National Archives, Ireland

Historical commentary for 1819

Beyond the passing of the Act of Union, the early decades of the 19th century remained shaped by the legacy of the 1798 rebellion. The registered papers for 1819 contain the claims of 'suffering loyalists' continuing in their quest to obtain compensation from government; women detailed bloody accounts of the murder of husbands, brothers, and sons by the rebels CSO/RP/1819/445. At the same time, the registered papers offer a snapshot of the plights of families on the rebel side in 1798. John Chambers, a printer and founding member of the United Irishmen in Dublin, was imprisoned and banished from Ireland for his active role as a member of the rebels' Executive Directory in 1798. The papers contain a petition from his son, to the Irish government, seeking permission for his father to return to Ireland CSO/RP/1819/237. Similarly the collection contains a letter from the son of William Orr, the Presbyterian farmer executed by government in 1797 for United Irish involvement, and immortalised in William Drennan's poem, 'The Wake of William Orr'. Orr's son noted that, 'I have little to say, but that the tale of misery and suffering endured by my late Father's Widow and children has been no more than half told'. The letter refers to the destruction of the family's home and possessions by yeomanry forces in June 1798, commenting that, '…I cannot for a moment suppose that these actions were sanctioned or that they even ever came to knowlege sic of the Government. I will rather attribute it to the wild fanaticism of a party of yeomanry clothed with the power of Martial Law' CSO/RP/1819/656.

The registered papers for 1819 also contain a letter from the Dublin barrister and former United Irishman, Leonard McNally, soliciting government employment several months before his death. McNally was posthumously revealed to have been an informer in the United Irish ranks, feeding information back to the government at Dublin Castle, on activities and decisions at the very highest echelons of the rebel leadership.[1] In his letter he alludes cryptically to his duplicity, noting that 'As to other matters upon which I rest a hope of success I leave the mention of them to your discretion – I only say The duke of Wellington sic – Mr. Poole – and Mr. Peele sic – would in my opinion – Serve me' CSO/RP/1819/620.

Enduring political and religious hostilities and resentments were compounded by economic distress. Napoleon's defeat in Waterloo in 1815 brought to an end Britain's protracted warfare with Revolutionary and Napoleonic France, but the subsequent economic slump which set in after the war was felt keenly in Ireland. Indeed, it was the economic depression after 1815 which did much to affect popular attitudes to the Union. The registered papers of 1819 testify to the plight of many thousands of Irish soldiers returning home from the war, reduced to half-pay or a military pension, and seeking employment to support their families. CSO/RP/1819/978 and CSO/RP/1819/845. The subsequent depression in agricultural prices after 1815, an accompanying commercial crisis, partial potato famines, and fever epidemics,

compounded the strains of the return of large numbers of discharged soldiers, creating widespread economic distress.[2]

As a result, the government based at Dublin Castle found itself increasingly drawn into an interventionist policy for the social and economic problems of Ireland, to an extent unheard of in the rest of the United Kingdom and at a time when *laissez-faire* remained the dominant political philosophy at Westminster.[3] It was the Chief Secretary's Office – the nerve centre of Irish governance and the key channel of communication with London – which controlled decisions on matters such as poor relief, grants to charitable institutions, hospitals, and public health. In 1819, Ireland, and in particular urban Dublin, endured the peak of a virulent typhus fever epidemic.

As well as reports from physicians employed in dedicated fever hospitals across Ireland, the registered papers reveal the personal stories of individuals and families, detailing the harsh realities of life in an era before formal government support for the poor, sick and vulnerable. One harrowing account of the Fountain family received at the Chief Secretary's Office in June of 1819 offered a glimpse of life for poor families in Dublin, and concerned the death of John Fountain, an employee at the Custom House in Dublin, leaving his wife and 8 children 'destitute of any means of support, or wherewithal sic to defray the Necessary expenses of his funeral'. Moreover, 'the Widow of the deceased is laying in the fever in the Same Bed with his remains and is not expected to recover...' CSO/RP/1819/474. Much government money and medical endeavour was directed to the treatment of fever patients in Ireland at this time, whilst eminent physicians, such as Dr William Stoker of Dublin, uncle of Bram Stoker, carried out research into the causes and prevention of the disease CSO/RP/1819/847.

Between 1787 and 1853, some 26,500 of the convicts arriving in Australia, had sailed from Ireland.[4]The registered papers offer a detailed insight into the infrastructure behind the system for the transportation of convicts from Ireland to New South Wales, Australia, including the various stages of the prisoners' journey, from their local county jail, to ultimate embarkation onto convict ships at Cove Cobh, County Cork[5]. The papers capture the concerns of local magistrates at the duration of time between conviction at local assizes, and removal of those sentenced to transportation from the local jails, emphasising over-crowding and the unsuitability of provincial prisons in offering secure holding for convicts; they also document procedures for equipping ships and prisoners with adequate supplies of food and clothing CSO/RP/1819/864; and in particular, to the health of convicts, not least government's perennial concern of disease during the long sea voyage. As well as offering a window into the workings of the transportation system from the perspective of the Irish government, the registered papers for 1819 also reveal the names and stories of some of the thousands of men and women sentenced to transportation CSO/RP/1819/247 and CSO/RP/1819/513.

The Irish fisheries act passed by parliament in 1819, provided for the establishment of a board of fisheries to regulate and promote sea fishing. The work of the board in investing in new piers, and in establishing a system of bounties on boats and catches, led to 'a prosperity of sorts' in Irish fishing, but the abolition of the board in

1829 meant that by the time of the famine, the industry found itself in the 'doldrums' once more.[6] The registered papers for 1819 contain applications from those seeking employment as local inspectors of fisheries; requests from local landed gentry to nominate candidates for the post of inspector in their local towns; and requests from fishermen seeking government assistance or protection. Dublin Castle received repeated complaints, for instance, at the activities of pirates in Galway Bay, preventing legitimate fishermen from earning their living CSO/RP/1819/408, and at the activities of fishermen using trammel nets, at the expense of the herring fishery in Youghal Bay, County Cork CSO/RP/1819/1011. Archibald MacDougall of Belfast, even suggested to government that a bounty might also be granted for seals caught off the Irish coast, noting the value of both their oil and skins.[7]

The question of legislation regarding insolvent debtors was also the subject of much debate in 1819, and a change in the law respecting those imprisoned for debt was widely anticipated. The scale of the problem was evident from a list of the numbers committed to Irish jails across each county in 1818, which was sent to Dublin Castle by the Reverend Forster Archer, inspector general of Irish prisons CSO/RP/1819/12. Perhaps what is most interesting about Forster's list, are the numbers of those committed to jail for sums of less than £20. Indeed, with harsh terms of punishment for those owing even small amounts of legal fees, the reality of debt in Ireland at this time was the very real prospect of perpetual imprisonment. As the plights of many individuals seeking assistance from government testifies, this often became a self-fulfilling prophecy, whereby men found their livelihoods destroyed and their families impoverished during imprisonment. In short, those not in dire financial circumstances at the time of their confinement, soon became so, and all hope of repaying debts was further reduced CSO/RP/1819/410. It was a system which, as some contemporary reformers pointed out, was draconian and futile. The wretched conditions of the jails were the subject of frequent correspondence to the Chief Secretary's Office. The registered papers offer an insight into the desperation of many debtors held in the Four Courts Marshalsea and Kilmainham jail, Dublin, detailing persistent ill health, including eye infections resulting in eventual blindness; a stench of sewers; and blocked privies. CSO/RP/1821/168, CSO/RP/1821/212 and CSO/RP/1821/213. Moreover, the imprisonment of debtors owing small sums was a system which ultimately weighed heavily on the government purse, as William Logan, inspector of the Four Courts Marshalsea, pointed out to Dublin Castle.[8]

In the years following the Union, Dublin Castle was focused on cost-cutting measures, in an effort to drastically reduce Irish government expenditure. In reality, there was much duplication in government departments and boards between England and Ireland, with Ireland funding its own privy council, system of law courts, treasury (until its abolition in 1817)[9] and post office. In 1819, the Castle stepped up efforts to reduce government overheads, with an inquiry into what was perceived as an over-wieldy and corrupt law courts system, where offices (often sinecures) and their accompanying salaries and emoluments were treated as private property, to be handed down within families. Unsurprisingly, the reform of the court system was met with fierce opposition from those post-holders whose offices faced abolition or financial curtailment CSO/RP/1819/362.

The legacy of a vast national debt also led the Irish government into new ways of generating revenue, chiefly by increased taxation and by addressing revenue frauds committed through smuggling and illicit distillation. The registered papers for 1819 offer a vivid account of both government efforts to suppress illicit stills, and equally, the highly organised means by which local communities cooperated to evade the authorities; Captain Thomas Dawson, head of the revenue police at Letterkenny, County Donegal, reported to the Chief Secretary's Office, that 'not less than from six to seven hundred men' had assailed his police force during an attempt to seize an illegal still at Dunfanaghy in the county. Even allowing for some exaggeration, the letter paints a vivid picture of 'Country people' determined to resist authority. CSO/RP/1819/292. In poor districts, particularly in the north west, cash raised from illicit distillation comprised a vital part of the local economy;[10] indeed as one correspondent to the Chief Secretary's Office claimed, many magistrates and landlords were willing to turn a blind eye to the practice because it ensured that tenants had sufficient funds to meet rent payments.[11] There were also, undoubtedly, those who were simply reluctant to antagonise their local populations. Many contemporary commentators also regarded the fact that 'so much lower class life revolved around cheap drink', as a chief contributor to Ireland's social and economic problems, and the reason behind what was perceived to be extensive violence and lawlessness in rural Ireland.[12]

- 1 Marianne Elliott, *Partners in Revolution: The United Irishmen and France* (Yale 1982), p.73.
- 2 Cormac O'Grada, 'Poverty, population, and agriculture, 1801-1845', in W.E. Vaughan ed., *A New History of Ireland Volume 5: Ireland Under the Union I: 1801-1870* (Oxford, 1989), p.108.
- 3 J. C. Beckett, *The Making of Modern Ireland 1603-1923* (1981; London, 2008), p.293-4.
- 4 Rena Lohan, 'Sources in the National Archives for research into the transportation of Irish convicts to Australia (1791-1853)', *Journal of the Irish Society for Archives*, Spring 1996; also available at http://www.nationalarchives.ie/topics/transportation/Irl-Oz.pdf
- 5 See Lohan, 'Sources in the National Archives for research into the transportation of Irish convicts to Australia'.
- 6 Cormac O'Grada*, Ireland: A New Economic History 1780-1939* (1994; Oxford, 2001), p.147.
- 7 Letter from Archibald MacDougall, Belfast, to Charles Grant, London, Chief Secretary of Ireland, 30 June 1819, with copy of letter of reply from Grant to MacDougall, 24 July 1819, annotated on reverse, CSO/RP/1819/645/1.
- 8 Letter from William Logan, 40 Mecklenburgh Railway Street, Dublin, inspector of Four Courts Marshalsea, Dublin, to Alexander Mangin, first clerk in civil department of Chief Secretary's Office, Dublin Castle, 15 October 1819, CSO/RP/1819/219. Logan noted that, 'If a private fund was established to liberate those who are in the Four Courts Marshalsea for small sums I am convinced it would be a saving to the Public in the end'.
- 9 For a discussion of the consolidation of the Irish and English exchequers in 1816-17, and other reductions to the Irish budget at this time, see Douglas Kanter, 'Robert Peel and the Waning of the "Influence of the Crown" in Ireland, 1812-1818', in *New Hibernia Review/Iris Éireannach Nua*, 5/2 (Summer, 2001), pp.54-71.
- 10 S. J. Connolly, 'Union Government, 1812-23', in *A New History of Ireland* p.63.
- 11 Letter from James Connery, Ballyduff, near Lismore, County Kerry, magistrate, to Earl Talbot, Lord Lieutenant, Dublin Castle, complaining of the self-interested conduct of local magistrates in Lismore, particularly regarding the widespread problem of illicit distillation. Connery refers to one

magistrate who opposes the prospect of the military being summoned to the area, as they may clamp down on his tenantry's illicit distillation, without which his tenants would be unable to pay him his 'enormous Rent', CSO/RP/SC/1821/351.

- 12 Connolly, ‘Union government, 1812-23’, p.63.

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