



National Archives, Ireland

Historical Commentary for 1820

The Chief Secretary's Registered Papers for 1820 deal with a wide range of issues including health and hospitalisation, crime and punishment, employment and emigration, trade and insolvency, education and industrial training, religion and the arts, and fraud and mendicity. Documents dealing with crime including robbery, assault, smuggling, illicit distillation, fraud, or membership of a Ribbon society are numerous, as are those dealing with the police constabulary (often supported by informants), courts, gaols and convict depots. There is material on road building, canal development, harbour construction and lighthouses. The activities of various public bodies are represented, including the General Post Office, the Customs House, the Stamp Office, the Office for Auditing Public Accounts, the commissioners for Assistance of Trade and Manufactures, First Fruits, Fisheries and Revenue. Applications to the Chief Secretary's Office for employment, pensions, preferment or compensation remain a large category of correspondence, and sometimes have important references to service in the 1798 Rebellion or in Robert Emmet's rising of 1803. Significant developments in banking, trade combinations and prisons are covered.

The economic downturn following the end of the Napoleonic wars brought sharp repercussions to the Irish banking sector. By 1820 the number of private banks in Ireland had fallen to 20, which was about half of those in existence in 1804.¹ A particularly dramatic difficulty developed during May 1820 with the failure of Roche's Bank in Cork, a crisis subsequently followed by credit problems at Leslie's Bank in the same city. Within a few months, the financial contagion had spread across Munster and into south Leinster. Towards the end of 1820, the thorny issue of extending financial support to a weakening Leslie's Bank occupied senior officials and politicians. Writing to Nicholas Vansittart, Chancellor of the Exchequer, the Chief Secretary noted in confidence that the application by Leslie's Bank for parliamentary relief 'is very strong, as it is a most honourable house, guarded by the best possible Securities...On these and other grounds I am for the grant. But I ought to add that the Lord Lieutenant and Mr [William] Gregory are strongly against it'
[CSO/RP/1820/861](#). Many of the difficulties affecting Irish banks lay with an inadequate legal framework, for such institutions were commonly small, undercapitalized entities. Within a few years, however, banking in Ireland was revolutionised by the introduction of the Irish Bank Act of 1824.²

The instability in the banking sector had serious ramifications for merchants and manufacturers as well as small traders throughout the afflicted regions. The Corker Mills Company, of Doneraile, County Cork, sought a loan of £500 from the Lord Lieutenant to enable continuation of flour milling. Their difficulties were caused by the 'failure of the Banks in the South of Ireland, and the subsequent scarcity of a circulating medium', problems that prevented Garret Corker calling 'in from his Customers the money they owe him' [CSO/RP/1820/353](#). Similarly, in July 1820, the



negative impact of the loss of local banking was referred to by Richard Tresilian, Bandon, County Cork, in a letter seeking a reduction in excise duties on spirits. Drawing attention to the recent demise of 'several Banking Houses in the County', he bemoaned the 'distresses of the Tradesman, the like distresses affecting the Farmers from the depression in the Value of their commodities' [CSO/RP/1820/1249](#). John Norris Russell, president of the chamber of commerce, Limerick, wrote in June 1820 that 'the Trades people of this City are in great distress for want of Employment' and urged extension of relief to that quarter [CSO/RP/1820/816](#).

Petitions from individuals irate at the banks' behaviour also reached Dublin Castle. Joseph Hardy of Waterford city expressed acute displeasure at an apparent lack of transparency from Newport's Bank, a local casualty of the crisis. His letter describes the local 'despondency' and laments 'at the age of 64 – I must begin to drink whiskey punch and abstain from every expense and deny myself every comfort... This for my confidence in avariciousness and pusillanimous men' [CSO/RP/1820/606](#).

In the tightening economic atmosphere of the 1820s, discord among employees and employers led to the formation of combinations, early precursors of trade unions. The origins of such groups, representing associations of trades or crafts, lay in eighteenth-century guilds and early journeymen's clubs. Legislation of 1729 forbade combinations in Ireland, and labour-related activity was largely channelled through membership of friendly societies. It took almost a century, until 1824, before formal legislative changes laid the foundation for the growth of early trade unionism.³

In 1820, possible deterioration or breakdown in labour relations concerned a number of writers to the Chief Secretary's Office. A letter from James Allin of Youghal, County Cork, to the Under Secretary in late 1820 sought the introduction of a bill to enable the chief magistrates 'to fix the daily Wages of the several trades and the number of Hours they should work each day' [CSO/RP/1820/70](#). An atmosphere of conflict in County Limerick was complained of by a Mrs. Wilkinson in August 1820. She lamented the loss of £12,000 invested in a brewing plant in the city following an 'unfortunate contest' between Lord Gort and members of a party of 'Independents'. As a direct result of her husband's political alignment, 'the trades refused to drink his Porter', a reaction that was to culminate in his bankruptcy [CSO/RP/1820/1362](#).

Benjamin Russell, baker, of Limerick city, informed the Chief Secretary late in 1820 of the demolition of his house by a combination of tradesmen. He mentions having received earlier warnings and threats from 'a Body of men stiling [sic] themselves the United Trades of the City of Limerick' who demanded he 'should immediately discharge his two Apprentices and take in Two Journeymen of their Body' [CSO/RP/1820/1097](#). In some cases, strife between working groups and their employers was connected to wider political disaffection in Irish society. A link has been identified between combinations at this period and the Ribbon societies of Dublin who were 'active in protectionism and intimidation'.⁴ In an economy weighed down by the difficulties of distress and contraction of trade, the overall influence of such workers' combinations may well have been 'neither persuasive nor entrenched'. Those who sought to unite in support of a particular labour aim were frequently forced to succumb to 'defeats in the struggle against determined masters'.⁵



A growing awareness of the need for appropriate prison accommodation and discipline is a feature of the administration of law and order in Ireland in 1820. Prior to the middle of the eighteenth century, prisons were used primarily as temporary holding places for those awaiting trial by court of law. More general detention centres, known as houses of correction, used as places of confinement for beggars since the 1630s, came gradually to assume the function of prisons. Thus, by the end of the eighteenth century a considerable infrastructure existed for restraining those deemed to be unfit for participation in society, comprised of 112 bridewells and 41 county and borough prisons.⁶ Recognition of the necessity to reform prison life was reflected in a number of legislative measures in the early nineteenth century, most notably the wide-ranging Prison (Ireland) Act of 1826. It offered regulatory stipulations under 142 clauses, covering prison administration, staff conduct, jail organisation and living conditions.⁷

Contemporary theories of imprisonment were shifting towards a greater acknowledgement of the need to combine discipline and physical confinement with an element of practical work and personal reformation. Such a broad philosophy was to inform the foundation of penitentiary institutions, which started to appear in Ireland especially after 1820, following a marked reduction in capital offence convictions.⁸ An interesting example of such a structure can be found in the hand-coloured elevation and ground plan of Waterford Penitentiary by James Elmes, architect, of London; recorded on the drawing are separate compartments for use as workshops, milling facilities, and two infirmaries [CSO/RP/1820/432](#). Two years earlier in 1818, Richmond General Penitentiary was opened at Grangegorman Lane, Dublin.⁹ It was placed under a strict system of management, and inmates were subject to 'Rules to be Observed by the Prisoners in the Richmond General Penitentiary' [CSO/RP/1820/1041](#). Likewise, the conduct of turnkeys there was regulated by a code of discipline, which included, for example, a rule declaring 'All gaming of every description is hereby strictly forbidden' [CSO/RP/1820/1119](#).

A central component of the penitentiary system was to extract labour and to impart practical work skills to prisoners. Adequately qualified supervisors were required. Maria Rutledge wrote to the Chief Secretary's Office in 1820 seeking appointment to the post of matron at Richmond Penitentiary. Her principle claim to the position was based upon almost twenty-two years experience as superintendent of the House of Industry, Dublin, with responsibilities for instruction in use of lint, lace, glove-making, card-teething, knitting, bookbinding and straw-plaiting [CSO/RP/1820/1078](#). The work and teaching ethos in such institutions as Richmond is reflected in a letter from its governor, Samuel Hollingsworth, to Alexander Mangin, clerk, at Dublin Castle, written in November 1820. The governor expressed his willingness to receive 87 young offenders from Smithfield Penitentiary, Dublin, provided that 'previous to their removal orders may be given for sending here their Looms, wheels, Bedding, necessaries, and School books' [CSO/RP/1820/1083](#).

Medical facilities in Irish penitentiaries, where offered, also needed to be well organised and carefully managed. Competition tended to be fierce for the leading medical positions in major city institutions. Seeking employment as surgeon to the Richmond Penitentiary, Alexander Read informed the Lord Lieutenant of practical



knowledge gained through ‘Medical care of the Convicts under Sentence of Transportation confined in Kilmainham Gaol’ as well as eleven years’ professional experience in Mercer’s Hospital, Dublin [CSO/RP/1820/856](#). In his application for the post of apothecary at Richmond, Christmas B. Peter of Dublin, in addition to making reference to professional experience working with Daniel Moore of South Anne street, invoked the faithful political stance of his wife’s father, Joseph Chamney, who ‘for his Loyalty in the Coolattin yeomanry in the year 1798 was seized by the Rebels and piked to Death in his own demesne’ [CSO/RP/1820/1017](#).

Breaches in security at any Irish penitentiary were a serious matter, in particular the escape of prisoners from custody. The escape of prisoners from Richmond Penitentiary in late March 1820 led to full investigation, by Alderman John Cash and Joseph Gabbett, police magistrates of Dublin. Statements were taken from Archibald Wilson, assistant governor, John Mcfarland, turnkey, Robert Woods, porter, Frances Goldie, turnkey, Alexander McAlister, corporal of the guard, George Adair, sentry, and Andrew Graham, a prisoner [CSO/RP/1820/105](#). The means of escape was the removal of a padlock fitted to the back gate of the penitentiary. Payment of compensation for discovery of a prison escapee was the subject of a memorial from Thomas Tallent Jr, assistant gaoler, city of Kilkenny. In August 1820, Tallent complains of his inspector’s refusal to issue full payment of compensation, which he claims as his right for apprehension of James Nash, a deserter from the 86th Regiment [of Foot] and escapee from the Richmond Penitentiary [CSO/RP/1820/1254](#).

- [1](#) S. J. Connolly, *The Oxford Companion to Irish History* (Oxford, 1998), p. 36.
- [2](#) Cormac Ó Gráda, *Ireland: A New Economic History 1780-1939*, (Oxford, 1994), p. 139.
- [3](#) Connolly, *Oxford Companion*, p. 548.
- [4](#) R. F. Foster, *Modern Ireland 1600-1972*, (London, 1988), p. 293.
- [5](#) W. E. Vaughan (ed), *A New History of Ireland, Vol. V, Ireland Under the Union 1801-70*, (Oxford, 1989), p. 145.
- [6](#) Connolly, *Oxford Companion*, p. 463.
- [7](#) Vaughan, *A New History of Ireland*, p. 545.
- [8](#) Connolly, *Oxford Companion*, p. 463.
- [9](#) R. B. McDowell, *The Irish Administration 1801-1914*, (London, 1964), p. 146.

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