



National Archives, Ireland

Historical commentary for 1821

One of the most significant features of life in Ireland in the pre-famine era was a dramatic increase in population, estimated at around 5 million at the time of the Act of Union in 1800, rising to 6.8 million by the time of the Irish census in 1821, and reaching 8.5 million on the eve of the famine.¹ As reflected in the registered papers for 1821, arrangements for carrying out the 1821 census were orchestrated by the commissioners of Irish records, based at Record Tower, Dublin Castle. The papers include printed circulars relating to the control of the activities of the enumerators, and procedures for gathering in their printed forms and note books from across each county [CSO/RP/1821/746](#). The calibre of enumerators evidently remained a source of government concern, as did the reaction of local people to the process. Amongst the registered papers for 1821, is a copy of a printed circular letter for distribution among the clergy 'of every religious persuasion', asking them to assist with the census, by 'observing the conduct of the Enumerators', 'by occasionally inspecting their Note Books', and by removing 'any prejudices among the lower classes, tending to obstruct or retard' the census process [CSO/RP/1821/746](#). Problems in particular with arrangements for the census in County Cork lead to the issuing of a sharp reprimand to the magistrates of the county, lamenting that 'out of upwards of two hundred resident and acting Magistrates, so very few indeed were to be found to undertake the duty entrusted to them by the Legislature, of selecting efficient Enumerators, and superintending their proceedings' [CSO/RP/1821/36](#). One zealous correspondent writing to the Chief Secretary's Office in February 1821, suggested that census officials should avail of the opportunity to search every house they visited for signs of involvement in illicit distillation [CSO/RP/1821/310](#).

Such a rate of population growth further compounded the already serious social and economic problems affecting rural Ireland. The decades before the famine were characterised by persistent and frequently violent outbreaks of rural unrest, chiefly through the activities of agrarian secret societies. The overwhelmingly failure of rural authority had led Robert Peel, Irish Chief Secretary between 1812 and 1818, to establish the peace preservation force in 1814, to be dispatched to baronies proclaimed to be in a state of disturbance.² The force had mixed success: a focus of local conflict, some fearful inhabitants welcomed their arrival, whilst others opposed the expense of supporting the force which was levied on the locality in question. Moreover, it frequently required the additional bolster of outright military support to maintain law and order. Above all, the peace preservation force, like the Irish government's forays into matters of public health and poor relief, 'involved government taking on new functions and a style of administration that diverged sharply from that in contemporary Britain'.³

Lack of trust of the authorities among the population, especially in matters of law and order, persisted and consequently reinforced the special relationship between the people and secret societies. Following in a long tradition of agrarian secret societies



such as the Whiteboys, Threshers, Shanavests, Carders, and Ribbonmen, the followers of Captain Rock in the early 1820s – one of the fiercest of the pre-Famine agrarian societies – employed threatening notices, cattle maiming, haystack burning, night-time raids, the ploughing up of grassland, and personal assault, in an attempt to prevent rent increases and evictions, and to intimidate local tithe proctors.⁴ Motivated largely by local issues and economic grievances, the societies were therefore essentially defensive in character, broadly seeking to protect the rights of land occupiers in relation to rents, leases, evictions, the availability of ground for tillage, tithes, and dues levied by the Catholic clergy on their parishioners.⁵ Above all, they adhered to an alternative conception of law and government.⁶

The sub-series of registered papers for 1821, entitled 'State of the Country', clearly demonstrate the extent of government alarm at the Rockite disturbances. The quantity and frequency of reports on their activities and on other signs of unrest and disaffection across the country, evidently warranted their separate arrangement at the Chief Secretary's Office. The Reverend John Chester, Church of Ireland rector of Mallow, County Cork, reported that his fellow clergyman had fallen foul of the Rockites: 'They avowed their determination to cut off, and nail to the Church Door, the Ears of Mr Cotter – the respectable Clergyman of Castlemagner Parish', for presuming to tear down a threatening notice issued from 'Captain Rock', warning of the consequences for those who attempted to collect tithes and rents. Chester enclosed the notice in question in his letter to Dublin Castle. [CSO/RP/SC/1821/271](#).

Letters flooded in to the Chief Secretary's Office from local magistrates, clergymen, and landowners across parts of Ireland, reporting on the activities of the insurgents, and in particular their nightly raids on homes in order to obtain firearms. For those who refused to support or join their cause, the secret societies sought revenge. One tenant farmer, Michael Feeghan, in Durrow, King's County Offaly petitioned Dublin Castle, noting in detail the persecution endured by his family. He included a threatening note which had been fixed to the door of his home from another mythical leader 'Captain Carder' warning the family to quit the area, 'or if not the most morose Deth sic you must Get' [CSO/RP/1821/1705](#). Feeghan attributed his persecution to the hostility of his 'disaffected neighbours', at his 'punctual Discharge of his Rent'.

Throughout the summer of 1821, government became increasingly concerned at reports from the scene of the most persistent and violent 'Rockite' unrest which occurred in counties Limerick and Cork. This was centred on local grievances, and, chiefly, on the bitterly unpopular figure of Alexander Hoskins, land agent to Lord Courtenay's estates. Events threatened to spiral out of control following reports that County Limerick insurgents, killed in a confrontation with the peace preservation force in August 1821, had been hastily buried in quick-lime [CSO/RP/SC/1821/656](#). It culminated in the brutal murder of Major Richard Going, the county's former chief police magistrate.⁷ The state of County Limerick in 1821 caused fear and alarm amongst local gentry, clergy and magistrates, and, in particular, the Irish administration at Dublin Castle, who became increasingly desperate to find a means of quelling the situation. The proprietor of the *Limerick Telegraph* newspaper offered his observations on the root cause of the county's disturbances. He accepted that whilst Hoskins' 'ill-judged and intemperate' conduct had been the catalyst for



violence in the county, the real problems, he said, lay in much deeper grievances – chiefly the economic distress occasioned by ‘the depression in value of the produce of the Land’; the methods used to exact tithe payments; and the supineness of the magistracy.⁸

But alongside local, socio-economic grievances, deeper religious and political strands could clearly be detected. References to the apocalyptic ‘prophecies’ of Pastorini, predicting the downfall of Protestantism in 1825⁹, featured strongly in the unrest of 1821, and such intense millennial prophecies suggested the underlying importance of sectarian animosities [CSO/RP/SC/1821/742](#). These could, above all, be utilised by the insurgents and secret societies to transcend divisions among the rural population, and act as a unifying force.¹⁰ Inevitably, ‘Religious antagonism served to complicate...the relationship between owners and occupiers of the land; the former, predominantly protestant, the latter largely Catholic.’¹¹

The State of the Country papers also shed light on ongoing sectarian tensions across Ireland beyond agrarian unrest. Orange processions continued to be a source of antagonism, especially around the annual 12th of July celebrations. One local clergyman wrote to the Chief Secretary’s Office complaining of a meeting of some ‘eighteen Lodges’ at Dunnamanagh, County Tyrone on 12 July, and reporting on an armed clash between several of the lodges and the ‘opposite party’. Reverend Andrew Hamilton echoed the frustrations of other commentators, with his belief that such activities merely kept alive ‘party spirit’ [CSO/RP/SC/1821/715](#). Equally, a report of illegal meetings of Roman Catholics at Rathfriland, County Down to celebrate the 17th of March, reached Dublin Castle, together with a list of names of the individuals involved; those gathered were heard to cry that ‘the bill had passed the Romans would have there sic rights’ and ‘To Hell with Castlereah’ sic; an allusion to Lord Castlereagh, Foreign Secretary, and architect of the Act of Union [CSO/RP/SC/1821/109](#). Frequent complaints also reached Dublin Castle concerning the Orange complexion of Dublin city’s corporation and police magistracy: the papers include a threatening note sent to Dublin merchant George Ness, warning him against his support for the admission of ‘Bloody vagabond cutthroat sic papists’ to the guild of merchants. The letter is signed ‘a fellow that would shoot a papist, as soon sir as you would a mad dog’, with a postscript stating, ‘see what the papists is sic doing in the county Limerick . Burning every neighbours house and killing the Magistrates who sir, would give the like of them power, no wise man’.

[CSO/RP/SC/1821/1064](#).

Moreover, the zeal of Dublin’s Orangemen in adorning the statue of King William III on Stephen’s Green with ribbons every 12th of July and every November King William’s birthday, became not only a source of antagonism within the city, but an embarrassment to the Irish executive. Marquis Wellesley, Lord Lieutenant in Ireland from December 1821, and an open supporter of Catholic emancipation, found himself at the centre of an attack by an Orange rabble whilst attending the New Theatre Royal in Dublin one evening in December 1822. The cause of the protest against the Irish executive at Dublin Castle? The government’s efforts to ban the commemorative dressing of the statue.



There was doubtless much truth in the comment of Lord Charles Cornwallis, Ireland's Lord Lieutenant in 1799, that 'The mass of the people...do not care one farthing about the Union'.¹² On 1 January 1801 when the Act of Union came into existence, economic realities were, in many ways, of far greater importance to Ireland.¹³ Equally, there were many Presbyterians and Catholics who would shed few tears for the loss of the 'Protestant Ascendancy' parliament in Dublin. Despite the intentions of William Pitt that Catholic emancipation would follow hard on the heels of the Union legislation,¹⁴ the measure was never delivered in the years immediately following, and the subject continued to remain the country's 'running sore'.¹⁵ As demonstrated by popular responses to the visit of King George IV to Ireland in August 1821, Ireland's political stance remained complex. Despite deepening rural unrest throughout 1821, King George IV was enthusiastically received when he visited Ireland in August of that year and hopes appeared high that the long-awaited emancipation was imminent.

The registered papers contain information on preparations made by the government for the royal visit: loyal addresses from towns and cities across Ireland; and hundreds of petitions directed to the king, from Irish supplicants, military pensioners, convicts, and widows, to name but a few. These are found in the records of the Irish executive, as most of them were subsequently forwarded to Dublin Castle for consideration. Although famously intoxicated on landing at Howth harbour, County Dublin, the king was rapturously received on his arrival into Dublin city¹⁶, leading some commentators to marvel at the apparent contrast 'between the enthusiasm displayed and the reports of popular disaffection that normally dominated news from Ireland'.¹⁷ But whilst Robert Enscoe of Stephen's Green, Dublin, wrote to advise the Irish government on a suitable slogan to adorn the 'canopy' at Dunleary Dún Laoghaire harbour, for the farewell to 'our most Gracious, and beloved Sovereign' at the end of his Irish trip, a threatening notice from 'Captain Rock' to local gentry in Youghal, County Cork, was illustrated with a crude depiction of a pike, and the message, 'hang the King'. [CSO/RP/SC/1821/684](#). At the same time, the registered papers contain references to the illumination of windows in the town of Carrickfergus, County Antrim, in a gesture of support for the king's estranged wife, Queen Caroline; the latter had become a figurehead for radical and reforming sentiment both in Ireland and in Britain. [CSO/RP/1821/57](#).

The registered papers for 1821 also shed light on the lives of women in early 19th century Ireland, and particularly their vulnerability, especially prior to the Poor Law System (introduced in Ireland in 1838) and the national education system (established in 1831 to provide free primary education to all religions, and offering both girls and boys the same core curriculum). Combinations of circumstances made women more vulnerable to economic hardship than men, especially lower down the social scale. The petition of Sarah Williams in County Tipperary, sent to the Chief Secretary's Office in November 1821, detailed the death of her husband, a policeman, from a chill caught whilst escorting a prisoner in the rain. Williams requested a government pension, noting that she was only 19 years old and in the last stages of pregnancy when her husband died [CSO/RP/1821/968](#). The families of men sentenced to transportation to the penal colony of New South Wales were in a similarly vulnerable position, as seen in the petition of Johanna Sullivan of Cork city,



requesting free passage for her and her daughter to sail to New South Wales to join her husband, and emphasising their destitution since his departure [CSO/RP/1821/183](#). Even Dr Edward Trevor, superintendent and medical inspector of convicts, with overall responsibility for their efficient despatch from Ireland, recognised that women such as Johanna Sullivan were ‘great objects of distress’; ‘the wives and children of such convicts who are banished, more particularly those convicted of Crimes not of the most heinous nature....are left without any means of support, by which they are forced to commit offences, and it frequently happens that some commit offences to be Transported to their relations in New South Wales’ [CSO/RP/1821/1209](#).

- [1](#) O’Grada, *Ireland: A New Economic History*, pp.5-6.
- [2](#) R. F. Foster, *Modern Ireland: 1600-1972* (1988; London, 1989), p.294.
- [3](#) S.J. Connolly, ‘Union Government, 1812-23’, in *A New History of Ireland* pp.63-64.
- [4](#) K. Theodore Hoppen, *Ireland Since 1800: Conflict and Conformity*, 2nd edition (1999), pp.49-50.
- [5](#) Beckett, *Making of Modern Ireland*, p.292.
- [6](#) Foster, *Modern Ireland*, p.292.
- [7](#) James S. Donnelly jnr., *Captain Rock: the Irish agrarian rebellion of 1821-1824* (Wisconsin, 2009), p.49.
- [8](#) Letter from Stephen B Goggin, Limerick, County Limerick, proprietor of the *Limerick Telegraph*, to D’Arcy Mahon, inspector general of stamp duties, Dublin, 4 December 1821, CSO/RP/SC/1821/1010/1.
- [9](#) James S. Donnelly jnr., ‘Pastorini and Captain Rock: Millenarianism and Sectarianism in the Rockite movement of 1821-4’, in Samuel Clark and James S. Donnelly jnr, eds., *Irish Peasants: Violence and Political Unrest 1780-1914* (1983; Wisconsin, 1986), pp.106-7.
- [10](#) Hoppen, *Ireland Since 1800* (1999), p.52.
- [11](#) Brian Jenkins, ‘The Chief Secretary’ in D. George Boyce and Alan O’Day eds., *Defenders of the Union: A Survey of British and Irish unionism since 1801* (London, 2001), p.40.
- [12](#) Cornwallis to Ross, 2 July 1799, as quoted in Danny Mansergh, ‘“As Much Support as It Needs”: Social Class and Regional Attitudes to the Union’, *Eighteenth Century Ireland/Iris an dá chultúr* 15 (2000), pp. 77-97.
- [13](#) For instance, in 1799 Ireland experienced a bad harvest.
- [14](#) A repeal of those acts barring Roman Catholics from holding various offices of state, including taking a seat in parliament. William Pitt, British Prime Minister between 1783 and 1801, and again between 1804 and his death in 1806, was a chief architect of the Act of Union of 1800.
- [15](#) Hoppen, *Ireland Since 1800*, p.17. Indeed, it would take until 1829 for the measure to be realised.
- [16](#) Jacqueline Hill, *From Patriots to Unionists: Dublin Civic Politics and Irish Protestant Patriotism, 1660-1840* (1997; Oxford 2006), p.322.
- [17](#) Connolly, ‘Union Government, 1812-23’, p.68.



Dr. Julie Brooks, Project Archivist