

**POPULAR MEMORY AND IDENTITY:
STREET BALLADS IN NORTH MUNSTER
IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY.**

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In January 1850 a letter under the pseudonym 'Felon Peasant' appeared in the radical nationalist newspaper, *The Irishman*, describing in romantic terms the influence of the broadside ballads of the time:

...The ballads... are to be found in the pockets of every peasant in the country - read and sung by each fireside... they keep alive in the heart of the Irish peasant the sense of bondage - the deep unquenchable hatred of the oppressor..[The ballads] are the literature of the peasantry and a ballad singer is a more powerful missionary of the cause than a thousand pamphlets.¹

More critical observers described the ballads as 'thousands of yards of nonsense daubed on tea-paper', pointing out their combination of political naiveté and literary awkwardness and attempting to supplant them with more refined patriotic poems more recently described as 'lace curtain ballads'.² These latter poems, often themselves of little literary merit but extremely emotive when wedded to appropriate airs, were mainly the

production of the Young Ireland movement of the 1840s, though the way had been opened for them by the patriotic compositions of Thomas Moore in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Whatever their literary status, these more sophisticated patriotic songs certainly succeeded in their main purpose of rousing nationalistic sentiments and creating and perpetuating a set of historical myths which became part of the stock-in-trade of history textbooks after the creation of the new state in 1922. Until the 1960s (and perhaps later) Moore's 'Let Erin Remember' and 'O, breathe not his name', along with Davis' 'A Nation Once Again' and 'The West's Awake' remained among the most rousing songs of the nationalist tradition. Other patriotic poems of the mid-century, particularly those of Aubrey de Vere, which are very relevant in the Limerick context, never developed beyond the poetry stage to become popular songs. Nonetheless, they remained prominent in the repertoire of patriotic verse-speakers into the mid-twentieth century, while the great depth of feeling accompanying their recitation bore testimony to the sincerity (if not the historical accuracy) which prompted their composition in the first place.

While the Davis-type ballads did, in the latter part of the nineteenth century, become interwoven at times with the more rumbustious and vibrant street-ballads, the two genres remained largely separate and distinct. So what were these less refined street ballads? The descendants of a very ancient genre of popular poetry whose rhythm may have been geared to accompany dancing, ballads were generally built on four to eight line stanzas with alternate lines rhyming. This stylistic simplicity was matched by a thematic simplicity. Usually based on a single incident and underdeveloped characters, the focus was on narrative rather than analysis, so that all was black and white - spotless heroes, base villains - and no attempt was made to progress beyond the majority value system of the community from which the balladeer sprang.³

All these elements attach to the ballads sung around north Munster during the nineteenth century, but some surprising features also emerge, relevant less to the style than to the theme of the compositions in question. The patriotic poets of the Young Ireland

school had understandably concentrated a great deal of their attention on the events of the late seventeenth century when composing ballads relevant to Limerick and the surrounding areas. The *Nation* newspaper and the repeatedly published songbook, *Spirit of the Nation*, churned up a continual diet of the events of the Williamite wars and their aftermath with such poems as de Vere's 'Ballad of Sarsfield', 'The Last Struggle', and the more famous 'Ballad of Athlone', Davis' 'Death of Sarsfield' and 'Battle of Limerick', and Gavan Duffy's 'Rapparees'.⁴ However, the common broadsides sold around the fairs and markets of the area largely ignored the events of the 1690s although passing references were made to the main 'highlights' of the period. A ballad sung at Bruff in October 1843 recalled (with delightful disregard for accuracy) the

Sage [*sic*] of Aughrim when Sarsfield was betrayed,
By bribes and villainy they took Athlone and Limerick.⁵

In the same year 'A New Repeal Song' sung at Kilmallock admonished:

Let the Treaty of Limerick lay [*sic*] fresh in your veins,
And banish those tyrants as you conquered the Danes.⁶

If such references are evidence of confused historical perspectives, their infrequency also suggests that the Young Ireland recussitation of the events or myths of the 1690s had little immediate impact on the popular mind of the time, even in the very area where one might expect folk memories of a period only 150 years in the past to have survived. Nor had the Young Ireland influence permeated much deeper into the folk mind by the late 1860s, when references to Williamite days were as scarce as ever, though the occasional balladeers did weave the late seventeenth century events into the theme of contemporary sectarian animosity. A singer in Castleconnell fair in 1869, for instance, referred in his ballad 'The Downfall of Heresy' to

.....what William signed
When *Shemas* was defeated.⁷

The north Munster folk memory as revealed through the street ballads actually appears quite short-term, certainly not extending back in any meaningful way to the seventeenth century. The only incident from the distant past which was recalled in the popular ballads of this region was the execution of Fr. Nicholas Sheehy in Clonmel in 1766. Charles Kickham's novel, *Knocknagow*, first published in 1873 and based to a certain extent upon his personal observations of south Tipperary life in his youth in the 1830s and '40s, suggested the vibrancy of this popular memory of Fr. Sheehy, and the ballad 'The Shanvanvucht' sung in the country between Borrisokane and Carrick-on-Suir in the summer of 1843 kept the memory alive with promises of future revenge for current ills:

Remember Fr. Sheehy, says the Shanvanvucht,
For him our veins are bleeding, says the Shanvanvucht,
For we're ready at a call and are willing for to fall,
So we'll thrash the villains all, says the Shanvanvucht.⁸

The Fr. Sheehy reference is, however, the exception which proves the rule that the ballad reflection of folk memory, unlike the artificial historical memory created by Moore, Davis and de Vere, seldom extended back more than half a century. If Davis' poems covered such remote events as the rise and fall of the Fitzgeralds, the death of Eoghan Roe O'Neill and the enactment of the Penal Code, such themes receive next to no mention in the street ballads.⁹ Certainly, there were constant references to the 'evil' of the Protestant reformation and to the gory events of the 1798 rebellion, but such references lacked detail and the events were generally used as a backdrop against which to narrate more recent happenings.¹⁰

The average street ballad in north Munster, as elsewhere, was spawned by contemporary events, chief among which in the 1830s was the anti-tithe agitation which rocked the countryside in Munster and south Leinster until the tithe issue was more or less settled by the Tithe Commutation Act of 1838. Several clashes occurred between the protesting peasantry and the forces of the law during that campaign, several resulting in deaths on both sides. A particularly gruesome incident happened at Carrickshock near

Knocktopher in south Kilkenny in 1831 when the peasantry ambushed those going to enforce the collection of tithe - an incident which resulted in several dead on the authorities' side and became the focus for vicious (if understandable) peasant triumphalism for a long time to come and for many miles outside the original scene of the conflict.¹¹ By August 1832 a ballad called, appropriately, 'The Downfall of Tithes' was being sung in Clonmel and also as far away as Kilmallock, some fifty miles from Knocktopher, to commemorate the incident:

May Heaven prosper you, sweet Knocktopher,
 No bard but Homer could your praises chant.
 You loyal subjects that fought victorious,
 Fire and smoke could not your courage daunt...
 ... Who could desire to see better sporting,
 To see them groping among the rocks,
 Their skulls all fractured and eyeballs broken,
 Their fine long noses and ears cut off...¹²

Vicious stuff, indeed. Many of Davis' 'lace curtain ballads' were not without their own modicum of violent sentiments:

.... May God wither up their hearts,
 May their blood cease to flow,
 May they walk in living death -
 They who poisoned Eoghan Roe.¹³

Davis' violent sentiments, however, were not in the verbal technicolour displayed by the street ballads. Was the balladeer's delight in recounting gory deeds partly due to a social difference between him and the Davis-style poets of the Young Ireland revival? The latter were largely lower middle class men and women and 'respectable' artisans with, what can be described as, Victorian sensibilities and an abhorrence of violence. The balladeers, on the other, hand, anonymous though they usually were, seem to have come from the lower classes of both country and town - a sector of society which was in no way sheltered from violence. The nature of agrarian violence in the nineteenth century, perpetrated against

humans and animals alike, bore witness to a rural lower class inured to violence through circumstance and necessity, while urban violence during foot riots, elections and trade union disputes was equally frightening in its intensity. To such a society the niceties of middle class refinement and the O'Connellite message of passive resistance can have had little real meaning. The ballads, therefore, with their ultra-gory language, act as a window into what the 'lower orders' perceived (often correctly) as oppression. While the street ballads with their violent language, then, are both comic and deeply upsetting, they are more revealing of folk attitudes in the nineteenth century than Davis' and Young Ireland's poetry could ever aspire to be.

The street ballad, moreover, combined the role of 'Top Ten' and news bulletin, as it transmitted news from faraway places, kept alive the sense of grievance or triumphalism which such events produced, and at the same time was a source of entertainment for the listener and remuneration for the singer. The news transmission aspect was vital. If the Carrickshock incident was commemorated, as noted above, in one ballad sung in Kilmallock in late 1832, it was being publicised a year previously even further away in Killaloe by a separate ballad, 'The Roman Bull of Wollengrange' sung by a ballad singer who had only just arrived from Kilkenny. On this occasion the news spreading function of the ballad was underlined by the fact that the same ballad singer was singing and selling another similar piece. This was an 'Elegy on the Death of Catherine Maher' which detailed a further tithe-related confrontation from the less distant location of Thurles, while at the same time a ballad sung in Fethard, Co. Tipperary, narrated the events of a County Wexford tithe incident.¹⁴ In like manner, news travelled outwards from north Munster to other provinces. In 1852 a broadside prose narrative entitled 'Murderous attack on the people at Six-Mile Bridge' describing the shooting of election rioters in County Clare, was found circulating around Carlow, almost a hundred miles from the scene of the event and being 'eagerly bought up by the people'.¹⁵ Nor did the subject matter of the news-transmitting ballad deal exclusively with violent and popular incidents. It could also act as publiciser of parliamentary debates

and decisions. Such was the case with a ballad sung at Carrick-on-Suir in June 1843 which lauded a parliamentary speech given by Mark Blake of Ballinacorney, M.P. for Mayo - an unlikely subject for a ballad sung in Munster.¹⁶ In some ways, the ballad could fulfil for the poor the function of the local newspaper whose price and limited distribution network put it outside the reach of the rural lower classes. The broadside bridged this information gap by reporting on significant events and public meetings as in the case of 'A New Song on the Glorious Repeal Meeting at Cashel' sung from Carrick-on-Suir to Roscrea in the summer of 1843.¹⁷ Where ballad composers found their material is a matter of conjecture. Some may have been gleaned from newspaper reports and more may have come from eye-witness accounts, but until further detailed study is carried out on the subject, this question must remain unanswered.

If we look on the ballad as the nineteenth century version of the 'Top Ten', then the relative popularity of different ballads at different times must be considered. The chart-topper for 1843, unconfined by locality, was undoubtedly the seditious ballad entitled 'A Speedy Repeal' sung around Roscrea and Borrisokane in June of that year. In the same month it was also being sung in Carlow; by July was circulating as far south as Waterford and as far west as Galway; in September it was reported from County Cork; and by October it was spreading northwards through counties Louth and Tyrone.¹⁸ Though the anti-Protestant sentiments of this particular ballad were hardly any more virulent than those of the average ballad of the pre-famine period, they were considered, in the highly excited atmosphere of the 'Repeal Year' called by O'Connell for 1843, to be particularly provocative:

Ever since the reformation our heroes suffered sore,
 The tyrants, thank God, is broke around the Shamrock shore.
 Our clergymen they will attend whilst blood runs in their veins,
 And Granua's sons with pikes and guns will chase them like the
 Danes.....
 ... We'll have an Irish parliament, fresh laws we'll dictate
 Or we'll have satisfaction for the year of ninety-eight...
 Then Luther's generation must take a speedy flight

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And go into Hanover from the land of sweet delight.
All heretics must cut their sticks and leave this fertile land
For 'twas decreed that Harry's breed would fall by God's
command.¹⁹

It was not surprising that in the years immediately preceding the famine Protestants all over Munster were terrified of a popular catholic uprising aimed at their destruction. The memories of the sectarian confrontations of 1798 were not far in the past, and what the Protestant population feared the catholic lower classes anticipated with a wicked delight - the extirpation of 'heretics' and the seizure of their lands and privileges (perceived as well as real). It was no accident that the favourite villains of the ballads were largely classified on religious grounds, and from the past came a veritable rogues' gallery which included not just the inevitable 'Danes', but Luther, Calvin, Henry VIII, Elizabeth I and Cromwell, while from more recent times came Pitt and Castlereagh who 'stole away the parliament from Erin', the tories, the 'Orange dogs', and Protestants in general - the 'tyrants of Luther's black race'.²⁰ Though the ballads made occasional gestures towards a more tolerant attitude based on the conciliatory policies of O'Connell, and though everyday relations between Protestants and Catholics were not inevitably hostile, the ballads kept up the sectarian dimension of popular identity.

This sectarianism was at its most virulent in the 1830s and '40s when the anti-tithe agitation, the dissemination of spurious anti-Protestant prophecies like those of Pastorini, and the hopes of great change to accompany O'Connell's political movements combined to produce a highly volatile atmosphere of mass expectancy:

All heretics must cut their sticks
And leave this fertile land,
For 'twas decreed that Harry's breed
Should fall by God's command.²¹

A modern study of nineteenth century Irish popular politics suggests that the theme and the language of the ballads became less sectarian in the latter half of the nineteenth century:

After the famine, the language of the songs became so laundered as to render them (if not their reciters) almost acceptable in the most bourgeois of surroundings. A kind of indirect neutering had spread from Young Ireland's genteel warblings and from the artificial 'literary' ballads increasingly popular in nineteenth century drawing rooms.²²

Though this is certainly true in a general sense, there were some exceptions. In the early 1850s, for instance, the Ecclesiastical Titles Bill and the Stockport Riots produced another crop of sectarian ballads - though not in any way as flourishing a crop as in the previous two decades. Again, twenty years later in the wake of church disestablishment, yet another series of triumphalist anti-Protestant ballads appeared. Though only a handful on this occasion, these ballads' sentiments and mode of expression were as violent as anything of the pre-famine period. At Castleconnell, County Limerick, in August 1869, the topical song 'The Fenians' Welcome to Ireland', while largely substituting 'Saxons' for 'heretics' as the villains, still referred in 1830s fashion to 'tyrants of Luther's black race' while a ballad sung in Kilmallock in the following month was even more explicitly sectarian. This latter, appropriately entitled 'A New Song on the Downfall of Heresy' crowed (none too poetically) over the disestablishment of the church and what it gleefully foresaw as the outcome:

The parson now will lose his fat,
 His cheeks that were rosy is [*sic*] slacking.
 His coach and four horses and all his stock
 Are terminated nearly out.
 His wife must sell her vail [*sic*] and hat
 And buy India mail [*sic*] for herself.
 She must wean herself from bread and tea,
 To potatoes and buttermilk.²³

The lack of character analysis which had always been a feature of the ballad genre certainly applied, then, to the popular street broadsides of north and mid-Munster in the nineteenth century.

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Nothing stirred the vocal chords of the singer or the emotions of the audience quite like a truly hateful villain, and with the wide choice open to the balladeer - from the 'heretics' of the past to those of their own day - there was no dearth of raw material for topical songs. Heroes of varied hues were equally accessible to the popular bard, and as the villains were of deepest black, the heroes were blameless.

Chief hero of the pre-famine ballads was, of course, O'Connell, who was celebrated with a strange mixture of awe and intimacy. Credited with aims and accomplishments which frequently had no basis in reality, he was the messiah, the hope of his people for, as the ballad singer at Kilmallock expressed it in August 1832,

When all our woes are terminated
And all those tithes are dead and gone,
Poor Irish captives liberated
All by the means of our lovely Dan.²⁴

A year later at Fethard, Co. Tipperary, an Irish ballad proclaimed in similar vein:

Tá Donal 'sa throop i gcúis an daingean chugainn
Is deimhin gurb eagalach don dream nár ghéill;
Beidh ministrí galla ar ball 'na sagartaibh
Agus gurb geall le easpaig iad ag scrudú léinn.
Beidh *Orangemen* 'na dteannta ar slabhraibh ceangailte
Is ná leofaidis labhairt ag iarraidh cabhair ar ár n-eaglais,
Dófaim a leabhair agus mo lom, ní h-eagal dúinn,
Taimid 'nár gcodhladh agus ár gcúis dá plé.²⁵

Another hope of the pre-famine ballads was Napoleon's son - Young Boney - in whom was seen the continuing possibility of French aid.²⁶ The revolutionary events in Paris in 1830, when King Charles X was replaced by Louis Philippe, sparked off these groundless hopes again, as John Drew from Patrickswell, singing at Kilmallock in November 1831, proclaimed:

But now all France is blazing
With greatest preparation,

I wish they'd wait with patience
 To free this country.
 To burst their chains asunder
 That long have kept them under,
 Young Boney and O'Connell
 Will set old Ireland free.²⁷

Such hopes were short-lived for young Napoleon's death in 1832 put an end to the ballads in his name, while the 1830 revolution in Paris produced a regime which turned out the opposite of revolutionary. Yet even without the 'big names' so popular with the ballad singers, rural and small-town Ireland provided many a 'village Hampden' of its own to stand as hero of the street ballads. Popular priests, along with local businessmen and public officials who took the 'right' side in the political confrontations of the day, found a place in the repertoire of the balladeer. The song 'Fr. Cantwell's Triumph', the singing of which was considered by the authorities as 'calculated to cause a riot' around Thurles in 1853, celebrated the actions of a local priest who roused very understandable Protestant indignation by administering the last sacraments to a dying Protestant woman, while another typical composition sung through the county of Tipperary in 1843 had exhorted its audience to give preference of custom to a Cashel baker who was pro-O'Connell:

Bold Repealers all, both great and small, whenever you are able
 You have a loaf from Mr. Nagg's to grace your breakfast table.
 Let no man fail with him to deal from the goldsmith to the nailor,
 His heart is pure, you may be sure he is a bold Repealer.²⁸

The ballads needed martyrs as well as heroes, and those killed in confrontations with the law were given an immortality which they would never have found if their lives had remained untouched by violence. If the newspapers of the time generally took a pro-authority stance, the ballads more than redressed the balance by portraying the popular side not just as victims but as innocent victims. The confrontation between the forces of law and order and the anti-tithe demonstrators at Newtownbarry in County

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Wexford in 1831 had been, in reality, the product of provocation on both sides. However, the ballad on the incident, sung around south Tipperary soon afterwards put forth an admittedly transparent picture of popular injured innocence:

A few unfortunate boys some stones they chanced to throw,
Which gave an opportunity to fill the town with woe,
The road on all sides those tyrants left streaming with blood,
Whilst numbers from the carnage slept in the Slaney's flood.²⁹

In similar manner, the 'Ellogy [*sic*] on the Death of Catherine Maher' who 'fell a victim to the infernal fury of a nefarious tithe proctor in the parish of Thurles' in 1831, exhorted:

All you enlightened Christian hearts with me now humbly pray
That Catherine Maher may find eternal joys on the great Judgement Day

and added a significant postscript in prose reminding the audience that 'this departed heroine hopes her spirit shall not be forgotten.'³⁰ The official press account, needless to say, differed considerably from the ballad's version of events, describing how thirty police protecting a process server were

furiously assailed by a mob of at least one thousand persons, who commenced pelting the police violently with stones, and using all kinds of threats and gestures at them. Many of the constables were knocked down with stones and several of their carbines were broken in two. The police were in the act of retreating with Fleming [the process server] in order to save his life from the lawless miscreants, when they doubly renewed their attack, by firing on the constables, following it up with a tremendous volley of stones, many of which took effect on the policemen. They at last conceiving of their lives and that of the process server in immediate danger, were obliged to fire on the mob, when one woman was shot dead on the spot and a number of men wounded.³¹

The innocent victim was, thus, a common motif of the ballads of the 1830s and 1840s. From 1848 onwards, however, the motif re-

emerged in a new form - i.e. the victim of foreign misrule who had sacrificed himself for his native land. This was the main theme of the ballad entitled 'John Mitchel's Farewell to Ireland' sung in August 1848 at Newcastle West, but through the entire summer of that year reported as popular through the country as far afield as County Longford:

Farewell fond wife and children dear,
Your father bids you now farewell,
Thy piercing words brought forth my tears
When parting in the felon's cell.
Yes, dear wife, you to me said:
'My hero, yield not to be a slave,
Bear a patriot's noble name,
And Heavens bless you when far away.'³²

Two decades later, the tragic martyr-hero had become even more established in broadside literature with the unsuccessful Fenian rising and the imprisonment of many of those involved in the movement. 'Bourke's Dream', a popular ballad sung through out County Limerick in the autumn of 1869, commemorated the imprisonment of Richard O'Sullivan Bourke who had master-minded the abortive attempt to release Fenian prisoners in Manchester in 1867 and whose own unsuccessful prison break attempt occasioned the Clerkenwell explosion and a further penal servitude sentence of fifteen years.³³

The latter two ballads differ quite obviously from their equivalents of earlier decades, not just in terms of the type of hero-victim they portray, but also in their style of expression and their mastery of English. The ballads of the pre-famine decades, though most of them were written in English, frequently showed a lack of facility with the language, often descending into mere nonsense as they groped for the correct form of expression. The more deliberately nationalistic ballads of the post-1848 period, on the other hand, while cloying and melodramatic in expression, were perfectly at home with the English idiom. They shared the style of the often third-rate patriotic poetry published in the *Nation*, the *United Irishman*, the *Irish People* and similar patriotic periodicals

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of the time, and were modelled in sentiment on the poems which Young Ireland had produced in the 1840s. The motif of the patriot dreaming of home and of past heroes as he lies languishing in his prison cell (the main theme of 'Bourke's Dream') echoed Kells Ingram's rousing 'Memory of the Dead' and the touching 'Felons of Our Land' as did the theme of the Irish patriot exiled for his country's sake. Rhythm, too, could be borrowed from the 'Davisised' poetry of the 1840s. 'Bourke's Dream', for instance, was exactly modelled on the rhythm of O'Donnell Abu, and presumably sung to the same air:

On with the Saxon, then,
Fearing our Fenian men,
Soon they reeled back from our pike volunteers.
The cry was loud and shrill -
'Wexford and Vinegar Hill,
New Ross, Fr. Murphy and the Brave Shelmaliers!'³⁴

At the same period the 'Fenians' Welcome to Ireland' sung around Castleconnell was to the rhythm and air of the 'Limerick Rake'.³⁵

Borrowing from known songs and familiar rhythms was not, however, peculiar to the later ballads. Back in the 1830s and '40s songs from the Gaelic tradition had been used as models, lending not just a rhythm and an air but also familiar refrains and, more importantly, memories of past events which could merge with current happenings to rouse popular excitement. The rhythm and air of the 'Sean Bhean Bhocht' was used for the identically titled ballad 'The Shanvanvucht' sung through County Tipperary in the summer of 1843 and, indeed, for many similar topical doggerels sung outside Munster at this time.³⁶

More interesting is the interweaving of an older air and theme in two other topical ballads of the early 1830s. One was 'I dream 'tis asleep though awake I be' sung at Fethard, County Tipperary, in 1831 and obviously based directly on the traditional 'Táim-se im' chodhladh 's ná dhúistear mé'. The Fethard song was much more than the love song which the original Irish version had been. It was typical of the macaronic political songs of its day, the English lines innocuous and those in Irish being quite seditious, ending with the

ominous line - 'Táimid 'nár gcodladh agus ár gcúis dá plé' (We're asleep while our cause is being pleaded) - whose implicit warning was calculated to inspire fear in the hearts of the hated 'heretic'.³⁷ Equally significant, of course, was the overall format of the song - an '*aisling*' or vision poem. Work by Ó Madagáin has shown how vibrant the *aisling* form was in County Limerick in the early nineteenth century and this is certainly confirmed from the records of the authorities in Dublin Castle which showed that genre being used on very many occasions by the street ballads - Irish, English and macaronic - to rouse popular political feelings.³⁸ The second ballad, sung in 1832 throughout the triangle where the counties of Limerick, Cork and Tipperary meet, was alternately entitled 'The Downfall of Tithes' and 'Slievenamon'. It was directly modelled on the Cork poet Micheál Óg Ó Longáin's poignant lament for 'ninety-eight' - 'Sliabh na mBan'. Written by a more competent handler of the English language than was 'I dream 'tis asleep though awake I be', this song followed the exact rhythm of Ó Longáin's song, and though its theme was the 1831 tithe affray at Carrickshock, the concluding line of each stanza, like that of the original Irish song, transformed an isolated contemporary event into a link in the chain of historical oppression and a harbinger of the great revenge to come. And so, just as Ó Longáin had promised:

Go mbeadh claoi ar mhéirleach is an adharc dá shéideadh
Ar thaobh na gréine de Shliabh na mBan,
[That the traitors would be defeated and the horn blowing
On the sunny side of Sliabh na mBan]

so the 1832 song foretold a similar revenge:

....Yet all that's past is but a token
Of what we'll show them on Slievenamon.³⁹

Who were the ballad singers who spread these compositions throughout the countryside? In most cases we can only assume that they were poor - though hardly illiterate if they could read the broadsides from which their songs came. It is only in cases in

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which the law intervened in their activities that we have any information on their identity, and in such instances all we have are names and brief descriptions. John Drew from Loughmore near Patrickswell, County Limerick, for instance, was taken up for singing ballads in Kilmallock in 1831. Michael Waters of Nenagh sang ballads on a circuit between Clonmel and Carrick-on-Suir in 1832, and Mary Anne Maguire of Limerick sang in the environs of the city in 1846.⁴⁰ Sometimes, however, the information is more comprehensive and allows one to suggest the background of the balladeers. Women frequently plied the trade, and though the census gives little information on their numerical strength, there was apparently a large number of women singers, many accompanied by their children and apparently supplementing their seasonal begging with ballad singing.⁴¹ Others sang in the company of their husbands, as did Mary Higgins who sang in Bruff in late 1843. Her husband did not sing with her - just as husbands did not actually engage in begging themselves but left it to the womenfolk - but made himself useful by threatening to beat up the policemen who arrested her.⁴² Other singers were ex-soldiers or militia men who were supplementing their pensions or had fallen on hard times. In 1843 one John Osborne, discharged from the Seventh Fusiliers, sang at the fair of Roscrea and was apparently still following the career of ballad singer eight years later when (if it's the same John Osborne) he sang at Thurles in the company of one Patrick Fitzpatrick.⁴³ A similarly circumstanced individual named Delaney, a pensioner of the 88th Foot, sang ballads around Tipperary Town in 1844 while in 1832 one Edmund Barry of Ennis, who described himself as a yeoman, had travelled from Kilrush to Listowel where he was arrested for singing seditious ballads at the fair.⁴⁴ Barry had a tale of woe to tell the authorities, a tale which, though hardly without its frills, revealed the marginalised existence of the wandering ballad singer and, surprisingly, his assertiveness in the face of what he considered unfair treatment by the forces of the law:

Petitioner is a poor man, who in consequence of ill-health is obliged to earn a livelyhood [*sic*] by singing ballads. That petitioner went to the fair of Listowel in the County of Kerry -

from Kilrush in this county, and was in the act of selling the ballads which he had, when petitioner was arrested by John Redmond, Esq., a Justice of the Peace residing near Listowel. That petitioner was kept three days and three nights confined in a cold bridewell in Listowel by order of Mr. Redmond and was given only potatoes and salt herrings to subsist on, and the cold flags to sleep on...⁴⁵

Other ballad singers were migrant labourers - *spailpini*- who turned their hands to singing when labouring work was scarce, and who - unlike the female singers and the distressed military pensioners mentioned above - were young, tough and able-bodied.⁴⁶

The main feature of ballad singing was mobility. As we have seen, ballads served in the 1830s as spreaders of news from south Leinster to north Munster and *vice-versa* and even further afield. Ballads sung in Castleconnel and Kilrush recounted events from Kilkenny, while news from Limerick was spread by ballads eastward to Carlow and northward to Longford and the north midlands. The mobility of singer and song alike had the effect of bush telegraph, and if ballad-borne news was never fully accurate with its element of '*dúirt bean liom...*' it was considered all the more detrimental to public order. Both the authorities and respectable citizens alike hated to see ballad singers in town because of their propensity to cause public excitement which frequently led to rioting, but because it was difficult to procure a conviction for ballad singing and because the authorities were genuinely sympathetic towards the miserable singers brought before them, they generally preferred to secure a conviction against the printer of the ballads.

Such an attitude was obvious in the case of Michael Grogan, the Limerick printer brought to trial in 1831 for printing the seditious 'New Song called the Catholic's Advice' - a composition of doubtful literary merit but of a distinctly provocative nature:

You sons of Milesians, I pray you will cheer up your hearts,
I hope you'll not blame me for speaking so much of this art,
For many a brave hero was laid quite flat on his back
On Aughrim plains or with shame on Limerick trap.⁴⁷

Grogan was netted by the authorities through the use of an approver who went to the printing shop, bought copies of the offending ballad and then testified in court against the printer. Even with this success in tracking down, Grogan, however, a conviction proved difficult to procure. The jury attempted to produce a 'popular' verdict by combining in it the contradictory elements of guilt and exoneration which they ingeniously worded - 'guilty but not with a malicious intent'. Only when the judge refused to accept such a verdict and threatened to summon the court for a second day did the jury bring in a verdict of 'guilty with a recommendation to mercy' - this time in the remarkably short space of two minutes. Grogan got a sentence of either one or three months (different newspaper accounts are in conflict) and was treated to an admonitory speech from the judge who informed him, for the benefit of others, that the sentence would have been much heavier if he had been the author rather than the printer of the ballad.⁴⁸ Some printers were, in fact, suspected of being authors of the wares they sold, although most ballads were anonymous compositions. On rare occasions the writer obligingly identified himself, as did the composer of 'Fr. Cantwell's Triumph' in 1852 by concluding his piece with a reference to 'the prayer of the poet, poor Patrick Ryan'.⁴⁹ In like manner, the author of the 'Fenians' Welcome to Ireland' in 1869 signed himself the 'Old Poet, J. W.', identified by the Dublin Castle authorities as one Walsh from Limerick who frequently visited O'Sullivan's Hotel in Kilmallock.⁵⁰ In most cases, however, the authorship of the ballads remained a matter of conjecture and these elusive bards continued to cause headaches for the enforcers of law and order until the end of the century.

By the 1870s the broadside ballads, though still sold and avidly bought up at fairs and markets, were being gradually replaced by a new headache for the authorities - patriotic songbooks which were sold in shops and railway station stalls in towns like Limerick and Kilkee.⁵¹ These publications were considered less mischievous than the broadside ballads 'because [they were] not disseminated in the same way'.⁵² They were much more akin to the parlour ballads of Moore, Davis and de Vere, although they also included a number of rousing numbers from the Fenian tradition - 'The Rising of the

Moon', 'Slievenamon' (Kichham's composition) and 'The Bold Fenian Men'.⁵³ They were manifestly less sectarian and more nationalistic than the former street ballads, having substituted England for Protestantism as the source of all evils, and while they could hardly be classed as literary, their level of literacy and their facility with the English language (in which they were all written) was far ahead of that of the old broadsides.

Nonetheless, perhaps the function of these more modern popular nationalist songs did not differ fundamentally from that of their predecessors. They promoted a sense of solidarity against the perceived oppressor, a sense of pride in an often imagined past, and an admonition to emulate dead 'heroes' - most of whom had been raised to that status only after their deaths. In many ways, the over-romanticised view of the street ballads which the self-styled 'Felon Peasant' sent to the *Irishman* newspaper back in 1850 still applied to the songs of the later period:

The same spirit pervades them all - love of country, hatred of the tyrant, and a firm belief in 'a day to come'.⁵⁴

Even if in reality they were, in the words of the earlier cynic, 'non-sense daubed on tea-paper', their role in reflecting - and perhaps forming - popular memory and identity was still significant.

NOTES

¹ *Irishman* 19 January 1850.

² Charles Gavan Duffy, *Four Years of Irish History*, Dublin, 1885, p. 66; K. T. Hoppen, *Elections, Politics and Society in Ireland 1832-1885*, Oxford, 1984, p. 428.

³ I am indebted for this definition of ballads to Fr. Hugh Duffy, Head of the English Department, Mary Immaculate College

⁴ Published in many poetry collections of the latter half of the nineteenth century, several of these poems became part of the primary and secondary school English curriculum of the new state after 1922.

⁵ Chief Secretary's Office Registered Papers, Outrage Reports, National Archives of Ireland (cited hereunder as CSORP.OR) 1843, 16/24131.

⁶ CSORP.OR 1843 16/22979.

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- ⁷ Fenian Papers, National Archives of Ireland (cited hereunder as FP) 1869, 4590R.
- ⁸ CSORP.OR 1843, 27/13, 13337.
- ⁹ Davis' poems on these themes were 'The Geraldines', 'Lament for Eoghan Roe O'Neill', and 'The Penal Days'.
- ¹⁰ Georges-Denis Zimmermann, *Songs of Irish Rebellion*, Dublin, 1967, pp 35-50.
- ¹¹ State of the Country Papers, National Archives of Ireland (cited hereunder as SOC) 1831, L. 1572.
- ¹² *Ibid.*
- ¹³ 'Lament for Eoghan Roe O'Neill'.
- ¹⁴ CSORP.OR, 1831, B. 120.
- ¹⁵ CSORP.OR. 1852/16, filed with 1855/8631.
- ¹⁶ CSORP.OR. 1843, 27/13343.
- ¹⁷ CSORP.OR. 1843, 27/12117, 13343.
- ¹⁸ CSORP.OR. 1843, 5/13187, 3/12391, 11/14217, 6/17767, 28/20575, 20/21769.
- ¹⁹ CSORP.OR. 1843, 27/12177.
- ²⁰ Georges-Denis Zimmermann, *Songs of Irish Rebellion*, p. 135; CSORP.OR. 1832, W/1223, FP 1869, 4681R.
- ²¹ CSORP.OR. 1843, 27/12177.
- ²² K. T. Hoppen, *Elections, Politics and Society in Ireland*, p. 427, FP. 1869, 4681R.
- ²³ FP. 1869, 4681R.
- ²⁴ CSORP.OR. 1832, L/1572.
- ²⁵ CSORP.OR. 1831, B/101:
'O'Connell and his forces are holding the fort for us,
And it will go badly for those who will not yield,
Foreign ministers [or religion] will soon be made into priests
And they will study [Catholic] learning as bishops do.
Orangemen will be with them, bound in chains,
And they'll have to look for help from our church,
Their books will be burned and, indeed, there's no fear of us,
We're asleep as our cause is being pleaded.'
- ²⁶ Georges-Denis Zimmermann, *Songs of Irish Rebellion*, pp 32-4.
- ²⁷ CSORP.OR. 1831, B/101.
- ²⁸ CSORP.OR. 1853/9131, 1843, 27/12117, 13343.
- ²⁹ CSORP.OR. 1831, B/101.
- ³⁰ CSORP.OR. 1831, B/101.
- ³¹ *Limerick Chronicle* 8, 15 October 1831.
- ³² CSORP.OR. 1848, 19/233.
- ³³ Leon O Broin, *Fenian Fever*, New York, 1971, p. 210, FP 1869, 4681R.
- ³⁴ FP 1869, 4681R.

- ³⁵ FP, 1869, 4590r.
- ³⁶ CSORP.OR 1843, 27/13, 13337; Georges-Denis Zimmermann, *Songs of Irish Rebellion*, pp 133-7.
- ³⁷ CSORP.OR 1831, B/101.
- ³⁸ Breandán Ó Madagáin, 'Limerick's Heritage of Irish Song' in *North Munster Antiquarian Journal*, vol. xxviii, 1986, pp 84-7.
- ³⁹ CSORP.OR. 1832, L/1572, A/1581.
- ⁴⁰ CSORP.OR. 1831, B/101; 1832, C/1431; 1843, 16/8261.
- ⁴¹ Maura Murphy, 'The Ballad Singer and the Role of the Seditious Ballad in Nineteenth Century Ireland: Dublin Castle's View', *Ulster Folklife* vol. 25, 1979, p. 87.
- ⁴² CSORP.OR. 1843, 17/21651, 24131.
- ⁴³ CSORP.OR. 1843, 27/12177; 1851, 27/377.
- ⁴⁴ CSORP.OR . 1844, 17/7641; 1832/2608.
- ⁴⁵ CSOPR.OR. 1844, 17/7641.
- ⁴⁶ Maura Murphy, 'The Ballad Singer and the Role of the Seditious Ballad', pp. 83, 94.
- ⁴⁷ *Limerick Chronicle* 16 March 1831.
- ⁴⁸ *Limerick Chronicle* 12, 16, 23 March 1831.
- ⁴⁹ CSORP.OR. 1841, 6/5191; 1853, 9131.
- ⁵⁰ FP 2869, 4681R.
- ⁵¹ FP 1870, 6791R, 6314R.
- ⁵² FP 1870, 6314R.
- ⁵³ Charles O'Connor, *Ballads and Songs of Ireland*, Dublin, 1869.
- ⁵⁴ *Irishman* 19 January 1950.