

A LETTER FOR POSTERITY



For a long time in this country one of our more favoured national pastimes has been that of the political postmortem. The pundit, the hurler-on-the-ditch, even the man-in-the-street has not been behind the door with his tuppence-halfpenny's worth when it comes to measuring the impact of the local or national politician. And seldom do all the punters agree. Yet, in early 1795, shortly after the departure of Fitzwilliam, the Lord Lieutenant, most people felt that he had done a marvellous job. Even a rival politician declared:

"What is the state of Ireland at the moment? A state of unexampled prosperity: the landlord gets his rent to the hour; the tenant finds money for the purchase of his land the moment he-brings it into the market; and the manufacturer finds employment and payment to his satisfaction".

Quite an epitaph, one would agree. And did not the people of Dublin draw his carriage through the streets of the city as he left? Yes, but how quickly things were to change.

Within a few brief years, armed insurrection had broken out in various parts of the country. The volatile relationship between landlord and tenant ignited into a war of attrition that was to drag on for decades. Agrarian outrage and atrocity became a perma-

by Michael McCarthy

nent feature of the agricultural landscape only to be matched in viciousness by the sentences meted out at the various assizes. For example, Patrick Moloney, Mary Ryan and Margaret Reeves were sentenced to seven years transportation for stealing sheep near Roxborough, Co. Limerick. In comparison with some of the other sentences at the time, this one could be considered lenient!

Co. Limerick had its own ample quota of the violence. Early 1800 proved to be particularly distressing for the authorities, with some horribly brutal murders being perpetrated on the local gentry and big farmers by marauding bands, many of which belonged to secret societies. Towards the end of that same year, the Acting Judge Advocate, Charles Ormsby attempted to assess the extent of the unrest in the country by writing the following letter to one A.B. Esq., a Justice of the Peace in the County:

"Limerick 17th October 1800

Sir,

It being His Excellency the Lord Lieutenant's Commands to me to endeavour to attain a knowledge of the general state of this country, and what parts of it still suffer from a spirit of Rebellion and Disobedience to the Laws = I have earnestly to request you will be good enough to

send me the earliest accounts of any Outrage committed in your Neighbourhood, giving me the names and places of abode of the Parties injured, the extent of the injury, and if possible the names and descriptions of the Persons suspected of being the Perpetrators, together with every particular that may come to your knowledge - you may be assured that any communication you shall favour me with, will meet the utmost attention.

I have the honour to be

Sir,

Your most obedient Servant,
Charles M. Ormsby,
Acting Judge Advocate

To A.B. Esqre,
J.P.

Co. Limerick".

The Justice of the Peace replied on November 3. He signed his name to the letter but then crossed it out so that his identity is unknown to us. But it is a fascinating twelve-page document which is very short on details of atrocities and outrages, which the Lord Lieutenant was looking for, but gives an extensive and detailed account of the economic circumstance of the peasant and of his lifestyle at the turn of the eighteenth century.

He begins by listing four reasons for what he calls "the current spirit of



The headquarters of the Property Defence Association at Pallasgreen, Co. Limerick.

insurgency”:

1. To raise the price of labour;
2. To reduce the price of food;
3. To prevent the farmers from hiring Kerry men, and
4. To abolish tithes.

Raising the price of labour is a leading issue in the agitation, he writes. As background to this point he then gives the various rates for labour:

- In spring – 6½ pence a day if fed;
- 8-10 pence a day and no feeding;
- In summer – 6½ pence a day and no feeding;
- At Harvest – the same as spring;
- In winter – the same as summer.

He explains that during spring the call for labour in tilling and sowing and, in harvest, in saving and digging was so great, as to cause an increase in wages. Seemingly, very little was done in summer or winter.

Interestingly enough, he also lists the rates of pay for women in spring and harvest – 6½-8 pence a day. Women would help in cutting and planting potatoes, in saving hay, binding corn and in gathering potatoes. Spinning flax and wool, partly for home use and partly for sale at the markets and fairs was their main occupation. “At the present moment”, he writes, “there is not a woman or girl who would not find ample employment at the above prices in the last mentioned occupations, and by spinning at four pence per day”.

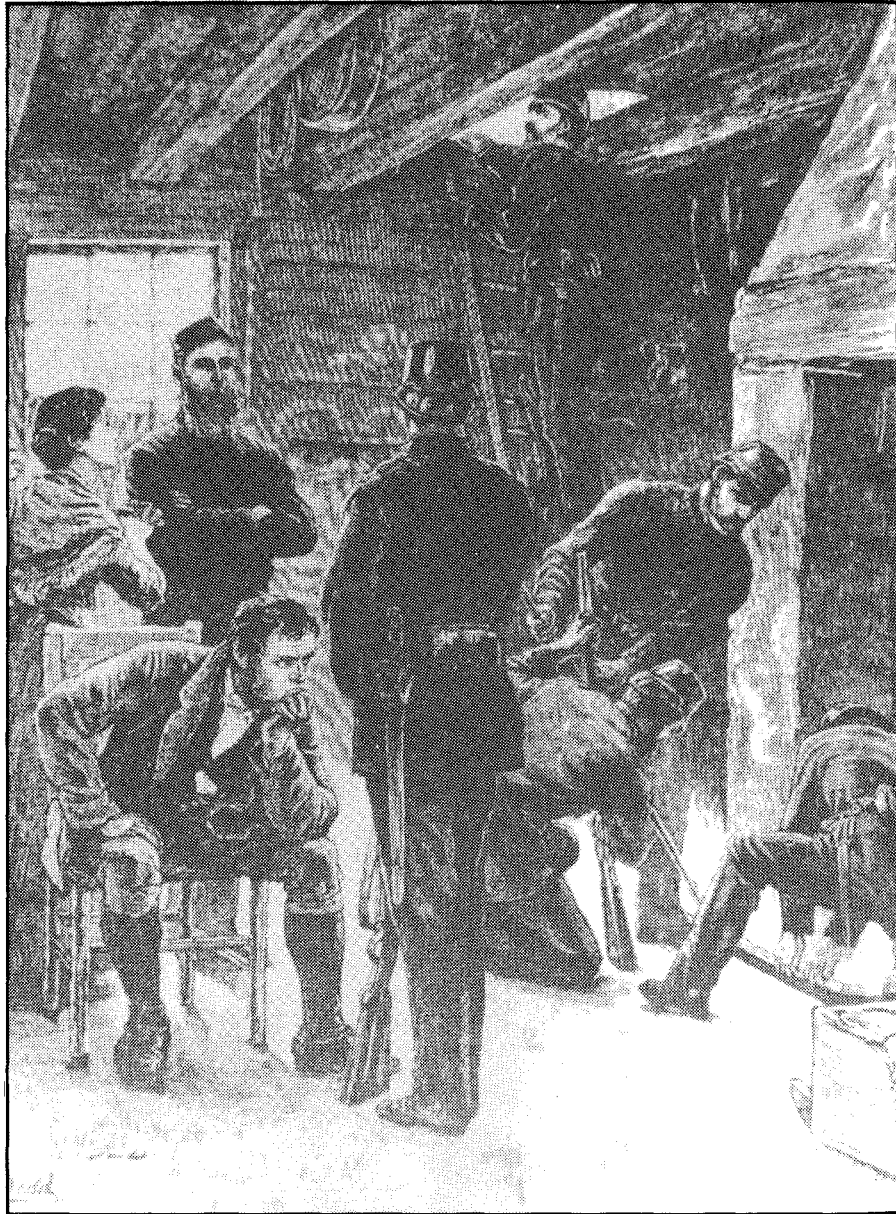
He moves on from the price of labour to the price of food and notes that the sharp increase in the cost of food between 1790 and 1800 was another reason for the general unrest in the country. For example, a pint of sweet milk was priced at twopence, whereas ten years previously it had been three-farthings, and in 1780 it only cost a halfpenny. Bacon went for 1s 2d a lb., compared to sixpence ten years before, and fourpence ten years before that again. Salt pork sold at seven and eight pence a pound and French pork at six and sixpence – halfpenny. Fresh butter cost 1s 4d a lb., representing a rise of 10 pence in as many years.

Potatoes cost sixpence – halfpenny a stone. Oatmeal sold at fourpence – halfpenny a bottle and barley three-pence – halfpenny a bottle. Beer went at tuppence – halfpenny to three pence a quart and whiskey at 14 to 16s a gallon. Obviously it was then, as is now, the same story of a spiralling cost of living outstripping rates of pay.

Related to the cost of food and drink was that of another basic commodity – clothes. Seemingly, peasants at the time generally wore frieze which was a home-made product. According to the letter, wool could be bought at 10/- a stone if payment was prompt and at 20/- if on a credit basis. Women first spun the wool and then wove it into a frieze. A stone of wool produced a coat and waistcoat for a man, a short coat for a woman and possibly, with care, a pair

of stockings. If they did not do it themselves at home, weaving cost 5/5 and the making of garments 2/8½. Besides, a shirt took nine bundles of cloth to make, each bundle costing fivepence to sixpence – halfpenny. Half-dressed leather breeches cost 4/4. Brogues with

in addition to a proportion of labour, a certain sum of money, from 15/- to 20/-, which they call Horn money, but the most general mode is to pay by labour. I do not find any other indulgence granted”. And little enough indulgence it all amounted to, one could rightly



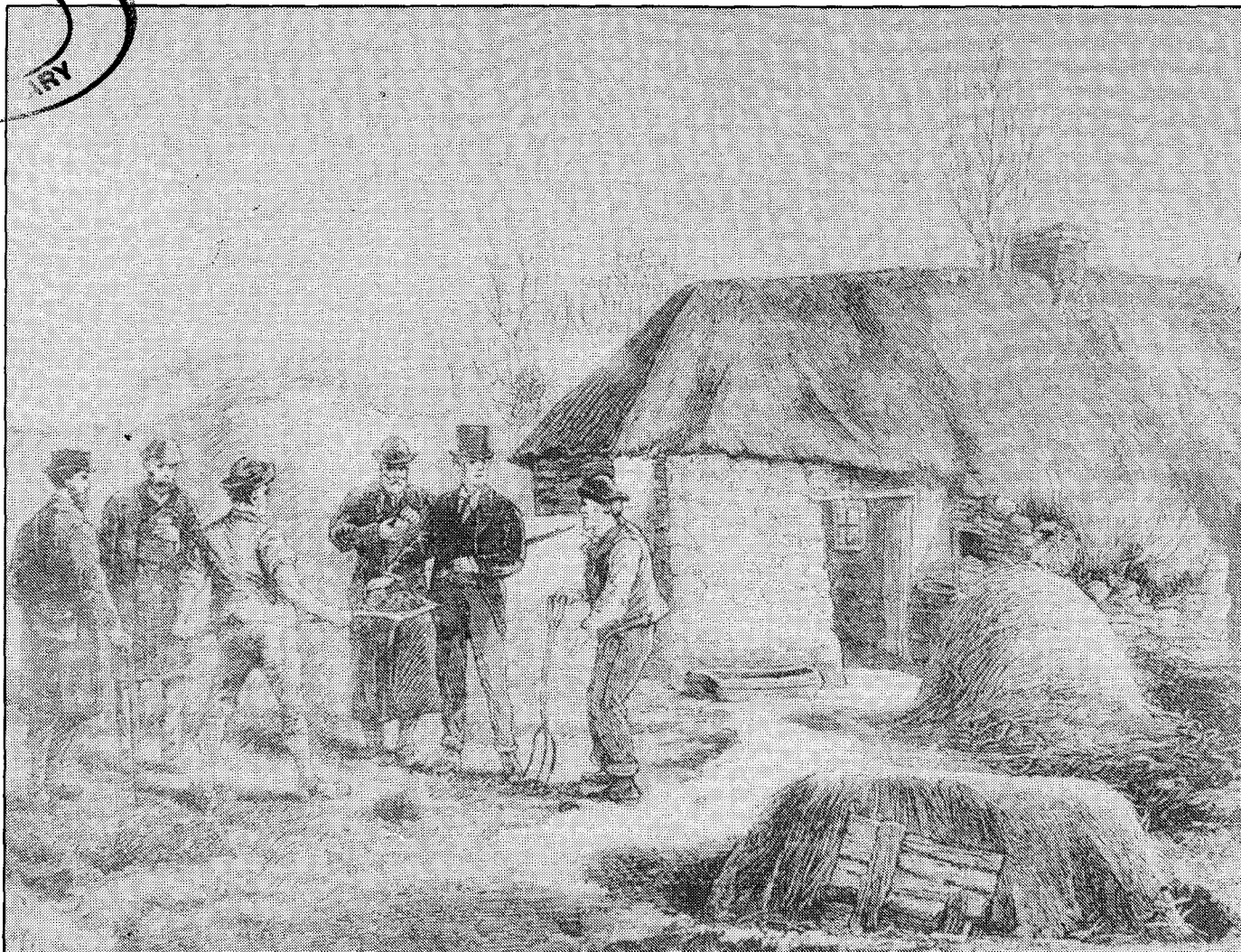
Police searching for arms.

nails went for 7/7 and, to top it all, a felt hat cost between 3/3 – 3/9½. Between the bits and pieces, it would cost about £3 before one could venture out and look even half-decent.

In explaining the general situation of tenants he writes that usually they receive the grass for a cow or two, paying for it a separate rent: “It is estimated that a good labourer (at a daily rate), particularly should he have a grown-up son, will give (exclusive of the labour of his own garden) an equivalent to the rent of his cabin, garden and grass for a cow or two; some take,

add. No wonder the tenants were kicking against the system, particularly when one considers the prevailing custom of working out rent by labour to the landlord, usually at a rate of four pence to sixpence – halfpenny a day.

A tenant could be paying £1-10-0 to £3-8-3 to the landlord for an acre of grazing land. He could be paying from six to eight guineas for an acre of land for potatoes and £5 to £5-13-9 for an acre of barley or wheat. On top of this, there was the obvious necessity – a cabin. A tenant could be paying anything from £1-2-9 to 40/- a year for one



Confrontation in Co. Limerick.

depending on its quality.

Further, there was the refinement that a tenant's rented land would not necessarily be set directly to him by the landlord but would be set through the middleman, who would also be looking for his profit. Middlemen were of considerable social consequence in the country and had enormous leverage due to the fact that much of the land they held was on long lease or renewable for ever. Consequently, the tenant had as much to fear from the middleman as he had from the landlord. But it was the system itself demanding rent for cabin, grazing and tillage which ensured that the tenant remained firmly, albeit discontentedly, at the bottom of the social ladder.

Moving away from the economic profile of the peasant, if one may call it such, there are some interesting observations in the letter on "the general spirit of insurgency" in the country. Most of the campaign of terror was carried out after nightly meetings. He reports that the 'mob' or 'banditti' of one parish usually go into that of another group and raid the houses where Kerry men are put up. The unfor-

fortunate spailpins came in for particularly rough treatment, seemingly, as they tended to flood the Limerick market with cheap labour. This was strongly resented by the insurgents who treated the Kerry men and their employers with great severity. One punishment, commonly administered to migrant labours, was that of 'carding' on the chest or the back. The instrument used for carding wool or for taking the knots and tangles out of wool was used to rake a victim's upper torso, to horrible effect. Another terror tactic was to administer oaths to people. Time and again in official reports on such activities one finds magistrates asking defendants, "Did you administer any unlawful oaths for secret societies!"

One curious account of an outrage in Boherbue highlights this point but also has a typically Irish twist to it:

"The mob broke into the house of a man named Sweeney, a respectable farmer, who was formerly concerned in collecting tithes for Mrs. Duggan; fortunately Sweeney heard them coming and made his escape. They administered several unlawful oaths

to his brother (a most inoffensive young man) and beat and cut him in a desperate and cruel manner, and set fire to the house, but very shortly after, some of the party returned to assist in extinguishing the fire, saying, 'it was too near the chapel', which they had no intention of endangering'.

But the insurgents did not always stop short at administering oaths, torturing houghing cattle or looting. Sometimes their campaign went much further. The *Limerick Chronicle* of March 12th 1800 illustrated the extent to which they were prepared to go:

"This being the day appointed by Proclamation for a General Fast, the same was observed in the city with due reverence - the shops, etc., were shut up, and Divine Worship performed in all the churches, chapels, and meeting-houses. It could not be expected that in the hasty manner we received on Saturday last the account of the shocking murder committed at Manister, it could be literally correct:- A Gentleman who was on the Inquest has favoured us with the following particulars: It appears

that at a late hour on Friday night, a great number of civilians arrived with muskets, swords and pikes, attacked the house of Mr. John Boland, of Manister, and demanded his arms; at the same time a considerable part of the Banditti, on horseback, were placed at a distance to keep watch; Mr. Boland, with his brother James, were in the house in bed (as were Mrs. Boland and her two daughters) – on the first alarm, the men got up and determined to defend their house and property, with that spirit which is Yeoman and Loyalists they were most remarkable; after firing a number of shots amongst the barbarous assailants (several of whom there is good reason to believe done execution) – unfortunately for this brave family the house was thatched, and the wretches set the room on fire, which caused them to come out, in consequence of which Mr. John Boland, his brother James, his two sons, James and Mat, were butchered in a manner shocking to relate: the latter lived until next morning, but died without giving any account of his murderers. – It also appeared to the Inquest, that Edmund Boland, brother to Mr. John Boland who lay in a neighbouring house, was coming to the assistance of his family and was murdered between the bridge of Manister and the house which was burned down. – To add to this more than hellish outrage, poor Mrs. Boland, who, with her daughters, narrowly escaped from the flames, has become quite deranged, and the recovery of the daughters still continue doubtful”.

Another tactic employed by the insurgents was to dig up land belonging to landlords and big farmers. The same report, as above, in the *Limerick Chronicle* of March 12, 1880, contained the following account:

“Sunday night, some of those deluded wretches who persevered in disturbing the peace of this county, turned up fourteen acres of lay ground, near Pallasgreen; they also cut down some ash trees on the lands of High Park, and dug a number of pits in nine acres of the said land, leaving a notice there, that if more than six guineas was required for potato ground, the owners should be interred in those pits or graves”.

The campaign of digging up ground was part of a policy to force the cattle-ranching landlords into more tillage as well as the above-stated one of keeping the rent for potato land within manageable limits. Our correspondent tells it in his own way – they “dig up ground in order to increase the quantity of potato land, as the County of Limerick being so much in pasture they hoped to force the landlords into that species of tillage, – to these facts I speak from personal observation having seen ground

they had turned up”.

Publicity was a major factor in the campaign of terror. This usually took the form of notices posted at night on farms or at places of public gatherings. Grievances were detailed, as was the retribution to be meted out to the offending parties. Unfortunately, the *Limerick Chronicle* of those years does not carry any samples of the notices posted, but one can see how it was developed into a fine art by the time the agrarian campaign really got into full swing later, with the following example:

To All Whom It May Concern

It is hoped that no person will display the rudeness of taking down this paper until satisfactorily read, the motive of it being to preserve from ruin property, life and family, by acquainting the public of a few capital errors which ought to be particularly avoided as the ignorance of them might lead people blindfold to be hurled down the steep and rugged precipice of Destruction – Behold my sword is unsheathed to mow down offenders, my fire is kindled every night to consume their property and my resolution is fixed. Therefore I hope that no person will be so infatuated as through a violation of my laws to lay his head on the block or thrust himself and all his possessions into the flame that opens widely, its devouring fiery laws to swallow up all cursed transgressors, let no person consider that the rigours of English laws will suffer to protect an offender of my regulations. No, for a gallows filled with radicals or a ship laden with White Boys cannot intimidate the heart of a true United Irishman, inflamed with the spirit of Liberty. 'Tis true we have been deprived of some of our associates by hanging and transportation, but this has only increased our strength, as weeding a garden encourages the growth of the genuine plant. Consequently, I expect that due adherence will be paid to the following Articles as the violation of any of them deserves shooting and burning besides several other excruciating tortures –

Article 1st – That no person or person shall propose for or take into his possession directly any house, farm, or lot of lands, wrested from a tenant by his landlord, until the expiration of seven years after the ejection.

2nd – That no person shall pay Tithe money to the Minister or any person acting under him.

3rd – That no Wolfish Proctor shall sue for tithe money.

4th – That no person shall serve a process or processes for tithe money.

Any person or persons transgressing any of these will suffer shooting, burning, etc., etc., etc.

N.B. A voracious Minister screams aloud in dreary tantrums for a merciless proctor and for sworn process servers let Chas. McCarthy, Barrett and Davin prepare as they are considered very fit persons to fill a situation in full.

Captain Rock,

By the Grace of God.

Many elements in this notice can be identified in the campaign of the 1800s and are mentioned explicitly in the JP's letter to the Acting Judge Advocate, Charles Ormsby.

The final section of his letter is very interesting because it gives the man's own feelings about the current unrest in the country. He summarily dismisses the theory that a French agency is behind the present ferment:

“... It is suggested by several that the present ferment has been created by a French agency in order to encumber the Government by insurgency, and by a system of terror hold out against those of the peasants not yet contaminated, and force them to it for their personal security, but to substantiate this I cannot discover anything from the conduct they adopt, or the measures they pursue, as their actions seem rather to be guided by a few idle dissolute persons who attend more to the gratification of local prejudice against the Kerry men and Proctors, and public plunder – I cannot find that at present taking of arms is any part of their intentions; I am told it has been; – plunder, I know is, as a few nights since they forced the cabin of a poor woman and took from her ten guineas, from which I am induced to think, that the nightly meetings are only those of lawless Banditti without any present settled object, and that the rumours and daily reports from this quarter are extended much beyond fact, a circumstance which I have found to be the case when on the spot myself”.

In conclusion, the contents of the letter state that, whatever the agency which is responsible for the unrest in the county, the insurgency did not appear to be directed by any leaders of great consequence. In fact, he says, most of the activity would suggest that none of the leaders had an over-all policy and were incapable of disciplining the tumultuous mob or capitalising on the impulse of the movement. As far as he could gather, while regular meetings were held for drilling and training in the use of arms, the whole campaign, if one could call it such, was haphazard and without focus. He was, however, shrewd enough to issue the caveat that, because of the nature of his intelligence, the prospect of more serious danger is up for speculation! In hindsight, how shrewd he was ... so much so that he crossed out his signature.