

WHITEBOYS AND RIBBONMEN

EARLY AGRARIAN SECRET SOCIETIES

Ireland has probably had more secret societies than any country in Europe except Russia. They have existed here from the late eighteenth century to the present time. Naming some of the major societies gives an indication of their importance in Irish history: the Orange Order, the United Irishmen, the Fenians, the Irish Republican Brotherhood and the Irish Republican Army.

In this article we are concerned only with the principal agrarian secret societies of the eighteenth and early nineteenth century, the Whiteboys and the Ribbonmen. Both were firmly entrenched in Limerick, and Ribbonism made its appearance in Munster when there was an eviction threat on the Courtney estates in the county.

These were peasant oath-bound societies formed to protect the farm workers and the poorer tenant farmers. The Catholic Church opposed them and condemned the taking of secret oaths. The societies in turn retaliated and threatened priests who spoke against them; they also took up issues like increases in baptismal, marriage, and mass fees. Clergy who increased their fees were issued with threatening letters ordering them to lower their charges. The societies were not sectarian in their original conception and aims, although they were represented as such.

The agrarian movements of this period have been presented by historians as a loose aggregate of secret societies, lacking in overall philosophy and theory. They have also been represented as having no real liaison with

by Pat Feeley

the urban workers. This has always been the popular belief. At a Labour History Society meeting in Dublin some years ago, however, the late Miriam Daly read a well-researched paper on the agrarian societies which showed that they were much more tightly organised and clearer in their thinking than was generally believed and that they did have some contact with urban workers. Unfortunately this paper was never published and a copy of it was not available when this paper was being written. Accordingly the article follows the traditional view of the rural secret societies as local, loosely organised, reformist, peasant defence organisations.

Secret societies active in the interests of the common people are to be found in Ireland from the middle of the eighteenth century onwards. Towards the end of 1761 in the Clogheen-Newcastle district of Co. Tipperary, groups of men began to come together at night to level the ditches, which landlords and graziers had erected around the commons on which the people had until then enjoyed free grazing rights. At first they were called Levellers, but when other grievances concerning rent and tithes were added, the movement spread and the men took to wearing white shirts. They then became known as



A raiding party.

Buachailli Bana, or Whiteboys. The white uniform was adopted so that they might easily recognise each other.

Organisations of this kind were not an entirely new phenomenon. They had been formed during the famines of 1741 and 1756, and an act was passed in 1756 to prevent combinations against tithes.

There was a swing towards grazing and beef cattle farming between 1735 and 1760. There were a number of reasons for this: the exemption of pasture land from tithes, the lifting of the ban on exports of live cattle to Britain, the outbreak of the Seven Years' War, with a consequent demand for provisions, and, finally, wealthy Catholics wishing to evade the Penal Laws had found that grazing was the safest form of farm investment. This development led to a drop in tillage, with landlords and farmers switching over to the rearing of cattle. As a result there was high unemployment amongst the labourers, and the smaller tenant farmers were forced off the land to make way for open pastures. Most labourers, if they were not to starve, had to rent potato ground, and they now found that the competition of pasture farming forced up the rents.

There was an act of parliament which laid down that five out of every hundred acres should be devoted to tillage. There was, however, no machinery for enforcing it. There was not in Ireland at the time any statutory provision for the maintenance of poor and displaced people, who accordingly, when the bad times came, starved or were thrown back on the charity of their relatives and neighbours.

These were hard times for the labourers and small farmers. Local law was administered by the landlords and parsons who, for the most part, had little sympathy for the ordinary people. Nor could they hope for anything better from the higher courts, even if they had the money to seek redress at that level. It was in this situation that the Whiteboys, claiming to be the champions of the oppressed, emerged from amongst the peasantry. They were a secret oath-bound society and spread quickly over parish and county boundaries. Whiteboys assembled in great numbers wearing uniforms, blowing horns, carrying torches and riding horses that had been commandeered from big farmers of the locality. As well as levelling ditches and stone walls, digging up pasture land and uprooting orchards, they also searched houses for guns, demanded money to buy arms and to defray the expenses of Whiteboys standing trial.

Like the Ribbonmen that followed them, they were not just robbers or bandits. Mainchin Seoighe in his book, *Dromin Athlacca*, says that that part of Limerick was very disturbed in the 1820s, and that the Whiteboys were very active. In February of 1822 a group of about fifty men attacked the house of Mr. Bolster, near Athlacca. They broke windows, damaged the house, threatened the occupant and took his musket, but the money in the house was left untouched. A few nights afterwards there was an attack on Bolster's brother's house, and the Protestant Church in Athlacca was burned. The *Limerick News* reported that 'detachments of the Rifle Brigade', regarded at the time as a 'corps of sharpshooters', were sent to Athea, Athlacca, Abbeyfeale and Glin. In August 1822 a man from the district, convicted of firing at a local landowner, was hanged in Limerick.

It is important to note that the disturbances mentioned took place in the 1820s and are attributed to Whiteboyism. Some historians hold that Whiteboy, or Rightboy, agitations ceased about 1787 when there was a promise of tithe reform. They see Ribbonism as a separate, and practically unconnected, agrarian movement. The Marxist historian, T.A. Jackson, sees it differently. He regards one as just a development of the other. He refers to Whiteboyism under its new name 'Ribbonism'.

The engineer Richard Griffith, the great road-builder in the counties of Limerick, Cork and Kerry, arrived in

Limerick in 1822, and in writing of the agrarian unrest in the south-west, referred to it as 'the Whiteboy warfare'. The people of the time do not seem to have seen Whiteboyism and Ribbonism as two distinct movements.

The reasons for the two outbreaks, however, were different. The early disturbances were caused by the enclosure of commonages. Subsequently the tithe question and landlord-tenant relations became the focal points for agitation.

The outbreaks of organised peasant violence in the early decades of the nineteenth century took place for other reasons. The uprisings came after a potato failure and a drop in grain prices. When the price of corn fell the farmers reduced the labourers' wages or fired them. The labourers in turn retaliated in acts of agrarian terror.

Although some historians are inclined to view the outbreaks in the second half of the eighteenth century as unconnected with the disturbances in the early decades of the nineteenth, it seems more correct to link them.

The rich farmlands of counties Limerick and Tipperary were the centre of the agrarian revolt. It spread from there but took with it the local colour and the strong class antipathy between farmer and labourer, some of which is still found in the same counties today.

The tenant farmers seem to have been more dominant in the Whiteboys and the farm labourers in the Ribbon lodges. The difference between the poorer tenant farmer and the farm worker was often more apparent than real. Together they were to form the lumpen peasantry that was decimated by the Great Famine.

The bigger farmers were largely untouched by the effects of the potato blight in black '46 and '47 and when, under the land acts, they were able to purchase their farms and thereby terminate the old tenancy system, they went on to be a major power in the land. The socialist revolutionaries of the 1930s called for worker-peasant alliances, oblivious to the fact that the peasants had become farmers many years previous and were quite impervious and even hostile to calls for revolution.

The Whiteboys took up the major grievances of the people concerning tithes, land occupancy, landlord-tenant relations, wages, hearth money, roads, tolls, the right to work and the cost and disposal of provisions in time of scarcity. They did not seek to abolish rents or tithes, just to regulate them in an equitable manner. They sought, therefore, to enforce specific regulations that would bring to an end the grievances from which the labourers and tenant farmers suffered.

In furtherance of this policy they carried out acts of violence and terror. They burned houses and ricks of hay. If their threats were disregarded, they resorted to acts of personal violence. Some of these were savage by any reckoning: men were thrown naked into pits lined with thorn bushes and buried in earth up to their chins; cattle and people were mutilated and cold blooded murders were carried out when threats failed.

The contemporary public was outraged by stories of Whiteboy cruelty, but it should be remembered that the rough justice meted out by the Whiteboys only reflected the law of the land, which for many minor offences decreed the pillory, whipping or transportation and for more serious crimes, hanging and drawing and quartering. This was an age of public hangings, of corpses dangling on gibbets. But most Whiteboys managed to escape detention. They were of the people and could melt back into the community after a terrorist mission. Law enforcement in the eighteenth century was poor. The law-breakers' chances of escaping punishment were good. In fact, the man who broke the Whiteboy code was much more likely to be punished than the perpetrators of an outrage.

Richard Griffith noted in his report in 1822 that there were large garrisons in Newmarket, Kanturk, Millstreet, Castleisland, Listowel, Abbeyfeale, Glin, Newcastle



The start of a faction fight.

West, Dromcollogher and Liscarroll to contain the risen peasantry. But all to little effect. The wild country on the borders of the three counties was outlaw territory. Whiteboys, cattle thieves and criminals went to ground in the hills. Between the towns of Newcastle West, Newmarket, Listowel and Killarney there was a vast expanse of 970 square miles without any proper roads. This had been the seat of the rebellion of the Earl of Desmond in the reign of Queen Elizabeth, and the existing passes and rough roads had been constructed by the military after the rebellion. In winter the roads were impassable, even for horsemen. Griffith wrote that it was an 'asylum for Whiteboys, smugglers and robbers' and that 'their wickedness has frequently escaped punishment'. Griffith, who went on to supervise the construction and improvement of nearly 250 miles of road between 1822 and 1830, linking up counties Limerick, Cork and Kerry, made a big contribution to the bringing of law and order to the territory.

The agrarian secret societies failed to achieve tithes reform. However, they probably prevented the mass evictions that took place in Scotland in the land clearances of the second half of the eighteenth century.

Tenant-right as such was not recognised by the majority of southern landlords but the activities of the agrarian terrorists succeeded in establishing that the labourers and small farmers had rights and that these would be protected by force. The landlords were afraid to deal too harshly with their tenants for they feared the consequences.

A bad result of the Whiteboy and Rightboy movements was the emergence of sectarian secret societies in the final decades of the last century, especially in Northern Ireland. Edmund Curtis in his *History of Ireland* tends to stress this aspect, pointing out that the sectarian Protestant societies were established as a response to Whiteboyism. The Peep O'Day Boys, Steel Boys, Defenders, etc. were set up as a defence against popish conspiracies against the state and Protestantism. In 1795, after a sectarian riot in Armagh in which up to thirty

Defenders were killed, the most famous and durable of the Protestant secret societies, the Orange Order, was founded.

The Protestant ascendancy feared the agrarian secret societies, seeing in them the seeds of a peasant revolt. They set their followers against them on sectarian lines. Daniel O'Connell, the Catholic squire of Derrynane, hated the Whiteboys with a vengeance, regarding them as 'miscreants' who should be exterminated. Feargus O'Connor the Chartist leader, spoke of 'the glorious deeds of the Whiteboys'. Class stands were taken. The political and religious leaders saw the threat to the status quo in an organised and militant peasantry, which had superiority in numbers if in nothing else. No effort was spared to crush the law-breakers. A Whiteboys Act was passed. The taking of the Whiteboy oath carried the death penalty. Military expeditions raided likely hiding places. Suspects were taken in scores and hanged. Lord Chesterfield when Viceroy commented cynically that if they had hanged as many landlords as Whiteboys it would have been much better for the peace of the country. But all attempts to exterminate the Whiteboys failed. When they were put down in one place they sprang up in another.

The taking up of a sectarian position was a perversion of the original aims of the society but it was nonetheless understandable. Many of the Munster landlords and bigger farmers were Protestant, and the Whiteboys found themselves ranged against them from the beginning. It was easy to see how groups of poorly educated, often ignorant men could slip from a position of opposition to the farmer to one of hostility towards his religion, which they had been brought up to believe was alien and wrong. However, naked sectarianism seems to have been mainly confined to Ulster.

Dr. Patrick C. Power in his book, *Carrick-on-Suir and its People*, says that Whiteboys attacked two Catholic priests who had preached against them in the Carrick area in the 1780s. Both had to flee the district.

Neither sectarian riots, the military, the police nor the gibbet succeeded in breaking the Whiteboys. They were

not defeated. They ceased activities when conditions improved for the peasantry towards the end of the eighteenth century, only to reappear in Munster under a different name in the next century at a time when again there was a threat to the working and living conditions of the poor.

Ribbonism, which had its origins in Ulster at the turn of the nineteenth century, was more working class than Whiteboyism. It was a secret society of farm labourers for the most part. It was neither infused by Catholic consciousness nor nationalism, but it was a major force in the politicisation of the rural poor.

The chronology of Ribbon activities reflects the primacy of economic factors in the movement. Although there were many incidents of agrarian terrorism before the Famine, the three major eruptions in 1814 to 1816, 1821—'23 and 1831—'34, can be traced directly to economic causes. Grain prices, which had been exceptionally high in the previous four years, fell by about 45% in 1814—1815. The farmers were unable to pay a rent that had been agreed to in better years, and the labourers were thrown out of work. Agitation against threatened eviction, high rents and falling wages swept through several counties. The immediate cause of the unrest in 1821—'23 was an attempt by a new agent on a County Limerick estate to evict tenants who had fallen into arrears or were unwilling to agree on the terms of new leases. However, the outbreak spread because of a poor potato crop and because a fresh wave of 25 to 30 per cent falls in grain prices caused widespread distress.

In the early 1830s the agitation took place against the background of the tithe war but Ribbonism concerned itself with tithes only when the cottier, the backbone of the Ribbon movement, was directly assessed for tithes. But as in previous uprisings, the main causes at this time were once more a poor potato crop and a decline in grain prices after the fairly satisfactory years of the late 1820s.

The main causes, therefore, of Ribbon activity, in common with the more localised manifestation, can be related directly to agrarian rather than to sectarian or political issues.

As prices moved in favour of livestock in the pre-Famine years, the landlords and the farmers sought increasingly to substitute cattle and sheep for tillage. This tended to reduce both the demand for labour and the amount of cornacre that the farmers were willing to rent out for potatoes. In the century before the Famine there was a much more rapid increase in the number of labourers and cottiers, as opposed to farmers; this led naturally to an increasing demand for conacre, which in turn drove up the rent, leading to disputes between farmers and labourers.

The landlords were relatively immune from attack. Many of them were absentees; the others were well guarded. Farmers on the other hand were part of the community and could be threatened or assaulted directly. A study of agrarian activity in County Limerick, one of the most agitated counties, reveals that well over half the outrages involved labourers pitted against farmers.

Ribbonism spread through the rich farmlands of the Golden Vale, through the midland counties and into Roscommon and East Galway. It was not found in the western coastal districts where the farms were poor and the class divisions not so pronounced.

The Ribbonmen were primarily, but not exclusively, labourers; some were small farmers. What is most impressive is the lack of indiscriminate violence by these secret societies. Violence was employed on a calculated, specific basis, in contrast to the gratuitous bloodletting of the faction fights and the sectarian riots. Victims were carefully selected for some infringement of the Ribbon code. Attacks were always clearly linked to a specific issue — a particular eviction, a rise in rents, a protest

against labourers being hired from another county. There was rarely much difficulty in ascribing a motive; the perpetrators took pains to publicise the reasons for the violence as a warning and a lesson to others. Violence was preventive or deterrent.

Drink was not integral to the Society as it was to the faction fighters. Ribbon agitation took place mostly in winter, in the slack season. The men conspired at the fair, in the pubs and in the shebeens, at the very heart of the community. After an outrage they went back to the safety and anonymity of the community. There were no charismatic leaders. They were not needed. Nor are there many songs or ballads written about them, except where they happened to clash spectacularly with the police or military. The routine of their lives was too familiar to allow it to be romanticised by the ordinary people. They felt no sense of identity with the British state, and although Ribbon notices were often couched in legal jargon, showing that they believed justice was on their side, they had no illusions as to which side the forces of the state supported. Nearly one hundred policemen were killed and five hundred wounded in suppressing secret societies in the twenty years before the Famine—a clear insight into the Ribbon concept of the state. Like the Whiteboys, they fought not to abolish the existing system but to reform it and bring about an improvement in their own conditions. Neither were they anti-industrial or anti-urban, as were some of the peasant societies on the Continent. The rural Irish labourers and cottiers welcomed any industrialist or manufacturer who might offer them employment.

Agrarian agitation was considerably successful in achieving its limited objectives. It succeeded in holding rents below their market rates. Fear of reprisal blunted the threat of eviction, thereby offsetting some of the bad effects of insecurity of tenure. After the Famine when the Ribbon societies ceased to function, the number of livestock rose dramatically, indicating a sharp swing by the farmers and landlords to grazing. Ribbon agitation had acted as a brake on this development in the pre-Famine decades. The concentration on agitation to guarantee conacre was an effective means of ensuring the provision of food. The rural poor lived on potatoes. The food problem was one of production. In ensuring that they had conacre at the right rent, they were reasonably sure, unless the potato blight attack struck, of food on the table.

The labourers and cottiers, who outnumbered farmers in pre-Famine years, ceased to have numerical superiority in this period. By 1900 cottiers had virtually disappeared, and there were twice as many farmers as labourers. The Famine and the emigrant ship had thinned the labourers' numbers. The secret societies were broken and dispersed. The farmers were masters of the land — a mastery they have held to the present day.

The secret societies served a purpose. They acted as a tenant farmers' protection society and a farm labourers' union. As defence organisations they protected the rights of the peasants and acted as a deterrent against the would-be excesses of the farmer or landlord. In this way they brought home to the ordinary people the importance of organised action and also established the mental climate in which secret societies were acceptable, indeed almost natural. However, in contrast to latter day societies the members of the agrarian organisations had no option but to band themselves in underground combinations. They were the untouchables, despised by all the powers of the land. They also contributed to a tradition of lawlessness which still is with us. The Fenians took over in the organisational sense from the Ribbon lodges and the Whiteboy cells.

The wild savagery, the courageous recklessness, the class hatred and the sectarianism of the peasant rebels in



A protest meeting.

Co. Wexford in 1798 owed a good deal to Whiteboyism which was strong and organised in that county. The Land League was steeped in the traditions of the agrarian societies. The Invincibles, who were organised by prominent activists of the Land League, were influenced by agrarian terrorist traditions.

These peasant societies are an important part of Irish history. It is all the more remarkable, therefore, that two standard text books, one for junior and one for senior secondary school students, *The March to Nationhood* by Folens and *The Birth of Modern Ireland* by Gill and Macmillan, fail even to mention the agrarian eruptions of the early nineteenth century.

Charles Poulett Scrope, a radical English M.P., writing to the Prime Minister in 1834, summed up the reasons for and powers of the rural secret societies:

But for the salutary dread of the Whiteboy Association ejectionment would desolate Ireland, and decimate her population, casting forth thousands of families ... to perish in roadside ditches. Yes, the Whiteboy system is the only check on the ejectionment system; and weighing one against the other, horror against

horror, and crime against crime, it is perhaps the lesser evil of the two.

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