 1845 this policy had produced 210,000 acres of new plantation.<sup>24</sup> Most of this woodland was for decorative purposes and of no benefit to the vast majority of the tenantry. The huge variation between the demesne and the tenanted farmland is graphically illustrated in the original Ordnance Survey maps scaled at six inches to the mile and available at the Russell Library, St. Patrick’s, College, Maynooth. The demesne treescape is faithfully reproduced, drawn and engraved exactly, while the farmland is laid out in unadorned boundary lines. Every mud hut and footbridge is carefully recorded but not a tree is to be seen. Every bleach green and bog is detailed

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<sup>20</sup> Frank Mitchell and Michael Ryan, *Reading the Irish landscape* (Dublin, 1997), p. 329; Thomas McErlean, ‘The Archaeology of parks and gardens, 1600 – 1900’ in Audrey Horning *et. al.* (eds), *The post-medieval archaeology of Ireland, 1550 – 1850* (Dublin, 2007), p. 279. Recreating a natural landscape can be seen as a reaction against the surrounding treeless farmscape outside the garden.

<sup>21</sup> *Bill to prevent ships clearing from a British North American port loading timber on deck*. H.C. 1839 (389), v. 491.

<sup>22</sup> *Westmeath Journal*, 16 Jan 1823.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 13 Feb. 1823.

<sup>24</sup> Mitchell & Ryan, *Reading the Irish landscape* p. 329.



but vegetation of any type is missing.<sup>25</sup> The Royal Engineer officers who surveyed the county in 1837 recorded the scene exactly as they found it; their evidence must be accepted as a true record.

Westmeath had one natural resource which was not available in the corn-growing country of the south and east – peat bog, or ‘red bog’ as it was described by the valuers. Having little or no value on the official scale of valuation it was generally allotted to the tenantry on informal local arrangements, with the added benefits to the landlord of being incorporated into the rental figures.<sup>26</sup> Turf cutting, therefore, was an essential part of the agricultural life of the peasantry, either as labourers or consumers. During the period of staggering growth in the population, as the marginal land was taken up, new schemes were being relentlessly pursued, spurred on by learned discourses and scientific papers from the world of philanthropy. It was discovered that a thin layer of sand on a cutaway bog would produce a bountiful crop of potatoes.<sup>27</sup> A major landlord of the county could boast to a select committee that he had settled several men on the edge of his bog at Milltown and that they had prospered.<sup>28</sup> A survey of the high ground in the county, although nowhere more than seven hundred feet above sea level, reveals the extent of the agricultural crisis during the period. The hill of Uisneach, in the centre of the county, and according to folklore, the centre of Ireland, is 602 feet a.s.l. Its higher slopes, far above the present level of cultivation, have the outlines of many regular, parallel ridges, each about six feet in width, extending from ditch to ditch on the bare hillside. They had always been called lazy-beds, a derogatory term which probably originated among lowland agriculturists who planted their potatoes in regular ridges. Charles Trevelyan, assistant secretary at the treasury at a crucial point in Irish affairs, noted that the term ‘lazy-bed’ reflected the ease of the Irish method of potato growing. Cormac Ó Gráda remarks that this attitude displayed Trevelyan’s bias as well as his deep-seated ignorance.<sup>29</sup> Trevelyan would not have appreciated the practical difficulties of the cottiers of the hill country in ploughing these rough stony hillsides.

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<sup>25</sup> Ordnance Survey, 6- inch, Westmeath, sheet 26.

<sup>26</sup> Griffith’s valuation, Westmeath, parish of Killucan, townland of Knockaville, Edward Gaffney, land (bog) 292 acres, valuation £1.5s.0d. Gaffney was a tenant of the earl of Longford.

<sup>27</sup> Mitchell Ryan, *Reading the Irish landscape* p.329.

<sup>28</sup> *Report of select committee on Westmeath and unlawful combinations*. H.C. 1871 (147), xiii. 547.

Evidence of G.A. Rochfort-Boyd, p. 136.

<sup>29</sup> Cormac Ó Gráda, ‘Poverty, population & agriculture, 1801- 45’ in *New history of Ireland*, v. p. 126.

The lazy-bed was a practical and productive method of growing the potato, the only crop that stood between the rural population and starvation. Of all the innovations in agriculture in that century of inventions, one of the most practical was the Ransome plough. Together with Cyrus McCormick's wondrous reaper it reduced the toil and sweat of a week to the effortless, horse-powered work of one day.<sup>30</sup> These modern machines did not penetrate into the marginal high ground of Ireland until late in the century. The cottiers of Uisneagh, men, women and children still had to hew out their lazy-beds in the time-honoured tradition of their forefathers. The advent of the modern farming machine was to have serious consequences for the peace of the lowlands in the mid-century but the problem of cultivation in the hill country had by then been laid to rest by that great leveller, famine. The hill of Uisneach was returned to pasture land and all that remained from its tillage days were the lazy-beds and the ruins of the temporary homesteads of its pre-famine inhabitants.

Mullingar had always been a gap town on the route between Dublin and the west. The town sits in the valley of the River Brosna between Lough Owel and Lough Ennell. The main street was part of an ancient east-west highway during early Christian times.<sup>31</sup> From Anglo Norman times it formed a focal point of the tenuous salient of English rule, which stretched as far as the River Shannon at Athlone. Parts of the county were confiscated after the Cromwellian wars and the town of Mullingar lost its borough status in 1661. The town was granted to Sir Arthur Forbes, a Scottish adventurer whose father had been a royalist officer in the wars of the three kingdoms.<sup>32</sup> It appears that the Forbes' were belatedly rewarded for their services by Charles II. As Samuel Lewis recorded 'the Castle, the two dissolved monasteries, with the town and adjacent lands were, by Royal Charter, granted to Sir Arthur Forbes.'<sup>33</sup> His seat was in Newtownforbes, thirty miles from Mullingar and for the two centuries of the Forbes' proprietorship the town was an outlying fiefdom. In effect the Forbes family were absentee landlords. Other towns of similar size had their corporations but Mullingar was merely a manor of the earls of Granard as they had since become. Therefore, apart from the feeble efforts of the aforementioned

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<sup>30</sup> Asa Briggs, *The age of improvement, 1783 – 1867* (London, 1979), p. 41.

<sup>31</sup> J.H. Andrews and K.M. Davies (eds), *Irish historic towns atlas No: 5, Mullingar* (Dublin, 1992), p.

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<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> Lewis, *Topographical dictionary*, Mullingar, p. 412.

churchwardens of All Saints church the town had no local government until the advent of the poor law guardians in the 1840s.

In spite of its civic disadvantages Mullingar was a busy commercial centre in the early nineteenth century. The editors of the *Irish historic towns atlas* have, during their exhaustive surveys of Irish country towns, noticed a town lay-out common to many of them: 'the ideal shape for a shopkeepers' town is one street with country roads converging on the ends of it and no escape for the visitor (livestock drovers included) until every trading establishment has come within his sight.'<sup>34</sup> Mullingar certainly fitted this description. The livestock trade of the time demanded massive movements of cattle and sheep. Pigs and horses added to the flow of animals through the town as livestock was traded and transported from the store country of the west to the rich fattening land of Meath and Kildare. J.H. Andrews noted the 'funnelling effect' between Lough Owel and Lough Ennell, through which the ancient trackway ran.<sup>35</sup> The weekly market reports in the local newspaper indicated a thriving trade in barley, oats, beef and butter. Potatoes were trading at 2*d.* and 3*d.* per stone in April 1829, prices that varied very little over good years in the early nineteenth century.<sup>36</sup>

Travellers passing through Mullingar were very forthright in their condemnation of the miserable appearance of its streets. Arthur Young, passing through the town on his journey between the Pakenham seat at Tullynally and the Rochfort demesne at Belvedere, allowed Mullingar just one line in his *tour* 'a dirty ugly town'.<sup>37</sup> Watty Cox, a journalist, noted in 1815 that the town had 'a restricted population, an appearance of decay and a settled poverty; this most wretched town is in ruins and in a few years it must disappear altogether.'<sup>38</sup> By 1830 the town was still in existence and its slovenly appearance seems to have been almost a source of pride. The town was paying for its commercial prosperity in the chaotic traffic jams and broken pavements of a *lassaiz faire* economy. The *Journal* reported that Mullingar had the

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<sup>34</sup> Andrews & Davies, I.H.T.A., Mullingar, p. 4.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> *Westmeath Journal*, 23 Apr. 1829.

<sup>37</sup> Arthur Young, *A tour in Ireland, 1776 – 1779* (2 vols Shannon, 1970 edn), 1, p. 61.

<sup>38</sup> Ruth Illingworth, *Mullingar history and guide* (Dublin, 2007), p. 66, quoting *Watty Cox's magazine* Aug. 1815.

distinction of being the dirtiest town in Ireland.<sup>39</sup> It seemed that the citizens of the town had come to an acceptance that prosperity and wretchedness were inseparable components of the town's life.

The bridge over the Shannon at Athlone was, from all reports, an even greater obstruction to the passage of traffic than the main street of Mullingar. It was the only river crossing for twenty miles north or south to Lanesborough and Shannonbridge. In the normal course this would have been an extremely busy, crowded choke point on the road to the west, with the livestock and wheeled traffic of several western counties pouring through the town. The bridge had been constructed in 1567 by Sir Henry Sidney, in order to tighten his grip on the presidency of Connacht.<sup>40</sup> He must have had tactical reasons for building his bridge so narrow that two carts could pass only with great difficulty. The problem was compounded with the late addition of two corn mills on the bridge. The bridge had been the subject of political debate for many years. In March of 1829 the *Journal* reported the exciting news that the M.P. for the borough, Handcock of Moydrum Castle, had presented a petition to parliament for a grant to build a new bridge 'to remedy that long complained of nuisance occasioned by the extreme narrowness as well as the dilapidated state of the bridge.' The petition had been signed by the respectable inhabitants of the town and vicinity and also by the nobility and gentry of the provinces of Leinster and Connacht who had to cross this dangerous and inconvenient bridge on their way to the great fair of Ballinasloe.<sup>41</sup> Handcock's petition came to nothing; he had been supported by the members for Roscommon and Westmeath, but the House of Commons of March 1829 was convulsed by the Emancipation crisis, to the exclusion of almost all other business, and Irish bridges would have been a long way down on the governments agenda. Mr and Mrs Hall passed over the bridge in 1840 and they described it as remarkably narrow, but that a new bridge was in the course of construction. The old town on the western side was miserable and dirty; the more courtly part of the town on the eastern side was 'but a degree better.'<sup>42</sup> The Shannon Commission was indeed in the process of dismantling the venerable bridge. The *Guardian* carried a

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<sup>39</sup> *Westmeath Journal*, 18 Mar. 1830.

<sup>40</sup> Harman Murtagh, 'Old Athlone' in Marian Keaney and Gearoid O'Brien (eds), *Athlone: bridging the centuries* (Mullingar, 1991), p. 15.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 18 Mar. 1829.

<sup>42</sup> Michael Scott (ed.), *Hall's Ireland, Mr and Mrs Hall's tour of 1840* (London, 1984), p. 389.

notice in May 1840 of an auction of mills and machinery from the bridge.<sup>43</sup> They listed four mills, Mabbot's western mill, Jones' eastern mill and two middle mills. The machinery was nearly new and in good working order. Captain Thomas Phillips, cartographer to King James II, produced a neatly water coloured sketch of the bridge of Athlone in 1690, no doubt as a piece of useful military intelligence, but he carefully included two mill houses, perched on the bridge.<sup>44</sup> The two middle mills were apparently a later addition. All in all the bridge of Athlone would have been a sore trial for all its users and a vantage point for salesmen, beggars, vagrants and ladies of the night, all reaping any advantage they could from its tortuous passage. By the end of the year work was well advanced on a new high-level bridge seventy yards upstream. The *Guardian* could report that it had three ecliptical arms of sixty feet span, raised fourteen feet and a cast-iron swivel arch of forty feet to admit the passage of steam vessels of the largest class. A ceremonial event had been held, and a copper plated inscription, together with coins and newspapers, had been placed in a cavity.<sup>45</sup> Athlone was soon to be liberated from the toils of its old bridge and the county was now to be exposed to the marvels of civilisation. The modern world was coming to Westmeath.

The general election of 1826 was a point of departure between the elites and their subjects in Westmeath. An election had been expected since the previous year. When Gustavus Hume Rochfort, one of the sitting members for the county, died in February 1824 he had not been replaced. The two county seats had not been seriously contested since the Union. Country gentlemen could usually agree to divide the county into two manageable blocks, using their forty-shilling freeholders as electoral fodder as required. However, by the mid-1820s new forces were emerging in the country. O'Connell and Richard Lalor Shiel launched the Catholic Association in early 1823. The original group of members was strictly upper and middle class, Dublin based, and highly conservative in its strategy – Catholic Emancipation was to be secured by 'all such legal and constitutional measures as may be most useful....'<sup>46</sup> S.J. Connolly has listed the 62 as 15 landed gentry, 31 lawyers, 11 merchants, 3 newspaper editors, a surgeon and a Carmelite friar; not normally the stuff of

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<sup>43</sup> *Westmeath Guardian*, 7 May 1840.

<sup>44</sup> National Library of Ireland, M/S 3137 (32), collection list no. 157.

<sup>45</sup> *Westmeath Guardian*, 25 Nov. 1841.

<sup>46</sup> Connolly, 'Mass politics & sectarian conflict, 1823 – 30', p. 84.



revolution.<sup>47</sup> The master-stroke, however, was in the recruitment of associate members who contributed to the funds of the association according to their means, which in the towns and among the stronger farmers of the east and south, would have been substantial. The Catholic middle classes of Westmeath would have paid their share. The labourers could become part of the campaign with a contribution of as little as a penny per month. Thus Irish popular politics gained a new and radical momentum.<sup>48</sup>

The *Westmeath Journal* followed the progress of the Catholic Association with increasing dismay. The editor, William Kidd never neglected an opportunity to pour scorn and ridicule on any emergence of Catholic unrest. His editorials warned what he termed the deluded papist dupes that the levy being collected would cost them sixpence each per month. He labelled the committee ‘the bellows – blowers of Capel Street’ and made great play on the venue of the first meeting, held at Dempsey’s tavern in that street.<sup>49</sup> He assured his readers that ‘the Capel Street Association assumes, at every sitting a more legislative and representative character.’<sup>50</sup>

This interpretation of the situation was essentially correct and the administration in London was well aware that a new power was on the move in Ireland. Wellesley was not in favour of an outright ban on the association and 1824 passed in acrimonious debate between Dublin Castle and Peel in the home department. Meanwhile the organisation tightened its grip on the population. The Catholic clergy were expected to act as local agents and organisers. They had very little choice in the matter; they were swept along in the euphoria of the moment. Connolly records a contemporary assessment: ‘the priest, after a little time, was hurried along by the torrent, and had only to decide whether he should ride on its surface or be buried altogether beneath the stream’.<sup>51</sup>

Goulburn, the chief secretary, finally took the route of coercion in March 1825. He banned the association while attempting to display his even-handedness by

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., pp 84 – 5.

<sup>49</sup> *Westmeath Journal*, 6 Feb. 1824.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Connolly, ‘Mass politics and sectarian conflict’, p. 88.

prosecuting both O'Connell and Harcourt Lees, an Orange spokesman, for intemperate speeches. Both prosecutions failed, pleasing nobody, and the Catholic Association was soon reformed under a new banner of education, peace and harmony.<sup>52</sup> The new organisation did not collect the Catholic 'rent' at first and its proceedings were generally timid. O'Connell had agreed with Burdett's bill to disenfranchise the forty-shilling freeholders, balanced by payment of a state salary for the Catholic clergy. Burdett observed that 'as to the proposed stipend to the Catholic clergy, in the view of economy, the money required for that object would be so utterly trifling, that it would not balance the weight of a straw'.<sup>53</sup> This proposal, although it was temporarily stymied by the Lords, caused some dissension in the association.

In the midst of all this activity parliament was prorogued and a general election called for June of 1826. The writ of the high sheriff giving notice of the election was published in the *Westmeath Journal* on 15 June and on the same day three candidates inserted their statements of intent to enter the contest for the two county seats.<sup>54</sup> Robert Smyth of Drumcree had sat in the previous parliament. He was a member of a network of Smyths holding large estates at Drumcree, Barbavilla and Gaybrook. He assured the electors that he was fully independent of all unconstitutional connections and unfettered by obligations. Gustavus Rochfort invoked the memory of his late father whose seat he proposed to take. He omitted any mention of constitutional matters. The third candidate was Hugh Morgan Tuite of Sonna. His statement concentrated at some length on his determination to ensure that the respectable county of Westmeath should have an opportunity to choose its representatives by a free and fair election. He referred to 'deep laid schemes for the purpose of undermining that right, and to monopolise that gift granted by our constitution.'<sup>55</sup>

However veiled in constitutional probity, this was the rhetoric of O'Connell and the editor of the *Journal* was not slow to sound the alarm, citing 'the intolerance and

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid; Brian Jenkins, *Henry Goulburn, 1784 – 1856: A political biography* (Liverpool, 1996) , pp 170 – 73.

<sup>53</sup> *Hansard*, Geo IV, 6. 2<sup>nd</sup> ser., vol.12, 28 Mar. 1825.

<sup>54</sup> *Westmeath Journal*, 15 June 1826.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

bigotry of the system which the above address advocates.’<sup>56</sup> A letter to the editor from ‘a freeholder’ laid out the essence of the question: ‘we are on the eve of embarking on the horrors of a contested election, .....angry passions are likely to be called forth....we should resolve firmly to adhere to our landlords and be guided by their better judgement.....’.<sup>57</sup> The effect of the propaganda machine of O’Connell and his associations must have seemed very plain to these Protestant voters. Tuite would appeal to the tenantry on all sides and this time the forty shilling men would break ranks and cause a major upset.

The national press gave very little coverage to the victories of pro-emancipation candidates in Louth, Monaghan, Armagh and Dublin, as well as almost ignoring Westmeath. A diligent search is required even to discover the name of the Westmeath candidate in the general accounts of that momentous election then and since.<sup>58</sup> The contest in Waterford was the headline story.<sup>59</sup> O’Connell selected a young landowner, Henry Villiers Stuart, to challenge the Beresfords who had owned the county seats for several generations. He beat their candidate into a humiliating third place. Connolly argues that the publicity attached to the Waterford contest to the exclusion of other equally sensational results was due to the presence as chief organiser of Thomas Wyse, the historian of the Catholic Association and the triumphal progress of O’Connell himself through the Beresford territory.

Gustavus Rochfort headed the poll at the market house in Mullingar after ten days of ‘this dreadfully contested election.’<sup>60</sup> Rochfort and Smyth had outpaced Tuite for the first week but as the results were posted each evening it became clear that Tuite was overhauling Smyth. On the last morning of polling, at dawn, the partisans of Tuite erected an arch of green boughs on the street and at six in the evening the results were announced: Rochfort, 1423, Tuite, 1245, and Smyth 1220 – leaving Tuite in possession of the second seat with a margin of twenty five votes. Kidd of the *Journal* was entirely at a loss to express the horror of his respectable Protestant readers at this calamity. His standard outpouring of purple prose was totally inadequate and he

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Walker, *Parliamentary election results in Ireland*, p. 29.

<sup>59</sup> Connolly, ‘Mass politics and sectarian conflict’, p. 99.

<sup>60</sup> *Westmeath Journal*, 6 July 1826.

could only fulminate against ‘the priest’s candidate, and the bludgeon men who surrounded and imprisoned Smyth’s men on their way to vote.’<sup>61</sup>

Hugh Morgan Tuite was a wealthy Protestant landlord, a liberal pragmatist and one of several O’Connellite members elected to the new parliament. If O’Connell’s ‘tail’ were to be derided as rogues and buffoons in later years his original parliamentary coterie were nobody’s fools.<sup>62</sup> The forty-shilling freeholder had his last outing in the 1826 election and he was ruthlessly cast aside within three years. Tuite and his group could harness the ten-pound men just as readily for the next election as they had done in this contest with the forty-shilling ‘pauper’. The age of mass politics, a new and uncertain social phenomenon, had come to Westmeath. O’Connell had engendered a sense of fear and alarm in London. His many speeches left a distinct impression that his organisation stood between the crown and other, more sinister forces, which would not be so easily dealt with. This implicit threat would not have unduly worried ministers like Peel who had been applying coercion acts since the Union and would have no trouble in sending in the troops in the event of an open rebellion. As Robert Kee has rather gleefully noted ‘the frightening thing was not the expected disorder, but the reverse’.<sup>63</sup> Alvin Jackson has neatly described O’Connell’s tactics as ‘the lever of militancy’.<sup>64</sup>

In conclusion, political, economic and social pressures were mounting in the mid-1820s. As elections produced popular candidates, the towns descended into disorder and the rural population explosion intensified the relentless struggle for land.

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Oliver MacDonagh, ‘Politics 1830-45’ in *New history of Ireland*, v. p. 189.

<sup>63</sup> Robert Kee, *The green flag: a history of Irish nationalism* (London, 2000), p. 183.

<sup>64</sup> Alvin Jackson, *Ireland, 1798 – 1998: war, peace and beyond* (Chichester, 2010), p. 58.

### CHAPTER 3: DISORDER IN HIGH AND LOW SOCIETY

This chapter traces the beginnings of the process of transformation of the political landscape of the county during the 1820s, while at the same time violence and intimidation continued to escalate both in town and country.

The political mould of the county began the long slow process of disintegration during the 1820s. The Catholic middle classes had, by the end of the decade, shaken off the artificial contrivance of the forty-shilling freehold franchise. They found new and more effective levers with which to force concessions from the administration. The ten-pound freeholder was now to be the target of any electoral candidate in attempting to outwit his opponents. During the months following the passing into law of the Catholic relief legislation there was a rush of applications for the new franchise.<sup>1</sup> The *Westmeath Journal* carried the full list for the county, complete with names, addresses and descriptions of the freehold which was the basis of the application. Over three issues in May and June of 1829 they listed 715 applicants.<sup>2</sup> There were forty-eight in the fifty and twenty-pound categories; these would have been new applicants as all previous voters in this section of the franchise were exempt from the process.<sup>3</sup> There were seventeen new fifty-pound men in the list. A special session was held at Mullingar to adjudicate on the applications, and the *Journal* had the story.<sup>4</sup> One hundred and seventy-nine had met the exacting standards of the court. There was, however, a postscript to the report which revealed that, in spite of all the parading and rejoicing of O'Connell and his supporters, the aristocracy still held the reins of power in the county: 'the following list was handed to us as a correct return of the Noblemen and Gentlemen on whose estates the freeholders reside, and for whose interest they registered, with the number for each respectively.' There followed a list of names that could have fitted exactly with the members of the grand jury or the attendance at the hunt ball in any year of the previous century. Sir Thomas Chapman had thirty, Hugh Tuite had twenty, Colonel Rochfort had fifteen

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<sup>1</sup> Clark, *Social origins of the Irish land war*, pp 88 – 89.

<sup>2</sup> *Westmeath Journal*, 2 May 1829, 21 May 1829, 10 June 1829, 25 June 1829.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 7 May 1829, list of provisions of the new act.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 18 June 1829, Registry of freeholders.

and the list went on until all 179 votes had been allocated to the farmers and shopkeepers, who owed their allegiance to the Big House.

It came as no surprise to the *Journal* that most of the prospective ten-pound voters had been disallowed; the assistant barrister in charge was ‘a most impartial, conscientious, straightforward man’. The editor bemoaned ‘the persons who merely wish to have the name of a great interest, but who never wish to bring a sixth of them to the scratch; many of them having neither lease nor other title; their lands and houses are a potato garden, a cabin, a piggery.’<sup>5</sup> The *Journal’s* argument, it would seem, was that the gentry of the county had engaged in another contest to enrol the maximum numbers of their tenantry so that they could enhance their own status in the county, without considering outside factors such as electoral political strategy. The *Journal* and other conservative commentators were acutely conscious of the potential electoral value of the new freehold list to the radical agitators.<sup>6</sup> It could, nevertheless, be argued that these applicants, whether successful or not, would in future constitute the core of a new middle class in the county. Together with the clergy and the shopkeepers of the towns they formed a solid social group, which exerted major influence on the affairs of the county as the Union was solidified.<sup>7</sup> The disparity between the comfortable classes and the underclass of cottiers and labourers was a continuous cause of discomfort in London. Emigration was proposed by social engineers.<sup>8</sup> The population of Westmeath continued to expand, subdivision of holdings ran out of control and rural disorder was on the rise.<sup>9</sup>

The town of Mullingar was not exempt from violent disorder. On a Friday evening in September 1823, at about eight o’clock an invasion of the town took place. One hundred soldiers of the 93<sup>rd</sup> Highlanders rushed out of the barracks, armed with swords, bayonets and sticks that they had cut for the event. Kidd, the editor of the *Journal*, was able to witness the commotion from his office. He reported that the

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Charles Chevenix Trench, *The great Dan* (London, 1986), pp 129 - 30.

<sup>7</sup> Michael Beams, ‘The Ribbon Societies: lower class nationalism in pre-famine Ireland in C.H.E. Philipin (e.d.), *Nationalism and popular protest in Ireland* (Cambridge, 1987).

<sup>8</sup> *Select committee on emigration*, 3<sup>rd</sup> report. H.C. 1826 – 27 (550), v. 229, evidence of Thomas Malthus.

<sup>9</sup> W.E. Vaughan and A.J. Fitzpatrick (eds), *Irish historical statistics* (Dublin, 1978), p. 7, population of Westmeath 1831, 136, 872, up 6.25% on 1821.



assailants uttered the most hideous yells, attacked every person they met, broke windows, looted shops and public houses and by the end of the operation they had wrecked the town. The *Journal* account makes no mention of any intervention by the police, since of course the new force would not yet have been in place. The resident magistrate was insulted at the barrack gate when he called to interview the commanding officer of the 93<sup>rd</sup> on the following morning.<sup>10</sup> When it became clear that Colonel Gordon, the C.O., was not willing to enforce military discipline on his riotous soldiers, the local magistrates and gentry memorialised the lord lieutenant, which resulted in a court of inquiry.<sup>11</sup> The regiment was paraded on the barrack square and the townsmen were invited to identify the guilty parties. Only two were selected and at their trial the inhabitants requested that these should not shoulder the blame for the entire escapade; the prosecution was dropped.

Kidd apparently attracted the unfavourable attention of his opposite number at the *Dublin Evening Mail*, a publication that, if anything, was more establishment oriented than himself. In his next issue he explained that he published the story of the outrage ‘in language and expression, studied in delicacy and published with regret.’ He had felt little apprehension that his motives or his credibility would be called into question. He informed the *Evening Mail* that he had not recounted ONE TWENTIETH of the outrages perpetrated during this episode and that had he not slammed his office door in the face of a murderous villain wielding a brick he would not be alive to write this editorial.<sup>12</sup>

The 93<sup>rd</sup> Highlanders were not to enjoy their comfortable billet in Mullingar for much longer. Within the month they were on the road to Cork. From there they were to be redeployed to Demerera in the sugar islands of the West Indies where a violent revolt of the slaves had taken place. Kidd reported their departure with some satisfaction and published a long letter from ‘an inhabitant of Mullingar’ praising the conduct of Mr. Lyons, the chief magistrate, in his pursuit of compensation for the damage suffered by the town. Colonel Gordon had promised some recompense during the court hearing but as Kidd remarked, his anxiety to serve his regiment had gotten the

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<sup>10</sup> *Westmeath Journal*, 11 Sept. 1823.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 18 Sept. 1823.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

better of his good manners.<sup>13</sup> It would seem that the town was not compensated by the 93<sup>rd</sup> Highlanders .

The army, as has already been observed, formed an integral if somewhat semi-detached social element of any garrison town. The other ranks drank, socialised and spent their wages among the townspeople. They would not appear in the town in civilian attire and would therefore be easily identified and targeted by the beggars and prostitutes. The ready availability of cheap whiskey was always an aggravating factor in their dealings with the public. The local newspapers reflected the attitude of the population. There was no great hatred in town or country of the army as an institution. They were tolerated in spite of their occasional bouts of disorder and could generally be regarded as a neutral influence on the county. The garrison in Mullingar would occasionally be of some service to the civil powers, as described in a report from the *Westmeath Guardian* in 1835.<sup>14</sup> Two men had been reported, driving a suspicious looking flock of sheep through the main street of the town. The chief constable called out a constable on horseback and a party of infantry from the military barracks, pursued the miscreants on the Kilbeggan road and succeeding in arresting them at La Mancha on the shore of Lough Ennell two miles south of the town. The sheep-stealers were not armed and would not have presented any resistance to two or three well armed and mounted constables. It would appear that the soldiers from the barracks would have been usefully employed as shepherds in driving the recovered flock of eight sheep to the pound of Mullingar. One of the miscreants, Tully, was already under investigation for horse-stealing and as both horse and sheep-stealing were still capital offences he stood a fair chance of being sentenced to death on conviction.<sup>15</sup>

The garrison of Mullingar was a regional centre from which troops could be deployed in any disturbed areas, some of them a considerable distance away. The *Guardian* noted with some alarm that two companies of the 82<sup>nd</sup> Regiment had been detailed for Killeshandra and Arvagh in Cavan in July of 1835, leaving less than three hundred

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 4 Dec. 1823; 20 Nov. 1823, Lyons and the sacking of Mullingar.

<sup>14</sup> *Westmeath Guardian*, 20 Aug. 1835.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

men to ensure the tranquillity of Westmeath.<sup>16</sup> The entire strength of the regular army in Ireland at the end of the year was 18,682, excluding Royal Artillery and Ordnance units.<sup>17</sup> This was about half of the number in the country ten years earlier. There is a noticeable decrease in the local reporting of army affairs in the local press from the mid-1830s onwards. The officers of the garrison still appear at the Grand Ball and the Westmeath Hunt but the garrison as a factor in the preservation of law and order recedes as the civil forces gain some acceptance among the general population.

During the early months of 1829 the House of Commons was preoccupied with the Irish problem. The Catholic relief bill was the cause of much acrimonious debate in response to the king's speech. O'Connell's long delayed appearance to take his seat for County Clare was daily anticipated.<sup>18</sup> Contributions in the sitting of 5 February, were typical of the explosive atmosphere surrounding the Emancipation crisis. Colonel Gustavus Rochfort, the member for Westmeath, assured the house that 'the vast majority of Protestants of his county, of all ranks and denominations, were against further concessions to Roman Catholics, and were actuated by no motives but a sense of the danger of granting them political power.'<sup>19</sup> Lord Corry, a Tyrone representative, condemned the Catholic Association, 'that seditious body'. Henry Grattan, displaying all the cool logic of his late father, warned the right honourable gentleman opposite (the prime minister, Wellington) of the 'fearful results of Orange and Green standards in collision.' He reminded the members of the warnings, ignored in 1775, that led to the American confederation. Peel, now home secretary and a less strident and more sober politician than in his Irish days, reminded the house of 'an event that had taken place in the county of Clare.....the same event could have occurred in twenty other counties.' He was referring to O'Connell's election. The old king, now in his last year, surveying the wreckage of his long cherished Irish policy, is reported to have commented that 'Wellington is king of England, O'Connell is king of Ireland and, I suppose I must be the dean of Windsor.'<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 9 July 1835.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 31 Dec. 1835, quoting official sources.

<sup>18</sup> Hansard, Geo. IV.10. 2<sup>nd</sup> ser., vol. 20, 5 Feb. 1829.

<sup>19</sup> Hansard, Geo. IV.10. 2<sup>nd</sup> ser., vol. 20, 5 Feb. 1829.

<sup>20</sup> Charles O'Mahony, *The Viceroys of Ireland* (London, 1912), p. 228.

The Emancipation argument had been resolved and there was some optimism in government that the Irish question had been put to rest. During the early summer of 1829 there were serious disturbances among the industrial workers of Lancashire and Yorkshire. The army was called out and volleys were fired at rioters in Rochdale.<sup>21</sup> Robert Peel made great play of his request to the lord lieutenant in Dublin for the release of three regiments to be dispatched urgently to the insurrectionary towns.<sup>22</sup> He had sustained some collateral political damage by reneging on his long-held anti-Catholic rhetoric during the years of controversy which had preceded Emancipation, and he now hastened to assure the Commons of ‘the beneficial consequences of concessions.’<sup>23</sup>

The *Journal* of the previous week had recorded the departure from the garrison of Mullingar of the 17<sup>th</sup> Infantry and the 24<sup>th</sup> Foot, both units sailing from the Custom House quay on board two steamships for Liverpool and onwards to Manchester. The 1<sup>st</sup> Royals, a cavalry unit, was also *en route* for Liverpool having staged through Mullingar from Cork. The *Journal* commented favourably on the smooth working of the military transport arrangements; the 17<sup>th</sup> Infantry, 900 strong with twenty baggage carts was loaded onto a ship which had just arrived heavily laden and which was unloaded with incredible dispatch. The unit departed with the rise of the tide. The garrison was thus rendered available for any sudden emergency along the western coast of England.<sup>24</sup>

There is an undoubted sense of barely concealed satisfaction about the reporting of the English uprisings in the Irish newspapers in the early summer of 1829. Subscribers to the *Westmeath Journal* or the *Evening Mail* would take great comfort from reading the more lurid accounts of ‘the Rochdale massacre’ and ‘the distress of Lancashire’, troops attempting to restore order, and general chaos in the industrial heartland of Old England.<sup>25</sup> The administration in London might now reflect on the trials and tribulations which the Irish gentry had so stoically endured for many a year in attempting to control the lower classes.

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<sup>21</sup> *Westmeath Journal*, 14 May 1829, quoting Manchester papers.

<sup>22</sup> *Hansard*, Geo. IV. 10. 2<sup>nd</sup> Ser., vol. 21, 21 May 1829.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> *Westmeath Journal*. 14 May 1829.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

There were, however, other forces at work in the Irish rural midlands. The local newspaper editors were never slow in recording the state of the town markets and the prospects for the harvest. Potatoes were still holding at 3*d.* to 4*d.* per stone at the Mullingar market in mid-May.<sup>26</sup> By early June the *Journal* was reporting from the early harvest country around Rush and Skerries: ‘we have been assured by farmers of the district, that several tons of seed which were planted at the commencement of the year have not as yet put forth a stalk above the earth’.<sup>27</sup> The crops in general were poor with deficiencies were in prospect. There had indeed been partial failures in the potato crop and the administration was forced to take remedial action in supplying funds for relief.<sup>28</sup>

Meanwhile, the rural outrages and agitations which were an integral part of the life of the county continued. The magistrates resolved at the quarter sessions in Mullingar to memorialise the lord lieutenant for the reduction of the police strength by three chief constables and fifteen men. This plan might have been in accord with the impression of tranquillity then in fashion in higher circles but it did not reflect the situation on the ground. The *Journal* emphasised the point; in the same column in which the magistrate’s decision appeared, Kidd printed an account of the outrages carried out in the previous week. On Thursday night an armed party of Rockites visited John Whelehan of Gurteen. They discharged several rounds, ordered him to set out a farm in grazing and not to employ ‘strange’ workmen.<sup>29</sup> On Saturday night a cargo of turf, lying on the canal bank near Thomastown, consigned for Dublin, was maliciously set on fire and destroyed. The owner, Edward Donohue, had been warned by Captain Rock not to cut turf on the bog. On Monday night a house at Inon was maliciously burned to the ground. There were several outrages on the estate of Lady Jane Loftus near Kinnegad and, most serious of all, a major riot took place at the fair of Moate, resulting in one unfortunate man having his head fractured.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> *Westmeath Journal*, 4 June 1829.

<sup>28</sup> Connolly, ‘Mass politics and sectarian conflict’, p. 107.

<sup>29</sup> The term ‘strange’ was employed by newspapermen at the time to describe the various vagrants, beggars and transient labourers that thronged the roads and streets of the county.

<sup>30</sup> *Westmeath Journal*, 7 May 1829.

This list of outrages was typical of the *Journal's* recitation of the disorder in the county in any week of the decade. Armed parties of 'Rockites' were a constant presence. Graziers were usually targeted because of their policy in converting arable land to grass, thus reducing the labour force. It appears from the Whelehan case that he was being threatened for the opposite reason – the agitators required him to set out the farm in grass, although it is more probable that the word 'not' was inadvertently dropped from the phrase 'to set out a farm in grazing'. Strange workmen would have been employed during the haymaking in June, and Whelehan, it would appear, had taken on 'Connachtmen', contravening the rules of the enforcers.

The effect of local combinations on the business of the transport companies will be assessed in detail in a later chapter but the case of Edward Donohue, turf merchant, must be considered here. The borderlands of south Meath and east Westmeath are covered in large tracts of peat bog. The Royal Canal was constructed to run through this low-lying, featureless country due to the absence of natural obstacles. The opening of this new artery of trade provided an impetus for many traders who grasped the opportunity to expand their business with the towns to the east and particularly to Dublin. Among these were the turf merchants. Their unwieldy product was difficult to transport in bulk on the roads of the time but the canal barge could take many cartloads at a cheap rate.<sup>31</sup>

Traders such as Donohue were heavily dependent on the canal for storage space pending loading. The Dublin trade was a commodity like any other and Donohue would have to bid and compete for his share of the market. The story in the *Journal* did not illustrate the background to this particular outrage – Kidd was always averse to prying too deeply into such matters – but it may be surmised that Donohue had ignored several warnings, that he was not a paid-up member of the local Ribbon Society, and that he was being excluded from the commercial turf business. The Royal Canal Company contractors could count themselves fortunate that Donohue's turf had not already been loaded when the incendiaries arrived. The barge would

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<sup>31</sup> *Railway Commissioners report*, p. 15; H.C. 1837 – 38 (145) xxxv.419; Ruth Delany, *Ireland's Royal Canal, 1780 – 1992* (Dublin, 1992), p. 114.

have just as easily formed part of the conflagration. Some years later a turf boat was burned at Thomastown Harbour under similar suspicious circumstance.<sup>32</sup>

The burning of the house at Inon, a townland now unknown, having disappeared during the process of making the 6-inch map, was not an event of particular import. Thatched roofs and open hearths were a highly flammable combination in the labourer's cabins of the 1830s and many such incidents were immediately attributed to the Ribbonmen by police and magistrates anxious to inflate their crime statistics, thus justifying their own positions, or by tenants attempting to construct a claim for compensation from county funds.<sup>33</sup> In later decades, when police reporting was more meticulous it would be possible to allocate such incidents to their proper place in the crime records, but the Inon fire must be consigned to the file of doubtful cases.

A listing of outrages in the weekly press is incomplete without an account, in graphic detail, of a riot at a fair. Moate, in the south of the county, halfway between Kilbeggan and Athlone on the main east – west highway, was a typical one-street town and the venue for an extensive monthly fair. The *Journal* report of 'serious rioting', together with a mention of the victim whose skull was broken, followed the usual format; the police and magistrates restored order, culprits were apprehended and court proceedings would follow.<sup>34</sup> The Irish social phenomenon known as faction fighting does not figure in descriptions of the serious disturbances at these fairs and markets in the county. Violence was random, recreational and fuelled by liberal supplies of cheap whiskey. According to some commentators the official policy up to the mid-1830s was to 'stand back and let them at it'; the theory being that while the warring factions were locked in mortal combat the police could stay out of harm's way and tidy up the residue of dead and wounded when the battle was over.<sup>35</sup> This attitude was to change with the advent at Dublin Castle in 1835 of 'that exact Scotchman' Thomas Drummond as undersecretary.<sup>36</sup> The constabulary strength in

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<sup>32</sup> *Westmeath Guardian*, 9 Aug. 1839.

<sup>33</sup> Brian Griffin, *Sources for the study of crime in Ireland* (Dublin, 2005), pp 23 – 26. The state of the country papers frequently reflect the anxious state of mind of magistrates, yeomanry officers, policemen, members of the gentry and other loyalists....

<sup>34</sup> *Westmeath Journal*, 7 May 1829.

<sup>35</sup> Patrick O'Donnell, *The Irish faction fighters of the 19<sup>th</sup> century* (Dublin, 1975), p. 22.

<sup>36</sup> R. Barry O'Brien, *Fifty years of concessions to Ireland, 1831 – 1881* (2 vols, London, 1883), 1, 543.



Moate in that summer of 1829 was one chief constable, three constables and six sub-constables.<sup>37</sup>

The state of the county on the eve of the new decade may best be set out by a survey of the proceedings of the assizes court held in the new courthouse in Mullingar in March of 1830. The only surviving record of the court, which disposed of the list in three days over the Friday, Saturday and Monday, can be found in the *Westmeath Journal* of 11 March.<sup>38</sup> Disregarding the standard choleric asides, which were part and parcel of Kidd's editorial style, it is possible to extract a fair estimate of the state of law and order, the application of the criminal law and the engagement of the various strata of society in the county with the due process.

The judge, the Right Hon. Lord Plunkett arrived in town on the Thursday evening, under the protection of a mounted police escort. The grand jury was sworn in on Friday morning. Sir Richard Levinge of Knockdrin Castle was foreman and Robert Smyth of Drumcree was high sheriff. The other twenty-one members were the gentlemen of the county, indistinguishable from any list of the previous century. Lord Plunkett congratulated the members on the light list of criminal cases before him; the tranquil state of the county was a credit to them, but he could not say the same for the town of Mullingar. His quarters for the previous night adjoined some of the more disorderly houses on the main street. During the entire night he was awakened by continuous screaming, yelling and other noises, caused by consumption of whiskey. He was not surprised to hear that a murder had been committed during that night.

He then adjourned proceedings until Saturday morning when the criminal cases were dealt with expeditiously. Two brothers, Galvins, were accused of stealing two sheep. The mutton, suet and skin had been found hidden in their house; one was found guilty and sentenced to be transported for seven years, the other was acquitted for lack of evidence. Two soldiers, Healy and White and a woman, Mary Jackson, were charged with robbery. They met a weaver, Hanlon, on the street and invited him into Mr. Fielding's public house. After several whiskeys he took out his money, 31s.

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<sup>37</sup> *Return of constabulary police in Ireland*. H.C. 1830 (498), xxix.269.

<sup>38</sup> *Westmeath Journal*, 11 Mar. 1830.

2d.1/2 in coins, a considerable amount in these days, to pay for the drink. The soldiers then took him to another, more disreputable house – Fielding was also the superintendent of Mullingar gaol and therefore his premises would not suit the transaction they had in mind. There Hanlon was plied with more liquor and further enticed to accompany them back to the barracks where he could ‘lie with the corporal’s sister’. At this point Hanlon decided to run for cover but the three accused tripped him and robbed him of all his coins. After evidence from an army officer of the good character of the two soldiers all three were sentenced to death for highway robbery.

Edward Gill was accused of assaulting a man whom he encountered crossing the bog of Coole. He took a gun, which the victim was taking home from the gunsmith. Gill was sentenced to death for robbery from the person. Patrick Connor and Anne Reilly got twelve months imprisonment for larceny. William Walsh was transported for seven years for the same offence. Peter Mulligan got twelve months for assault with felonious intent – this case involved the attempted rape of a thirteen-year-old girl. Thomas Keegan received a twelve-month sentence with hard labour for appearing armed at night. There were two cases of uttering base coin, both receiving six months sentences, one with hard labour.

If these cases are to be taken as a sample of the workings of the judicial system in the county it is arguable that tranquillity was indeed the order of the day as proposed by Lord Plunkett. There was only one offence with even a tinge of rebellion, that of Keegan for appearing armed at night. The crime of larceny attracted a wide range of sentences. Three of the Mullingar accused were imprisoned for twelve months, a fourth was transported; yet they could all have received the death penalty. In the previous eight years twenty people had been hanged for larceny and housebreaking.<sup>39</sup> The two soldiers and their lady friend, sentenced to death for highway robbery, were also in some jeopardy; although a drunken wrangle over a few half-crowns on the pathway over the Green Bridge would seem a harmless enough offence, nevertheless,

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<sup>39</sup> *Select committee on state of the poor in Ireland*, abstract, p. 146. H.C. 1830 (667) vol. vii .1.

highway robbery had been punished by the full rigour of execution in twenty four cases since 1822.<sup>40</sup>

While capital punishment for a wide range of offences was to remain on the statute books for many years, by 1830 a more lenient regime was in operation. Most sentences were being commuted, not to life imprisonment, which would have placed an intolerable strain on the county gaols of the country, but to the much more politically accepted strategy of transportation to the colonies of New South Wales and Van Diemen's Land. Of the two hundred and twenty-four capital sentences sent down in 1829 in Ireland, only thirty-eight were carried out.<sup>41</sup> Five men had been condemned at Mullingar assizes in 1823 for breaking into a house and cutting off the ear of the owner. Four days before they were due to be executed a respite was received from Dublin Castle.<sup>42</sup> This was the standard stay of execution pending transportation. There was no further report on a public hanging which would undoubtedly have occupied many column inches in the *Journal*. Evidence from court reporting of the Mullingar assizes indicates that judges resorted to sentencing prisoners to transportation for the most trivial of offences. At the March assizes of 1829 Mary Moorcroft, charged with stealing a piece of calico from a shop in Athlone, was transported for seven years. Margaret Curley 'an unfortunate girl of the town' stole a watch from a gentleman of her acquaintance and was transported, also for seven years. Bridget Atkins, found guilty of stealing nine yards of friese, only got four months. The reports do not specify the ages of the defendants but it is probable that Moorcroft and Curley were young and healthy and that Atkins was older and therefore of little use as a servant or wife in Van Diemen's Land.<sup>43</sup> By 1835 the scarcity of female servants in the Australian colonies had reached crisis point. The committee for the emigration of females, chaired in London by Edward Forster was taking half-page advertising space in the *Westmeath Journal* and, no doubt, in other provincial organs, promising free, government-assisted, passage to single women and widows of from fifteen to thirty years of age. Work was plentiful, 'comfortable situations' were guaranteed and the disparity between the sexes being so great,

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> *Westmeath Journal*, 18 Sept. 1823.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 19 Mar. 1829.

marriage prospects were far beyond what they could hope for in these crowded islands.<sup>44</sup>

The gentry of the county were, as a matter of course, cast in the role of controllers and arbitrators through their monopoly of the magistracy, the grand jury and the Established clergy. It is therefore of some interest to discover, again through the court reports of the *Journal*, that some of the most hard-fought and revealing cases in both assizes and higher tribunals involved the foremost landed families in the county. The sessions in Mullingar of March 1829, having disposed of the riff-raff of the county gaol, turned its attention to an intended murder and assault. The accused was John Edward Piers, son of Sir John Piers, baronet, a member of the grand jury which had been sworn in just days before. The prosecutor was James Cox, Esq., gamekeeper to Richard Malone of Baronstown. Both protagonists were on grouse-shooting parties coursing the bogs of Baronstown and Sonna, which belonged to Hugh Morgan Tuite. Piers objected to the presence of Cox, shouting that he alone had permission to shoot over the stretch of ground, to which Cox replied that he would not be spoken to in such an overbearing tone. After some name-calling and threats, Piers struck Cox on the head with a loaded horsewhip, knocking him senseless. There was some discussion on the following morning about a proposal to resolve the matter in the time-honoured 'pistols at ten paces', but this came to nothing and the case came to court. Piers was acquitted on the charge of attempted murder but found guilty on two assault charges and sentenced to six months on each charge, to run consecutively, so serving twelve months.<sup>45</sup>

That this case, with its social implications for all concerned, was brought to a public court shows that some aspects of modern civil procedure were at work among the elites of County Westmeath. One generation earlier a duel, probably with fatal consequences, would have settled the matter to the satisfaction of all sides, but by 1830 the proper legalities had become the norm and the law took its course. The court did allow due deference to the high status of the accused in the leniency of the sentence; if any of the previous miscreants before the court in that session had struck an opponent on the head in a whiskey-fuelled public house row using a loaded

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<sup>44</sup> *Westmeath Guardian*, 14 May 1835.

<sup>45</sup> *Westmeath Journal*, 11 Mar. 1830.

horsewhip the outcome would surely have been, at the very least, a one-way trip to Australia.

The gentry and the clergy of the county could generally be expected to observe public decorum in the face of the chaotic condition of the lower classes. The brittle façade of upper class respectability was, however, again shattered in the spring of 1830 in a civil action before the chief justice in Dublin. Percy Nugent of Donore took an action against Rev. John Coghlan for trespass. The story was published in the *Freeman's Journal* and copied shortly thereafter by the *Westmeath Journal*.<sup>46</sup> The most singular aspect of this case was that both litigants came from the same side of the religious divide. Percy Nugent was the main landowner of the area, a picturesque stretch of farmland, woodland and water on the eastern shore of Lough Derravarragh. He traced his patrimony back to a grant of land in the time of Charles 1.<sup>47</sup> The Catholic branch of the family had clung to their land ever since and he was now a leading member of the Nugent dynasty. He was, according to his counsel, 'living at the family mansion, acted as a magistrate for the county, took his place upon the grand jury and exercised all the rights of royalty over the estates'.<sup>48</sup> His opponent in the case, Rev. Coghlan, was the parish priest of Multyfarnham, the Catholic parish of which the mansion of Donore was the centrepiece.

Hare coursing was a popular sport in the county at this time. It was cheaper than foxhunting, involving the use of a few well-trained dogs. Horses were not required; the hunters followed the dogs on foot.<sup>49</sup> Coghlan was an enthusiastic participant in hare-coursing and, according to the evidence, was in the habit of leading the tenantry of the estate in chases across the lakeside pathways and woodlands, much to the annoyance of the Nugents. For several years they had remonstrated, warned, posted notices of 'no trespass' and latterly employed a gamekeeper to enforce their rights of 'free chase and free warren' according to the deed of Charles 1. The gamekeeper, apparently rendered incapable of dealing with Coghlan, being a member of his congregation, failed miserably in his duties. Coghlan, after a successful hunt, called to his house and presented him with two dead hares, with instructions to convey them

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 1 Apr. 1830.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., Nugent's evidence to the court.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Edward F. Dease, *History of the Westmeath Hunt* (Dublin, 1898), pp 107 – 112.

up to the Big House where they would make a dinner ‘for that starved house of Donore.’ This piece of theatre provoked an altercation with Thomas Nugent, younger brother of the owner, and Coghlan then took the argument onto a much higher plain with the remark – ‘you would turn me off! you, indeed, Tommy Nugent! You are no Nugent, but a base-born bastard’. At this point, as in the *Piers v Cox* case, pistols at ten paces were proposed by Coghlan but the Nugents preferred the legal route; proceedings were instituted and a figure of £1,000 damages was set. The defence could only produce the rather flimsy argument that the reverend gentleman had been given a turf bank on the estate which entitled him to free passage to Cloneve bog and that himself and Nugent had coursed together in more congenial circumstances in former years.

The judge was about to start his summation of the case for the jury when the defence conceded and offered an apology. Percy Nugent, from his place on the bench, accepted, stating that his objective was only the preservation of his property rights and atonement for the past. Coghlan then, in a tone almost inaudible, regretted that he had offended Mr. Nugent, promised never to trespass again and further promised to repeat this statement from his alter at Multyfarnham. Thus ended a very expensive piece of litigation concerning the harmless pursuit of game over a few overgrown trackways and lakeshore gravel banks.

The remarks made by Lord Plunkett regarding the lawless condition of the town of Mullingar provoked a serious debate in the columns of the *Journal*, commencing with a long editorial analysis of the current state of the town and outlining the deficiencies in municipal arrangements that had left it in chaos.<sup>50</sup> Drunken vagabonds roamed the streets; there was a great concourse of idle and dissolute persons, flocking together for a more determined pursuance of vice, immorality and profligacy. The public houses, ‘the yawning doors of the never-closing whiskey houses’, were heavily criticised. The streets were in a disgraceful state, dirty and ill regulated, blocked by nuisances. The pathways were impassable due to ‘dangerous holes and gulphs’. While the countryside around was progressing in order, peacefulness and propriety, in

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<sup>50</sup> *Westmeath Journal*, 17 Mar. 1830.

the midst of all this peace, order, prosperity and wealth Mullingar presented an appearance of culpable neglect.

The editor then turned his attention to the causes. First he instanced the want of a magistrate who resided in the town. The nearest magistrate at this time was John Lyons of Ledeston, a landowner, whose mansion of the northern point of Lough Ennell was about two Irish miles away. He was not a resident magistrate of the later type of full-time official, but it would appear from the editor's remarks that he was negligent in his supervision of the town. The constabulary had not exerted themselves and there was a shameful laxity in enforcing restrictions on the sale of drink. The natural depravity of the lower classes, some thought, was at the heart of the problem.

Lyons was not slow in taking issue with these accusations. He responded with a detailed rebuttal of all allegations against him, which was published two weeks later.<sup>51</sup> He demanded to know if it was his duty to arrest drunken rioters or to apprehend squalling prostitutes 'who were at present more numerous than ever in the town'. He had issued orders regularly to the chief constable to have nuisances abated and prevented but he could not be expected to go around the streets at twelve o'clock at night closing public houses and impounding pigs. He quoted the constabulary patrol reports laid before the magistrates at petty sessions. With only one exception the reports invariably ran; 'patrolled the town and suburbs, found all regular'. The police were therefore responsible for the dilapidated and depraved state of Mullingar but the strength of the force was insufficient for the enforcement of all the regulations specified in their book of instructions. There were thirteen men in the barracks including the chief constable, who did not, of course, patrol himself. One constable was fully employed as his servant, another as his clerk; the stable man was so busy looking after the horses and equipment that he counted as only half a man. Two men were on the sick list and incapable of performing any duty and one man, a carpenter, was fully employed in house repairs in the town but did an occasional duty. Counting him as another half man this left seven men to do the duty of Mullingar.

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 1 Apr. 1830.



John Lyons was an experienced magistrate with thirteen years service. His account of the town's police force must be taken as an accurate description of its strength and capabilities. The force had taken up duty in Mullingar six years earlier and would have had an established routine in the maintenance of peace. The 'fully fledged professional police force' promised in the legislation of 1822 had not come to fruition in Mullingar.<sup>52</sup> The town was, at this point, in great need of all the professional policing expertise it could get. The assistant barrister issued a warning at the quarter session that 'the system of outrage which is now so prevalent in the town of Mullingar must be put down.'<sup>53</sup> Michael Alin, returning to town from a race meeting at Walshestown, had been set upon by a party of fellows and brutally murdered. His cousin was severely injured, knew the assailants but refused to divulge names, being in great fear of 'the system'.<sup>54</sup> Seven warrants had been issued but no great hopes were entertained of any success in apprehending the perpetrators. A week later a large party of men attacked a house in the town, beside the canal harbour.<sup>55</sup> They were armed with pistols and blunderbusses. Having threatened a servant they made off with cash and furniture. Again, no information was forthcoming on their identities. Neither of these outrages were likely to appear on Lord Plunkett's list for trial at the next assizes. His comforting remarks to the grand jury at the last session must be viewed in the light of a continuous and long-standing policy among victims and the general public to 'say nothing'. His list may have been light but there were other lists and other tribunals abroad in that turbulent year.

In conclusion, Dublin Castle, having established, trained and deployed a modern police force, reformed the magistracy and revived the yeomanry, could have expected an improvement in the behaviour of the population. Parliament in London, it would appear from reports, was also optimistic that some equilibrium had been achieved. The next chapter sets out to discern whether these comforting theories had any basis in fact.

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<sup>52</sup> Connolly, 'Union government', p. 71.

<sup>53</sup> *Westmeath Journal*, 22 Apr. 1830.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 13 May 1830.

#### CHAPTER 4: A LOYAL AND TRANQUIL COUNTY?

The administration in London were undoubtedly greatly relieved to read the conclusions arrived at in the report of the select committee that had enquired into the state of the poor in Ireland in 1829.<sup>1</sup> They reported with a note of great satisfaction that several measures already in operation had produced favourable results. The improvement in the operation of the police, the revision of the magistracy, the establishment of petty sessions and the principles of appointment of assistant barristers had all been productive of the most beneficial consequences. Witnesses had testified on the Tithe Composition Act, which had been carried into effect as extensively as could be expected during the short time since its passing. The distillery laws had promoted tranquillity in the country and a new valuation and land survey was under way which would provide a more equal levy on occupiers. Witnesses had noted the increase in slated houses, agricultural implements and cheap calico.<sup>2</sup>

The committee admitted that some problem areas still required further work. Relations between landlord and tenant were being put at great risk by the minute subdivision of land. They could not propose a solution to the extreme difficulty of preventing this great evil. All intermediate middlemen had powers of distraint; legal remedies could not be devised. The grand jury presentment system was now to be properly supervised but it was still imperfect.

The report ended with an optimistic forecast that the restored state of tranquillity in the country would allow for an introduction of different branches of manufacture, and should it fortunately continue uninterrupted, the best hopes might be entertained, that by furnishing employment to the poorest classes, one of the great incentives to disturbances might be permanently removed. The county of Westmeath was not represented by any of the thirty expert witnesses called by the committee. The chairman was Thomas Spring-Rice, a Limerick landowner, ennobled as Lord Monteagle, who in later years was famously lampooned by O'Connell as 'Lord

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<sup>1</sup> *Select committee on the poor in Ireland, report.* H.C. 1830 (667) vii. 173.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.

Mountgoose' and many of the witnesses had Munster connections.<sup>3</sup> The members were greatly impressed by the evidence of progress on the estate of Lord Headley in north Kerry – 'so interesting and so instructive that Your Committee insert it as part of their report'<sup>4</sup> James Doyle, Roman Catholic bishop of Kildare and Leighlin, better known by the title, J.K.L., appended to his many missives to all and sundry, appeared on behalf of his congregation.<sup>5</sup> He relayed the horrific scenes of starvation and disease that were endemic throughout his diocese. The committee, although suitably impressed, hoped that these extreme conditions were the exception, the inference being that Doyle had overstated his case.<sup>6</sup>

Another witness, Arthur Guinness, a Dublin brewer, described a situation in and around Dublin that was more comforting to the members. He paid his common labourers eleven or twelve shillings per week and his more advanced men were on thirteen to sixteen shillings.<sup>7</sup> He employed some farm labourers. 'I happen to have a good deal of land about my house two miles from the end of the town', he explained. He paid them eight shillings per week, and in winter he gave them a ton of coal. He supplied a free cottage, it being handy to have four or five men about the place. Guinness was asked about holidays and he said that 'there are not many Roman Catholic holidays kept in my neighbourhood'.<sup>8</sup> Being a director of the Bank of Ireland he could testify that labourers returning from seasonal work in England arrived at their premises in College Green with ten or twelve guineas in gold.<sup>9</sup> Thus, the committee heard two very different accounts of the state of the poor in Ireland. Doyle and Guinness both laid out the position as they had encountered it on the ground. Both had told the committee the true state of affairs, relying on their information and observations, and neither account could be contradicted. They were, however, dealing with two different social systems. Guinness would have been well aware of the destitution in the town of which he was one of the most prosperous tradesmen. His name appears on every list of subscribers to mendicity associations

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<sup>3</sup> W.J. Fitzpatrick (ed.), *The correspondence of Daniel O'Connell* (2 vols, London, 1888), 1, 427.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.

<sup>5</sup> MacDonagh, 'The economy and society, 1830 – 45' p. 220, on Doyle regarding the inability of the gentry to reduce their establishments to fit shrunken incomes.

<sup>6</sup> *Select committee on poor in Ireland*, 1<sup>st</sup> report p. 4. H.C. 1830 (667) vii. 173.

<sup>7</sup> *Select committee on poor in Ireland*, p. 18. H.C. 1830 (589) vii. 173.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19.

and relief committees of the period.<sup>10</sup> Doyle, as head of one of the more advantaged dioceses, would have moved in upper-class company and would have been on familiar terms with the landed gentry. He would not have been blind to the modernisation then afoot in the country. These two testimonials must be taken as two sides of the same coin; destitution and want among the rural majority and the wandering mendicants, vagrants and beggars of the streets, alongside the reasonably secure Protestant families of the towns.

As spring turned into early summer of 1830 the elite of the county could have congratulated themselves regarding the progress in stabilising their society. The chattering classes would have derived great amusement from the reports – very salacious and detailed – of the divorce case of the marquis of Westmeath and his marchioness; she, of course, being the wronged and innocent party.<sup>11</sup> The case being heard in the House of Lords, it was a national *cause célèbre*. The Manchester weavers were massing on the streets again, amid fears of serious disturbance. Among the worst paid of these weavers were the itinerant Irish, only employed on coarse cloth and totally destitute during the current recession in trade.<sup>12</sup> Sir John Piers and Richard Malone of Baronstown were penning long letters to the editor on the subject of game licenses and franchise rights, probably stirred into action as a direct result of the recent scandalous court proceedings provoked by events on their property, as already described.<sup>13</sup> The applications for the new freehold franchise continued to pour in to the court office.<sup>14</sup> The black edging of the pages of the *Journal* proclaimed the death of the old king at Windsor.<sup>15</sup>

On 1 July the first indications of trouble appeared in the local news column of the *Journal*.<sup>16</sup> There was no banner heading; potatoes were making 7*d.* per stone at the last market in Mullingar and there was some distress among the poor. The market for

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<sup>10</sup> *Freeman's Journal*, 1 Jan. 1830, The Strangers Friend Society, donations received and acknowledged by Arthur Guinness Esq., James's Gate; Swift's Alley school for fourteen helpless children, Arthur Guinness contributed £2; *Westmeath Guardian*, 31 Jan. 1835, fund for relief of poor in Dublin, list of contributors included Arthur Guinness, John Power and John Jameson.

<sup>11</sup> *Westmeath Journal*, 15 Apr. 1830.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.* 29 Apr. 1830.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* 27 May 1830, the Piers v Malone case on hunting rights.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.* 17 June 1830.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.* 1 July 1830.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

potatoes had not varied much above or below 3*d.* per stone for several years and now within the space of a month the price had doubled. July and August had always been known as ‘the hungry months’ in rural Ireland and the potato market was the main barometer of the severity to be expected before the new crop came to market in early September.<sup>17</sup> There were ominous signs the following week when a meeting of inhabitants was held in the town. A committee was formed for the relief of the poor and, in a manoeuvre that was to become common-place in the catastrophe of the next decade, the funds solicited from the town were to be collected by Hon. and Rev. Mr. Browne, the rector, and Rev. Mr. Kelly, the parish priest. The countess of Belvedere weighed in with a contribution of £20.<sup>18</sup>

In the following month the *Journal* catalogued the increasingly desperate plight of the lower classes of the country. From all parts reports were relayed by local newspapermen, all relating similar tales of starvation. The July fair of Mullingar reflected the trend in the market. The trade had seldom been worse, with few buyers at any price.<sup>19</sup> The *Cork Constitution* reported ‘distress in the south’; there was a desperate famine in Carrick on Suir and in Clonmel the poor were depending on relief committees. In Limerick a shipment of oatmeal had arrived, to be sold cheap, so that no more rioting would be expected. As Cormac Ó Gráda has explained: ‘.....the potato had become both the staple food of the poor and the linch-pin of the whole system of tillage, without which corn-growing on a large scale would not have been possible’.<sup>20</sup> Large areas of the midlands and the south were, apparently, experiencing a major failure in the potato crop. Starvation among the farm labourers would compromise the wheat and oats harvest, at that time a most labour intensive, flail and sicle business, leading to a general economic downturn. Such failures in the agricultural economy had previously resulted in an upsurge in rural unrest and were always likely to spawn a new campaign against the landed classes, the administration or the Established Church.<sup>21</sup> Connolly’s argument that the unrest of this period was due to the demise of the controlling influence of the Catholic Association and

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<sup>17</sup> MacDonagh, ‘The economy and society’, p. 222, on the decline in the quality of the potato and the stretching of the summer hunger gap.

<sup>18</sup> *Westmeath Journal*, 8 July 1830.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> Ó Gráda, ‘Poverty, population and agriculture’, p. 112.

<sup>21</sup> Broeker, *Rural disorder and police reform*, p. 7.

disillusionment with the lack of progress in the promised social change must be set against the real and immediate threat of famine as the source of rebellion.<sup>22</sup>

Economic conditions, as described by Connolly, were certainly one of the motivating factors in the incidence of outrage and commotion, but they were never the main motivation. Eighteen-Twenty-Four had been a good year for agriculture in Westmeath. The *Journal* reported that the level of trade at the midsummer fair had not been equalled for many years. Horses were in great demand; the army was competing with foreign buyers for the choicest 'longtails'. Black cattle, the local breed, were making very satisfactory prices; lambs were half a guinea to 14s., and wool was 15s.-16s. per stone. The day was fine, business was brisk and there was not the slightest disposition to riot. The only blot on an otherwise most peaceful and prosperous event was a drowning in the canal. Laurence Loughrey, while walking home, fell in while in a most intoxicated state, according to the inquest.<sup>23</sup> Yet, regardless of all this reporting of the good times in Mullingar, less than five miles out the road towards Castletown Delvin, a familiar scene was played out. A small farmer, James Gavigan, had recently taken a tenancy on the estate of Robert Cooke of Cookesborough. The farmhouse was burned to the ground in the night. Gavigan, his wife and ten children barely escaped with their lives. The house was only newly built, the previous one having been burned down during an outrage after a tenant had been evicted. The constabulary had posted a reward notice promising £100 to be paid for information. The good times for agriculture in Westmeath were only a stimulus for the relentless search for land, at any price and with no regard for the consequences, of which Gavigan and many others fell victim.<sup>24</sup>

There were some valiant attempts at this time to introduce the business of home manufacture into Westmeath. Malone of Baronstown offered premiums to linen buyers at Ballinacarrig market.<sup>25</sup> The *Journal* editorial was profuse in its praise of this initiative; it would employ great numbers in the culture and preparation of the raw material, there were great natural facilities for the cultivation of flax and there was a pressing necessity for the introduction of such an industry to the county. A meeting

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<sup>22</sup> Connolly, 'Mass politics and sectarian conflict', p. 106.

<sup>23</sup> *Westmeath Journal*, 8 July 1824.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 24 June 1824.

of the Ladies Association was held in Mullingar in July of 1824 for the purpose of employing poor females in spinning. Subscriptions were solicited for the purchase of flax and reels. All avenues would have to be explored to meet the wretched conditions of the female peasantry.<sup>26</sup>

There is some evidence of flax growing and weaving in the south of the county in the 1820s. The 6-inch Ordnance Survey map of 1838 shows several fields and sundry open spaces labelled 'bleach-green'. Newspaper reports of court cases mentioned weavers.<sup>27</sup> The Summers family of Tyrrellspass, land agents in later times, first appear as weavers and linen merchants.<sup>28</sup> However, all this industrial promotion came too late for the 'wretched females' of Westmeath. As George Ensor, a landlord from Armagh, explained to the select committee on the poor in 1829, a woman engaged in domestic spinning in his county was reduced to earning 1*d.* per day. The application of new machinery from England had transformed linen production from a home based, lucrative source of income to a highly mechanised factory industry.<sup>29</sup>

Richard Malone was not to gain much credit for his efforts to promote the linen business around his estate. In June of 1825 he was posting reward notices offering a £100 reward for the apprehension of several persons who forcibly entered his stable yard, took a double-barrelled gun, a pistol and a powder horn. His stable boy, who was asleep in his quarters in the stable, was roughly handled and could not identify any of the assailants. Hugh Tuite, a neighbour, offered a further £100 and there was a list of smaller contributions from Malone's tenantry. This was published in the *Journal*.<sup>30</sup> There is a sense of unreality about such lists, which were a regular feature of the newspapers. It would have been perfectly obvious to all concerned that no information would be forthcoming in such cases, regardless of the amount of reward money offered. The tenants subscribed their 10*s.* or £1 on the basis that it

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<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 22 July 1824.

<sup>27</sup> *Westmeath Journal*, 13 Oct. 1831, auction of Oldtown Lodge, 2 acres of flax in stack; *Westmeath Guardian*, 9 July 1835, assault on Jones, a weaver by trade.

<sup>28</sup> N.L.I. S/L 187 – 8. D26.197, Boyd Rochfort papers, lease of 2 May 1809 to Richard Summers, linen merchant, house and garden in Tyrrellspass.

<sup>29</sup> *Select committee on the poor, 1830*, H.C. 1830 (667) vii.1. Evidence of George Ensor, 3<sup>rd</sup> report pp 437 – 487.

<sup>30</sup> *Westmeath Journal*, 9 June 1825.



would never be claimed. The landlord, with his ostentatious notice, kept up the pretence that he was in control of the outlawry of his area. The neighbouring gentry hastened to show their solidarity on the understanding that, when next they were faced by a similar predicament, they could expect the compliment to be returned. The tenantry had shown suitable deference to their master and the Ribbonmen carried on their campaigns unhindered by informants. Malone was to adopt similar procedures five years later. In December of 1830 his wood ranger, John Maguire, was murdered by a gang of men who attacked him in the town of Ballinacarrig. His notice, posted in the *Journal* of 16 December, promised a £100 reward. Tuite's contribution was £20 and there were fifty contributions of £1.<sup>31</sup>

On 3 June 1830 the *Journal* featured a brief piece among its less noteworthy news items. A vestry meeting in St. Patrick's parish in the townland of Waterford had decided on an applotment of 1/4d.<sup>32</sup> Catholics had appeared at the meeting in great numbers and had used their majority to vote the nominal amount of a farthing as the basis of the tithe. Oliver MacDonagh, in his article on economy and society places the opening of the Tithe War at a riot in Graiguenamanagh in November, but the vestry meeting in Waterford must rank at least as an opening skirmish.<sup>33</sup> The editor had good reason for his reticence on this meeting. The natural resistance to payment of tithes was now being harnessed by O'Connell and his aides; 'participation and manipulation', according to MacDonagh.<sup>34</sup> The Waterford vestry meeting did not attract the attention of parliamentary scrutiny but a similar event in Youghal during that same Easter week was the subject of some anxious attention in parliament.<sup>35</sup> An account of the proceedings was printed as a parliamentary report. Catholics had been excluded from the Easter Monday meeting when an applotment of £136 17s. 0d. was voted for salaries, coal, candles, wine and repairs to the church, all the exclusive business of the Protestant congregation according to law. The civil business of the vestry was dealt with on the following day. Catholics were admitted and were

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<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 16 Dec. 1830.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 3 June 1830.

<sup>33</sup> MacDonagh, 'The economy and society', p. 222.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 160.

<sup>35</sup> *A return of the several sums of money assessed in the parish of Youghal by vestries holden in Easter Week in the year 1830; distinguishing the purpose for which each sum was assessed, and also distinguishing the sum assessed by the vestry at which Catholics were by law excluded, or supposed to be excluded, from voting, from those at which the Catholic inhabitants were entitled to vote.* H.C. 1830 (524), xxxi. 317.

entitled to vote. A total of £2 6s. 0d. was approved, £2 2s. 0d. for repairs to the church clock, 1s. for foundlings, 1s for coffins for the poor, 1s. for the vestry clerk's salary and 1s. for fees incurred in the collection of the tithe. The report noted that the Catholic members did not accept the first item, the repair of the church clock. While the Youghal meeting did not result in the same derisory applotment as the Waterford vestry it was by now very apparent to Westminster that the Irish tithes crisis was about to run out of the control of Dublin Castle. Dissatisfaction over tithe had been in gestation for most of the 1820s. Goulburn, the chief secretary, had attempted to defuse the controversy in 1823 by his tithe composition legislation, which proposed to eliminate the more objectionable aspects of the tithe laws. Individual parishes were to be allowed to take up his new system, in which, instead of assessment and collection annually by the tithe proctors, an agreed value for three years would be paid. A crucial element of the new arrangement was the inclusion of grassland, hitherto exempt. Previously an uneven levy was exacted, based on wheat and oats, set at very high wartime prices. Potatoes were chargeable in Munster, southern counties of Leinster and the Foyle valley in Derry and Donegal.<sup>36</sup>

Westmeath was not a major centre of tithe disturbance. The county north of the eskers, as described earlier, was grassland. Some wheat and oats crops were grown in the eastern baronies and potatoes were exempt. Nevertheless, every parish had a tithe applotment. The question of the Established Church in Ireland and its revenue was a continuous source of debate in London. One of several select committees discovered that the diocese of Meath had 214 parishes, 103 of which had a clergyman allocated.<sup>37</sup> A witness at the committee, a Dublin lawyer, gave expert testimony based on long experience, on the methods of tithe collection. The proctor set up his office in the sessions town, a public house was generally the venue and in most cases he happened to be the publican. He took whatever cash was tendered and the balance was secured by a new promissory note at a usurious rate of interest. The full weight of the tithe payment fell on the poor cottier and small farmer, who grew cereal crops in order to pay his rent. The landlord and the grazier were untouched. They had a

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<sup>36</sup> *Bill to amend church rate laws in Ireland*, H.C. 1823 (87), 1.591, appended map; Jenkins, *Henry Goulburn*, p.158. The bill was watered down, and what remained was a complicated and cumbersome procedure for temporary compositions.

<sup>37</sup> H.C. 1831 – 32 (663), xxii.181, *Select committee of lords on collection and payment of tithes in Ireland*, H.C. 1831 – 32 (663), xxii.181; Diocese of Meath, H.C. 1831 – 32 (663), xxii.181.

direct interest in opposing the act, which would tax them and relieve the poor corn-growers.<sup>38</sup>

By the end of September 1830 the parish of Mullingar was reaching crisis point in the tithe dispute. It would have been open to the vestry in any year since Goulburn's act seven years earlier to adopt the new arrangements and broaden the list of tithe payers. The vestry had refused to do so. A special vestry had been held in January 1825 with William Middleton in the chair at which the members had voted unanimously to reject any composition of either rectoral or vicarial tithes. The parish was one of many throughout the county in which the tithes were partly owned by various jobbers and authorities. The Mullingar tithes were set at £800, £415 of which was payable to the Bluecoat School, later named Kings Hospital, in Dublin and the remainder to the vicar.<sup>39</sup> The Rev. Thomas Robinson of Annville, the rector, did not attend. He sent his curate, Rev. Robert Ryan. The Bluecoat School had leased on their portion of the tithe to a jobber who was represented by a local land agent, John Hynds. Both Ryan and Hynds were authorised to comply with the provisions of the act but in the face of the obdurate resistance of the vestrymen the meeting had to be adjourned *sine die*.<sup>40</sup> It would seem that the landed classes of the parish were not prepared to yield an inch on their opposition to any measure that affected their income. They were unlikely to have grown wheat or oats inside their demesne walls and the tithe proctor had no recourse to them in the event of a default among their tenantry. They chose to ignore an ominous development in an adjoining parish some weeks earlier. Samuel Robinson of Ballinagore, a local tithe proctor and summons server, was set upon on the road near Kilbeggan on his way to serve civil bills in Moate and brutally murdered by a large mob. He had survived several assassination attempts already. The *Journal* noted mournfully that he was in reduced circumstances, having earlier been a member of the landed class. He had distinguished himself as a member of the Kilbeggan Yeomanry during the Ninety-Eight rebellion and was a sad loss to the loyal people of south Westmeath.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., evidence of Pierce Mahony, p. 171.

<sup>39</sup> Lewis, *Topographical dictionary*, vol. 2, Mullingar.

<sup>40</sup> *Westmeath Journal*, 6 Jan. 1825.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 14 Oct. 1824.

The proceeds of the tithes were the subject of much commercial ‘jobbery’ in the county. The word always carried connotations of corruption, sinecures and ‘fixers’. An advertisement notice in the *Journal* of May 1823 illustrates the point.<sup>42</sup> The court of chancery was adjudicating in a case between Humphrey Minchin, plaintiff, and Sir John B. Piers, defendant. The commodity to be let to the highest bidder was the tithe of seven parishes in the west of the county. Goulburn’s act made no attempt to deal with the ‘jobbery’ inherent in such a system. As S.J. Connolly put it, even if all the malfunctions and anomalies had been eliminated from the tithe tax ‘the act did nothing to remove the essential anomaly of a tax intended for the support of the Church of Ireland, being levied on a predominately Catholic population’.<sup>43</sup>

By September of 1830 the vestrymen of Mullingar were being subjected to the most extreme pressure to alter their stance on the question of composition.<sup>44</sup> The lord mayor of Dublin led a delegation representing the Bluecoat School to attend upon the vestry and to treat with the parishioners, or failing an agreement, to offer the tithes of the parish for letting by public competition. The vestry chose to ignore the threatening tone of the deputation, agreement could not be reached and the next issue of the *Journal* carried a notice by the King’s Hospital, offering the rectoral tithes of Mullingar on a twenty-one year lease, payable six months in advance, sealed tenders to be received by 1 January.

The editor could not allow such an eruption in the settled loyal community of the parish to go unnoticed. His editorial alongside the report of the vestry meeting was couched in the language of diplomacy, mentioning no names, but he regretted that the small farmers whose voice was not heard would be the sufferers, exhorting them to take warning from the last twenty years and prevent the tithes falling into the hands of jobbers. He demanded to know if it were not possible for some disinterested gentlemen to step forward and show them how they should act and save them from the consequences of being sacrificed by those who were crafty enough to have them mystified and entrapped.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 29 May 1823.

<sup>43</sup> Connolly, ‘Union government’, p. 70

<sup>44</sup> *Westmeath Journal*, 30 Sept. 1830.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

The *Journal* was, it would appear, placing itself in the unaccustomed position of being a champion of the lower classes. The inference in the editorial piece was that tithes were being paid without complaint by the long-suffering tenantry, that they were not allowed by their landlords to attend and vote as they were entitled to do at the decisive vestry, that these landowners of the parish were now allowing the tithes to fall into the hands of ruthless jobbers who would employ proctors to enforce the antiquated, unfair rules that preceded the 1823 act. Mullingar was a parish of over one hundred townlands with a considerable spread of landed estates and each of them would have taken some part in the vestry decision that had incurred the wrath of the *Journal*.

The shift in policy reflected in the editorial is noteworthy. The paper could, up to then, be relied upon to extol the virtues of property and the wisdom of the landed proprietor as the sole protector of the whole population of the county. However, as near-famine conditions appeared in the rural areas in that summer, commentators of every hue could not have failed to realise that major adjustments were imminent in the financing of the Established Church. More and more select committees, commissions and Commons debates were anxiously examining the state of Ireland. It was increasingly difficult to gainsay the relentless diagnosis of radicals like Joseph Hume, member for Aberdeen, during a debate on Goulburn's bill in 1823. Dealing with the clergy of the Church of Ireland he told the members, 'that a most important part of their duty was the cure of souls and he should be glad to know how this cure of souls was to be effected, in a parish in Ireland, by a clergyman or church dignitary, who sojourned constantly at Bath, at Cheltenham, at Paris or at Rome'? He contrasted army and navy pay with church income. 'Was army or navy pay a perpetual and unconditional assignment? it was income, to be employed only when he continued to perform his duty'. Hume concluded with the resounding declaration, 'this is no time for drones.'<sup>46</sup>

A report commissioned for Lord Morpeth at Dublin Castle in 1835 demonstrated the precarious condition of the Church of Ireland in the diocese of Meath, which included

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<sup>46</sup> *Hansard*, Geo. IV. 4. 2<sup>nd</sup> ser., vol. 8, 4 Mar. 1823.

almost all of County Westmeath.<sup>47</sup> Out of two hundred and forty-three parishes sixty-six were possessed of neither a church nor a glebe house and none of these sixty-six had more than fifty members. Nine of the listed livings were in the Mullingar area. The parish of Lynn was not included; the compilers of the list apparently counted its ancient ruin, the remains of the sixth-century monastery, as a working church.<sup>48</sup> There were several similar omissions as noted by the Royal Engineer's survey of 1837. These nine non-existent parishes, together with the many other doubtful cases, still had tithe applotments which were payable to an assortment of incumbents and lay impropiators. It could be anticipated, given the hard times of the period, that these applotments would have precipitated some violent unrest among the tenantry, but the accounts of the time, newspaper comment and court reporting, contain little information on the subject. The beneficiaries, whether clerical or lay, would surely insist on prompt and full payment. Collectors, whether agents or jobbers, still went about their business. The parish of Lickbla, on the edge of the drumlin country in the north of the county, was one of the vacant livings listed in the 1835 Parochial Benefices report. However, a survey of the parish tithe applotment book creates an impression of a viable working parish.<sup>49</sup> The tithe applotment for 1829 was made by D.W. Pollard Esq. and Rev. Richard Ryan, commissioners, on the total acreage of 4290 acres. 1<sup>st</sup> quality land, valued at £2, per acre was costed at 2s., 2<sup>nd</sup> quality was 1s. 8d., 3<sup>rd</sup> quality at 1s. 0d.1/2d. and 4<sup>th</sup> quality 5 1/4d., resulting in a total applotment of £300. The vicar, Rev. Chaworth Browne, received £133 6s. 8d. and the lay impropiator, the marquis of Westmeath received £166 1s.4d. The valuations were based on the price of oats, the main cereal crop of the parish, at 13s. per barrel. The attached certificate was signed by three Fagans, Lynch, Moore and Nangle. Thus, all the proper forms were observed. The parish, having made a composition under Goulburn's Act, would appear to be a settled, well organised rural living. In parishes on the limestone- strewn landscape south of Mullingar where ploughing was difficult, very little cereal crops were grown, leaving the proctor to collect or distraint any product that came to hand, regardless of tithe regulations.<sup>50</sup> The casual rural violence and the targeted depredations of the Ribbonmen all proceeded in

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<sup>47</sup> *Parochial benefices (Ireland) Return of parishes said to contain less than fifty members of the Established Church.* H.C. 1835 (388) xlvii. 49.

<sup>48</sup> Ordnance survey, 6-inch map, Westmeath, sheet 26, notes Lynn church as 'in ruins'.

<sup>49</sup> Tithe Applotment Book, parish of Lickbla, M.F.A. 53 – 107, microfilm in National Archives of Ireland.

<sup>50</sup> Mitchell & Ryan, *Reading the Irish landscape*, pp 332 – 35.

separate campaigns, leaving the tithe question to be contested in the more prosperous counties of the south and east.

1830 was a year of revolution. France and Belgium were in a state of revolt. The farm labourers of Kent and Sussex were marching on their local towns, threatening outright rebellion. The duke of Buckingham wrote to Lord Melbourne, the recently installed home secretary, 'this part of the country is wholly in the hands of the rebels'. He might have been referring to his Westmeath estates but in fact this rather hysterical note was sent from his base in southeast England.<sup>51</sup> The uprisings broke out all over the corn country of the southeast in the wake of two disastrous wheat harvests.<sup>52</sup> The south of England was in the throes of a deep economic depression from the winter of 1829.

There are some striking contrasts with the situation in Westmeath in the events of the autumn of 1830 in England. Eric Hobsbawm has argued that there was one unique facet of rural English society in the early nineteenth century; it had no peasants. Half of the farms in the country in 1851 were between 100 and 150 acres in size. The agricultural labourer was a wage-driven rural proletariat.<sup>53</sup> The market town of Horsham in West Sussex had apparently been 'a hotbed of sedition' and at a vestry in the parish church an immense body of people from seven surrounding parishes confronted the local landlord and the owner of the parish tithes. The farmers and the labourers joined forces in demanding a reduction of half of the tithes and a minimum wage of 2s. 6d. per day. The church doors were locked, railings torn up, the chancel invaded. The landlord conceded a rent reduction but the tithe-holder held out until violence was threatened. The mob withdrew, leaving the church 'much disfigured' according to the lady who wrote this account.<sup>54</sup> They then broke every window at an inn, which refused to entertain them. The county of West Sussex had suffered eleven arson attacks, twenty-two wages riots, twelve robberies with intent to prevent the use of agricultural implements, eleven wreckings of machinery and five 'Swing' letters. Three Sussexmen were sentenced to death. One was executed. Seventeen men were

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<sup>51</sup> Eric Hobsbawm and George Rude, *Captain Swing* (London, 1969), p. 85.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, pp 23, 25 – The Westmeath version of Hobsbawm's peasant would have been the two-acre farmer.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, pp 112 – 13.

transported to New South Wales and Van Diemen's Land. Altogether nineteen men were executed for crimes associated with the 'Swing' movement.<sup>55</sup>

The disturbances in rural southern England were on a different scale to Irish agitation in 1830. The 'Swing' riots were mass-mobilisations of entire parishes, as Hobsbawm describes them, 'snowballing' through the countryside to arrive at a town or parish church in such numbers that the targeted personages had no option but to submit, at least temporarily to their demands. No mob, however unruly, would have had the temerity to take possession of a church, chapel or meetinghouse in Ireland in order to enforce such a settlement. Irish peasants, it would therefore appear, had a stronger sense of attachment to the forms of religion, of any denomination, than the lower classes of southern England. The nearest recorded piece of sacrilege to the Horsham riot in Westmeath at the time was a report of a window broken in Leny church, a small isolated outpost of the Church of Ireland. The *Journal* editor contented himself with the laconic comment, 'so much for conciliation'.<sup>56</sup> There were no murders, attempted murders, shooting at landlords or their agents, targeting of tithe proctors, or any of the multitude of deadly retributions practiced by 'Captain Rock' and his acolytes, in the list of 'Swing' outrages. The English campaign may have been spontaneous, driven by near-famine and a knowledge of social revolution in Europe, but it had some overall direction and two well orchestrated demands, the elimination of rural unemployment and a living wage. The rising was suppressed with some severity in the most rebellious counties by the use of a special commission on the pattern of the insurrection laws long in force in Ireland.<sup>57</sup> The total executed, at nineteen, was harsh by Irish standards; only thirty-eight were executed in Ireland in the previous year, and this for a multiplicity of offences, not by any means all connected to Ribbonism.<sup>58</sup>

Disorder and outrage took their usual random, chaotic course in rural Ireland in the following spring of 1831. The *Journal*, now under new proprietorship but still a staunch purveyor of the ascendancy cause, catalogued the outrages and intimidation endured by the members of the Established Church in the vicinity of Mullingar. Two

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid., Summary of repression, p. 309.

<sup>56</sup> *Westmeath Journal*, 29 Apr. 1830.

<sup>57</sup> Hobsbawm & Rude, *Captain Swing*, p. 258.

<sup>58</sup> *Select committee on poor in Ireland*, abstract, p. 146. H.C. 1830 (667) vii. 1



Protestant farmhouses near Killucan had been broken into by a lawless mob in search of arms. They were driven off in disarray by a determined defensive action. William Robinson of Annville, a son of the rector of Mullingar, was waylaid and savagely beaten. He was not expected to live and eight men had been committed for trial. Notices had been posted in the town on 'exclusive dealing'. This was a tactic used widely by nationalist activists of the day to divert custom from Protestant shops. The notices posted in Mullingar excused any Protestant shopkeeper who had contributed to what the *Journal* termed the O'Connell fund.<sup>59</sup> The list was reported by the *Freeman's Journal*, noting that the collector was the Very Rev. Mr. McCormick, a senior clergyman of the Catholic parish.<sup>60</sup> The *Freeman's* was not alert to the highly volatile nature of the local politics displayed by the publication of the names of the Protestant traders who subscribed. The listing was published without a commentary, leaving its readership with the comfortable assumption that Mullingar was a tranquil town, that its inhabitants of all religious persuasions, had settled into a reasonable accommodation and that only the lowest classes of the country people remained to be rendered compliant.

There were no indications that the outrages and disturbances of previous years were to abate in 1831. Even the inmates of the town jail in Mullingar contributed their share of mayhem. A newly arrived prisoner was immediately attacked by a gang who accused him of belonging to one of the local factions. 'Are you a Derrig or a Cummins', they demanded. In fact his name was Donohoe. He barely escaped with his life.<sup>61</sup> Mrs. Salmon of Kilpatrick was visited by a large band of men who searched her house for arms and warned her sons to give up a farm they had recently taken. The lady was apparently from the upper classes as a reward of £420 was offered, £100 on reporting the perpetrators and the balance on conviction. The Misses E and H Busby, newly arrived in the town, were included on the usual list of contributors. They were offering £100. It would appear that an immediate and substantial contribution to an outrage fund was an essential prerequisite for any newly arrived member of high society in the town. The *Journal* kept a close watch on developments in the world outside its circulation boundaries. The *Londonderry*

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<sup>59</sup> *Westmeath Journal*, 20 Jan. 1831.

<sup>60</sup> *Freeman's Journal*, 12 Feb. 1830.

<sup>61</sup> *Westmeath Journal*, 27 Jan. 1831.

*Sentinel* had an item of interest; Richard Griffith had commenced his general survey of Ireland in their county. His valuers were well trained and would produce a much-needed basis for taxation. The difficulties surrounding the tithes, church rates and grand jury cess were such that any new measure was to be welcomed.<sup>62</sup>

The next issue of the *Journal* featured a letter from a settler who had some time earlier emigrated to the Swan River settlement, an extremely remote farming colony in New South Wales. He informed the public that anyone who was brave enough to venture that far would find a genial climate, a prosperous God-fearing colony and unlimited opportunity to advance themselves. Female servants were in great demand and were assured of the most favourable terms.<sup>63</sup>

The occasional reports of progress in the affairs of the country were not allowed to divert the *Journal* from its constant editorial theme – the violent state of affairs in Westmeath. The paper occasionally used a ploy common to other conservative organs since the growth of a popular press; they would, at times of unrest, quote liberally from Temple's history of the rebellion of 1641, that standard work on the 'horrible atrocities' committed by the murderous Roman Catholics on a defenceless colony of peaceful Protestants.<sup>64</sup> The *Journal* headed its extract 'let ye beware', and left its audience in no doubt that if proper measures were not effected the Protestant population of the county could find themselves in a similar position again.<sup>65</sup> The county was reassured in the next issue that the administration in Dublin Castle had the situation in hand. The treasury was to provide a subsidy of £50,000 for the strengthening and rearming of the yeomanry. The lord lieutenant, Angelsey, was reported to have sent an urgent requisition to London for a shipment of 10,000 firearms of the newest and most up-to-date type.<sup>66</sup> As the editorial of that week put it 'that vile incendiary' O'Connell was to be put in his place. The *Journal* found it difficult to admit that the same 'incendiary' was, and had been for the past year, the

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 17 Feb. 1831.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 24 Feb. 1831.

<sup>64</sup> Sir John Temple, *The Irish rebellion, or an history of the beginnings and first progress of the general rebellion raised within the Kingdom of Ireland upon the three and twentieth day of October in the year 1641, together with the barbarous cruelties and bloody massacres which ensued thereupon.* (London, 1646).

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 3 Mar. 1831.

sitting member for Clare in parliament, having, with very little notice by the *Journal* taken the oath and his seat on 4 February 1830.<sup>67</sup>

The rundown condition of the Westmeath yeomanry must have occasioned some concern in the upper echelons of the gentry in the spring of 1831. The optimistic reporting of early March on the financing and arming of the local corps was followed on the 10<sup>th</sup> by a somewhat panic-stricken notice in the *Journal*, addressed to Dublin Castle requesting that a meeting of the county be convened for the purpose of taking into account the disturbed state of Westmeath and adopting measures to correct the lawlessness which prevailed.<sup>68</sup> Twenty-seven gentlemen signed the petition, nine of them members of the grand jury, elected the following week for the spring assizes. Three members were conspicuous by their absence from the list of petitioners, Sir Richard Nagle and Gerald Dease, both Catholics, and Hugh Morgan Tuite, the radical; another indication that the gentry of Westmeath were no longer a homogenous, unshakable political force, as recent election results had already demonstrated.

The conservative gentlemen had good reason for alarm. The border country between Westmeath and north Longford was very much disturbed according to police reports quoted by the *Journal*.<sup>69</sup> The only object of the many raids listed was the taking of firearms, on 2 January at Abbeyshrule a gun and a case of pistols, on 15 January a gun and a blunderbuss, on 16 January a gun and a pistol. When Capt. Atkinson of Forgney was at church a fellow entered, demanding a gun. Atkinson's servant pluckily locked him in but the raider escaped through a window. On 21 January a mob of fifty men attacked a farmhouse, warning the tenant to obey the laws of Captain Rock. They failed to locate his shotgun. Another victim had only recently surrendered his gun to the magistrates. Another gun and pistol were stolen at Abbeylara. A policeman in Drumlish arrested a man who was wanted for one of these crimes. He was immediately surrounded by a mob. They beat him severely, rescued his prisoner and stole his rifle and bayonet. The report concluded with the less-than-satisfactory admission that only two women could be arrested.

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<sup>67</sup> *Hansard*, Geo. IV. 11, 2<sup>nd</sup> ser, vol. 22, 4 Feb. 1830.

<sup>68</sup> *Westmeath Journal*, 10 Mar. 1831.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*

The outward appearances of tranquillity and civil order were preserved at the opening of the spring session of the assizes at Mullingar. The chief baron noted the lightness of the list before him and congratulated the members of the grand jury. There were no cases of a heinous nature for prosecution.<sup>70</sup> Politics were conducted in the carefully choreographed style of all previous elections when parliament was dissolved and writs issued for a new contest in April. Gustavus Rochfort and Sir Richard Levinge proposed to run in the conservative interest. The radical standard was carried by Montague Chapman and Percy Nugent. After some blatant posturing in the local publications Levinge and Nugent withdrew, leaving the sitting members, Rochfort, and Chapman to take their seats without a contest.<sup>71</sup> Rochfort and Levinge addressed their notices to ‘the gentlemen, clergy and freeholders of the County Westmeath’. Chapman confined his appeal to the freeholders of the county. Nugent explained in his speech on nomination day that he withdrew to avoid ‘the excitement of an election’<sup>72</sup> The *Journal* editorial of the following week struck a note of relief coupled with a warning for the gentry of the county ‘the election terminated without a contest in consequence of the disposition of the great landed proprietors to save the county the disturbances usual at such scenes.’ All the dissolute spirits were arrayed in hostility, the mob against the gentry,...they should now exert themselves.....another election was likely and they should never allow this anomalous situation to arise again.<sup>73</sup> Even the hint of a contest, it would appear, was too much for the editor of the *Journal*.

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 17 Mar. 1831.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 5 May 1831.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 12 May 1831.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 19 May 1831.

## CHAPTER 5: ANATOMY OF A RIOT

With the political bandwagon restored to its proper track the gentry of Westmeath could look forward to a summer of some tranquillity in 1831. The movement for parliamentary reform was making little progress in London and it seemed likely that the *status quo* in the county was set to continue indefinitely.<sup>1</sup> The Ribbonmen continued their low-level agitation, robbing houses in search of arms and ‘persuading’ tenants to abide by their regulations on the taking of land. Captain Rock was now printing his notices, a frightening development according to the *Journal*.<sup>2</sup> It boded ill for the county if such an expensive appliance as the printing press was now part of his armoury. One of these notices had been posted in that ‘most loyal town’ of Tyrrellspass.

As already argued, tithe violence was not a major component of agrarian disturbance in Westmeath. In County Kilkenny during the previous winter thousands of labourers, cottiers and small farmers marched into vicarage lawns and glebe houses, thinly disguised as hurling teams and demanding reductions.<sup>3</sup> Thus far no major confrontations had occurred; the police were forbidden, under the petty sessions law of 1827, to assist in collecting tithe arrears or to seize livestock in lieu. They were, however, authorised to enforce the law in cases of forcible resistance.<sup>4</sup> The ‘hurlers’ were led, in some cases by the Catholic clergymen. The ringleader of the Graiguenamanagh campaign, Rev. Martin Doyle, was liable for tithe on a 40-acre farm which was not, according to tithe regulations, exempt. He had successfully claimed exemption on another farm and contended that all his holdings should be tithe-free. When the case was raised in a Lords committee of the following year on the Irish tithe problem one of the witnesses alleged that Doyle was a relative of the bishop of Kildare and Leighlin, James Doyle (J.K.L.).<sup>5</sup> The bishop gave evidence to a later session of the committee but no one among the members had the temerity to enquire from him as to the veracity of this allegation. The witness could hardly be

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<sup>1</sup> *Westmeath Journal*, 23 June 1831.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 1 Sept. 1831.

<sup>3</sup> Noreen Higgins –McHugh, ‘The 1830s tithe riots’ in William Sheehan and Maura Cronin (eds), *Riotous assemblies: rebels, riots and revolts in Ireland* (Dublin, 2011), p. 85.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 87.

<sup>5</sup> *Select committee of Lords on collection and payment of tithes in Ireland*, H.C. 1831 – 32 (271), xx11., 1<sup>st</sup> report, evidence of Rev. Samuel Roberts, pp 35 – 45.

regarded as a reliable source. The Rev. Roberts was not a resident incumbent; he resided outside the parish, five miles from the glebe, had a preferment of £700 a year and had been a magistrate for eighteen years. His opinions on tithe payment differed little from those of the ten other Church of Ireland clergymen at the committee who demanded ‘instant relief’ from the government in this time of great distress.<sup>6</sup>

One possible reason for the marked variation in tithe disturbances between Westmeath and eastern counties appeared in the evidence to the tithe committee. Major Tandy, the resident magistrate for Kildare and west Wicklow informed the members that ‘the crops have been uncommonly good for the past two years’.<sup>7</sup> He would have had wheat and barley in mind. Potato failures, which would have loomed large in any discussion of the harvest in more westerly areas, were not a major consideration in his country. A bountiful harvest was a great boon to the tithe proctor. In parishes, which had not been compounded higher yields per acre of corn presented him with opportunities to extract a higher tithe. The R.M. would have been in a position to observe the tensions created by the unintended consequences of a good harvest.

The state of the wheat crop in Westmeath would not have been a subject of any great discussion in May of 1831. It was a time of waiting. The livestock season was well advanced. The hay was still green. Corn had been planted and awaited the vagaries of the autumn weather. Potato stalks were showing but nothing could yet be hazarded on the likelihood of the dreaded blight. On the last Monday of the month the country people congregated at the fair of Castlepollard. The town is situated on the southern edge of the drumlin country, surrounded by bog land, lakes and little hills.<sup>8</sup> The layout of the town is reminiscent of more northerly establishments, with an oblong, almost rectangular configuration of houses surrounding a spacious fair green with a small market house in the middle.<sup>9</sup> Five roads converge on the corners from Oldcastle, Castletown Delvin, Coole, Finea and Ballymacad. The demesnes of

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., iv.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 32.

<sup>8</sup> Mitchell & Ryan, *Reading the Irish landscape*, p. 352.

<sup>9</sup> Darragh Curran, ‘The great Protestant meeting of ‘Dungannon’ in Sheehan & Cronin (eds), *Riotous assemblies*, p. 101.

the earls of Longford at Pakenham Hall, the Deases at Turbotstown and the Pollards at Kinturk were all within a mile or two.<sup>10</sup>

The fair of Castlepollard was very typical of such events in the midlands. Rioting at fairs and markets had been a form of recreation enjoyed by the rural populace since ancient times. Factions arranged their encounters to avail of the theatrical backdrop of the audience and the streetscape. Everybody, from the strong farmer with his wad of cash to the itinerant drover with his shilling was, by evening time, well intoxicated; hard liquor was sold in great quantity. Women figured prominently in the festivities and the police would generally stay in their barracks and only venture out when the mob had safely dispersed.<sup>11</sup>

The townspeople of Castlepollard were accustomed to riotous crowds on fair days. The May fair of 1824 had been a fierce affray. The *Journal* reported a most alarming and serious riot.<sup>12</sup> Police had failed to restore order and were assaulted in a most violent and outrageous manner by the mob. Large bludgeons and showers of stones were used. Some constables were injured and at length completely overpowered. The editor remarked that only the prompt and determined exertions of several magistrates retrieved the situation, suppressing the riot and apprehending the ringleaders. Reporting of such disturbances at the fair of Mullingar was usually confined to a footnote in the market report. At the great midsummer fair of that year trade was good, 'unequaled for many years' as the *Journal* enthused.<sup>13</sup> No violence was recorded and the only trouble was caused by the counterfeit note merchants.

The riot at the May fair of Castlepollard in 1831 was on a different scale to any such event since the Union. Some bloody encounters had occurred in Cork and Limerick in the early 1820s but always between tithe proctors, their police escorts and rebellious tithe-payers.<sup>14</sup> The Castlepollard affray had its origins in a normal country fair. The north Westmeath area had been in its normal state of 'tranquillity', with the

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<sup>10</sup> Ordnance Survey, 6-inch, Westmeath, sheets 3 and 7, 21 Sept. 1838 - see illustration.

<sup>11</sup> Constantia Maxwell, *Country and town in Ireland under the Georges* (London, 1940), p. 161; Patrick O'Donnell, *The Irish faction fighters of the 19<sup>th</sup> century* (Dublin, 1975), p. 20, local magistrates turned a blind eye on faction fighting.

<sup>12</sup> *Westmeath Journal*, 27 May 1842.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 8 July 1824.

<sup>14</sup> Higgins-McHugh, in '*the 1830's riots*', p. 82.

occasional outbreak of cattle-maiming and threatening notices. However, for this fair the constabulary would seem to have been concerned that there was trouble in store. The local barracks had a complement of one chief constable, one constable and four sub-constables but on the day of the fair, as far as can be deduced from reports, about twenty men were assigned to the town.<sup>15</sup>

The *Journal* covered the story in special editions over the following month, and when the standard rhetoric of its conservative editorial style is stripped away it still makes for horrific reading. The editorial headline on the following Thursday morning read DREADFUL AFFRAY BETWEEN THE POLICE AND COUNTRY PEOPLE AT THE FAIR IN CASTLEPOLLARD. – THIRTEEN LIVES LOST.<sup>16</sup> The facts of the case are easily enough discerned. The attendance may have numbered up to two thousand people, the public houses were crowded, some riotous behaviour was observed, fuelled by alcohol, fights broke out around a show tent on the green. The police arrested one of the ringleaders and tried to confine him in the barracks. He was rescued and carried shoulder-high to safety by the crowd. The police, under chief constable Peter Blake, formed up in their anti-riot configuration, fixed bayonets and attempted to clear the green area. The crowd was slow to retreat, stones were thrown and the police retired to the market house. Blake then read the riot act and deployed his men again. After more stone throwing he ordered his men to open fire on the crowd. They dispersed in all directions on the first volley and firing continued for seven or eight minutes.

Justice in Westmeath may have been arbitrary and unbalanced in the 1830s but it was also swift. By the Saturday following the fair the coroner, Mr. Dickson, had concluded the inquest on thirteen victims. The number of wounded was never ascertained and no policemen were seriously injured. The verdict of the coroner was that ‘the deceased came to their deaths by gunshot wounds inflicted by the police.’<sup>17</sup> Dublin Castle was alarmed; the solicitor general was dispatched to Mullingar and spent two days ‘enquiring minutely’ into the facts of the case. He contributed, along with the gentry and magistrates, to a subscription for the relief of the bereaved

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<sup>15</sup> *Return of constabulary police in Ireland*. H.C. 1830 (498), xxix.269.

<sup>16</sup> *Westmeath Journal*, 26 June 1831.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 2 June 1831.



relatives.<sup>18</sup> Within the month the grand jury assembled for the summer assizes in Mullingar and eighteen policemen, including the chief constable, Blake, were arraigned to be tried for their lives.<sup>19</sup> The grand jury was convened on Saturday 28 July by the chief baron. He was constrained to refrain from the usual congratulations on the lightness of the calendar on two counts; he had learned from recent experience to consider the calendar as a very fallible criterion of the state of the country. He had applied a much more conclusive test of the situation than the list which meets the judge's eye. He had ordered a schedule of offences committed in the county in the four months since the last assizes – seventeen houses burned, twenty-two assaults (in his view a most confining use of language), connected to Ribbonism, sixty-eight of illegal notices, nine of illegal meetings, twenty-one of injuries to property and twenty-seven of attacks on houses.<sup>20</sup> None of these cases were before him. The second reason for his lack of congratulation was the 'melancholy' occurrence at Castlepollard. In a thinly veiled swipe at the press on both sides of the argument he regretted that, in some places, it had been necessary or expedient to discuss the case in a way which might influence the public. The *Journal*, of course, interpreted this remark as a rebuke to Rev. Burke, parish priest of Castlepollard, whose sermons of the intervening Sunday morning had followed a predictable line of abuse against the authorities. According to the *Journal* he had been summoned to Dublin Castle and censured for stirring rebellious feeling in the town and had raised subscriptions in surrounding parishes to engage a senior lawyer for the prosecution.<sup>21</sup>

The grand jury foreman, Sir Richard Levinge, intimated to the court after a short deliberation that they would not entertain murder charges against the eighteen accused, but that they would consent to bills for manslaughter. This completed the involvement of the county grand jury members. The case would now be heard by the chief baron and a common or petty jury selected from the freeholder list. The composition of the inquest jury had already drawn down the ire of the *Journal*; of the jury that was to decide what was to be made a party case, ten were Catholics, and one of these had been in the custody of the police on a charge of felony. Rev. Burke

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 28 July 1831.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

challenged every respectable juror. The *Journal* fumed that the accused men were to be offered as victims to popular ferocity and priestly influence.<sup>22</sup>

The selection of a jury was not a simple exercise. The panel of about 400 names was scrutinised and ransacked by both sides. The lawyers for the next-of-kin challenged sixty proposed jurors and the defence twenty-two. The eventual twelve-man jury list was published as part of the *Journal's* court report.<sup>23</sup> It appears that the county elites had been slow to attend to the composition of the inquest jury – ten Catholic jurors broke into the process; there would be no repeat of such impertinence on this occasion. Charles Arabin, Robert Matthews, J. Thornton, Richard H. Levinge, Tenison Lyons, John Black, Christopher Adamson, Robert Jameson, Peter Smyth, John Smyth, Aungier Brock and Peter Green were the chosen men and no more respectable, solid, Protestant group could have been selected.<sup>24</sup> The *Journal* was suitably demure – no comment was offered on the list. The Castlepollard trial jury was selected from a list compiled by the sheriff. The procedure dated from the previous century and allowed for great latitude in selection. The law on jury selection was updated by Perrin's act of 1833 – too late for the victims of Castlepollard.<sup>25</sup>

The main witness was Gerald Dease of Turbotstown, the local Catholic magistrate. He had spent the day in the town from ten in the morning to five in the evening. He had several consultations with the chief constable and they had agreed that the police should withdraw to barracks. The sergeant had arrested a troublemaker, imprudently in his view. Blake had been struck on the head by a stone and told Dease that the party feeling of the police was very strong, warning that when ignorant men such as them had arms in their hands they would not care who they shot. Dease and Blake seemed, from the evidence to have been in agreement that the fair should be allowed to reach its natural conclusion. They closed the party tent, which would appear to have been a centre of hilarity. The police presence on the street was stood down and

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<sup>22</sup> *Westmeath Journal*, 2 June 1831.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 28 July 1831.

<sup>24</sup> *Select committee on disturbed state of Ireland*, H.C. 1831 – 32 (677), xvi.1 p. 208-218, evidence of Rev. John Burke. He alleged that there were no Roman Catholics on the Castlepollard jury. They were all Orangemen.

<sup>25</sup> 3 & 4 Will. 1V,c.91,s,1 (28 Aug. 1833); W.E.Vaughan, *Murder trials in Ireland, 1836-1914* (Dublin, 2009), p. 121.

the men withdrew to barracks. Dease had an urgent dining appointment and Blake told him that without the presence of the magistrate he would allow any further rows to proceed; ‘ he would let them fight it out.’ He would detain the policemen from the out-stations until midnight to ensure that no altercations took place on the roads. To end his evidence Dease admitted to the defence lawyer that he had never seen so many drunken men at the fair. Blake had remarked that, although the crowd had thinned out there were still a great many country people drinking in the public houses ‘that it would be better not to meddle with’. At this point Dease departed to his five o’clock dinner engagement and Blake returned to barracks.

The next witness was Thomas Nugent – the same Tommy Nugent who had been the butt of Rev. Coghlan’s onslaught during the hare-coursing incident at Donore. His evidence fitted neatly enough with that of the magistrate. He had seen the fights and riots, saw one stone thrown at the police, and on his way out of town, passing the police barracks he spoke to Sergeant Mills who had apprehended and then lost the prisoner. His next piece of evidence goes some way towards elucidating the events that unfolded during the evening. He happened to look down a passage at the rear of the barracks and saw a group of policemen in discussion. Mills informed him that a court-martial was being held on a coward among them who had allowed the prisoner to escape but that they would have their revenge on the mob before the night was out. Mr. Nugent departed the town without further delay.<sup>26</sup> Several distinguished character witnesses appeared in support of the chief constable. W. D. Pollard of Kinturk, a magistrate and owner of the town, assured the court that Mr. Blake’s conduct between the upper and lower classes had always been exemplary in the two years he had served in the area. Sir John Harley, the inspector-general of police, Dublin Castles’ chief policeman in Ireland, lauded his humanity and excellent character. Rev. Moffit, Major O’Donoghue and Captain Graham also testified in his favour. The rest of the prisoners were also supported by other gentlemen – the *Journal* did not have the space to detail all of them.

The chief baron’s charge to the jury was a model in evenhanded, dispassionate legal direction. The police were entitled to use force, but this force had its limits; the

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<sup>26</sup> *Westmeath Journal*, 28 July 1831.

moment that resistance on the one side ceases, in that moment the application of force ought to cease upon the other. On this crucial point the chief baron did not place any emphasis on the several witness accounts of the police tactics in continuing to prime, load and fire at will for eight to ten minutes at Blake's orders after the crowd had run for their lives from the fair green. The jury, having disagreed and being locked up all night, finally emerged to a somnolent court at daylight on Wednesday morning. Amid what the *Journal* ruefully described as a scene as unusual as it was ludicrous, with the remains of unsnuffed tallow candles, barristers of both grades and all ages, grand jurors, constabulary chiefs, squires, squireens etc. The jury returned with one acquittal, Sergeant Mears, who by several accounts, had never left the barracks on the fatal day.<sup>27</sup> The foreman, Mr. Arabin, informed the court that there was no chance of agreement on the remaining cases. The chief baron sent them back to their quarters with the soothing assurance that he had often known jurors to agree after a similar announcement and adjourned until two o'clock in the afternoon. Recalled again after this six-hour session Arabin again pleaded that any hope of agreement was 'perfectly fallacious', but again the judge sent them away for further deliberation. Within the hour they returned with a unanimous verdict of *not guilty* on all charges.

The trial of the Castlepollard policemen was a model of legal exactitude. The prisoners had been properly confined in the county jail pending the hearing, illegally confined by warrant of the coroner, according to the *Journal*.<sup>28</sup> The victims had been professionally represented in court by a learned lawyer, Mr. Wallace, his fees having been raised by public subscription organised by Rev. Burke. The jury selection process had been rigorous, even though, as already enumerated, the twelve men selected were all of the governing class. The judge, the commentators and the gentry of the county could all afford to pay due deference to the niceties of legal form in this case in the sure and certain knowledge that the jury, after a suitable interval would come back with the proper verdict, an acquittal.

However, it would seem that the Castlepollard case did not follow the predictable course. It appears that a serious disagreement arose among these twelve jurors. Their deliberations could not be revealed or published but they had been confined, either in

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<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 4 Aug. 1831.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 9 June 1831.

the jury box or their jury room from Saturday morning until Monday afternoon without respite. The case against the police was a compelling one and some, at least, of the jury members must have been in favour of a guilty verdict. The rules of the assizes court regarding jury deliberations were set with just such deadlock in mind. In a brutal system the verdict was all-important and in spite of any delicate feelings a decision was forced on the members. A loyal jury had done its duty but it had been a close-run thing.

The *Journal*, having somehow restrained itself from its more extreme editorial opinion during the course of the trial, now felt free to unleash the pent-up horror of all loyal citizens at the treatment of the maligned and persecuted policemen. Notwithstanding the foul calumnies, wilful misrepresentation and ferocious denunciations of a factious press, the police had been acquitted, not only of murder, but even of the minor offence of manslaughter. Due to the extreme length of the proceedings they were precluded from publishing the entire account of the case; they would, however, be producing a special pamphlet for wider circulation, with a complete transcript of the evidence and the splendid and most eloquent address of the learned judge.<sup>29</sup>

The aftermath of the Castlepollard affair cannot be related in its entirety. There are no reports on the fate of the several wounded that were carried away from the scene. The funerals of the thirteen dead would have been occasions of much oratory of a rebellious tone. No reports are available on the effects of the affair and the verdict of the court on the temper of the county. The August fair of Castlepollard, on the first Monday, passed off without incident. Captain Thompson, the county inspector, deployed a large force of police, which were backed by sixty infantrymen of the 12<sup>th</sup> Foot under Captain O'Neill. The town was patrolled constantly by the gentlemen of the county. Lord Longford, Mr. Levinge, D.W. Pollard, Colonel Osborne and Captain Pakenham were in attendance all day. Mr. Dease did not appear, nor did Rev. Burke. The *Journal* assured the county that only the Protestant magistrates, by their constant and vigilant presence, were capable of keeping order in these turbulent

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 26 July 1831.

times.<sup>30</sup> The policemen at the centre of the Castlepollard affair, Peter Blake, was not returned to his station after the trial. The gentlemen and freeholders of Moate published a fulsome farewell address to their chief constable, William Hemsworth, on his reassignment to Castlepollard in August.<sup>31</sup> Hemsworth's reply, published alongside the address, was equally effusive, thanking the body of numerous and respectable people for the uniform and effective co-operation which had been continuously afforded him, and the great happiness he had enjoyed in his years in Moate. He greatly regretted having been so abruptly removed from their neighbourhood and society. The best and only return he could hope to make would be his exertions to realise the flattering hopes they had expressed in his new appointment. It would seem, if these sentiments were to be realised, that Castlepollard was about to encounter a new and very different style of police management.

Within the month following the affray in Castlepollard another event occurred over a hundred miles away which bore many of the characteristics of that fatal confrontation. The town of Newtownbarry, renamed as Bunclody in the twentieth-century by a state anxious to erase such planter placenames, was always a gap town in the hill country which protects the western borders of the County Wexford. The River Slaney, a major watercourse at this point, flows past the bottom of the town, with a bridge just upstream of the market square. The riverside water meadows above and below the town provide a picturesque, tranquil vista for the many demesnes that occupy the fertile slopes of the Slaney valley.<sup>32</sup> The chief proprietors in the 1830s were the Perceval-Maxwell family of Cavan. The head of that aristocratic family, Lord Farnham owned the town and much of the surrounding farmland.<sup>33</sup> The area was always a rich agricultural heartland, growing wheat, barley and oats in a mild southeastern climate. The grassland of the rolling hillsides was ideal fattening country for store cattle imported from the west.<sup>34</sup> The fishing rights, then as now a valuable asset, were closely guarded by the proprietors on both banks of the Slaney

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<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 4 Aug. 1831.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 1 Sept. 1831.

<sup>32</sup> Ordnance Survey 6-inch, Wexford, Sheet 9, 10 Nov. 1841 – see illustration.

<sup>33</sup> *Report of Brigade Major Bushe to the lord lieutenant on the Newtownbarry affray*, H.C. 1831 (241) xv.487, pp 2 – 4.

<sup>34</sup> Lewis, *Topographical Dictionary*, Wexford.

and the holders of shooting licenses could find good sport on the slopes of Mount Leinster overlooking the town.

The July fair of Newtownbarry was held on Friday 17 July. There were no accounts of rioting or drunken disorder but placards appeared during the day, carried by youths, and warning of a tithe auction to be held the following morning at the town pound.<sup>35</sup> On Saturday morning the tithe proctor John Ralph, attended by the local magistrate, who was also the agent for the Farnham estate, attempted to sell the distrained cattle, three young heifers. The county police and the local yeomanry were on standby. The police were withdrawn and the commanding officer of the yeomanry deployed his force of 150 men in line and attempted to disperse the mob using bayonets and musket butts. Stones were thrown, a shot fired from behind a ditch felled one of the yeomen and Captain Graham, the C.O., gave the order to fire into the crowd. Fourteen of the mob, one yeoman and the son of another were killed.<sup>36</sup>

Thus briefly described the Newtownbarry affair bears close resemblance to the Castlepollard riot of the previous month. The street and market square of Newtownbarry were not ideal venues for a riot. The street descends at a steep east/west slope from the hill, having the market square at its base, below which the river runs north/south through the meadows. Water from the mountainside was diverted and canalised to run down the middle of the street, a unique and precious supply of clean water for the town. The market square is about fifty yards square, much smaller than the square of Castlepollard and the canalised river leaves no scope for deployment of large bodies of people, whether civilian or military, on the street.<sup>37</sup> Newtownbarry was a bigger town than Castlepollard in 1831 in population terms, with 2162 people. Castlepollard had 1618 in population but conversely it had 362 inhabited houses against 351 in Newtownbarry.<sup>38</sup> Cronin and Sheehan, in their survey of riotous behaviour, have proposed 'the indefinable nature of the riot'.<sup>39</sup> While the Castlepollard affray was, by several accounts, fuelled by large quantities of

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<sup>35</sup> *Depositions to coroner's inquest*, H.C.1831 (342) xv. 399. Evidence of Col. Irvine, magistrate, p. 12.

<sup>36</sup> *Hansard*, 23 June 1831 3<sup>rd</sup> ser. vol. 4 [117]; Blackstock, *An ascendancy army*, p. 251.

<sup>37</sup> Ordnance survey, 6-inch, Wexford, sheet 9.

<sup>38</sup> *Abstracts of population, baronies of Demifore*, p. 100 and *Scarawalsh*, p.110. H.C. 1833 (634) xxix.59.

<sup>39</sup> Sheehan & Cronin (eds), *Riotous assemblies*, p. 20.

raw whiskey, the market day on that Saturday in Newtownbarry was a dry outing. The evidence to the coroner's inquest, commencing on the morning of Monday 20<sup>th</sup>, bears only one reference to drunken behaviour among the crowds; a yeomanry sergeant told of hearing Captain Graham exhorting the crowd to go home quietly and an apparently drunken man with a firelock responding that his weapon was as good as any that the captain could muster.<sup>40</sup>

While the Castlepollard affair was rooted in a general detestation of the enforcement of law and order the Newtownbarry affray had its origins firmly in the area of tithe collection. The rector of St. Mary's, as the parish was named, was Rev. Alexander McClintock. His tithe income from the parish was £369 4s. 7d.1/2d. There was no intervening lay impropietor and the parish had agreed a composition under Goulburn's act. McClintock also had the proceeds of the tithes of Clonegal, a neighbouring parish in Carlow.<sup>41</sup> He had not been slow to grasp an opportunity to expand his clerical and financial domain in earlier years. The chief secretary's papers in the National Archives contain two very obsequious notes from the Rev. McClintock to the undersecretary requesting the indulgence of the lord lieutenant in having him appointed to a vacant living. This was probably Clonegal and it would appear that the letters had the desired effect.<sup>42</sup> The farmer whose heifers were at the centre of the confrontation, Patrick Doyle of Tombrick, was not a landholder in the parish of Newtownbarry. The townland is in the civil parish of Ballycarney.<sup>43</sup> Rev. McClintock, therefore had an interest in tithes over a considerable area in Wexford and Carlow.

The news of the Newtownbarry affray was not long in making headlines through the country and beyond. The *Westmeath Journal* was still attempting to contain itself pending the trial of the Castlepollard policeman when on 23 June the Newtownbarry story broke. The *Journal's* analysis was succinct; two armed forces had come into collision, the insurgents against the king's troops. The government side had won this battle but the country was now in open insurrection. There would now be a trial of

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<sup>40</sup> *Depositions*, H.C. 1831 (342) xv, 399., evidence of Moses Doyle, p. 13.

<sup>41</sup> *Tithe Composition Act, return of every parish in which a composition has been made*. H.C. 1831 – 32 (136) xxx.273. Diocese of Ferns, p.15; the Castlepollard tithe was payable to the earl of Westmeath, diocese of Meath, p. 5.

<sup>42</sup> N.A.I., C.S.O. papers, OP 586/10, 6 Dec. 1828 and 9 Dec. 1828.

<sup>43</sup> *Griffith's Valuation*, Wexford, parish of Ballycarney, townland of Tombrick.



strength between the peasantry and the constitutional authorities.<sup>44</sup> The *Journal* had it on good authority that the Castle had been informed before the affray that a riot was planned for the tithe sale. The *Evening Post* had apparently used intemperate language in its report – ‘the people against Orange Graham and his blood – thirsty yeomen’. The *Journal* was, it seems, quite oblivious to the irony of this statement when applied to its own coverage of both Castlepollard and Newtownbarry.

Just five days had elapsed since the Newtownbarry affray when that small market town was placed at centre-stage in parliament. The Commons debate on 23 June was based on the early news reporting and reflected the highly charged partisanship of the press.<sup>45</sup> It was alleged that twenty or thirty of the populace had been shot by the yeomanry – an accurate estimate as it transpired, and that it was time for Repeal, this opinion not from O’Connell but from an English liberal, Henry Hunt. He had read only a few days earlier of the slaughter at Merthyr Tydfil in which eighteen people had lost their lives and he equated this affair to the Newtownbarry affray. The *Morning Chronicle* of 13 June had indeed carried what appeared to be a postscript to a more comprehensive report of earlier date. Seventeen or eighteen men had died, including some who died of wounds and the men had returned to work. It would appear that the coalminers and ironworkers of south Wales were subject to the same treatment as the countrymen of Newtownbarry or Castlepollard.<sup>46</sup> The most comprehensive contribution came from the member for Cavan, Henry Maxwell. *Hansard* is contradictory on his Commons service, listing his first election as 10 December 1832. He was certainly, however in his place on 23 June 1831, according to the *Hansard* transcript for that day.<sup>47</sup> He began by explaining that he was connected to that part of the country, neglecting to mention that he was the heir to extensive estates in the neighbourhood of Newtownbarry. He told the house that the parish had compounded for tithe, that composition was in effect and the evils of other parishes did not exist. The clergyman, Rev. McClintock, was not mentioned by name but Maxwell declared that he was an extremely humane and excellent man. The simple fact was that the Roman Catholic farmers would not pay. Doyle had told the rev. gentleman that he could distrain him if he liked but he would pay him nothing.

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<sup>44</sup> *Westmeath Journal*, 23 June 1831.

<sup>45</sup> *Hansard*, 23 June 1831, 3<sup>rd</sup> ser., vol. 4 [269].

<sup>46</sup> *Morning Chronicle*, 13 June 1831.

<sup>47</sup> *Hansard*, 23 June 1831, 3<sup>rd</sup> ser., vol. 4 [269]. For date of his election see list of members.

History has not recorded what Pat Doyle of Tombrick would have made of his name being bandied about the House of Commons in London. Maxwell proceeded to extol the virtues of Captain Graham, a 'gallant, honourable and humane man' with whom he was long acquainted. Lord Milton intervened to tell the house that he had information that the reverend gentleman was not on harmonious terms with his parishioners. Mr. Grattan's opinion was that the constabulary was the only force to be employed in keeping order. They were well conducted, and regarding the yeomanry, as was well known in Ireland, they were generally selected from party motives and they were consequently a very obnoxious force.<sup>48</sup>

The Maxwells had not yet concluded their campaign on behalf of the loyal citizens of Newtownbarry. Lord Farnham addressed the Lords on 13 July to reinforce the argument that there was conspiracy afoot in Wexford.<sup>49</sup> He was 'intimately connected' with the town. He had reports of handbills in circulation in Birmingham and Wolverhampton headed 'indiscriminate slaughter' 'massacre' and 'dreadful slaughter at Newtownbarry'. He held a copy of this last one in his hand, displaying it to the members, describing the libellous and abominable lies being spread about the kingdom. Since the Graiguenamanagh incident there had been a systematic conspiracy to undermine the Established Church. He laid the blame squarely on Bishop Doyle whose letters were 'morally responsible' for the whole crisis.

Farnham had known the Rev. McClintock for twenty-four years. He was universally and deservedly beloved. He had nine or ten children and the whole family would have starved due to the straitened circumstances imposed by the iniquitous campaign if his lordship's steward had not given them sheep from his flock.<sup>50</sup> He had heard of the placards displayed about the country and at the fair on the day before the riot. He had all the detail on the boy who was paid a shilling by Doyle to parade his placard at the fair. The placards were printed in Dublin. He added, rather ominously, that he knew the printer. Captain Graham, he told the house, had served with Wellington in the Peninsular War, owned property in several counties and was not to be trifled with. Farnham would have proceeded further but for the intervention of the lord chancellor

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 13 July 1831, 3<sup>rd</sup> ser., vol. 4., 1169 – 1184.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid. [1178].

who pointed out that they were sitting in the highest court in the kingdom while the lowest court had not yet decided the case.

The political representatives of Westmeath were not to the fore in parliament as the debates proceeded on these latest manifestations of mayhem in Ireland. While the Maxwells leaped to the defence of their clients in Wexford, Chapman and Rochfort pursued their dreary path of argument for and against the Reform bill – Chapman in favour and Rochfort against.<sup>51</sup> Contrary to his usual ebullient form the marquis of Westmeath made no appearance in the Lords to protect his county constabulary. His only appearance in the record of the time appears in the form of a highly confidential letter, written from his Westmeath seat, Clonyn Castle, dated 7 March to Lt. Col. Sir William Gosset, the undersecretary at Dublin Castle. The subject was the proposed raising of a new yeomanry corps in north Westmeath by a relative of his, Sir James Nugent of Ballinlough. The marquis had already put Gosset on notice that this new corps was not, under any circumstances, to be allowed. The letter outlined the awkward predicament in which he now found himself. Sir James had got wind or suspicion that it was the marquis who had ‘put a spoke in his plan’ and although he was closely related he would now hardly speak to him. The marquis had denied to Sir James that he had spoken to Angelsey, the lord lieutenant. He had, however told Sir James that if his opinion was asked for he would state that as Sir James was leaving the country and, given the temper of the population, in his absence the people he proposed to arm could not be depended upon and it would be quite impolitic to give them arms. Gosset should now consult him in his capacity as sovereign of the county, whereupon he would by return of post make his opinion known. This would save him an awkward situation with his relative and justify the Castle in denying Sir James his new yeomanry corps.

The present proprietor of Ballinlough, Michael Nugent, maintains that his Catholic ancestor was, during this period, in the service of the army of the Austrian Empire.<sup>52</sup> The marquis was careful to omit this very relevant piece of information from his letter to the Castle. A yeomanry unit with such a corps commander would, at the very least, have been an interesting augmentation of the force in north Westmeath.

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<sup>51</sup> *Westmeath Journal*, 14 July 1831.

<sup>52</sup> Local information.

The marquis informed Gosset in his final paragraph that the parish priest of Castletown Delvin had been induced by Mr. Fetherston, a magistrate, to convene a meeting of landholders of the parish to discuss their complaints and distress. There had apparently been some previous disturbance and the marquis thought that the moment was particularly ill chosen in view of this ‘tumultuous assembly’. He had instructed the priest, Rev. Fitzgerald, that the meeting was highly improper and he would not countenance it. He enclosed, for Gosset’s information, the letter he had received from Fitzgerald. It is included with the correspondence in the archival file and reveals the tone of clerical relationships with the management of the county. Rev. Fitzgerald agreed perfectly with his lordship that after recent circumstances it was not the wisest plan to convene a meeting and his lordship could rest perfectly satisfied that he would send the people quietly to their homes with no feeling of disappointment.<sup>53</sup>

This file of correspondence reveals several interesting aspects of the internecine local politics of County Westmeath. The marquis wrote his note to Gosset in March, two months prior to the Castlepollard affray. The distance between his seat at Clonyn, near Castletown Delvin and Castlepollard is no more than eight Irish miles. The contents and tone of the letter were astutely pitched to convey the impression of a county lieutenant in firm and fair control of his area of responsibility. He could whip the local clergyman into line with a few well-chosen remarks. The last thing the county needed was another corps of yeomanry with an absentee commander. Dublin Castle would, no doubt, have been highly impressed. There was, however, a sense of anxiety in his dealings with the parish priest. The marquis had always been awake to the dangers of allowing any symptoms of rebellion to take root in his area. He wrote to O’Connell during the Catholic Association campaign objecting to the Catholic rent in his parish. He had instructed his tenants that the subscription proposed to be raised had within it the seeds of lasting mischief and ought to be discouraged. It was ill-judged, calculated to make politicians of ploughmen and make Irishmen savage against each other.<sup>54</sup> O’Connell’s reply was not published.

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<sup>53</sup> N.A.I., C.S.O. papers, O.P/622/16.

<sup>54</sup> O’Connell (ed.), *The correspondence of Daniel O’Connell*, 3, no. 1281.

The intervention of the marquis would seem to have called a halt to the recruitment of the yeomanry in north Westmeath but through the northern and eastern counties there was a flurry of promotions and replacements in the officer class. The *Journal* kept the county abreast of the upgrading and modernisation of the force through the early months of 1831. The Longford corps was in danger of being infested; one man of a seditious type had been infiltrated into the ranks. Would they abide him? the editor demanded.<sup>55</sup> Officer appointments had been made in Limerick, Antrim, Carlow, Londonderry, Donegal and Kildare.<sup>56</sup> By March every edition was listing promotions and appointments in a dozen counties. Angelsey's brief reactivation of the force in response to the Emancipation crisis was well under way.<sup>57</sup> A cargo of 3000 stand of firearms of the latest type, together with ammunition, was unloading in the Foyle and orders went out for all outdated arms and accoutrements to be returned to barracks.<sup>58</sup> The strength of the force was computed at 1,137 officers and 30,285 men on 26 March 1832.<sup>59</sup>

The marquis of Westmeath had succeeded against the odds in warding off the additional corps in his county. Listing for 1827 shows a total yeomanry number in Westmeath of 426, probably a nominal rather than an effective strength.<sup>60</sup> The Wexford yeomanry had no difficulty in deploying three units totalling 190 men, including horse holders and camp staff, at Newtownbarry; the Westmeath force would have been hard pressed to produce fifty men on the ground, hence their non-appearance at Castlepollard.

The Newtownbarry affair prompted a major reassessment of the capabilities and utility of the yeomanry force in Ireland. Allan Blackstock notes that 'the carnage at Newtownbarry precipitated a gradual run down of the yeomanry which was completed in 1834'.<sup>61</sup> The police action at Castlepollard did not result in any such scrutiny. Apart from the removal of the chief constable policing in Westmeath took its normal course. The next chapter outlines a disturbing increase in agitation and

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<sup>55</sup> *Westmeath Journal*, 27 Jan. 1831.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>57</sup> Blackstock, *An ascendancy army*, p. 291.

<sup>58</sup> *Westmeath Journal*, 24 Mar. 1831.

<sup>59</sup> *Army and yeomanry returns*. H.C. 1831 – 32 (317), xxvii. 115.

<sup>60</sup> Blackstock, *An ascendancy army*, p. 118.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 294.

outrage in the county. Local sources make no mention of any connection with the 'massacre' but it is most likely that attitudes had hardened in the aftermath. The elites and the lower classes had one more bone of contention.

## CHAPTER 6: AGRARIAN VIOLENCE AND THE ROYAL CANAL

This chapter examines continuous violence in rural Westmeath during 1831 and also surveys the social affairs of the gentry, a stark illustration of a main theme of this work – the existence, side by side, of two distinct and almost mutually exclusive social systems. The new, modern industrial world and its encounters with older local ‘combinators’ is beyond the scope of this thesis. However, any investigation of agrarian outrage in Westmeath should include the Royal Canal and its course through the county. It is quite probable, although authoritative evidence is lacking, that the gangsters who terrorised townlands adjacent to the canal line were one and the same as those who wrecked the canal banks and burned the boats.

As the inquests and trials on the Castlepollard affray proceeded through the summer of 1831 the Ribbonmen pursued their campaigns of intimidation and assault. Tisdall of Redmondstown, near Castletowngeoghegan, had a visit by a large group of armed men who ordered his workmen to leave his employment immediately. Tisdall was told to vacate his house and land. The raid did not go according to plan; Tisdall and his workmen put up what the *Journal* called ‘a spirited and determined resistance’ The gang was driven off, having apparently failed in their mission.<sup>1</sup> However, in its next edition the paper had a notice of chancery advertising Tisdalls farm to let.<sup>2</sup> Any prospective tenant for this farm would have had to contend with two very different tribunals. The Court of Chancery was in effect a land court, a labyrinthine organisation which could take years to complete a transaction.<sup>3</sup> It was later replaced by the Incumbered Estates Court. Having secured his tenancy from the court the new occupier would immediately face the problem of placating the local gang bosses who controlled the labour market. He would, of course have been approved in advance as an amenable customer; he would have no chance of a settled tenancy without their prior consent.<sup>4</sup> Tisdall was, however, not an easy target and his tenacity in holding his position was in evidence in April of the following year when he was still firmly in possession of Redmondstown. On 7 April two armed men arrived in a field where he

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<sup>1</sup> *Westmeath Journal*, 14 July 1831.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 21 July 1831.

<sup>3</sup> Boyce, *Nineteenth-century Ireland*, p. 121.

<sup>4</sup> Lee, ‘The Ribbonmen’ in Williams (ed.), *Secret societies in Ireland*, pp 28 – 29.

was working with his labourers and demanded that he re-allocate a tenancy to a man of their nomination. They also pursued him on the question of the wages he paid to his workmen. The *Journal* account laid great emphasis on the tactics of the workmen, who stood aside and allowed these ruffians to intimidate their employer. Tisdall apparently placated his adversaries and they departed, firing a pistol into the air to show that they were prepared to enforce their mandate.<sup>5</sup> His men had shown great spirit in his defence during the previous action in September but it would appear that they had been taught a severe lesson in the interim and could no longer be relied upon. The Court of Chancery had, in this case, demonstrated its customary lethargy; Tisdall was still in possession of Redmondstown demesne seven months after the publication of his ejectment order and any prospective client would certainly have steered well clear of such a contentious property

By the hungry months of summer, outrages against persons and property reached alarming levels.<sup>6</sup> On 1 September the *Journal* reported trouble all over the county, quoting the type of detailed information only available from police reports, to which the *Journal* seems to have had unlimited access.<sup>7</sup> The editorial concluded mournfully that the county was showing disturbing signs of insurrection. The synod of Catholic bishops was, for once, in complete agreement with the old adversary. On 10 August they sent a petition, with the signatures of all twenty-four members, to parliament in London. Their description of conditions in the rural areas left no room for ambiguity; a great national calamity loomed, the position was going from bad to worse, distress was showing itself in disaffection, with secret and illegal combinations appearing even in previously tranquil areas.<sup>8</sup> There was a significant contribution in support of the petition from the floor of the Commons. O'Connell was relatively quiet on this occasion but Charles Brownlow, a prominent landowner and member for Armagh, spoke eloquently in support of the petition. While one part of the population was 'rioting in profusion' he told the house, the great majority were unable to procure the means of satisfying the common wants of humanity. He proposed that a poor law

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<sup>5</sup> *Westmeath Journal*, 12 Apr. 1832.

<sup>6</sup> Ó Gráda, 'Poverty, population and agriculture', p. 114.; Regina Sexton, 'Diet in pre-famine Ireland' in John Crowley, William Smyth and Mike Murphy (eds), *Atlas of the Great Irish Famine* (Cork, 2012), p. 41.

<sup>7</sup> *Westmeath Journal*, 4 Sept. 1831.

<sup>8</sup> *Hansard*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ser., vol. 5, 1105 – 1131, 10 Aug. 1831.



for Ireland was the only satisfactory solution and the property of Ireland should be responsible for the poverty of Ireland.<sup>9</sup>

There was certainly ‘rioting in profusion’ in Westmeath during that autumn. The Mullingar races had always been a noted venue for great assemblies, riotous and otherwise, and the September meeting on the Smyth estate at Gainstown was a classic example of the celebration of harvest time, when all classes and ranks would be expected to intermingle in peace and harmony. The *Journal* rejoiced in the spectacle of crowds pouring in from every side, each section of the populace well represented, with beauty, rank and fashion to the fore. It was, of course, regrettable that some riotous behaviour had rather spoiled the enjoyment of the patrons on the evening of the second day’s sport. One unfortunate drunkard had broken an arm in three places as he attempted to cross the track in the middle of a race. The festival was brought to a suitably genteel conclusion with a dinner at Murray’s hotel at which ninety-six sat down, entertained by the band of the garrison.<sup>10</sup> Another event, which attracted the favourable notice of the *Journal* during that week was a harvest home dinner at Bracklyn Castle, the seat of Thomas Fetherston.<sup>11</sup> Three hundred of his tenantry were entertained in specially erected tents on the lawn. The *Journal*’s account of the event was couched in its most effusive and obsequious prose. The report noted that Lady Eleanor Fetherston, the matriarch of that distinguished line, graced the occasion with her presence and that great joy was felt by the assembled dignitaries at the comfort and cleanliness of the happy assembly. After indulging in the generosity of their landlord the tenantry disbanded to their respective homes in a quiet and orderly manner, repaying by their gratitude the favours bestowed on them. The *Journal* applauded the example of Mr. Fetherston – well worthy of imitation, and the editor remarked that if the majority of landed proprietors were as solicitous of their tenants welfare, then Ireland would be a scene of prosperity and contentment.

These portrayals of bucolic contentment in north Westmeath were in stark contrast to the weekly accounts of murder, outrage and intimidation throughout the county and to the reports of turbulence and warfare further afield. The mail boy had been robbed

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> *Westmeath Journal*, 29 Sept. 1831.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 6 Oct. 1831.

of all his post packets at Thomastown harbour for the second time in a fortnight. The land steward of Richard Dyas, having been sent to secure a farm on the Cavan border, was badly beaten and left for dead. Dyas commandeered a car from the archdeacon and sent him to Navan hospital where he was not expected to survive.<sup>12</sup> A riot in Athlone ended with a particularly vicious murder. A Protestant man intervened in the row, helping three of the rioters to escape from their pursuers by rowing them across the Shannon in his boat. When they got to midstream they took his oar, beat him over the head and cast his unconscious body into the river, where he drowned. The perpetrators absconded into County Roscommon.<sup>13</sup> There was a serious and alarming riot at Lincoln races and the city of Bristol was in turmoil due to Chartist agitation.<sup>14</sup> The excise officer in Mullingar, never a popular official, had his house ransacked by a mob. The police were unable, due to lack of numbers, to prevent this outrage, only a stone's throw from their barracks.<sup>15</sup> Sir George Hodson of Green Park was a regular target for Ribbon action. A servant, Coote, who lived in the yard was issued with a threatening notice and when he continued in his situation four men entered the yard, beat him severely and ordered him to leave his masters employment. As in the Tisdall outrage at Redmondstown, two other servants of the house stood by and refused to help the victim. The *Journal* remarked that the system of intimidation was daily becoming more effective.<sup>16</sup> In a rare case of tithe agitation in the county a notice was posted on the chapel door in Ballymore, signed by Terry Alt, promising death to any man in the parish who paid his tithes.<sup>17</sup> On the same day the corn mill in the town was burned to the ground, Mrs Leeson, the proprietor, having ignored warnings not to grind corn for farmers who had refused to comply with directions.<sup>18</sup>

There were wide variations in working conditions and in tenancy arrangements in the county. Earlier historical opinion has always held that absentee landlords were generally found wanting in their business dealings with their farmer tenants, leaving detailed arrangements to incompetent or unscrupulous agents.<sup>19</sup> The converse has

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 27 Oct. 1831.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 10 Nov. 1831.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 17 Nov. 1831.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 1 Dec. 1831.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 15 Dec. 1831.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> *Select committee on poor in Ireland*, evidence of Mr James Bryan, q. 515; Ó Gráda, 'Poverty, population and agriculture'; H.C. 1830 (667) vii.1, p. 129.

also gained currency in popular history; resident landlords could usually be depended upon to dispense justice and fair treatment. Neither of these propositions would withstand a proper scrutiny – there were gifted, professional land agents, such as Chaloner of Coolattin, on the Fitzwilliam estates in Wicklow.<sup>20</sup> There were rough, uncompromising despots in permanent residence on their estates, such as the third earl of Leitrim, William Clements, or George A. Boyd of Middleton Park, both of whom were notorious ejectors, and equally both suffered the unfavourable verdict of history due to their unrelenting efforts to improve and modernise their vast estates.<sup>21</sup>

Given these various landholding methods and philosophies the question arises as to the wide discrepancies in the behaviour of the tenantry on Fetherston's estate when compared to the wilful brutality as practiced on Hodson's estate at Green Park or Tisdall's farm at Redmondstown. K.T. Hoppen probably caught the sense of the dichotomy best when he quoted a contemporary source who bemoaned the two-faced stance of the lower classes; 'daylight sycophants, moonlight marauders'.<sup>22</sup> Liberal supplies of free drink had been an integral and indispensable component of society in rural Ireland since time immemorial.<sup>23</sup> The half-yearly moiety of rent, due in November, would have caused landlords and their middlemen to employ any stratagem to keep their tenantry on the paths of righteousness and away from the clutches of the Ribbonmen. Parliamentary candidates were regularly accused by their opponents of lubricating the electoral machine at the hustings with raw liquor. During the general election of 1826 Kidd of the *Journal*, in his customary partisan support of the conservative candidates, Rochfort and Smyth, reported that the 'monkish mob' – the lower class supporters of Tuite, as well as having the 'ecclesiastical artillery of damnation' on their side, were also fortified by, 'the

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<sup>20</sup> N.A.I., RLFc3/1/306/5, report on deficiency of seed potatoes in Leinster, 1846. Chaloner's efforts to promote good agricultural practices – the only union in Leinster with 1/10<sup>th</sup> or less loss was the Shillelagh estate of Earl Fitzwilliam.

<sup>21</sup> *Report of select committee on Westmeath, illegal combination*. H.C. 1871 (147) xiii.1. Evidence of Dr. Thomas Nulty; N.L.I. private collection No. 3108, rental book of George A. Boyd, 1854; also see A.P.W. Malcomson, *Virtues of a Wicked Earl, the life and legends of William Sydney Clements, 3<sup>rd</sup> earl of Leitrim, 1806 -78* (Dublin, 2009), p. 207.

<sup>22</sup> Hoppen, *Election politics and society*, p. 136; *Westmeath Guardian*, 25 Oct. 1838, Fetherston's sailboat robbed of all her riggings, three men arrested.

<sup>23</sup> Elizabeth Malcolm, 'Ireland sober, Ireland free: Drink and temperance in nineteenth-century Ireland' review by M.E. Daly in *Irish Historical Studies*, 25, no.100 (1987), pp 455 – 6; Malachy Magee, *1000 years of Irish whiskey* (Dublin, 1980), p. 50.

amazing quantity of ardent spirits consumed by the infuriated wretches'.<sup>24</sup> The coming-of-age of the heir to a large estate was always an occasion of celebration, accompanied by much parading, triumphal arches and lavish consumption of beer, wine and spirits, all conducive to tranquillity and proper deference to the proprietor.<sup>25</sup> By the 1860s Perry of Ballinagore, a Quaker mill owner was so far enveloped by the high society of the county that he staged just such a show for his son's wedding. The village was *en fête* according to local reports, with marching bands and an unending supply of beer; Perry apparently recognised the disastrous consequences of exposing his workmen to raw spirits.<sup>26</sup>

Attempts by the management of the county to purchase popularity and good order were not generally successful. The Fetherston estates and their tenantry suffered their fair share of disruption and disorder regardless of any staged entertainments. Perry of Ballinagore, an industrialist with a modern milling operation, was not immunised from the Ribbon conspiracies. His timekeeper was shot dead outside his office within a year of the wedding celebrations. Francis Dowling, an ex-soldier who had served in the Crimea, had taken the place of a previous employee who had shown a tendency to amend his records to the advantage of the Ribbonmen at the mill.<sup>27</sup>

The industrial revolution appeared late in Westmeath but by 1805 the Royal Canal Company had, after years of financial chaos, pushed their waterway as far as Thomastown Harbour. The project had commenced at the Broadstone in Dublin in 1790 and progress was hampered by mismanagement, political interference by the promoters of the rival Grand Canal Company and disagreements over the chosen route.<sup>28</sup> Ruth Delany, the historian of Irish canals, has noted that the preferred route would have taken the canal on a more northerly line through the Meath towns, to join the Shannon above Tarmonbarry. However, she argues, the duke of Leinster was an important subscriber to the project and he insisted, as a condition of his large

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<sup>24</sup> *Westmeath Journal*, 29 June 1826, report on Westmeath election.

<sup>25</sup> *Westmeath Guardian*, 15 Mar. 1838, report on celebrations on majority of George A. Boyd.

<sup>26</sup> Richard Harrison, 'Irish Quakers in flour milling' in Andy Bielenberg (ed.), *Irish flour milling: a history* (Dublin, 2003), p. 99.

<sup>27</sup> *Report of select committee on Westmeath, unlawful combinations*. H.C. 1871 (147) xiii.1. Evidence of George A. Rochfort Boyd and Rt. Rev. Thomas Nulty; N.A.I., C.S.O., i. c.r.i., 1870. Outrages reported to constabulary office, 26 Nov. 1870.

<sup>28</sup> Delany, *Ireland's inland waterways*, p. 101.

contribution to the share capital, that the canal be rerouted to pass the gates of his demesne at Carton. The duke prevailed and had the great satisfaction of having his own private harbour convenient to his estate.<sup>29</sup> This diversion brought the canal over the Ryewater gorge outside Leixlip. The embankment carrying the canal is still, over two hundred years later, a major engineering achievement, but the cost, of over £28,000, ruined the company. By the time the canal reached Mullingar in 1806 it was in no condition to withstand the depredations and combination that were to bedevil its operation for the following forty years.

By 1814, after a government bail-out and a transfer of management to the Directors General of Inland Navigation, the canal builders were on the last leg of the line to the Shannon.<sup>30</sup> The European wars were over, the economic condition of the country, as already noted, was in a severe depression and the agrarian disturbances that swept the County Westmeath now manifested themselves in trouble on the canal line. 'Thrashing notices' were posted demanding extra wages. The contractor reported that there were 'acts of turbulence and riot.....forty men armed with guns, swords and pistols have carded eight men more in a shocking manner.....the workmen were afraid to continue on their employment.'<sup>31</sup> A full regiment of infantry was dispatched to the worksite. The Directors General, now in full control of the scheme, paid the accommodation costs of the troop deployment. It soon became clear that military protection was no guarantee of peace and tranquillity on the Royal Canal. By April 1815 the contractors found that they could not employ men from outside the area. Some trades, such as stonemasonry and specialised underwater operations, would not have been available among the throngs of local applicants who besieged the works office, but when outsiders, 'strangers', were employed, the local parish bosses used their powers of intimidation and worse.<sup>32</sup>

By April of 1815 Killaly, the chief engineer of the Directors General, could report that, while tunnels, locks and bridges were well advanced the heavy work of earthmoving was at a standstill due to a shortage of labour. His explanation for this

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> *Report of select committee on canals in Ireland, Royal Canal*. H.C. 1812-13 (198), vi.35. Even the most sanguine could not deny their complete insolvency, p. 4.

<sup>31</sup> Delany, *Ireland's Royal Canal*, p. 64.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

most unsatisfactory position was that many of the labourers were engaged in the farming business – a remarkable revelation at a time of destitution and hunger according to contemporary intelligence. Killaly did allow that they would be returning to work as soon as the season ended.<sup>33</sup> By June about five thousand men were back on the job and early the next year the contractors could dispense with the army. Killaly noted that there had been convictions for Ribbonism in Mullingar and Longford, followed by executions. Normal working resumed and the construction proceeded. By May 1816 the contract was completed but no sooner had Killaly opened the supply line and filled his canal with water than several malicious breaches of the banks were observed and the troops, who had been withdrawn to barracks in Ballymahon, were called out to patrol the line again.<sup>34</sup>

We have seen in an earlier chapter that ‘cutting the bank’ was an extremely effective method of disrupting the working of the canal.<sup>35</sup> For long stretches of its course the Royal Canal stands well above the level of the surrounding flat bogs and meadows. It appears from the company correspondence in the early 1820s that a lucrative local industry had evolved along the canal. A substantial breach would be cut at a point where the canal water would pour out into the bog. An investigation would reveal convincing evidence of spadework. When the company engineer, Tarrant arrived at one particularly injurious cut he found five hundred men already loading material into carts. They demanded 10s. per week per man to complete the repair job and Tarrant, as he dolefully informed head office, had no option but to comply.<sup>36</sup> The country people, he added, were ‘very viciously inclined’.

Despite its many transformations and changes of ownership some of the records of the Royal Canal Company have survived intact. The company minute books passed successively through the stewardship of the Midland Great Western Railway Company in 1845, the Great Southern Railway in 1924, Coras Iompar Eireann in 1945 and latterly Irish Rail, the railway department of C.I.E.<sup>37</sup> They portray a vivid picture of the tribulations of a modern business organisation, rolling out a new

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 66.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p. 76.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p. 77, quoting Royal Canal Co minute book vol. 3, 1 Jan. 1821.

<sup>37</sup> Tom Middlemass, *Irish standard gauge railways* (Newton Abbot, 1981), pp 31 – 38; Fergus Mulligan, *One hundred and fifty years of Irish railways* (Belfast, 1983), pp 67, 68.

innovative service across a benighted, almost medieval society of internecine warfare and grasping local despots.<sup>38</sup> The minute books form a complete record of the correspondence in and out of their head office at the Broadstone. Each item is recorded almost *verbatim*, thus revealing the temper and the underlying motives of the writers. The board met every week, sometimes for two days, and every minute detail of the company's operation was scrutinised. Men were penalised, demoted, removed and dismissed for an array of misdemeanours and breaches of regulations. The Board of management, at their boardroom table in the Broadstone exercised a most rigid system of control over its massive workforce all along the line, from the warehouses of the North Wall to the terminus at Richmond Harbour but it was singularly incompetent in attempting to impose its will on the wider local landscape through which its waterway ran.

The barony of Rathconrath was proclaimed under the Insurrection Act in January 1823 and the canal suffered its share of the outrage and pillage then afflicting the western baronies of the county.<sup>39</sup> On 30 January the *Journal* reported a breach in the canal bank within a mile and half of Mullingar. An extensive level of water had been turned into the surrounding country.<sup>40</sup> This would have been a serious loss to the company. The summit level runs from Killucan, six miles east of Mullingar to Coolnahay, seven miles west of the town. The water of the entire canal from Dublin to the Shannon comes from Lough Owel, above Mullingar, via a supply line to Mullingar Harbour. The exit sluice gate at Lough Owel would prevent the lake water from flooding the countryside but the entire contents of the summit level would disappear into the bog, leaving any canal traffic high and dry. The company took remedial action, fitting stop-planks at locks and bridges to limit the loss of water. These fittings took time and money to construct and they could never solve the problem of water loss as by the time the canal staff were alerted and rushed to the scene to fit the planks the damage was done.

The *Journal* noted the damage done to the farmland of the adjoining country by the overspill of water from the breaches and laid the blame on the incendiaries who had,

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<sup>38</sup> Irish Rail archives, Heuston station – Kingsbridge, Royal Canal Company minute books, 1801 – 1845.

<sup>39</sup> *Westmeath Journal*, 23 Jan. 1823.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 30 Jan. 1823.

during the past winter, repeatedly obstructed the navigation of this important national work by similar sets of depredation. Regretfully, the miscreants had so far escaped with impunity. Stop gates had been placed at the harbour bridge but there would be a week's delay in resuming navigation.<sup>41</sup> Such incidents as cutting the canal bank kept the company under a great financial strain. The viability of the operation was further compromised by combinations among the horse drivers and labourers on the line. The passage boat inspector reported in 1821 that 'the Ribbon system had got to such a head that he had no power of control whatever over his drivers, as those who were correct and attentive were unmercifully beat and turned off the canal, and those who remain do as they please'.<sup>42</sup> When a local landowner, More O'Ferrall, recruited a private police force to patrol the canal line they proved to be more trouble than they were worth, discharging their muskets indiscriminately and singing Orange songs while in a state of intoxication.<sup>43</sup>

The company was still intent on expanding the canal network to outlying towns and in January 1830 the new extension to Longford town was opened.<sup>44</sup> This new scheme was intended to open up new business opportunities for both packet and passenger traffic. The company was also aiming to position itself to offer haulage of coal to the new industries of the eastern counties from the colliery at Arigna.<sup>45</sup> The Longford extension was in operation for only a week when a serious breach occurred near its junction with the main line. The minute book of 29 January tells the story. Mr. Tarrant, the engineer, reported that a breach had taken place at the Clonsheeran embankment. He had inspected it on Thursday evening and it was quite safe, but on Sunday night eighteen perches had been dug up and the breach was three perches wide and rapidly expanding. The lock keeper, Geraghty, explained that he was not there at seven o'clock on Saturday night when the crime occurred but he arrived immediately afterwards and assisted the boat crew who fitted the stop-planks at the bridges at each end of the embankment. Geraghty told Tarrant that he would tell the truth if put on his oath but on no account would he have his name mentioned in the investigation. Two packet boats were now stranded on the Longford side of the

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Delany, *Ireland's inland waterways*, p. 105.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Delany, *Ireland's Royal Canal*, p. 99.

<sup>45</sup> Delany, *By Shannon's shores* (Dublin, 1987), pp 8 – 9.



breach and repairs would take ten days. The watchman, placed on a float only forty perches from the scene, had seen or heard nothing.<sup>46</sup>

It would appear from this account that both the lock keeper and the watchman were under the direct control of the Ribbonmen. Tarrant was well aware of this but makes no reference to outside influences in his report – the facts speak for themselves. McMahon, the contractor was in no doubt as to the cause of the breach. The company had, it appears, attempted to blame his workmanship for previous breaches and he now moved with great acclarity to disclaim any liability. He had heard rumours that the people of Richmond Harbour, the western terminus of the main line were extremely jealous of the new terminus at Longford which would drain away much of their revenue. They were obviously the guilty parties in this atrocity. McMahon added, rather brashly, that he would of course be available to effect repairs, subject to a new contract. The record is silent on whether he got the job.<sup>47</sup> Williamson, the manager of the new Longford terminus, hastened to add his opinion in a letter to the Board on 28 January. It was notorious, he informed them, that the people at Richmond Harbour looked on the new extension with jealous eyes. He confirmed McMahon's rumour, that had been circulating, that an attempt was to be made to disable the new line. He had an anonymous letter from a trader in Longford, quoting the parish priest of Killashee, who warned that the break would be made as soon as the first boat passed.<sup>48</sup>

The local landholders were keenly aware of the possibilities of compensation during the inundations of farmland. On 7 January John Geraghty wrote to the Board. He held 20 acres adjoining the Clonsheeran embankment and he would suffer greatly in the event of a breach. He would, however, forego any claim to compensation if the Board were to appoint him as bank manager for the branch line.<sup>49</sup> Bank management in this case would not have been of the financial variety but a form of security guard job. The Board noted his letter and the secretary made a marginal note that they would entertain the application. The official opening of the Longford branch was held amid great celebration on 21 January 1831. Williamson reported that he had

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<sup>46</sup> Royal Canal Company Minute book No. 13, 1829 – 1830, 25 Jan. 1830.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 28 Jan. 1830.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 7 Jan. 1831.

engaged the band of the 1<sup>st</sup> Regiment of Dragoon Guards to meet the leading boat a mile outside the town. A vast concourse of townspeople were entertained and the police had been deployed at Clonsheeran embankment in consequence of more threats from Richmond Harbour.<sup>50</sup>

The operators of the inland navigation firms were a dominant group in the economy of the midland counties during the first half of the nineteenth-century. The workforce employed during construction could run to several thousand and the working of the waterway in its day-to-day operation took almost 800 men on the Royal Canal.<sup>51</sup> Lock-keepers, maintenance men, toll collectors, canal guards and head office staff formed the core of the operation. These positions were much sought-after in the hard years of depression and emigration. The lock keepers, generally Protestants, had a free house with additional benefits in the form of bribes from late boats.<sup>52</sup> Apart from these company employees there was a wider canal community. The contractors who ran the fleet of barges, passenger boats, packets and fly-boats employed boat crew, horse contractors and drivers. The canal hotels along the route, at Broadstone, Moyvalley and Richmond Harbour were operated initially by the company and employed a full complement of staff. There was also a wider network of suppliers, feeder services and hostelrys, official and otherwise all of which was dependent on the canal.<sup>53</sup>

The Ribbonmen had already demonstrated during the construction phase that their agrarian terrorism tactics could readily be reconfigured to encompass the canal company, its employees and suppliers. Delany argues that the potato export business was the cause of great disturbance on the line during years of bad harvests and starvation. In the winter of 1823 – 24 the guards were laid off during a temporary lull in outrages. The line manager warned head office – ‘as the potatoes are very bad, should any export from Westmeath to Dublin take place by the canal, he would not answer for the safety of the banks.’<sup>54</sup> It would certainly have been no great trouble to

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 21 Jan. 1831.

<sup>51</sup> Delany, *Ireland's inland waterways*, p. 16. The Grand Canal employed 160 men directly. The boat contractors, suppliers and warehouses employed many more.

<sup>52</sup> Information from Walter Mitchell (1916 – 1994) lockkeeper on the Grand Canal, interview with author, 1978.

<sup>53</sup> Delany, *Ireland's inland waterways*, p. 97.

<sup>54</sup> Delany, *Ireland's Royal Canal*, p. 82.

the local parish masters to arouse the ire of a population bereft of the only sustenance between them and starvation when passage boats loaded with several tons of saleable potatoes passed up the line on their way to a lucrative market in Dublin town.

It was inevitable, given the temper of the times and the example of events in industrial England, that the canal company employees would be infected by the fashion for combinations and gang warfare which prevailed through the rest of society in Westmeath.<sup>55</sup> After one particularly disastrous bank cutting at the Blackwater aquaduct in 1825 Tarrant imported a crew of labourers from Dublin to effect repairs. He discovered too late that they were local men who travelled to Dublin and returned posing as ‘strangers’. They assaulted his lock keepers and refused to work.<sup>56</sup> The local magistrate, Major Tandy, in a report to Dublin Castle, put the position plainly. His opinion was that there was a close combination between the labourers, the carmen and the stonemasons to create employment. When the company cut the wages workers pretended to return to Dublin, disembarked five miles up the line and returned posing as new men, when, of course they had to be re-employed at the previous rate.<sup>57</sup>

The duke of Leinster was, it seems, never averse to taking swift action when trouble arose in his locality and when the lockkeeper of the 14<sup>th</sup> lock was assaulted he took immediate action. In his letter to the Board of 22 November 1832 he explained that he had been called out three days earlier to take the information of the lockkeeper who he found in such a state that he could not identify the person who assaulted him, or give any information. He advised that a replacement lockkeeper be sent down to take charge of the lock, as it was unlikely that the victim would recover.<sup>58</sup> The Board instructed the secretary to acknowledge the receipt of the foregoing and to convey their thanks for the trouble his Grace had taken respecting this barbarous outrage. Both the duke and the members were very aware of Leinster’s status as a major landowner on their route and no doubt the duke felt it unnecessary to point out to the Board the danger to his loyal tenantry if this violence were to continue.

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<sup>55</sup> Briggs, *The age of improvement*, p. 280.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 83.

<sup>57</sup> N.A.I. S.O.C. papers, 1825, 2721/6.

<sup>58</sup> R.C.C. Minute book No. 16, 1832 – 33.

The Royal Canal Company made several attempts over the 1820s to deal with the vexatious and expensive problems of law and order on their line. The traders on the canal paid one-third of the cost of an armed guard, but as only eighteen men were employed to cover a ninety-mile line, they were not likely to be a deterrent to determined local marauders.<sup>59</sup> The fate of a guard at Ballinacarrig was fairly typical of the treatment meted out to this force on the canal. The *Journal* reported an assizes case in March 1829 when two local men, Keena and Boyhan were charged with beating and disarming Robert Ringland of the Royal Canal guard. He had been on duty on a winter's night at the harbour of Ballinacarrig, standing guard over the boats, when two men approached him. After some conversation they attacked him, took his gun and bayonet, and with the help of a large crowd that had gathered, they flung him into the canal. His arm was dislocated and he almost drowned. He described his attackers as two low-sized men in frieze coats. The defence argued that this description could have fitted half of the male population of the town and the prisoners were acquitted.<sup>60</sup> The near impossibility of securing convictions in these night-time escapades is well illustrated in this incident.

As the 1830s progressed the canal proprietors might have expected some respite in the disturbances and obstructions that had so hindered their operations thus far. The Emancipation crisis was over and the Irish radicals had been absorbed into the party machine at Westminster. Likewise, the gentry of Westmeath looked forward to some tranquillity after a decade of disturbance. The loyal townsmen of Tyrrellspass sent an address to the king in May of 1835 to which Robert Peel replied. His letter, dated 25 April, asked Rev. Eames to convey to those who signed the address his sincere thanks for their very flattering proof of their approbation and confidence.<sup>61</sup> The *Westmeath Guardian*, which had supplanted the *Journal* in January of that year had inherited all the loyalist, conservative editorial policies of its predecessor and 'that most loyal town of Tyrrellspass' was always good for an arresting headline. The 12<sup>th</sup> of July was celebrated in style by the Loyal Orange Lodge. The great day having fallen on a Sunday, a flag on a forty-foot pole was hoisted at midnight on the village green, decorated with orange and blue lilies. On Monday evening the Lodge

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<sup>59</sup> Delany, *Ireland's Royal Canal*, p. 83.

<sup>60</sup> *Westmeath Journal*, 19 Mar. 1829.

<sup>61</sup> *Westmeath Guardian*, 14 May 1835.

members came pouring in from all over the district to enjoy an immense bonfire on the green. ‘Amid great harmony and good humour one hundred and eighty brave, loyal and determined men sat down to a sumptuous dinner. The entire evening passed without the slightest interruption to the peace and harmony of the brethren’.<sup>62</sup> The countess of Belvedere, accompanied by George A. Boyd and her domestic chaplin, Rev. Frew, returned to Belvedere House, Great Denmark Street, from a tour of the Continent.<sup>63</sup> The Westmeath Horticultural Society held a highly successful exhibition of fruits, vegetables and flowers at Murray’s hotel. The winners in all categories were the head gardeners of the nobility and gentry of the county.<sup>64</sup> A newly developed flower, *mimilus westmeathiensis*, was named after the marquis, patron of the Society. The guests at a dinner party at the Vice-Regal Lodge included the Roman Catholic archbishop Most Rev. Dr. Murray, Mr and Mrs. H. Grattan, radicals, Thomas Drummond, recently appointed undersecretary and Mr. Sheil, one of O’Connell’s ‘tail’. The *Guardian*’s report referred to ‘sleek, meek Dr. Murray’.<sup>65</sup> For good measure they had copied a London report of a meeting at Chester to consider the means of relieving the distress of the Irish clergy and their families who were suffering the greatest privations.<sup>66</sup> The Belvedere regatta was attended by all the fashion of the county, the Archery Club had an unsuccessful outing at Gaybrook House – the wind spoiled the marksmanship, the Westmeath Hounds were to be revived. After many years of decline due to the unsuitable hunting conditions of the county the time seemed opportune to resume hunting over the broad acres of Westmeath.

A casual reader of these accounts in the local newspapers would have gained an impression of a normal, modern society, with a stabilising political establishment, a contented farming community and a satisfactory, if somewhat brittle, arrangement of the Established Church. And yet, behind this grand façade, the life of the county proceeded along the long-established, immutable line of threatening notices, brutal retribution and wilful lawlessness that had plagued it for half a century. The Royal Canal was always a prime target. Nesbit, a trader on the canal, had employed a horse

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 23 July 1835.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 22 Oct. 1835; The list of subscribers to Lewis’ *Topographical Dictionary* included Rev. J.J. Frew, Belvedere House, Great Denmark St., Dublin. Appendix to 1837 edn.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 2 July 1835.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 24 Dec. 1835

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 19 Nov. 1835.

contractor who was not in good standing with the Ribbonmen. When two of his boats were navigating through the 44<sup>th</sup> lock a large party appeared, opened fire on the crew, stabbed one with a cane-sword, beat him severely and ordered him to return a horse which he had employed in drawing boats.<sup>67</sup> Over the winter McCann, one of the main traders, was subjected to several attacks and some of his boats were burned. The *Guardian* report on these atrocities was headed ‘Dan’s combination boys’.<sup>68</sup> The highways were never safe for the transport of commodities. Kilduff of Roscommon, a distributor for Guinness, transported his merchandise by four-wheel dray from Dublin. He did not use the canal option as road transport allowed him more flexibility in his distribution business. He was waylaid outside Mullingar and lost five kegs of porter. The brewer, Richard Guinness, wrote a testy letter to the magistrates, demanding armed protection for his customers, pointing out that the ‘combinators’ were out of control on his distribution routes.<sup>69</sup> By September the *Guardian* noted with great satisfaction that two Guinness drays had passed through the town on the way to Longford guarded by an armed escort.<sup>70</sup> This, however, proved a short-term solution. By the following August Guinness was again the target of the Westmeath Ribbonmen. Two of his drays were attacked at Carrollstown and the whole consignment disappeared into the alternative distribution system. Mr. Guinness’s reaction to this calamity was not recorded.<sup>71</sup> A week later another turf boat was burned at Thomastown Harbour.<sup>72</sup>

An event occurred in the winter of 1837 which exemplifies an underlying theme of this work – the constant collision between two separate worlds in the county of Westmeath. On 7 December a notice appeared in a prominent position in the *Guardian* seeking private information on persons who had, on the previous night cut down and carried away two leaden figures, which rested on pedestals on the lawn of Bloomfield. A reward of £20 was offered and the notice was signed by George Augustus Boyd.<sup>73</sup> Bloomfield was a dower house of the Rochforts and had been the residence of Jane, countess of Belvedere until her death in the previous year. Her

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<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 10 Sept. 1835.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 28 Apr. 1836.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 25 Aug. 1837.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 21 Sept. 1837.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 9 Aug. 1838.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 16 Aug. 1838.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 7 Dec. 1837.

only son, by her second marriage, George A. Boyd had inherited her estates and was, at just twenty-one years old, one of the biggest landowners in the county.<sup>74</sup> He was appointed to the magistracy in June of 1837 on reaching his majority.<sup>75</sup>

The lawn of Bloomfield, to this day, presents a very pleasant vista, sweeping down to Lough Ennell shore with a series of pathways and woodland rides. The boathouse lies at the winter water level, which until the Brosna drainage works of the 1840s, varied considerably from the summer level.<sup>76</sup> According to the *Guardian* report which accompanied the reward notice the missing ornamental figures were made of lead and weighed at least one ton each. They were transported from the lawn in a large pleasure boat, which was taken from the boathouse. The boat was discovered on the following morning in the Lynn river. The *Guardian* fumed at the audacity of the thieves – ‘this was a bad way of encouraging a young gentleman of large fortune to reside in the county and thereby benefiting the people, as Mr. Boyd was constantly evincing a wish to do’.<sup>77</sup>

The operation of cutting down and transporting these two leaden statues would have required some organising. They were dragged or rolled for over two hundred yards to the boathouse and on reaching the Brosna, as Lynn river was more properly named, they were then lifted out of the boat and onto some type of wheeled transport for the rest of their journey. The *Guardian* estimated that about twenty men would be required to complete the theft.

There were no subsequent reports on the case and it would appear that Mr. Boyd’s reward money was never claimed. Lead was a valuable commodity and cash buyers could, no doubt, have been easily found. There was also a brisk trade in weaponry of all types and with continuous attempts by the authorities to restrict the holding of guns and ammunition it is probable that the illicit armaments trade would be in the market for large consignments of lead.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 10 Nov. 1836, Notice of death of countess of Belvedere.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 21 June 1837.

<sup>76</sup> *Westmeath Guardian*, 13 Aug. 1846 Belvedere lake was about to be drained so that would not rise higher than the present summer level. The Brosna drainage works lowered the level of the lake.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 7 Dec. 1837.

<sup>78</sup> *Arms (Ireland) Bill to prevent improper persons from having arms in Ireland*. H.C. 1837-38 (536) i.5.

## CONCLUSION

Rural violence was endemic in Westmeath for most of the nineteenth century. Taking into account the evidence uncovered during the course of this project some conclusions may be drawn as to the causes and effects of the outrages of the period under review. It has been argued that Irish rural violence stemmed from political illiteracy.<sup>1</sup> This proposition carries some weight; that the rural population clung to their own laws and customs, leaving little scope for an overlay of civil law. Theo Hoppen has argued the point admirably; ‘the more the detailed workings of individual political communities in Ireland were examined, the more striking and important seemed the gap between the local realities and the rhetoric of national politics’.<sup>2</sup> He places O’Connell, along with Parnell, as ‘an unusual superimposition on the enduring localist traditions’ of political life in rural Ireland. Fugitives from the Young Ireland affair in 1848, hiding out in the hill country of south Kilkenny came across places where O’Connell was virtually unknown.<sup>3</sup>

The tenant farmers and small traders of Westmeath were a deeply conservative group. Their political objectives were to maintain the social order of their class, not to destroy it. The Ribbon Societies, to which the police and magistrates attached responsibility for every rural outrage, were never a centralised movement. It is more likely that they consisted of small parish-based cadres who assembled for specific missions and then retreated to their farms and shops. It has been argued that there was a general acceptance among the farming and cottier classes of the brutal and occasionally murderous methods of the ‘Ribbonmen’.<sup>4</sup>

The landed aristocracy maintained their grip on the social and commercial life of the county through the 1830s, although there were signs that the Catholic middle classes were about to infiltrate their ranks. The Malone estate of Ballinahoun Court was advertised for sale by the Court of Chancery in 1830.<sup>5</sup> It was purchased by Andrew Ennis, a Dublin merchant, who took up residence in the following year. His son was

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<sup>1</sup> E.R. Norman, *A history of modern Ireland* (Harmondsworth, 1973), p. 18.

<sup>2</sup> Hoppen, *Elections, politics and society*, preface vii.

<sup>3</sup> Idem, *Ireland since 1800* (London, 1989), p. 46.

<sup>4</sup> Charles Townshend, *Political violence in Ireland: Government and resistance since 1848* (Oxford, 1983), p. 9.

<sup>5</sup> *Westmeath Journal*, 5 Aug. 1830.



immediately admitted to the grand jury and by 1837 the *Westmeath Guardian* reported that John Ennis, late of Roebuck, Dublin was now the high sheriff of the county, appointed by Lord Mulgrave ahead of three better qualified men.<sup>6</sup> Ennis was a Catholic.

Society in Westmeath was still highly stratified in the 1830s. The aristocracy and elites of the county owed their privileges, wealth and security to the connection with England. The middle classes, now including the more enterprising tenant farmers and shopkeepers, were more interested in maintaining and improving their economic positions than in politics, local or national.<sup>7</sup> The small farmers, cottiers and landless labourers were engrossed in a daily scramble for survival. They formed a very numerous sub-class, which would grasp at any proposed solutions to their plight, whether they came from officialdom, the clergy or the local Ribbonmen.

The rapid growth in the population of the county since 1800 has been emphasised during this thesis. The brutal competition for land at any price, the colonisation of marginal hill and bog land and the dearth of any alternative for employment among the rural poor are all central factors in the argument that Westmeath did not possess the social or economic infrastructure to transform the county into a progressive modern unit. The chaotic condition of the towns resulted directly from the overspill of disorder from the rural hinterland. The law enforcement apparatus of the time was increasingly overtaken by events and was never equal to the formidable challenges with which it was increasingly confronted.

The governing elites of the county were acutely aware of their precarious position at the apex of this highly volatile social system. David Dickson's study of the period in County Cork has some resonances in Westmeath; 'many props that supported the regional society...were weakening'.<sup>8</sup> This thesis has detailed several attempts at agricultural improvements, emigration, voluntary and otherwise, and industrial development, as solutions. None of these achieved their objectives as the population explosion inevitably negated all these schemes. Given the absolute authority which

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<sup>6</sup> *Westmeath Guardian*, 2 Feb. 1837; grand jury books, Westmeath.

<sup>7</sup> *Select committee on the poor of Ireland*. H.C. 1830 (589) vii. Evidence of John Dyas of Kells, tenant farmer holding 700 acres, pp 23 – 39.

<sup>8</sup> Dickson, *Old world colony*, p. 498.

the landed gentry still exercised over all aspects of life in the county a social or political revolution was never a realistic possibility, and so the cycle of violence, intimidation and retribution proceeded.

Authority, however, was no substitute for a broadly accepted local government structure and the county was never to have settled relations between the classes as long as governance was based on high rents and the relegation of the masses to a subservient role. It has been argued that improving landlords, rather than reaping the rewards of their attempts to modernise their estates, were subject to much abuse for evicting surplus sub-tenants and 'straightening' their farms. Michael Beames argues that trouble was most likely to arise, not due to absenteeism, but to the attempts of new heirs or landlords to gain control of estates neglected by absentees.<sup>9</sup>

The terms 'Ribbonmen' and the Ribbon Society' occur throughout the work of historians in their commentaries on the rural warfare of nineteenth-century Ireland. To the question, 'who was behind the operation of the communal code of law'? the answer is generally 'the Ribbonmen'. Joe Lee, in his definitive work, argues that the terms were a convenient shorthand for various rural, highly localised groups with no central guidance or national organisation.<sup>10</sup> His contention that the names gained general currency due to the many reports from nervous local officials and informers 'on the make' to Dublin Castle, is a convincing one. Beames concurs; he concludes that recruits were admissible to the organisation if they drank in the right public houses, could pay the membership fees and show an appearance of sympathy with the Ribbon cause.<sup>11</sup> Tom Garvin argues that the Ribbon societies, while they were organised in local, unconnected units, could still show signs of politicisation and articulation over wide stretches of country. He allows, however, that no central structure existed.<sup>12</sup> He suggests that Ribbonism was less dangerous than the pre-political local agrarian gangs.<sup>13</sup> No hard evidence has emerged of any organised Ribbon Society in Westmeath but, nevertheless, an efficient local organisation would be essential in order to assemble large bodies of men at the scene of an eviction or to

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<sup>9</sup> Beames, *Peasants and power*, p. 140; *Select committee on Westmeath*, H.C. 1871 (147) xiii, evidence of G.A. Rochfort Boyd on his attempts to 'straighten' a farm.

<sup>10</sup> Lee 'The Ribbonmen' in Williams (ed.), *Secret societies in Ireland*, p. 26.

<sup>11</sup> Beames in *Past & Present*, No. 97, p. 124.

<sup>12</sup> Garvin, *Defenders, Ribbonmen and others*, p. 134.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* P. 152.

harvest a distrained crop. Printed notices, which were posted in some areas, would certainly have been set up, paid for and distributed by someone in authority. It must be concluded that Ribbonism, by whatever label, was a real, if shadowy force in the county.

This survey has attempted throughout to argue that violent disorder was an inescapable and integral component of life in rural Ireland in the early nineteenth-century. However, occasionally and, it seems, randomly, deadly confrontations interrupted the standard pattern of local banditry. Two of these are examined in some detail. The Castlepollard affray and the Newtownbarry riot were both serious encounters between the forces of the law and the rural population. Townsmen apparently absented themselves from active participation in both cases. The motivations behind the events were very different – a commonplace enough fair-day commotion in Castlepollard and a highly contentious tithe riot in Newtownbarry. The aftermath, however, was quite similar in both; inquests, court prosecutions and acquittals of the enforcers of the law. Neither event precipitated a rush to arms by the farmers and their supporters, who were the injured parties. Despite unfavourable notice in parliament and the liberal press, all sides settled back into their version of normality. The gentry and the comfortable classes of the towns were left to administer the county as they saw fit and the rural population continued in their separate world of a precarious, fraught existence.

The influence of alcohol, particularly raw whiskey, is a constant sub-theme in this work. While a separate study would certainly uncover the full extent of the evil influence resulting from the proliferation of drinking establishments, the evidence used in this study has, arguably, been of a quality to leave no room for doubt that without the spectacular consumption of hard liquor, Westmeath would have been a more tranquil place.

The main conclusion to be drawn from the evidence of this project must be that rural violence in Westmeath was grounded in the socio-economic conditions of the time. Whether the government of the county was run from Westminster by the duke of Wellington or from College Green by Daniel O'Connell was of very little import to the lower classes of Westmeath.

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