

Contrary to popular belief, Ireland was a very loosely administered and poorly policed country in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Until 1814, when the first unit of the Police Preservation Force was formed, the policing of rural Ireland was very haphazard and ineffective. Many parts of the country had no police at all. Some districts had the baronial police or 'Barnies', as they were popularly called. Local magistrates had the right to appoint the constables to this force, but these appointments were often made on a patronage basis: the magistrates appointed their servants, retainers and supporters. This generally meant an untrained, part-time, poorly-motivated force, many of whose members were ill-suited to, or unfit for, police work. The low standing of the force can be seen from the fact that the military often ignored it when they came into an area.

From the 1760s, agrarian disturbances and uprisings were an intermittent feature of eighteenth century life. From the beginning to the middle of the nineteenth century, they had a more or less continuous, slow-burning existence. As a consequence, it became increasingly clear to the authorities in Dublin Castle that a properly trained police force was required to deal with the agrarian insurgents and other law-breaking activities in rural Ireland. It was for this reason that the P.P.E. was set up and later, in 1822, the more successful County Constabulary. The men who led this early police force played a historic role: they laid the foundations of the Irish police system, establishing police practices and codes of conduct for the future. One of the most notable of the early police officers was Richard Willcocks.

It is as an agent of Dublin Castle that we first came in contact with Willcocks. In 1813, he was sent into Westmeath to investigate and report on the causes of agrarian disturbances in that county. This outbreak had been sparked off early in 1813, and had run like a gorse-fire through the Midlands, then crept across provincial borders into Munster and spread as far south as Limerick and Waterford. This was the Carders' insurrection, so called because those involved used a comb for carding wool to scrape the skin off the backs of those who ignored or transgressed their agrarian code of rules and regulations. In his report, Willcocks said that the entire lower class in the county and some of the farmers had been sworn into the combination, many by force and through fear. Some of his informants told him that those in the secret society had taken an oath 'to be true to Bonaparte', while the magistrates of the county believed that the disturbances were political and that their objective was 'to plant the tree of liberty in the centre of Ireland'.⁽¹⁾ But Willcocks was skeptical of the political

A PIONEERING POLICEMAN

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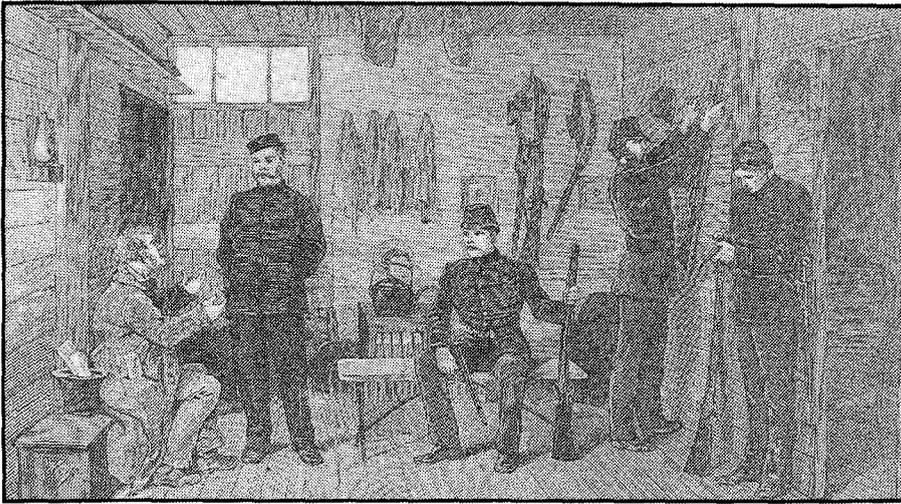
'...an untrained, part-time, poorly-motivated force'.

motives ascribed to the Carders.

This illustrates one of Willcocks's strong points – his capacity to listen to and weigh the views of others, but to reach his own independent conclusions. He did not allow passion or personal feeling to cloud his thinking or judgement. Willcocks was cool, objective and detached. The gentry and the magistrates tended to believe that the disturbances were part of a plot to overthrow the established order but he did not go along with this. Nor did he agree with those who saw the outbreaks of violence as an attack on the established church. Willcocks saw the

disturbances for what they were – a violent protest by the poor against a worsening of already intolerable conditions.

In 1814, County Tipperary was riven by an intense outbreak of agrarian violence. A succession of outrages culminated in the assassination of one of the magistrates of the county. In September of that year, the Lord Lieutenant proclaimed the barony of Middlethird to be in a disturbed state and applied the new Peace Preservation Act to it. This led to a peace preservation force of twenty ex-cavalry sergeants being sent into the barony under Richard



The headquarters of the Property Defence Association, Pallasgreen, Co. Limerick, The Graphic, 31 December, 1881.

Willcocks as chief magistrate. Willcocks chose Cashel as his headquarters, whence he sent out mounted patrols to police the roads at night. Robert Peel, the chief secretary, was pleased with the force's initial success. He wrote: 'Although the police bill has been but a few weeks in operation, the effect is already such as to justify the most sanguine expectation of its ultimate success.'⁽²⁾ But, as time was to show, Peel's expectations were premature. The tranquility was seasonal, not terminal. The Whiteboys had just taken a break while harvesting the crops. With the harvest work done, the disturbances started up again. As well as having to contend with the insurgents, Willcocks and the P.P.F. were also under pressure from other quarters. Lord Donoughmore, a prominent resident landowner in Tipperary, attacked the new force, saying that it was ineffective and that it was a mistake to send ex-soldiers from Dublin under a Castle magistrate into Tipperary, where they did not know the people or the countryside. The Peace Preservation Act he described as a 'bill of taxation'. (This was because the act had a penal clause. The cost of paying and maintaining the force had to be borne by the inhabitants of the proclaimed barony). The force was also attacked by the *Dublin Evening Post* which said that it was ineffective and the bill a complete failure. But the paper praised Willcocks, whom it described as 'a meritorious and excellent Magistrate'.⁽³⁾ Criticisms of the P.P.F. were not without justification. In the Cashel area an isolated farm was attacked at night by the insurgents. The farmer and his sons defended themselves and their property, but a patrol of the P.P.F., hearing the shots, rode to the farm and, mistaking the defenders for the attackers, shot one of the farmer's sons dead.

With no end in sight to the disturbances in Middlethird, the Insurrection Act was applied to the barony and the army was sent in. This took the pressure off the P.P.F., which was over-extended. With the military holding down the

rebellious population, Willcocks' police were able to do the work they were set up to do, such as serving warrants, making arrests, escorting prisoners, giving evidence in court and acting as guides for the military. Given their proper role, the P.P.F. was seen to have a part to play in the fight against the agrarian terrorists, while Willcocks was acknowledged by the authorities as a police magistrate of considerable ability and competence.

One can learn something about the man from his reports and letters and the evidence that he gave to the select committees enquiring into the disturbances. He was a fair man. He believed that magistrates who accepted presents or took fees should be removed from the magistracy. Unlike other officers of the Crown, he had no hatred for, or fear of, the ordinary people. He condemned the severity of the proctors and the mismanagement of land-agents and middlemen. He argued with two County Limerick clergymen on the correctness of levying 12/- per acre on wheat and potatoes, at a time when prices for agricultural produce had plummeted.

With the passage of time, it became clear that the P.P.F. did not have the support or confidence of the people. The magistrates were hostile because they did not have the right to make appointments to the force and because they saw the stipendiary magistrate as a rebuke to them and as infringing on their powers. Landholders were unsympathetic, if not outright opposed, because of the financial burden which the force imposed on them. A P.P.F. magistrate in County Cork claimed that the force was so unpopular that he was unable to get information on 'anything' from the local gentry. There were also other reasons for their unpopularity. Major Going, the stipendiary magistrate in Limerick, allowed an Orange lodge to be set up within the force. The police in Limerick paraded the streets of the city on 12 July with orange ribbons in their buttonholes. Going's Orangeism was undoubtedly a

factor in the ferocity with which he was murdered in October, 1821. He was succeeded for a brief period by a Mr. Stewart, and then Willcocks took over as chief magistrate of the Limerick P.P.F. He immediately set about ridding the force of the Orange taint, dismissing a number of officers and breaking up the Orange lodge. Willcocks was free of religious sectarianism. In evidence before a select committee he said: 'I am satisfied that I have raised myself above eight hundred police and constables and I never asked a man what was his religious profession'.⁽⁴⁾

In 1821, Major Willcocks and another police magistrate, Major George Warburton, reported on the state of Co. Limerick. We know from other sources that Warburton was conservative and traditional in his thinking, so that it is possible to distinguish Willcocks' contribution from his. The following are a few of the more interesting points made in the report. The tenants of the Courtenay estate, where the insurrection of 1821 began, were said to be 'very unfairly and tyrannically treated'. Unemployment and a long tradition of lawlessness and disorder were seen as root causes of the disturbances. And it was noted that the lower classes think that 'the laws were only framed to benefit the wealthy and to hold themselves in bondage'.⁽⁵⁾

In October, 1822, Willcocks was appointed inspector of police, under the Constabulary Bill, for the counties of Cork, Kerry, Tipperary and Waterford. And, in January, 1825, the government formally appointed him inspector-general for Munster. This was the high point of his career. And it must have given him pleasure to be able to report on the exceptional peace in Munster. In a characteristic comment, he remarked: 'what renders it still more gratifying is that the relinquishment of outrage had not been effected by coercive measures but gradually attained by legitimate causes'.⁽⁶⁾ At best, this is only partly true, as all the disturbed areas of Munster had been proclaimed under the Insurrection Act, saturated with police and military, and all the repressive measures available to the state brought to bear on the people. But it is of interest for its revelation of Willcocks' thinking. It shows him to be a believer in law and order and not in force. He was a pioneering, professional policeman, who set a high standard for those who followed in his footsteps.

SOURCES

1. Galen Broeker, *Rural Disorder and Police Reform in Ireland, 1812 - 36*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1970. p.27-28.
2. *Ibid.* p.75.
3. *Ibid.* p.78.
4. Select Committee of House of Lords, 1824, p.86.
5. Select Committee of House of Commons, 1825, p.950.
6. Broeker, *op.cit.*, p.155.