

Claiming the Landscape: Popular balladry

in pre-famine Ireland

Broadside ballads, narrative songs printed cheaply for public sale, were a significant form of entertainment for pre-famine Ireland's *cosmhuintir* or common people – i.e. those below the ranks of the middle classes. Mostly in English, the ballads frequently echoed the themes and refrains of Irish compositions, their themes including political invective, romance, tragedy, romance and love of place. Printed in jobbing shops throughout the island, particularly in Dublin and Cork, ballads were sung and sold through streets, fairs and markets – or wherever else crowds gathered – and were considered by contemporaries to both reflect and shape popular opinion.

To what extent did the printed ballads and the orally transmitted songs, Irish and English, reflect a popular consciousness of landscape? Did they follow the current literary trend of equating the character of the landscape with the character of the people – a trend that was also visible in print culture outside the literature of the elite? Tourists' accounts, for instance, were peppered with parallels between scenery and *mentalité*, while works whose focus was primarily factual were equally susceptible to a preoccupation with the romantic.¹ Lewis' *Topographical Dictionary* of 1837, besides detailing local population figures, economic pursuits, topography and prominent landmarks, also pursued the scenic and sublime, making specific references to 'lofty mountains', 'sublime and beautiful scenery', 'view which is the most magnificent imaginable', 'most picturesque and romantic scenery'.² Contemporary

¹ Glenn Hooper, *The Tourist's Gaze: Travellers to Ireland 1800-2000* (Cork 2001), especially pp 55-589, 67-73, 85-94.

² Samuel Lewis, *Topographic Dictionary of Ireland* (London 1837), pp 283-284 et passim.

trade directories and tourist guides, too, mixed practical information with descriptions of awe-inspiring landscape, and although guides to Irish beauty-spots, especially Killarney, continued to be produced mainly by Dublin and London publishers, provincial entrepreneurs took up the initiative from 1840 onwards.³ Windele's 1840 *Guide to the Cove and the Harbour of Cork*, for example, included scenic, antiquarian and historical material, while in 1843, the canny proprietor of the recently opened Kilkee Baths published what was really an extended advertisement for his own business, but which doubled as a general tourist's guide to the beauties of Kilkee and its environs.⁴ Newspapers, too, used descriptions of landscape to two distinct ends. Firstly, such descriptions were a verbal substitute for visual representation – a veritable painting in words, accurate enough, though frequently sharing the painting's tendency to 'touch up' nature. Secondly, landscape descriptions, like those in literature, were used as a metaphor for the perceived qualities of the people who populated the landscape. Accounts of meetings, outings and communal pastimes, all becoming increasingly newsworthy in the 1830s, provided an opportunity for the newspaper writers to exploit to the full this descriptive-cum-metaphorical function of landscape. Such was the *Waterford Mail's* account of a purely local event, the Dunmore East regatta of August 1833:

'We do not think that the majestic scenery of our River ever appeared to more advantage. At one side the bold and precipitous cliffs of the County Waterford reared themselves, bearing upon their broad shoulders the varied and animated population [watching the event]. Opposite to this, and well

³ John Windele, *Guide to the Cove and Harbour of Cork* (Cork 1840)

⁴ *New Guide to the Scenery of Killarney by a Visitor* (Dublin 1830); *A Directory of Kilkee in the County Clare on the West Coast of Ireland with a Map showing the situation and number of the Lodges, to which is added some useful information relating to warm and vapour baths, and the mineral waters of the locality, which have been analysed by Dr. Gore of Limerick. Published by and for Hugh Hogan, proprietor of the Kilkee Baths* (Limerick 1843).

contrasting with it was the flat coast of the County Wexford, studded with neat villages and villas, and terminated by the Hook Tower light house, the useful and cheering beacon of the wearisome mariner. Between the two shores the River of Waterford expands its broad bosom and joins the broader sea. Innumerable yachts and boats of all descriptions and of every size and tonnage were upon the water, and by the fluttering of their white sails and the heaving motion with which they were wafted along, completed the picturesque character of the scene. Steamers and other large vessels arriving and departing added, if possible, still more to the effect.⁵

To what extent did such a consciousness of landscape, either in its pictorial or symbolic sense, enter the consciousness of the *cosmhuintir*? Some Irish language poetry of the eighteenth and early nineteenth century certainly implies an intense awareness of scenery and natural beauty in a local setting, Merriman's 'Cúirt an Mhéon Oíche', for example, giving a sense of the combined serenity and menace in the landscape of east Clare, as well as the impact of that landscape on the individual:

Do ghealladh mo chroí an uair chinn Loch Gréine,
An talamh, 's an tír is íor na spéire,
Taithneamhacht aoibhinn suíomh na sléibhte
Ag bagairt a gcinn thar dhroim a chéile.⁶

At least some individuals from within the *cosmhuintir*, though admittedly from its higher ranks, were not only well acquainted with Merriman's lines, but could also apply them to the landscape that they observed in their daily lives. Half a century after Merriman penned his poem, Humphrey O'Sullivan, a Kerry-born schoolmaster who

⁵ *Waterford Mail*, 31 August 1833

⁶ Brian Merriman, *Cúirt an Mhéon-Oíche* (Liam Ó Murchú, ed), (Dublin 1982), p. 19; Ciaran Carson (translator), *The Midnight Court* (Loughcrew 2005), p. 19. Carson's translation runs as follows:
The sight of Lough Graney would dazzle my eyes,
As the countryside sparkled through the blue skies.
Uplifting to see how the ountains were stacked,
Each head peeping over a neighbouring back.

plied his trade in the south Kilkenny town of Callan until his death in 1838, quoted the lines in his diary when he looked at the snow-covered Wicklow mountains on his way from Callan to Dublin in April 1831.⁷

Such consciousness of landscape, its sights and – equally importantly – its sounds, was peppered throughout O’Sullivan’s diary, as obvious in one of his entries for early January 1832:

The little thrush is singing sweetly on the branch in every sheltered bush; the wild lark happily singing high up in the sky, and many other birds enhance the beauty of the morning with their sweet song. The bright daisy, the yellow dandelion, the star-like celandine and the yellow flower of the furze adorn every glen. A fine soft quiet cloudy day.⁸

Such timeless consciousness of landscape is equally apparent in his somewhat clipped description of the dawn scenery as he travelled from Callan to Clonmel in December 1831:

First signs of dawn came at Tigh na Naoi Mile; daybreak at Muileann na gCloch Chapel; the first blush of aurora at the opening of Glen Bodhar; rosy blushes before sunrise at the end of Glen Bodhar; sunrise shortly after that. The view of Gleann an Óir and the Commeraghs was beautiful.⁹

Whether such an awareness of landscape was the preserve of a culturally attuned and literary minority is not clear, though that it penetrated down into local communities is suggested by the longevity of some songs at regional level, where local scenes (admittedly less minutely and more formulaically described than by Merriman or O’Sullivan) set the scene for the ensuing story. Máire Bhuí Ní Laoire’s ‘Cath Chéim an Fhia’, perpetuating the memory of the armed clash between locals and the authorities at Keimaneigh in January 1822, evokes the sights and sounds of the countryside around the pass in which the event occurred:

⁷ Tomás de Bhaldraithe (ed), *The Diary of Humphrey O’Sullivan 1827-1835* (Dublin and Cork 1979), p. 105.

⁸ de Bhaldraithe, *Diary of Humphrey O’Sullivan*, p. 116, 8 January 1832.

⁹ de Bhaldraithe, *Diary of Humphrey O’Sullivan*, p. 113, 28 December 1831.

Cois abha Ghleanna an Chéime in Uibh Laoire 'sea bhímse
Mar a dtéann an fhia san oíche chun síor chodhladh soil,
Ag macnamh seal liom féinig, ag déanamh mo smaointe,
Ag éisteacht i gcoilltibh le binn-ghuth na n-eoin.¹⁰

In the broadside ballads, however, though many were in praise of place, landscape descriptions were stylised and formulaic, just like the classical allusions with which they were inter-layered. The language used was pedestrian, with many 'floaters' or stock lines and phrases used more to fit the requirements of metre and internal rhyming (borrowed to some extent from contemporary Irish language poetry) than to capture the essence of the scene described.¹¹ As a result, sentiments in harmony with Irish language idiom and poetic convention frequently descended into combined hyperbole and banality. The 'Praises of Cove', printed in the 1830s by Haly of Cork, was a typical combination of the allegorical and the humdrum:

What pleasant prospects are near to Cove,
From Passage Ferry to Belgrove,
Where nymphs and swains to dange and rove
To take sweet recreations...¹²

'Sweet Castle Hyde' was in the same vein. Written in the late eighteenth century in praise of an estate on the banks of the Blackwater near the north Cork town of Fermoy, its composer was reputedly chased away from the gates of the said demesne when its owner thought the song was one of ridicule, so exaggerated were its sentiments:

The richest groves throughout this nation,
In fine plantation you will see there,
The rose, the tulip and sweet carnation
All vying with the lily fair...¹³

¹⁰ 'Cath Chéim an Fhia', written by Máire Bhúí Ní Laoire of Inchigeelagh in West Cork. For an outline of this event, see Brian Brennan, *Máire Bhúí Ní Laoire: A poet of her people* (Cork 2000).

¹¹ Michael N. Joy, 'The Everyday uses of Nineteenth Century Broadside Ballads and the writings of John Clare' p. 12, <http://www.jrc.sophia.ac.jp/kiyou/ki22/mjoy.pdf>: accessed 10 November 2006.

¹² 'The Praises of Cove', Madden Ballads, Reel 12, frame 607.

Some researchers of broadside balladry consider that the woodcut heading the broadside was as great a selling point as were the words of the ballad.¹⁴ This woodcut was the obvious place for visual representation of landscape, but relatively few landscape-based woodcuts exist. Granted, a number of castles, bridges, rivers, woods and urban skylines figure in the woodcuts, but these are based less on representation of a real scene than on a stylised pattern applicable to any one of many familiar landscapes. Thus, ‘Sweet Castle Hyde’ printed in the 1830s by Haly of Cork whose woodcuts were superior to those of many contemporary printers, bore at its head the woodcut of a stately turreted castle built in the fold of two hills, skirted by woodland, and overlooking a graceful bridge over a broad river. But this was, in fact, a less accurate representation of the palladian-style Castle Hyde than of Lismore Castle some twenty miles distant on the shores of the same Blackwater river in the neighbouring county of Waterford, and described by Lewis as ‘an imposing object, rising majestically from the elevated bank of the river, and occupying the verge of a precipitous cliff, partly clothed with wood and towering above the foliage which conceals its base’.¹⁵ Similarly, ‘Cork’s Own Town’ was headed by an urban skyline, complete with steeples, towers and river, equally applicable to Limerick and Waterford as to Cork – as obvious in the use of the same or similar woodcuts in other contemporary broadsides, while ‘A New Song in Praise of the River Lee’ had as its woodcut a generic illustration of a bridge over a tree-lined river – which could represent any river in any age and was, indeed, used also to head another Haly

¹³ ‘Sweet Castle Hyde, a much-admired song’, Madden Ballads, Reel 12, frame 8497; Andrew Carpenter (ed), *Verse in English from Eighteenth Century Ireland* (Cork 1998), p. 520.

¹⁴ Michael N Joy, ‘The everyday uses of Nineteenth Century Broadside Ballads’, p. 5.

¹⁵ ‘Sweet Castle Hyde’, Madden Ballads, Reel 12, frame 8497; Lewis, *Topographical Dictionary*, Vol. II, pp 283-284.

number, ‘The Lovely Sweet Banks of the Suir’.¹⁶ In most ballads, however, the use of woodcuts even vaguely representative of local landscape was dispensed with, and the text was headed by pictorial representations only tangentially linked with the place and scene celebrated. Thus, ‘An Admired Song on Youghal Harbour’, its third line describing how ‘sol appeared with pomp most charming’, was surmounted by a stylised sun, while ‘The Praises of Cove’ was headed by a woodcut of a three-masted ship, appropriate as an indicator of Cove’s maritime role, but only barely linked with the theme of the ballad.¹⁷

In most broadside ballads, it is clear that reference to landscape was simply a backdrop to the adulation of individuals, groups or idealised types. The ballad praising Cove focussed primarily on the ‘Irish heroes’ who manned the naval vessels in the harbour and the barracks on the hill; ‘The Lovely Sweet Banks of the Suir’ simply provided a backdrop to the adulation of the poet’s ‘own grá mo cree’; and ‘Sweet Castle Hyde’ – despite the unfavourable reaction of the castle’s owner – was dedicated more to praising the family’s wealth and hospitality than to describing the local scenery:

If noble princes, from foreign places
Should chance to sail to this Irish shore,
'Tis in this valley they would be feasted
As often heroes had been before¹⁸

– surely an echo of the celebration and lament for the south Tipperary Butler family in the Irish language song ‘Cill Cais’ dating from the earlier eighteenth century:

An áit úd a gcónaíodh an deighbhean,
Fuair gradam is meidhir thar mnáibh,
Bhíodh iarlaí ag tarraingt thar toinn ann
Is an t-aifreann binn á rá.¹⁹

¹⁶ ‘A New Song in Praise of the River Lee’, National Library of Ireland Broadside Collection, no. 243; ‘The Lovely Sweet Banks of the Suir’, Madden Ballads, Reel 12, frame 8387.

¹⁷ ‘The Praises of Cove’, Madden Ballads, Reel 12, frame 607; ‘An Admired Song on Youghal Harbour’, National Library of Ireland Broadside Collection, no. 25.

¹⁸ ‘The Praises of Cove’; ‘Sweet Castle Hyde’; ‘The Lovely Sweet Banks of the Suir’.

The local landscape, in both its visual and aural aspects, was also used in the popular songs composed in the early nineteenth century. Raftery, in his lament for Anthony Daly, hanged for alleged Whiteboy offences in Co. Galway in April 1820, interlinked landscape and personal tragedy:

Ni lasann na réalta
Is na héisc ní phreabann ar toinn,
Ní thagann drúcht ar an bhféar
Is na héanlaith ní labhrann go binn..²⁰

Similarly, a bastardised broadside version of the Irish ‘‘Séan Ó Dhuibhir a’ Ghleanna’ a song lamenting a seventeenth century Tipperary raparee, took up the original’s evocation of landscape sounds:

One morning as I started
From the house of Morpheus,
The hounds and trumpets rattled
Which caused the earth to shake.²¹

Thus, landscape, while frequently implied rather than elaborated upon, was a pervasive presence in popular song, whether in the Irish or English language. Usually supplying the harmless picturesque, it could also be used as a code to facilitate the expression of popular resentments, real or imagined. In an era when politicisation was proceeding at an accelerated pace, not only among the upwardly mobile middle classes but also within the ranks of the *cosmhuintir*, there was an increasing tendency

¹⁹ ‘The place where the noble lady lived, Who was honoured above all women, Earls travelled there from over the sea, And the melodious mass was celebrated.’ Donal O’Sullivan and Micheál Ó Súilleabháin (eds), *Bunting’s Ancient Music of Ireland* (Cork 1983), pp 3-4.

²⁰ ‘Anthony Daly’, Ciarán Ó Coigligh, *Raiftearaí, Amhráin agus Dánta* (Baile Atha Cliath 1987), p. 133.

²¹ The melody to which the song was matched was widely sung, certainly from the late eighteenth century onwards, a version being printed in Bunting’s *Ancient Irish Airs* (... 1796), most of the airs in which were collected from performers at the Belfast Harp Festival of 1792. The original text reads:

Ar m’éirí dhom ar maidin,.

Griain an tSamhraidh ag taitheamh,

Cúl an úll á casadh

Agus ceol binn na n-éan...’

A more elegant translation was produced in the later nineteenth century, beginning ‘After Aughrim’s Great Disaster...’

to link landscape with national identity.²² If by the mid-1840s, the Young Ireland movement saw the Irish landscape as ‘inescapably scored with historical signs’, this tendency had already begun with O’Connell who constantly referred to local landscape to make his audience conscious of current grievance and its imminent redress.²³ At Limerick he pointed to the ‘majestic Shannon’ as a symbol of Ireland’s future destiny; at Cashel he outlined Ireland’s past, present and future against the backdrop of the Rock; at Bagnelstown he gestured towards the surrounding ‘verdant vales’ from which the native had been displaced by the foreigner.²⁴ O’Connell’s lieutenants at regional level, particularly during the anti-tithe agitation, took up this historicisation of the landscape, coupling their scenic allusions with maledictions on ‘heartless tyrants’ and reminding their listeners, whether on the plains of Meath or on the banks of the Suir, of Cromwell’s appreciation of the Munster landscape – ‘This is a country worth fighting for’.²⁵

The same interweaving of place, past oppression and future retribution was apparent in the broadsides and chapbook songs. A maudlin song on ‘My Own Sweet Wicklow County’ was transformed into a potentially inflammatory number by including a reference to ‘my sires, the great O’Byrnes’.²⁶ Even more pointedly, the

²² Elizabeth Crooke, *Politics, Archaeology and the Establishment of the National Museum* (Dublin 2001), PP 32-34.

²³ Sean Ryder, ‘The Politics of Landscape and Region in Nineteenth Century Poetry’ in Glenn Hooper and Leon Litvack (eds), *Ireland in the Nineteenth Century: Regional Identity* (Dublin 2000), p. 170.

²⁴ *Freeman’s Journal* 21 April 1841; *Tipperary Free Press* 24 May 1843.

²⁵ *Tralee Mercury* 4, 18 August 1832

²⁶ ‘My Own Sweet Wicklow County’, Cambridge University Library Irish Ballads 446, Sel 203, folio 39.

‘Home of my sires, the great O’Byrnes,
My birthplace dear to me,
Oh when that day of hope returns
I’ll risk this life for thee.
But patiently I will await
The will of Heaven’s bounty,
And night and day I’ll always pray
For my own sweet Wicklow county.

Fiach MacHugh O’Byrne (1544-1597) defeated Lord Gray’s forces at Glenmalure in 1580.

‘Church of Slane’ openly equated the ruined state of the abbey in a Kildare village with the current humiliation of Ireland:

This abbey once respected, alas, now stands neglected,
I really did inspect it, which does increase my pain,
That man’s degeneration and Erin’s degradation
Which leaves depopulated the ancient church of Slane.²⁷

Similarly, in ‘The Abolition of Tithes’ sung in Tralee in 1832, physical ruin, former religious persecution and current grievance were all interlinked:

Our clergy they were banished
And our abbeys levelled down,
All for the pampered Ministers
By King Harry, the bloodhound.²⁸

Where references to landscape served to recall specific local events, the capacity of the ballad to fuel popular grievance was particularly powerful. Schama, in his work on landscape and memory, gives the historian a salutary reminder of the necessity to know a place and its landscape in order to understand its impact on events over time:

Historians are supposed to reach the past always through texts, occasionally through images; things that are safely caught in the bell jar of academic convention; look but don’t touch. But one of my best-loved teachers... had always insisted on directly experiencing ‘a sense of place’, of using ‘the archive of the feet’.²⁹

This warning is certainly worth bearing in mind when exploring the link between landscape, balladry and popular political consciousness in pre-famine Ireland. It is clear that certain places – and the landscapes linked with them – acted as veritable codes linking past and present, codes best understood when historical exploration is accompanied by familiarity with the landscape. Thus, references to the Curragh of Kildare were frequent in popular songs and ballads, partly because the placename fitted into an endless variety of rhymes, partly because its association with the army

²⁷ ‘The church of Slane’. Irish Ballads 446, (Cambridge University Library), f. 179.

²⁸ ‘The Abolition of Tithes’, Chief Secretary’s Office, Private Papers 1832, 1458, 31 July 1832.

²⁹ Simon Schama, *Landscape and Memory* (London 1995), p. 24.

made it a perfect location for songs about love betrayed, partly because the open and windswept landscape of the Curragh was one that remained in the imagination, and partly because it was the scene of a major defeat of the rebels during the 1798 rebellion - one of the most emotive events within living memory in the period under review. ‘Young Bony’s Freedom’, for instance, sung not only in the Kildare town of Newbridge but also in centres as far distant as Kilmallock (Co Limerick) and Broadford (Co Clare) between March and November 1831 took up this coded message, promising that

At the next Curragh meeting
We will leave those bigots sleeping,
Where they slaughtered Roman Catholics
And made their blood to spill.³⁰

In reality, then, the stress on landscape in ballads was to make an event ‘visible’ in the memory of the audience, to link that landscape and event with a memorable melody – capable of repeated recall over a long period – and ultimately to avenge that event.

This link between landscape, event, memory, melody and revenge was even more obvious in two interlinked songs, composed some thirty years apart, one in Irish and the other in English. Both songs were entitled ‘Slievenamon’, and were called after the south Tipperary mountain of that name from whose summit four counties can be seen and which is inextricably linked with the heroes of the mythic Fenian cycle.³¹ The first version was ‘Sliabh na mBan’, dating from soon after 1798, recalling the failed rising at Carrigmoyle on the mountain’s southern slopes near Nine-Mile-House. A haunting lament blaming failure on betrayal, the song’s several stanzas were closed by couplets simultaneously stressing the link between heroic failure and

³⁰ ‘Young Bony’s Freedom’, Chief Secretary’s Office, Private Papers 1831, 101; 3 March, 16 August, 22 November 1831.

³¹ From the summit of Slievenamon can be seen the Rock of Cashel and the flat expanse of mid-Tipperary and Kilkenny to the north, the Suir Valley and Comeragh Mountains to the South, and the Nore valley, Blackstairs Mountains and Mount Leinster to the East.

the local landscape of Slievenamon, and promising revenge for the betrayal causing that failure. Thus, memory and aspiration were tied to a familiar landscape, and familiar local scenery and popular recall were, in turn, linked to a nebulous sense of wider identity:

Dá mba dhóigh liom féinig go mbhfíor an scéal sin,
Bhéadh mo chroí chomh h-éadrom le lon ar sceach,
Go mbeadh cloí ar mhéirligh is an adharc dá shéideadh
Ar thaobh na gréine de Shliabh na mBan.³²

The second Slievenamon composition appeared in 1832, following a major incident in the escalating anti-tithe agitation.³³ This event was an attack by local people on a process server and fifteen policemen at the townland of Carrigshock in the hills above Knocktopher in South Kilkenny, some thirteen miles north-east of Slievenamon. In the attack, three locals were killed, while the process server and police were brutally stoned or beaten to death. This was not first such incident in the tithe war, but it was one of the most widely publicised and longest remembered, partly because it was so gruesome, and partly because of the outcome of the subsequent trials.

A number of arrests had been made after the incident, but it had proved impossible to bring a successful case against the attackers. The cholera epidemic disrupted the trials in early 1832, and when the trial was eventually held at the Kilkenny Assizes of July 1832, it proved impossible to secure a conviction because of the local conspiracy of silence surrounding the affair. Thus, as the trials collapsed seven months after the original incident, a wave of popular elation spread and a number of ballads celebrating the event were composed – the most significant being ‘The Downfall of Tithes’, alternatively called ‘Sleeve na Mon’, which was sung

³² George Sigerson, *Poets and Poetry of Munster* (Dublin 1860), p. 108. ‘If I could believe that this tale were true, My heart would be as light as the blackbird on the bough That traitors would be vanquished and the horn blowing On the sunny side of Slievenamon’.

³³ The spellings vary from Slieve na Man to Sleevenamon to Slieve na Maun.

throughout Munster and beyond up to late 1832.³⁴ Printed in inelegant but fluid English, its metre and refrain suggest it was probably sung to the air of the original ‘Sliabh na mBan’.³⁵ The closing lines of each stanza not only echoed the equivalent lines of the original Irish song, but acted as an answer to the 1798 number’s calls for revenge, for although the Carrickshock incident had not happened at Slievenamon, it had unfolded only a dozen miles to the north-east, within that mountain’s natural hinterland, and certainly within the region in which memories of the 1798 defeat were still alive. A brief glance at two closing couplets from both the 1798 and the 1831 compositions illustrates the way in which, firstly, the earlier number’s calls for revenge were answered and fulfilled by the triumphalist lines of the later broadside ballad and, secondly, a familiar feature of the landscape became a symbol of avenged defeat:

Beidh cloí ar mhéarlaigh is an adharc dá shéideadh
 Ar thaobh na gréine de Shliabh na mBan....
Is go gcuirfeam *yeomen* ag crith ’na mbróga
 Is go mbuailfí coach iad ar Shliabh na mBan...³⁶(1798)

as against

..... But all that’s past is but a token
 Of what we’ll show them on Slievenamon....
We’ll free old Ireland from every traitor,
 Or die like heroes on Slievenamon... (1831)

The broadside ballad spread throughout the country like wildfire between January and October 1832, and with it spread the association of place and landscape with popular triumph, but now, interlinked with the 1798-related memories of Slievenamon, the scene in question was ‘the narrow breen of Carrickshock’.³⁷ Place and event thus

³⁴ Jean Denis Zimmermann, *Songs of Irish Rebellion: Political Street Ballads and Rebel Songs 1780-1900* (Dublin 1967), pp 31, 206-207.

³⁵ Chief Secretary’s Office, Private Papers 1832: 1063, 1431.

³⁶ ‘The traitor would be vanquished and the horn blowing On the sunny side of Slievenamon; Yeomen would be made to shake in their shoes On the sunny side of Slievenamon.’

³⁷ Chief Secretary’s Office, Private Papers 1832: 1063, 1431.

passed into the codified vocabulary of the *cosmhuintir*, so that well into the 1830s when policemen were being taunted or threatened by hostile crowds, the phrases ‘Give them Carrickshock!’ and ‘Knocktopher to them!’ were used as rallying cries.³⁸

But if place, landscape and popular triumph were closely interlinked in the subtext of the songs and broadside ballads, there was also a sense in which popular triumph was also stamped both aurally and visually on the landscape itself. It was no coincidence that the song-narrated incidents of both 1798 and 1831 took place on hills – the earlier incident on the lower reaches of Slievenamon and the later at Carrickshock on the slopes of the Walsh Mountains. Similarly, when the ultra-loyalist candidate, Colonel Verner, won the Armagh election in 1835, both his supporters and opponents (fairly evenly divided in the south of the county) gathered on neighbouring hills to taunt and abuse one another, while three years earlier similar hill-sited confrontations had taken place in Sligo.³⁹ Many such attempts to monopolise landscape and locality were, particularly in Ulster and its borderlands, a manifestation of inter-denominational rivalry. But there were some rare occasions when opposing creeds joined together on the same hillside to present a common opposition to the authorities, as in 1830 when over a thousand people of all denominations assembled on the county Tyrone hill of Larnagar between Augher and Fintona to demonstrate against tithe.⁴⁰ In Munster, crowds seemed to gravitate automatically to a local hill when some issue of major local importance was brewing. For instance, in early 1846 a large crowd of country people, for instance, assembled at Ardvarna near Ahane, between Limerick city and Newport, when rumours of impending evictions spread. Remaining there for three days, they were supplied by

³⁸ *Kilkenny Moderator* 1 March 1832; *Waterford Mail* 6 July 1833. Knocktopher is the village nearest to Carrickshock.

³⁹ *Ballina Impartial and Tyrawley Advertiser*, 25 January 1835; Chief Secretary’s Office, Private papers, 1832, Carton 1585, 15 August 1832

⁴⁰ Chief Secretary’s Office, Private Papers, 1830, 191; 15 December 1830.

food from the village below, and kept themselves warm in the bitter weather by playing hurling.⁴¹ Later in the same year, when the potato scarcity had begun to pinch, another crowd converged on Tory Hill near Croom on the other side of Limerick, to discuss how the crisis might be met.⁴² This gravitation towards hills was largely a practical matter. Locals planning a foray or organising a meeting without official approval could more effectively watch out for approaching danger from a vantage point high on a hill, while control of the higher ground also gave them a psychological advantage over those whom they confronted. So much was the take-over of hills associated with popular mobilisation from the early 1830s onwards that in official reports to Dublin Castle the absence of shouting and horn-blowing crowds on hills was taken as an indication that no trouble was expected at local level.⁴³

The acoustic quality of the landscape of hill and valley also facilitated the transmission of messages of warning and celebration across the miles. The human shout could carry long distances, particularly when magnified by a natural echo or when relayed from one valley to the next by successive groups of people. In 1822, when the confrontation between locals and authorities took place at Céim an Fhia, the great shout – ‘an liú gur lean i bhfad i gcéin’ – rousing the local community across several miles of hills lived on in song and folklore for over 150 years.⁴⁴ Similarly, during the tithe agitation of the 1830s, the ringing of chapel bells and the more resonant sounding of horns vibrating across a landscape rallied local communities as at Gowran in Co. Kilkenny where horns were blown in February 1832 to warn the locals that the police were approaching to arrest a man who had been involved in a

⁴¹ Chief Secretary’s Office, Registered Papers, Outrage Reports 1846, 17/1045, 4125.

⁴² *Limerick and Clare Reporter* 11 April 1846.

⁴³ Chief Secretary’s Office, Private papers, 1832: 223.

⁴⁴ ‘The shout that carried afar off’. Brian Brennan, *Máire Bhúí Ní Laoire: a poet of her people* (Cork 2000) p. 38; Cathal Ó Riada, ‘Cath Céim an Fhia in its historical context’, unpublished undergraduate research dissertation, Mary Immaculate College Limerick, 1984.

murder, or at Desertserges in Co. Cork a year later, when similar sounding of horns gathered people from far and near to fall, Carrickshock-style, on a posse approaching to collect tithe.⁴⁵ It was hardly surprising that songs in both Irish and English used the sounding of horns on the hills as one of the most popular motifs signifying popular vigilance and triumph:

Is chuala fuaim na hadhairce
Ar Sliabh Guille le sult is greann
Ag Ó Conaill is a mhór-shluaite
Go luath cugainn thar sáile anall.⁴⁶

It was not simply a matter of using communication and vantage points to the greatest possible advantage: it was also a way of demonstrating to the hated ‘other’ (whether a rival community or an unwelcome representative of the central authorities) one’s control of the local landscape.

But it was the visual rallying signs that most effectively staked popular claims to the landscape. Perhaps the most dramatic attempt to impress on the landscape the ubiquity and tenaciousness of anti-tithe sentiment at popular level was the wave of mound building – usually on hills or high ground – which occurred in the summer of 1832. The mounds, consisting of earth and rocks, were erected mostly in Leinster, though some ordnance survey-related mounds made in Munster by government engineers were mistaken for the anti-tithe variety.⁴⁷ Considered by nervous observers to serve as ‘signal stations on corresponding heights’ the anti-tithe mounds had little meaning in themselves – but stood as a physical sign of resistance to tithe, sometimes being erected within sight of the local police barracks. So symbolic did the mounds

⁴⁵ Chief Secretary’s Office, Private papers, 1832, Carton 2175, 22 February 1832; *Waterford Mail*, 16 March 1833.

⁴⁶ ‘Orange Grief, or Colleen beg na luchra’, sung at Dunmanway, Co Cork, 27 April 1841. Chief Secretary’s Office, Registered Papers, Outrage Reports, 1841, 6/7015. ‘I heard the sound of the horn on Slieve Guille with joy and delight, As O’Connell and his great band [came] swiftly to us over the sea’.

⁴⁷ Report from Major Miller regarding mounds at Macroom. Private papers, 1832: 1609, 18 August 1832.

become that a veritable tug-or-war developed between locals on the one side, and law on the other, mounds demolished one day being re-erected the following night.⁴⁸ A major confrontation regarding the erection of an anti-tithe mound in the local landscape near the Wicklow village of Dunlavin in early July 1832 took place between locals on the one hand, and police, dragoons and yeomanry. Though the immediate issue was the demolition or retention of the mound, what lay at the heart of the confrontation was the settling of old scores (dating perhaps as far back as the 1798 rebellion) and the muscle-baring of an increasingly aggressive *cosmhuintir* intent on humbling a traditional elite.⁴⁹

The second method of putting the common people's mark on the landscape, more transient but also more immediately powerful in impact, was the lighting in swift succession of bonfires or signal fires on neighbouring hills as soon as news of an event had broken:

Céad moladh go brách le Rí na nGrást'
Mar chonac-sa aréir na tinte cnámh,
Do thóg mo chroí le h-áthas grin...⁵⁰

Thus, in August 1832, tithe-related excitement produced multiple signal fires on the hills around Sligo, while a parallel string of fires spread from the slopes of Nephin, above the Mayo parish of Addergoole, as far as Kilcummin – a distance of twenty miles.⁵¹ A year later, a party of police and tithe collectors were ambushed at Drumtarriffe, in North Cork by a crowd of locals who had been 'assembled by the sounding of horns and the lighting of fires upon the hills'.⁵²

⁴⁸ Mounds were reported in July 1832 from as far apart as Eagle Hill near Hackettstown (Carlow) and Talbotstown, near Kippure mountain in County Wicklow. Chief Secretary's Office, Private papers, 1832: 1042, 8 July 1832; 1384, 22 July 1832

⁴⁹ Chief Secretary's Office, Private papers, 1832: 1042, 8 July 1832

⁵⁰ 'An Irish Elogy', Madden Ballads, Reel 12, frame 8356. This ballad refers to the 1835 Cork City election when the popular candidates triumphed. 'Praise for ever to the King of Grace, Since I saw the bonfires last night My heart rose with joy...'

⁵¹ Chief Secretary's Office, Private papers, 1832, 1585.

⁵² *Limerick Chronicle* 9 January 1833.

But it was the Carrickshock affair and the subsequent acquittal of the prisoners that led to one of the most dramatic symbolic takeovers of the landscape by the *cosmhuintir* as bonfires blazed from hill to hill over a radius of some twenty miles. Within a few hours of the prisoners' liberation and their setting out on the twelve-mile journey home from Kilkenny city, fires flared from South Kilkenny to Slievenamon, on towards Fethard, Rosegreen and Cashel, and thence towards the Devil's Bit.⁵³ The broad landscape, centred on the Kilkenny and Tipperary lowlands and circled by ranges of hills and mountains from the Comeraghs in the south to the Castlecomer plateau in the north-east, became a natural amphitheatre in which the rising assertiveness of the common people literally blazed in the face of elite and authorities.⁵⁴ The letters flooding into Dublin Castle from frightened observers, particularly in the south of this amphitheatre, illustrated the rapidity with which the landscape was taken over by the bonfires. One observer in Cashel, for instance, described the scene thus:

He first perceived a fire on the side of the hill – it was almost instantly answered by another at a short distance – that was rapidly replied to by a third, and, in less than five minutes, from fifty to sixty fires could be counted extending along a line of fifteen miles.⁵⁵

Nor was the breathtaking effect of the scene lost on those who participated in or approved the celebrations: Humphrey O'Sullivan, the Callan schoolmaster, gave much the same account as he watched the domino-like spread of the fires from twenty miles east of the Cashel gentleman's vantage point:

There are thousands of bonfires on the hills of Ireland all around as far as I can see on Sliabh na mBan, hundreds of fires on Sliabh D'Íle, on the Walsh Mountains, on Sliabh Ardach, on the Crannach Hills, on every hill and mountain in the four counties, Kilkenny, Tipperary,

⁵³ *Freeman's Journal* 10 August 1832.

⁵⁴ The range of mountains, running clockwise from the south-east included the the Walsh Mountains, Comeraghs, Galtees, Silvermines, Slieve Felim, the Devil's Bit, Slieve Bloom, to the west and north-west, the Castlecomer plateau, Mount Leinster and the Blackstairs.

⁵⁵ Chief Secretary's Office, Private Papers, 1832, 1413, 24 July 1832.

Waterford, Wexford, and of course on Carrig Seac itself.⁵⁶

Local song and ballad singers took up the theme. One Irish composition, reputedly from the pen of one of the Cahill brothers of Killamory, celebrated not only the acquittal of the prisoners but also the killings for which they had been charged, by building up a veritable word-landscape in which the hated police barracks, one by one, were marked for destruction:

Léifead díbh feasta *barracks* na méirleach
Cill Lamhrach a haon díobh, is Leacht Breac a dó,
Bearna na Gaoithe is Ceanannas aerach,
Agus Callainn an aonaigh mar a mbíodh acu spórt...⁵⁷

Another triumphal song, probably from the same pen, and aptly entitled ‘Oíche na dTinte Chámh’ (Bonfire Night), described both the swiftness and the *éclat* with which the landscape was claimed for the triumphant locals:

Ní mire cú a rithfeadh ar thaobh cnoic,
Ná sneachta gléigeal á shéideadh ar bhán,
Ná oíche an adhmaid ’bhí á roinnt le féileacht,
Níor rith chomh héascaidh leis na tinte cnámh.
Ní raibh cnoc ná coil i radharc sa réim úd
Ná raibh sop á shéideadh agus réabadh ar fál
Ag tabhairt fios feasta don óg is aosta
Gur bhuaigh oíche Fhéil Shéamais ar Oíche Fhéil’ Sheáin.⁵⁸

Everything came together in this stanza: pastime, news-spreading and popular triumph, all woven together against the backdrop of the fire-illuminated landscape.

To what extent, then, did landscape figure in the popular songs and ballads of the pre-famine *cosmhuintir*? If landscape signifies ‘a portion of land which the eye

⁵⁶ de Bhaldráithe, *Diary of Humphrey O’Sullivan*, entry for 24 July 1832, p. 121.

⁵⁷ ‘Carraig Seac’. Daithí Ó hÓgáin, *Dunaire Osraíoch: Cnusach d’fhillíocht na ndaoine ó Cho. Chill Chainnigh* (Dublin 1980), p. 43. ‘The barracks of the traitors will be destroyed, first Cill Lamhrach and then Leacht Breac, then Windgap and airy Kells, and Callan of the fair where they once enjoyed themselves...’

⁵⁸ Ó hÓgáin, *Dunaire Osraíoch*, pp 18, 44. ‘The hound that races on the hillside, The sparkling snow on the bawn, The night when timber was shared out [for burning] – none ran as swiftly as the bonfires. There was not a hill nor a wood in sight in that region where sops were not burning, To let young and old know That St. James’ Eve was more splendid than that of St. John.’ The traditional bonfire night in Kilkenny was on 24 June, i.e. St. John’s Eve; the release of the Carrickshock prisoners was celebrated on 24 July, the eve of the feast of St. James.

can comprehend in a single view' or 'a picture representing a piece of country', then nineteenth century broadside balladry paid little enough attention to it, except insofar as it provided a tapestry against which an event or individual could be celebrated.⁵⁹ Nor was the historicisation of the landscape in the ballads as sophisticated as that in contemporary literature, travel writing and newspapers, though it was eminently more vibrant since it very easily translated from word to deed. If, on the other hand, references to landscape provided a metaphor for emerging popular self-confidence, then the ballads – and the communities for and among whom they were composed – manipulated landscape (both literally and physically) to reflect the political and social aspirations of the *cosmhuintir* in an era of change.

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⁵⁹ *The Cambridge English Dictionary* (London 1990).