

A Limerick Coachmaker and Trade Unionist 1833-'34

S on 4th May 1834, at Castlebellingham between Drogheda and Dundalk, the police discovered a smart leather pocketbook stuffed with letters and documents. Its owner was Michael Conneen of Limerick City, a coach bodymaker and an active trade unionist. The paucity of records about the lives of early Irish trades unionists and the diversity of information contained in these papers makes Conneen's loss an especially valuable gain for us.

One of the most interesting documents in the pocket book, which is preserved in the State Papers Office, (1) is a 'tramp book' of the type used by trade unionists when they travelled around looking for work. Conneen's book, which traces his search throughout England for work in 1833, bears the coat of arms of the Oxford Union of Coachmakers, where he began his tramp after a spell of employment in the area. From his other papers we can trace his return to Ireland in September 1833, and his trade union activities up to the time he lost his pocket book.

The documents also form a personal record. Letters from his brother Patrick, and from a trade union friend, Patrick Kearney, allow us a privileged glimpse into family preoccupations, tragedy, friendships and ties of kinship. Not all the documents can be reproduced, but a chronological list of the pocket book's contents appears as appendix I. The documents are referred to in the text as (PB...).

This article explores the insights revealed by the documents into the world of the travelling artisan, and places them in the broader context of trade unionism.

The prosecution of the Dorchester farm labourers, the six Tolpuddle Martyrs, in England, made 1834 a critical year in the history of trade unionism.

The martyrs were sentenced to a brutal seven years' transportation for forming a combination and for swearing an oath of loyalty.

by Bernard
Reaney

Their conviction provoked protest and demonstrations by trade unionists in Britain and Ireland. A police report, filed alongside Conneen's papers, records that on 14th April 1834,

"... a large meeting of persons styling themselves the Belfast branch of the General Trades Union was held in St. George's market in this town, as was stated for the purpose of petitioning the House of Commons on behalf of the six unfortunate unionists of Dorchester and to rebut the foul calumnies that have from time to time been charged upon them". (PB10)

This meeting was chaired by the trade unionist George Kerr who later went to Derry to organise a branch of his union, the cabinetmakers, and to aid the formation of a UK wide organisation for that trade. (2)

A NATIONAL UNION OF COACHMAKERS - CONNEN'S CONTRIBUTION

In 1834, Conneen's union, the coachmakers, were also trying to organise on a UK wide basis. The United Kingdom Society of Coachmakers (UKSC) was to unite British and Irish unions and branches. Until that time, coachmakers' unions did not have a secure national basis. There was a British Benevolent Society of

Coachmakers which had organised a national strike as early as 1819, but the organisation was broken when its secretary was prosecuted under the Anti-Combination Laws. The Dublin master coachmaker Robert Hutton told the 1825 House of Commons Select Committee on Trade Unions that coachmakers were organised throughout the city and had a 'general correspondence' with other coachmakers, including those in Britain. (3)

Michael Conneen trapped between coachmakers' societies in England and his record gives a good idea of the extent and diversity of their organisation on the eve of the formation of the UKCs. Two large federated bodies, the Lancashire Union and the

Midlands County Union, existed alongside independent town unions. In Shrewsbury there were still two autonomous societies, the 'Hunt Shop' and the 'Old Society', and this was also the case in Maidstone. The documents indicate that there were, in Ireland, independent organisations of coachmakers in Dublin, Dundalk and Newry, alongside a 'Northern Union'.

Thus by 1834 there was a good basis for the Irish wing of the UKSC, and the new union was to represent about 600 members in Ireland. (4) The very success of the UKSC led to a counter-attack by employers, who in late 1834 attempted to force members in Liverpool and Manchester to sign a 'document' declaring that they would leave the union.

The lockout and strike that followed the men's refusal to submit lasted 9 months. Coachmakers elsewhere rallied to their colleagues and donations in support of the striker came in from all over the union, including £130 from Ireland. (5)

Given this background, it seems that Conneen was on union business when he lost his pocketbook at Castlebellingham. The local police were sufficiently interested in their find to pass it on to Dublin Castle with the comment that

"it contained some papers connected with the Union of Coachmakers, and particularly a letter to that body resident in Belfast, introducing a man named Michael Conneen as a delegate from the Dublin Union." (PB12)

This letter was his credential from the Dublin union, and its signatories incidentally reveal the wide range of trades represented by the union.

It read:

"Monday 28th April 1834

TRAMPING

Tramping was a system which enabled members of a trade union to move in search of work between towns in which the society had branches or friendly contacts. Members were relieved on their journey, usually with a small sum of money and perhaps a meal and a bed. The skilled trades had long used this method of adjusting to seasonal and irregular employment and as a form of strike relief. The system probably pre-dates recognisable trade unionism. (6)

The House of Commons Select Committee on Artisans and Machinery heard evidence in 1824 that the tramping system was well established between Irish and British unions.

Conneen's tramping record shows that even before the formation of a UK union of coachmakers, a national fraternity of mutual support between town and district societies existed. Tramping members were clearly an important link between the autonomous unions before national unionism, and helped to strengthen and spread organisation in the trade.

Tramping might involve walking long distances - perhaps as much as 1000 miles including one or more crossings of the Irish sea. Leeson records that the various tramping unions at this time had 700 sympathetic pubs in 135 towns among their stops. At least one of Conneen's stops was a pub - the Robin Hood in Southampton. (7)

Conneen himself covered something over 600 miles during his six weeks tramp. It may be that he was able to hitch some rides, and probably his contacts among coachdrivers made this easier. His mail was carried by a friendly coachdriver, as indicated by one letter in the collection. (PB6) The record of John Flood of Belfast, which Conneen was carrying with him enables us to add Bath, Alveston, Stroud, Tewkesbury, Wigan and

The first (Oxford) and last (Liverpool) entries in the tramp book (See Appendix 1, 3).



This is to certify that the bearer of this Certificate Michael Conneen is by Trade a Coach Body Maker has paid to those out of employ and the Sick; and we recommend him to the Trade as one worthy of encouragement

Signed and sealed in behalf of the Trade

Wm Applin Treasurer

John Gosford Secretary

John Henn 1833

To prevent imposition by persons pretending to be Coach Makers, we have determined to refuse none but those who can produce a printed Certificate signed by two members belonging to the Trade; which will be of no use six months after date.

11. This Certificate to be given up when the bearer gets employment.

The tramp book: the front page showing the Oxford Union of Coachmakers' arms. (See Appendix 1, 3).

To the Coachmakers of the Northern Union Belfast Gent.

The Bearer of this, we the under-mentioned names have sent to you as a delegate to transact our Business according to the letters we have already sent you, as we never received any answer.

- Thos. Conway Wheeler
- James Marriott do
- James (?) Treeman (axle-tree maker)
- John Griffiths Painter
- William Butterby do
- William Roberts do
- William Ingham Smith
- Robt. McGrath Painter
- Michael Conneen Body Maker and bearer of this
- Mr Walter Fitzwilliam Trimmer Secretary". (PB11)

A further indication of Conneen's involvement in inter-union negotiations is an earlier letter to him from Thomas Keogh of the Newry coachmakers,

reporting that this society was on the point of joining the Northern Union. (PB7) The record tells us no more of Conneen's wider union activities and we can only speculate about his involvement in the general political protests of the period immediately after the transportation of the Dorchester labourers.

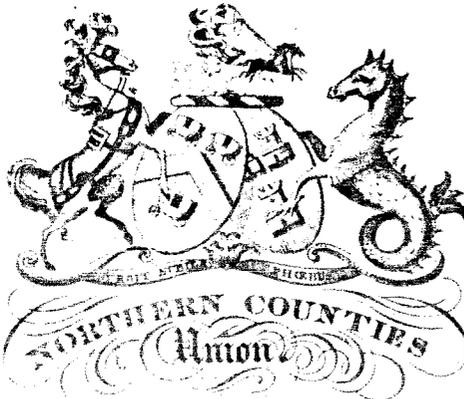
*Received by the Oxford Union of Coach Makers with 2/6 July 2nd 1833
Treasurer, Wm Applin*

*Lancashire Union Liverpool 13/3
Sept 9th 1833 for Warriner*

Warrington to the coachmakers' tramping circuit. (PB14) (Conneen's stops and the amounts of relief received are transcribed in Appendix II).

CONNEN'S LIFE ON THE TRAMP

During his tramp Conneen received between ten and fourteen shillings a week, apart from some generous payments immediately before his departure for Ireland, which must have been



Emblem of Northern Counties' Union (See Appendix 1, 14).

swallowed up by the journey to Dublin. He worked for most of the month of August in Birmingham, but we do not know what his earnings were.

We do know that he was hard up by the time he arrived back in Dublin to work at Thomas Longe's coach factory. His pocket book contains a ticket from pawnbroker P. Gillespie of South Great George's Street from around this time (PB5). Was he, one wonders, forced to pawn some of his precious tools? And a letter from Conneen's brother Patrick a few months after Michael's return

This is to certify that the bearer of this Mich^l. Conneen has been in our employ for a considerable time and we always found him an honest industrious workman.

*Coach & Harness Man^r. M. L. & S. Usher.
Newcastle
4th May 1833.*

A testimonial given to Michael Conneen by the firm of Usher, coachmakers and harness manufacturers, Newcastle (See Appendix 1, 1).

from his tramp demonstrates that his new job was but an intermittent source of income. Michael Conneen seems to have faced a financial crisis at home, with a creditor taking legal action to recover a debt. The contents of his pocket book reveal many further fragments of his personal circumstances. (PB8).

THE COACHMAKERS' TRADE

Michael Conneen was a member of one of Limerick's most important industries. Coachmaking was a luxury trade, supplying the aristocracy and gentry with a variety of coaches, postchaises and chariots. Despite the decline in such trade since the Union of 1801, the census of 1831 records 48 coachmakers in Limerick, compared with 65 in Cork and 368 in Dublin. However, many more than this were involved in the industry, for example the

104 coach painters who appear in the census in Limerick. (8) We have already noted the range of tradesmen involved in the Dublin Union. Adams has noted that 25 different trades were directly involved in making coaches, and that many others contributed indirectly to the manufacture of the finest coaches. (9)

Conneen's own trade of bodymaking put him among the most skilled and highly paid in the industry. He would have had a knowledge of geometry and drawing, as well as an ability to work wood and metals into the most complex forms with a very high degree of accuracy. Two surviving documents are testimonials to his good workmanship from employers. The documents indicate that Conneen was a member of a class of educated artisans who enjoyed a literate and urban culture.

The bodymaker owned the widest range of tools in the trade, worth from twenty to thirty pounds. The transport of Conneen's own large chest of tools from Limerick to his new job at Longe's in Dublin was a task requiring some organisation on the part of Conneen's friend Patrick Kearney. Kearney went to great lengths to go

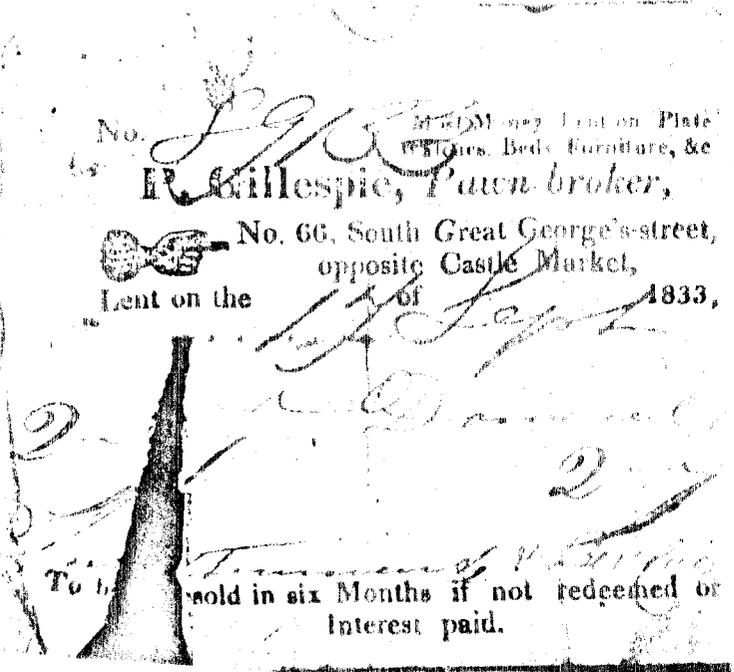
"... to the different offices to know which of them that would Bring them the Cheapest ..."

and

"I took the liberty of opening your Box and packing up your tools in a small one for the purpose of saving what expence I could as to the tool chest it is safe ..." (PB4)

Despite the coachmakers' 'aristocratic' status in the working class, there is no evidence here that Conneen had an extravagant life style. On the contrary, his tramp record shows that unemployment was a frequent and unpleasant consequence of being a wage worker.

These documents show the connections of one Limerick skilled worker to the wider network of early labour organisation. Conneen's role in the coachmakers' union draws attention



Pawnbroker's ticket from P. Gillespie, 66 South George Street, Dublin (See Appendix 1,).

more generally to the importance of the UK - wide network of organisations in the formation of early Irish trade unions.

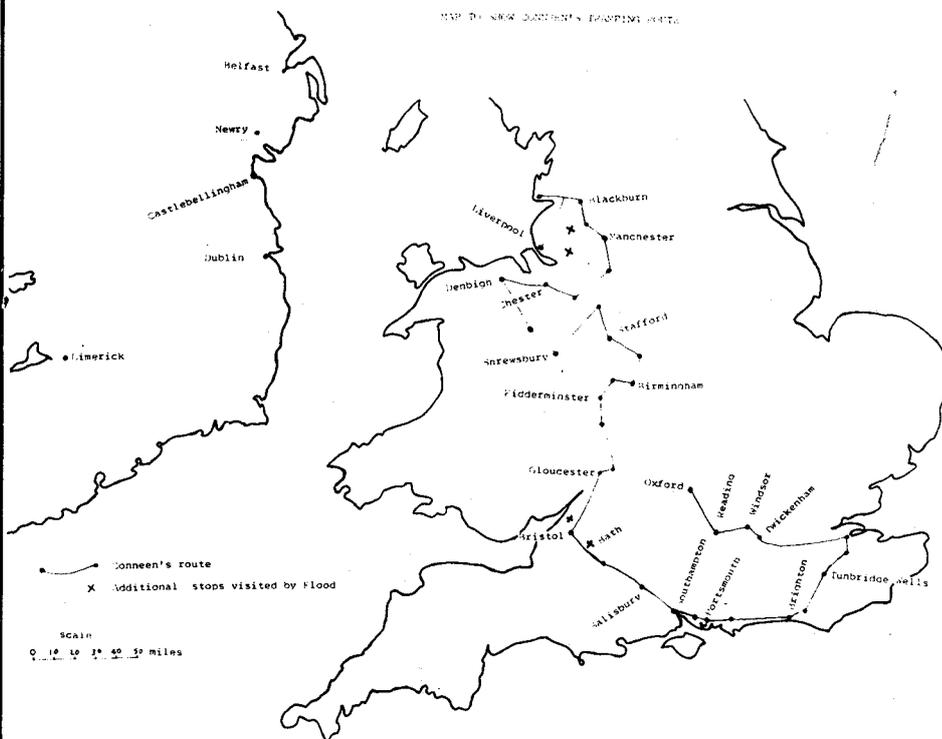
APPENDIX I CHRONOLOGICAL LIST OF CONTENTS OF MICHAEL CONNEEN'S POCKET BOOK

PB

1. 4 May 1833. Newcastle: The earliest mention of his whereabouts comes in a testimonial from Usher coachmakers and harness manufacturers of Newcastle from which it can be assumed that he left there at this time.
2. 10 June. Banbury: A letter to 'Commiqs' from John Gosford Sec. to the Oxford coach makers shows Michael Conneen to be working at Wyatts the Banbury coachmakers.
3. 2 July - 9 September: The tramp book is issued at Oxford and ending at Liverpool.
4. 15 September. Letter from his friend Patrick Kearney, Limerick, tells us that Conneen came to Dublin and had found work by 12th, probably at Longe's coach factory.
5. 17 September. Pawn Ticket from Gillespie pawn broker, Great George Street, Dublin.
6. 16 October. Letter from Francis Fay for the union at Dundalk to Conneen at Longe's Coach factory, Dublin, establishes him as working there.
7. 27 November. Letter from Thomas Keogh for the union at Newry from coach factory, Newry.
8. 25 February 1834. Letter from his brother Patrick Conneen wishing him speedy recovery from 'a lengthy illness'.
9. 4 March. Testimonial on leaving Thomas Longe, Dublin coachmaker.
10. 15 April. Letter from Belfast police to Dublin Castle reporting strikes and demonstrations in solidarity with the Tolpuddle martyrs.
11. 28 April. Conneen's credentials as delegate to the coachmakers of the Northern Union, Belfast.
12. 4 May. Letter from Castlebellingham police reporting finding Conneen's pocket book.
13. 8 May. Reply to above from Dublin Castle asking local police to try and discover reason for Conneen's visit to Belfast.
14. Other. John Flood's tramp record. Various accounts. Emblem of the Northern Union.

APPENDIX 2 THE ROUTE TAKEN BY MICHAEL CONNEEN ON HIS TRAMP

- 2 July. Tramps from Oxford 2/6 relief. (3-5 ") Reading 2/-.
- 6 Windsor Midlands Counties Union (MCU) 1/-.
- 8 Twickenham MCU 1/- and a bed.
- 14 Rochester Union 1/-.
- 15 (2 entries) Maidstone 10d.; Maidstone 10d.
- 16 Tumbridge Wells relieved at Elliotts shop 1/-.
- 17 Lewes 1/3.
- 18 Brighton 1/3.
- 19 Chichester New Union 1/-.
- 19 Chichester relieved at Cussen's 1/-.



Map of Michael Conneen's tramp route (See Appendix 2).

- 20 Portsea 6d.
- 20 Portsmouth Society 1/-.
- 20 Fareham 1/-.
- 22 Southampton at the Robin Hood 2/-.
- 23 Salisbury Union 1/6.
- 23 Warminster 1/-.
- 24 Bristol Union 3/6.
- 26 1/-.
- 27 Gloucester Society 1/-.
- 27 Cheltenham 2/-.
- 28 Worcester Union 2/-.
- 31 Kidderminster 1/-.
- 31 Dudley MCU 6d.
- 31 Birmingham MCU 3/3.
- 27 August: This is to verify that the Bearer of this card has been at work 1 month and has paid all demands. Birmingham (signed) Henry Tibbetts.
- 27 Lichfield Society 2/-.
- 28 Stafford Society 1/4.
- 29 Newcastle MCU 1/-.
- 31 Shrewsbury Hunts Shop 1/-.
- 31 Shrewsbury Old Society 1/7.
- nd (31 Aug. - 1 Sept.) Oswestry MCU 1/-;
- Denbighshire Union 1/10; Chester MCU 1/-.
- 2 September. Nantwich Society 1/4.
- nd (3rd) Macellesfield MCU 1/-.
- 4 Manchester Lancashire Union 4/4.
- 6 Bolton Lancashire Union 1/3.
- nd (6-7) Blackburn Lancashire Union 6/-.
- 7 Preston Lancashire Union 2/-.
- 9 Liverpool Lancashire Union 4/3.

(1) **The documents are in the State Papers Office, Dublin Castle. Registered Papers (RP) Outrage (OR), 1834, Antrim, 1/601. (We are grateful to the Keeper of the State Papers for permission to reproduce items from the pocket book in illustration).**

- (2) **Kerr was arrested and, together with two Derry men, accused of administering unlawful oaths. The charges were eventually dropped, although not before the three had suffered a period of imprisonment. Other trials of trades unionists in Ireland took place at this time, and are documented in Kerr's famous Exposition of Legislative Tyranny.** This is reproduced as an appendix in Andrew Boyd's **The Rise of the Irish Trade Unions 1729-1970**, (Tralee, 1972).
- (3) **Report and Minutes of Evidence from the Select Committee on Combination Laws**, HC 1825, iv, evidence of Robert Hutton, pp. 9-14.
- (4) **S. & B Webb, History of Trade Unionism**, (London, 1902), p. 492.
- (5) **A Hundred Years of Vehicle Building, 1834-1934**, (Manchester, 1934), p.12.
- (6) **E.J. Hobsbawn, 'The Tramping Artisan'**, chapter 4 of **Labouring Men**, (London, 1964).
- (7) **R.A. Leeson. Travelling Brothers**, (London, 1980), p. 135.
- (8) 1831 census, HC 1833, xxxiv, 634, pp. 406-7.
- (9) **W.B. Adams, English Pleasure Carriages**, (London, 1837).