

## Merriman's County: Clare in the Late-Eighteenth Century

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Merriman scholarship has been heavily based on textual analysis of *Cúirt an Mheán Oíche* and on the poet's family origins. Remarkably little has been written about the historical background against which Merriman's great poem was written, and which must surely have some relevance at least to the poet's endeavour. This article seeks to provide a first effort in this direction.

In the centuries before 1800 the physical landscape of Clare had always been an important factor in shaping the personalities of the peoples that entered or occupied its territory. Natural boundaries of seacoast, the two estuaries and the River Shannon helped mould largely self-contained populations, while at the same time containing and diffusing in-migrations within these limits. Internally, heavy bog and forest cover fostered and protected local diversity, which persisted even in the face of demographic calamities such as the Cromwellian onslaught or the mid-eighteenth century famine.

By the end of the eighteenth century, however, landscape was becoming less effective as a barrier to outside influence, and throughout Brian Merriman's lifetime he would have been aware of the effects of land drainage and bog reclamation, deforestation and the spread of roads. Drainage and bog development were only beginning to make their mark on the countryside as Merriman reached adulthood in the early 1770s, but by that time generations of unregulated exploitation had reduced Clare's forest cover to scattered fragments. In 1776, on entering Clare from the Galway side, the English travel writer, Arthur Young, was struck forcibly by the treelessness of the landscape except in the immediate vicinity of gentlemen's houses.<sup>1</sup> The woods that feature in the opening descriptive passage of *Cúirt an Mheán Oíche*, written four years later, were by then rare, and, it would appear, represented recent plantation, in an area that a generation earlier had been covered in natural forest.<sup>2</sup> By 1800, commercial logging had broken up the ancient forest and woodland of medieval Clare, leaving only scattered fragments, just one of which, at Cratloe in the extreme southeast of the county, would survive into modern times.<sup>3</sup>

At approximately the same pace as the receding of tree cover, an emerging road system was being extended every more widely across the county, reaching even into districts hitherto considered very remote by the end of the century. Apart from a small number of turnpikes, these roads were the work of a succession of county grand juries, and were paid for by succeeding generations of cess-paying land occupiers.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Arthur Young, *A Tour In Ireland, with General Observations on the Present State of that Kingdom; made in the Years 1776, 1777 and 1778* (4th ed., London, 1892) vol. I, p. 285.

<sup>2</sup> Liam P. Ó Murchú (ed.), *Cúirt an Mheán Oíche* (Baile Átha Cliath, 1982) p. 19; Rev. P. White, *History of Clare and the Dalcassian Clans of Tipperary, Limerick and Galway* (Dublin, 1893) p. 307; Hely Dutton, *Statistical Survey of the County of Clare* (Dublin, 1808) p. 272.

<sup>3</sup> British Library Add. MS 39261 (Twigge manuscripts), f. 9. For woodland logging sales, see *Clare Journal*, 31 May, 17 December 1787, 13 April, 29 June 1795.

<sup>4</sup> The full network is shown in Henry Pelham's grand jury map, *The County of Clare in the Province of Munster and Kingdom of Ireland* (London, 1787).

At their best such roads were well-constructed and impressive to visitors. As early as 1761 Edward Willes, Chief Justice of Common Pleas, travelling the Limerick-Ennis road on assize business, noted that it was 'as fine as a gravel walk,' while Daniel Augustus Beaufort, travelling southwards from Kilfenora towards Ennis in 1788, found the roads to be 'excellent the whole way.'<sup>5</sup> In more distant areas of the county, especially north and west Clare, the county roads may have been comparatively inferior, but their general standard was good.<sup>6</sup>

The problem was that even as late as 1800, there were still not enough of them, and there were extensive districts which were served only by non-standard, steep and dangerous roads, or by no roads at all. Over much of the county, people still walked cross country for long distance in order to get from place to place, riding being the privilege of the few who could afford saddle horses. The absence of roads in many areas is well-attested in the persistence of animal-drawn sledges and block-wheeled carts into the early decades of the nineteenth century.<sup>7</sup> At the same time, one cannot but be impressed by the doggedness with which the grand juries constructed new county roads over the decades, even when we realise that those involved were less motivated by a desire to benefit the public than by the many opportunities road construction brought for corrupt financial gain.

At any rate, as the network of good county roads spread, Clare inhabitants were not slow to make use of the wider national network into which the county was already becoming integrated.<sup>8</sup> This is clear from a report of an overturning accident involving Higgins's fly coach, one of a number operating between Dublin and the provinces, in March 1789, at Kilbeggan, Co. Westmeath. The accident was a minor one, and it is of interest chiefly for the fact that the six inside passengers and several of those outside had travelled from Ennis or its environs.<sup>9</sup>

Clare's developing county road system brought a host of newcomers to the county, whether transient or permanent: travelling labourers and tradesmen, beggars, chapmen, missionaries and tourists, merchants and detachments of marching soldiers, all of them carrying with them the stock in trade of their occupations, either on their person, on horseback, on pack animals and wheeled vehicles, or in the passenger coaches that plied in increasing numbers along the principal routes of the system.

One especially important influence to become established in Clare via the roads was a locally-based printing trade. By the mid-1780s, Clare had two newspapers, the *Clare Journal* and the *Ennis Chronicle*, which rapidly supplanted the Dublin and Limerick journals previously circulating in the county.<sup>10</sup> Coverage of local matters by the new papers, both of them Ennis-based, was initially very limited, but the detailed reports they carried of national and international events brought a new immediacy and regularity to the manner in which the reading public received news of the greater world, which gradually and unevenly percolated downwards and outwards by word of mouth to non-literate communities.

<sup>5</sup> James Kelly (ed.), *The Letters of Lord Chief Baron Edward Willes to the Earl of Warwick 1757-1762* (Kilkenny, 1990) p. 78; Daniel Augustus Beaufort, *Journey through Clare, August 1788*, cited in Brian Ó Dálaigh (ed.), *The Stranger's Gaze* (Ennis, 1998) p. 130.

<sup>6</sup> For complaints from Burren and Corcomroe baronies, see *C.J.*, 19 March 1792. Charles Bowden in *A Tour Through Ireland* (London, 1791) p. 212 refers to roads in North Clare as 'extremely bad'.

<sup>7</sup> White, *History of Clare and the Dalcassian Clans*, p. 312.

<sup>8</sup> George Taylor and Andrew Skinner, *Maps of the Roads of Ireland* (2nd ed., Dublin, 1783) pp 92, 100-102, 200-204.

<sup>9</sup> *Ennis Chronicle*, 12 March 1789.

<sup>10</sup> Earlier the Limerick-based *Munster Journal* was 'in great circulation in Clare,' John Ainsworth (ed.), *The Inchiquin Manuscripts* (Dublin, 1961) doc. 1468.

But notwithstanding all the external influences now bearing upon it, there was still a sense in which Clare remained relatively isolated. Communities hemmed in by natural geographic features that had yet to be transcended by roads, continued to live self-contained lives, particularly where the Irish language constituted the further insulation of a separate cultural consciousness. These factors together may explain such things as the failure of Whiteboy or Rightboy agitation to take root in Clare; the late appearance of Defenderism in the county, and at the end of 1798 the manifest ignorance on the part of those taking United Irishmen oaths in certain areas, of the bloodletting that had so recently taken place in other counties.<sup>11</sup>

Two particularly remote districts of Clare deserve mention. One was that expanse of territory running west and south of Ennis, between the civil parishes of Kilmaley and Kilmihil, encompassing a great tract of bog and moor, known as the bréantír. Here in 1807 Hely Dutton would tramp 'many miles square' that were 'almost without inhabitants,' and in a ride of more than eight miles would encounter only one bird, 'a kite.'<sup>12</sup> The other remote area was that mountainous region of east Clare centring on Merriman's Feakle, a region featuring neither in the Taylor and Skinner road maps nor in the *Post Chaise Companion* of ten years later.<sup>13</sup> Feakle does, however, figure in Pelham's grand jury map of 1787, which shows just one major route winding way upward through the parish, before forking round Lough Graney into two branches leading northwards towards Galway.<sup>14</sup> Recently stripped of its forest cover as we have seen, this district had been one of the last haunts of wolves in Ireland: nearly four decades into the nineteenth century John O'Donovan could still speak of it as 'sequestered and wild.'<sup>15</sup>

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Exactly how many persons inhabited County Clare at any given point in the late-eighteenth century is uncertain. In 1792 Beaufort believed there were 96,000 persons living in Clare, which Dutton considered to be an underestimate, substituting instead a figure of 120,000 for his own time (1807).<sup>16</sup> Also of relevance is a modern estimate of approximately 61,000 for 1766, based on the religious census of that year, and if we take account of all this data in addition to what is known of the county's subsequent demographic history, it would not be unreasonable to postulate a figure of 80,000 for 1780, the year *Cúirt an Mheán Oíche* was written.<sup>17</sup>

From these necessarily imprecise calculations it is clear that Clare's population was rising rapidly in the last decades of the eighteenth century. This sharp rise is reflected in developments such as the political ferment of the late 1770s to the widespread unrest leading into the 1798 period, both of which were fuelled to different degrees by the energies and frustrations of a youthful society that was rapidly increasing in numbers, particularly at the lower levels. Some perception of population imbalance due to rapid or uneven growth might also be legitimately inferred from one central premise of *Cúirt an*

<sup>11</sup> Kieran Sheedy, *The United Irishmen of County Clare* (Ennis, 1998) p. 82.

<sup>12</sup> Dutton, *Statistical Survey*, p. 288.

<sup>13</sup> William Wilson, *The Post Chaise Companion* (3rd ed., Dublin, 1803).

<sup>14</sup> Pelham, *County of Clare*, Sheet 4.

<sup>15</sup> Eileen McCracken, *The Irish Woods from Tudor Times* (Dublin, 1971) p. 30; letter of John O'Donovan, 22 November 1839, in W. Nolan (ed.), *The Antiquities of County Clare* (Ennis, 1997) p. 195.

<sup>16</sup> Dutton, *Statistical Survey*, p. 167.

<sup>17</sup> Brian Ó Dálaigh, "'Poet of a Single Poem': Brian Merriman (c.1749-1805)," in Ciarán Ó Murchadha (ed.), *County Clare Studies, Essays in Memory of Gerald O'Connell, Seán Ó Murchadha, Thomas Coffey and Pat Flynn* (Ennis, 2000) p. 120.

*Mheán Oíche*, that is the disproportion in the ratio of women to men, no matter how that perception might be refracted in the poet's imaginative vision.

Rapid population growth might be expected to result in increasing levels of disorder and crime, or at the very least a general perception of instability. Here we have no statistical framework at all, and the most we can say is that as far as we know the incidence of both agrarian and 'ordinary' crime remained low in Clare at the end of the eighteenth century. At the same time the concentration of much of the local coverage of the two Clare newspapers in this period on crime of a non-agrarian nature would appear to indicate a fear that such crime was on the increase. Whether or not this is true, and regardless of its value as a demographic indicator this crime coverage is worth dwelling on momentarily for the door it opens on levels of Clare society that are otherwise closed to us.

The crimes that feature in the local newspapers in these years include robbery, burglary, arson, assault and the odd homicide, the first two being by far the most frequently mentioned, especially in and around the town of Ennis. It was, indeed, a recent spate of 'wanton and illegal acts of outrage', apparently burglaries, committed by 'the lower class of people' in the town that provided the pretext for the establishment of an Ennis Corps of Volunteers in September 1778.<sup>18</sup> Though most of these crimes can be ascribed to locals, some bore evidence of criminal networking on a wider scale, not to speak of considerable geographical mobility. In August 1787, for example, thieves stole valuable watches from a private house in Ennis, which were recovered months later from a criminal clan named Ahearn at Mitchelstown in County Cork.<sup>19</sup> Two years later, at the Clare spring assizes, one clan member, Maurice Ahearn, was sentenced to death together with two local accomplices, for another robbery, a rather petty one which netted them (briefly) 'eighteen English shillings, a pair of silver sleeve-buttons, value one shilling, and a common grater'.<sup>20</sup>

At the same assizes one Thomas Stephens was also sentenced to death, for horse stealing, the harshness of the sentence reflecting the high value placed by society on such animals. Reported instances of horse stealing are relatively frequent at this time, but in many cases it is far from certain whether the owners were in fact the victims of thieves or the animals had merely wandered off.<sup>21</sup> Reported cattle robberies pose a similar problem, although certain cases are unmistakably the work of criminals. One such relates to a Robert Stephenson of Caher, Feakle, who reported the theft of a number of valuable heifers and bullocks, all of them branded, in December 1787.<sup>22</sup> In his newspaper advertisement Stephenson described the animals in detail, claiming that the thieves had driven them to Loughrea where they were sold. More than probably, Stephenson was the victim of 'a desperate and dangerous person' named Garrett Purcell, the reputed head of 'a gang of abandoned persons' whom we know to have been operating in this inaccessible mountain area at that time.<sup>23</sup> Two years later Purcell was jailed for larceny, arson and assault, and among the indictments already standing against him on his arrest was one for cattle theft from James McNamara of Ayle, sometime landlord of Brian Merriman.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>18</sup> *C.J.*, 12 October 1778.

<sup>19</sup> *C.J.*, 23, 27 August, 24 December 1787.

<sup>20</sup> *E.C.*, 15 January, 19, 23 March 1789.

<sup>21</sup> See *E.C.*, 26 January, 24 August 1789 for examples.

<sup>22</sup> *C.J.*, 17 December 1787.

<sup>23</sup> *E.C.*, 9 July 1789.

<sup>24</sup> *E.C.*, 9 July 1789.

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One incident from these years is revelatory of a certain level of fear harboured by respectable society of a rising threat from below, one that indeed could be seen as a product of the new mobility generated by an improving county road system. This was when in July 1789, a travelling pedlar named James Walshe, originally from Rathangan in County Kildare, was jailed at Ennis merely because he was 'suspicious looking,' and held until 'able to give an account of himself.'<sup>25</sup> About 5 feet 10 inches tall, Walshe had a 'sallow complexion, pitted with the small pox, black eyes and hair of the same colour which he wears tied.' He wore an old blue coat, which led to speculation that he had seen military service, and it was surmised also that he was a member of a gang of robbers recently active in the Loughrea area:

On searching him there was found a large quantity of rap halfpence: a purse containing a number of shillings and sixpences of base metal; some brass rings and a single gold one, &c. &c. and on examining a pack which he carried on his back, it was found to consist of a medley of shop goods, which he said he had for sale; however, they appear to be more calculated as a pretext for his rambling about, as they are neglected remnants, and rusty hardware, that did not seem to be opened or handled for a considerable time.

In late-eighteenth-century Clare the turbulent poor shaded into their law-abiding counterparts through a half-world of wandering pedlars like Walshe, absconding servants, and dishonest tradesmen. The law-abiding poor, infinitely more numerous though they might have been, are far less visible in the sources, and we usually see them collectively as victims of subsistence crises, or individually as victims of accident or assault or downward social mobility, in the latter case as indigent room-keepers or imprisoned debtors.<sup>26</sup>

The lower orders of rural Clare are most elusive of all, the sources leaving us little to go on apart from scattered references to localised agrarian disputes, and some criminal and disorderly acts. Arthur Young, a useful source for so many aspects of the Irish rural economy, is of little help here, and his generalisations jumble together whole layers of the stratigraphy of rural society, from comfortable tenants to cottiers and labourers. According to Young the 'poor' of rural Clare had greatly increased in numbers over the twenty years prior to his visit in 1776, but their condition was much improved, and they were now better clad and fed than ever before, a fact which he attributed to recent tillage legislation.<sup>27</sup> Young also notes that the poor lived on potatoes ten months of the year, kept cows, and paid their rent in labour.<sup>28</sup>

In regard to the very lowest levels of rural society in Clare one further item of evidence is worth citing. This is a remark made by John Lloyd in 1779 which refers to the in-migration on a seasonal basis, of 'numbers of destitute strangers and craving itinerants' from other parts of Ireland 'when scarcity presides in their own respective quarters.'<sup>29</sup> James Walshe's wanderings again may have formed part of this phenomenon, which interestingly enough, would be reported again in identical terms nearly seventy years later during the early stages of the Great Famine.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>25</sup> *E.C.*, 23 July 1789.

<sup>26</sup> *C.J.*, 10 July, 13 August, 13 November 1778, 1 April 1779.

<sup>27</sup> Young, *Tour*, vol. i, p. 288.

<sup>28</sup> Young, *Tour*, vol. i, p. 288.

<sup>29</sup> John Lloyd, *A Short Tour, or an Impartial Description of the County of Clare, with Some Particular and Historical Observations* (Ennis, 1780) p. 58.

<sup>30</sup> See Austin Bourke, 'The Visitation of God?' *The Potato and the Great Irish Famine* (Dublin, 1993) pp 112-13.

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If our knowledge of the lower strata of rural society in Clare in the late-eighteenth century is so desperately limited, contemporaries at a higher level on the social scale were not much better informed. Arthur Young's vague observations reflect the hazy half-knowledge of these few wealthy gentlemen with whom he spoke in the course of a flying visit, and Dutton's sharpest criticism of the Clare gentlemen of his day was that they 'neither know, nor even seem to care much, how their cottier tenants live, so [long] as they come to work when they are wanted.'<sup>31</sup> As a group the gentry of Clare would have been much more aware of the nuances of social differentiation at levels closer to their own, and collectively would have recognised no more than five landed magnates as belonging to a distinct social stratum above themselves. Of these five magnates, whose combined properties in the county amounted to between a quarter and a fifth of its land area, just one, Sir Lucius O'Brien, was a permanent resident in the county, the other four – the earls of Inchiquin and Egremont, the Marquis of Conyngham and Nicholas Westby – having extensive properties elsewhere.

The Clare gentry proper numbered no more than a hundred or so separate families, sharing the remaining acreage of the county in a hierarchy determined by estate size and familial and political connections.<sup>32</sup> They were a peculiar hybrid group, with a genetic inheritance that mingled strands from pre-1641 English settler and Cromwellian officer stock with that of the old sept leaders and *aes dána* of Gaelic Thomond, and Old English and Gaelic Irish landowners transplanted into the county during the 1650s. Despite the very disparate origins of these groups, even before 1700 they had shown a tendency to intermarriage, and over the course of the eighteenth century they merged entirely as Catholic landed families conformed under the pressure of the Penal Laws. By 1780 Catholic landownership in Clare, which had been higher than the national average at the beginning of the century (27% as opposed to 14%), had virtually disappeared.<sup>33</sup>

The Clare gentry lived for the most part on revenues from rent and the profits of live-stock rearing, in which they engaged on a large scale, both on their own properties and on enormous farms leased from the county's magnates. Some gentlemen also acted as estate managers, while virtually all at some time dipped into the gravy train of county road contracting. Highly interrelated as they were, with marriage connections that extended to similar networks in adjoining counties, they formed a close-knit world of Protestant privilege within the county. Country gentlemen ran the county's administration; they controlled its judicial system, and their factional rivalries were worked out in local electoral politics, at sporting occasions and in the occasional duel. County Clare was at once their creation, their home turf and their playground.

The leading figure among the Clare gentry was Sir Lucius O'Brien of Dromoland, a figure of enormous respect, even among his opponents in the county's factional politics. Owner of one of Clare's largest and most developed properties, Sir Lucius was a model landlord and estate improver, a generous host to visitors, and a nationally known parliamentary figure of pronounced Patriotic views. In an age of fashionable interest in antiquarianism, a particular cachet attached to his descent from Brian Boru and the Dal-

<sup>31</sup> Dutton, *Statistical Survey*, p. vii.

<sup>32</sup> Liam de Paor, 'Contae an Chláir le Linn Thomáis Uí Mhíocháin,' in Diarmuid Ó Muirthe (ed.), *Tomás Ó Míocháin: Filíocht* (Baile Átha Cliath, 1988) p. 13, counts 100 gentry houses in Clare in the late-eighteenth century from contemporary maps.

<sup>33</sup> See Ciarán Ó Murchadha, 'Land and Society in Seventeenth Century Clare' (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, U.C.G., 1982) pp 118, 147, 213.

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cassian kings of Munster and Thomond, although only that handful of Gaelic poets who still plied their craft in Clare would have accorded him respect for this alone.

It was from Sir Lucius and his two wealthy neighbours, John Singleton of Ballygireen and James Fitzgerald of Shepperton that Arthur Young derived the bulk of the Clare data found in his celebrated *Tour in Ireland*.<sup>34</sup> Young was highly impressed by the three men, whose keen interest in estate development seems to have given him an unduly favourable view of the county gentry as a whole. Hely Dutton, on the other hand an Irishman who interviewed their immediate descendants a generation later, knew full well how untypical such men were of the Clare gentry, whom he disliked intensely and considered to be uncouth, lazy and ignorant.<sup>35</sup>

One individual whom Hely Dutton would have been happy to view as typical had he met him, was William Stacpoole (1743-96) of Anagh and Eden Vale. Stacpoole came of Old English transplanter stock, his father having conformed in 1731 in order to retain control over the family's modest property in West Clare.<sup>36</sup> William's own fortunes were transformed by marriage to an heiress of the influential Burtons of Buncraggy, which allowed him move to a more central location near Ennis, where he laid out a scenic lake-side demesne and renamed it Eden Vale.<sup>37</sup>

A diary kept by William Stacpoole over several decades shows his life to have been one of continuous exertion, an endlessly repeated round of hunting, shooting and fishing excursions, varied at intervals by some robust electioneering, and all involving a great deal of long-distance travel either on horseback or in his carriage.<sup>38</sup> In politics Stacpoole was motivated as much by factional allegiance as by ideological conviction, and the violence that flared around him during canvassing may have had something to do with his political and familial kinship with the unruly Massy family of Doonass in southeast Clare.<sup>39</sup> Amidst all the hectic activity that made up his existence, which was frequently attended by heavy drinking, there were also tranquil interludes spent in the company of family and friends: Stacpoole was married twice, but also found time to keep a long-term mistress by whom he had eight children.<sup>40</sup>

If this lifestyle immediately calls to mind Arthur Young's critical description of the supposed habits of middlemen, at least one important difference stands out. Stacpoole was no feckless half-sir, but one of Clare's most prominent county gentlemen; he was a magistrate and frequent grand juror, who served as High Sheriff of Clare in 1784. Actively involved in public affairs, he was an ardent patriot, a member of the Ennis Volunteers, and a staunch supporter of measures for Catholic relief.<sup>41</sup>

Naturally enough his diary overflows with references to his peers among the Clare gentry; Fitzgeralds, Burtons, Westroppes, Colpoyses, and Daxons among others, men whose lifestyles seem to have been in the same approximate mould. For such men the

<sup>34</sup> Arthur Young, *Tour*, vol. i, pp 284-92.

<sup>35</sup> Dutton, *Statistical Survey*, pp iii-vii, x-xii.

<sup>36</sup> *Burke's Irish Family Records* (Dublin, 1976) under Stacpoole; Thomas P. O'Neill, 'Religion, Land and Laws in Eighteenth Century Thomond' in *North Munster Antiquarian Journal*, vol. xxxiii (1991) p. 82; T.J. Westropp notes to Stacpoole Diary in *N.M.A.J.*, vol xxiii (1981) pp 45-6.

<sup>37</sup> Leo F. McNamara (ed.), 'The Diary of an Eighteenth Century Clare Gentleman' in *N.M.A.J.*, vol. xxiii (1981) pp 35, 36, 39.

<sup>38</sup> McNamara, 'Diary,' pp 28-44.

<sup>39</sup> Burke, *Irish Family Records*.

<sup>40</sup> Burke, *Irish Family Records*; McNamara, 'Diary,' p. 44.

<sup>41</sup> See Kieran Sheedy, *The Clare Elections* (Dún Laoghaire, 1993) p. 84; Katherine Dillon and Robert Herbert, 'Extracts from the Minute Books of the Ennis Volunteers,' in *N.M.A.J.*, vol. vi (1949-1953) p.151; *C.J.*, 29 November 1779; *C.J.*, 19 March 1795.

wider Catholic world at the centre of which they lived was to some degree a life-support system for their own existences, and one with which they interacted with – indeed could not have avoided doing so – at innumerable points. Such interactions varied from the more formal contact of tenants, tradesmen, and shopkeepers, to the more sociable traffic of fairs and markets and the hunts and race meetings so beloved of the Clare gentry.

One of these points of contact relates to grand jury contracting, and the evidence here is of particular interest for what it reveals of a widespread practice by which over sustained periods of time certain Protestant gentlemen shared contract presentments for different local works with non-gentry associates who are clearly Catholics.<sup>42</sup> What we have here then is a localised division, between Protestants and Catholics of the spoils of cronyism and corruption for which eighteenth-century grand juries were notorious, something that operated perhaps on a landlord-tenant basis, as it did most certainly on a neighbourly one.

In Stacpoole's case, the diary contains enough other points of association to suggest the ghostly outline of a general system of local-level patronage transcending religious affiliation, one loosely based on the parish, and centring on the principal landowner. Apart from Stacpoole's contract sharing further significant indicators here are his ability to command his neighbours' votes at election time, and his long-standing friendship with the Catholic parish priest, Fr. Darby Broggy.<sup>43</sup>

On a wider level religious affiliation had little relevance in one often-ignored aspect of life in eighteenth-century Ireland, the invisible links that existed between persons of different creeds and social ranks through the credit system that operated widely in default of a reliable currency. One indication of how far these connections extended through society is found in the case of one Clare gentleman, a Mr. Thomas Grady, who mislaid his pocket-book at the fair of Clonroad in August 1795. The loss was much more than a personal one, since the vanished pocketbook contained in addition to his own note for ten guineas,<sup>44</sup>

... John [and] Dan. Kelly's note for 7*l.* 7*s.*, John Ryan's note for 3*l.* 7*s.* 3*d.*, Morough O'Brien's draft on John Chambers for 4*l.* 11*s.*, payable next Nov., Mrs. Scott's draft upon James Brown for 2*l.*, two drafts of Stephen Cunningham upon Mrs Haggerty, one payable 21st. Nov., of 5*l.* 1*s.*, the other for 2*l.* payable 21st. next, both accepted by her, all payable to Thomas Grace, or order, together with several other papers which cannot be of value to any person but the owner, payment upon them being stopped.

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The exercise of local level clientelism by the county gentry could not have operated efficiently without community-level involvement by well-off Catholic landholders, Clare's representatives of the 'underground gentry,' the problem being that we know even less about this group than we do of the 'official' gentry. However, there is every reason to believe that they shared the general characteristics that historians have connected with this social group in Ireland as a whole.<sup>45</sup> Based on this assumption, it is clear therefore

<sup>42</sup> Clare County Archives, GJ/AP/42.1, Grand Jury Presentment Book, 1784-1792.

<sup>43</sup> See McNamara, 'Diary,' 29 April 1776, p. 39.

<sup>44</sup> *C.J.*, 3 August 1795.

<sup>45</sup> See Kevin Whelan, 'An Underground Gentry?: Catholic Middlemen in Eighteenth Century Ireland,' in James S. Donnelly, Jr., and Kerby Miller (eds), *Irish Popular Culture* (Dublin, 1998) and L. M. Cullen, 'Social Classes under the Penal Laws' in Kevin Whelan and Thomas Power (eds), *Emergence and Endurance: Catholics in Ireland in the Eighteenth Century* (Dublin, 1990).



that there were a great number of well-off Catholic landholders in Clare in the late eighteenth century, that such individuals rented large farms for stock-rearing or subletting to cottier tenants, or both together; relatively few Clare landholders of either denomination were purely middlemen. That a hierarchy existed among such landholders is also fairly certain, as well as a broad division at the highest levels between families steadily making their way upwards from more humble origins, and those with an acute consciousness of descent from the haughty freeholders of Gaelic Thomond.

If Clare followed the pattern found elsewhere in Ireland, the second of these groups would have continued at some level the patronage their ancestors had provided for Gaelic culture. One old Clare Gaelic family, the Macnamaras of Ayle, Feakle, east Clare, has been ascribed this role.<sup>46</sup> The Macnamaras appear to fit the bill: originally Jacobite in sympathy, even in the late years of the century they were open-handed in hospitality in the manner of their forebears, and showed little interest in the economics of estate modernisation. Greatly sceptical of the law, they were inordinately given to litigation, and sought to prop up teetering estate finances by recourse to the illicit distillation of whiskey.<sup>47</sup> However, by 1780 the Ayle family was verging on disintegration, and hardly in a position to exercise their traditional role. No direct evidence links them with patronage of Gaelic culture in the last two decades of the century, not even of their famous tenant, Brian Merriman.

It may well be in fact that by this time the old-style cultural patronage afforded Gaelic poets by well-off landholding Catholics (and Protestants) in Clare no longer existed. It is certainly true that those Gaelic poets who still carried on their craft in the last two decades of the century were supporting themselves, most commonly by teaching, the best-documented example being Thomas Meehan (Tomás Ó Míocháin) who operated a school in Ennis for more than thirty years.<sup>48</sup>

Meehan is something of an anomaly, in that the middlemen/grazier family from which he came is not easily traced to status-holding freeholder antecedents in Gaelic Thomond.<sup>49</sup> Yet at the same time family members seem to have behaved as if they were, combining a reverence for Gaelic literature with an occasionally fractious disposition towards neighbours and those whom contemporary society chose to view as their social superiors.<sup>50</sup> The Meehans, in addition, were practitioners of Gaelic poetry rather than the patrons one might more readily have expected of a family of their background.

At any rate, Meehan's school was considerably more than a hedge school, a reflection perhaps of elevated social notions of his own. Conducted in a properly fitted school premises, it catered for older pupils who had already acquired a basic educational formation, and it was publicised over the years in wordy newspaper advertisements whose strongest emphasis lay on the teaching of mathematics, a speciality that carried particular prestige among the public.<sup>51</sup> It may well be that other Clare masters who also stressed

<sup>46</sup> Ó Dálaigh, 'Poet of a Single Poem,' pp 122-4.

<sup>47</sup> Illicit distillation was extremely widespread; for examples see *C.J.*, 5 April 1779, 17 May 1787, 2 May, 9 June 1791; *E.C.*, 12 February, 30 March, 7 December 1789.

<sup>48</sup> For Meehan see Brian Ó Dálaigh, 'Tomás Ó Míocháin and the Ennis School of Poetry c. 1730-1804' in *Dál gCais*, vol. 9 (1993) pp 55-73.

<sup>49</sup> The Meehans may have been descended from freeholder O'Mehan/Meighans found in Drumcliffe parish in the early seventeenth century, but if so their ancestral lands were not extensive and were lost between 1640 and 1660; R.C. Simington (ed.), *The Book of Survey and Distribution*, vol. iv, *County of Clare* (Dublin, 1967) pp 274, 277, 279, 285, 289, 292, 293.

<sup>50</sup> See for example, *Inchiquin Manuscripts*, docs. 763, 1710.

<sup>51</sup> Ó Dálaigh, 'Tomás Ó Míocháin' pp 67-70; Antonia McManus, *The Irish Hedge School and its Books* (Dublin, 2005) p. 120.

their ability to teach mathematics, notably the scholar, Peter O'Connell, and Merriman in his last years at Limerick, were consciously imitating the Meehan model.<sup>52</sup> As for Meehan himself, it would seem that he was at his best in imparting to his pupils ('grown youth' as he calls them) the rudiments of accounting and land surveying; practical skills for those destined to be town merchants and strong farmers.

If Meehan the teacher is of interest to the historian, his real significance lies in the body of poetry he composed in both Irish and English. This poetry is important less for its literary quality, which is limited, but for what it reveals of the mindset of Catholics in provincial Ireland with regard to the great events of their time, and in particular to the phenomenon of Protestant patriotism. Like other Gaelic poets writing in Clare and elsewhere, Meehan was deeply antagonistic to Britain, and during the American Revolution much of his Irish-language poetry is devoted to a gleeful celebration of American military victories and British defeats.<sup>53</sup> The undisguised seditiousness of these poems is startling, but is easily understood. Unpublished Gaelic poetry was not likely to come to the attention of the authorities, particularly since its dissemination was limited to a narrow circle, in this case perhaps only those who frequented the *Cúirt Éigse* or poetic assembly which Meehan convened at Ennis in 1780, and whose purpose was the encouragement and regulation of Gaelic literature.<sup>54</sup>

Meehan's published poems in English are very different: they seem to have no overt political content at all, and several are striking for their praise of members of Clare's Protestant gentry, including the Gaelic-descended Sir Lucius O'Brien, as well as individuals of English-settler origin such as Marcus Patterson of Ennis, or members of the Henn family of Paradise. In each of the above cases, it is true, the object of praise was known for public-spirited behaviour, but in the overall context of the poems there is apparent a generally positive, even warm disposition towards Protestant Clare as a whole.

In Meehan's mind therefore, a clear distinction existed between Britain and the Protestant gentry who had been the local representatives of its authority for several generations. His positive attitude towards the latter can be explained in a number of ways. There was firstly his personal acquaintance with members of the Clare gentry, and his experience of their public-spirited behaviour. On a wider level, his attitude may have been affected by signs that Protestant Ireland was developing an interest in Ireland's Gaelic past, to which Meehan himself was deeply committed. The new interest was in some degree a response to a fashionable enthusiasm for 'Celtic' antiquity in Britain, and in the circumstances, it was only natural that local custodians of the Gaelic past such as Meehan and his circle should have felt gratified at the new respect being accorded their tradition.<sup>55</sup>

The quest for Celtic Ireland acquired an important Clare dimension from the early 1780s in the famous affair of the ogham-inscribed grave-slab found on Mount Callan, supposedly the tomb of the legendary Fenian warrior, Conan Maol. It was Meehan's friend, John Lloyd, another schoolmaster and Gaelic poet, who first drew attention to the inscription in a book called *A Tour of the County of Clare*, which has given rise to the suspicion that he actually forged it.<sup>56</sup> Lloyd's *Tour* is itself full of enough antiquarian lore

<sup>52</sup> For Peter O'Connell, see Eilís Ní Dhea, 'Peadar Ó Conaill, Scoláire agus Scriobhaí (1755-1826)' in Ó Murchadha, *County Clare Studies*, p. 138.

<sup>53</sup> Vincent Morley, *Irish Opinion and the American Revolution, 1776-1780* (Cambridge, 2002) pp 107-09, 281-4; Ó Muirithe, *Ó Míocháin: Filíocht*, poems 35 and 37.

<sup>54</sup> Ó Dálaigh, 'Tomás Ó Míocháin', p. 64.

<sup>55</sup> Siobhán de hÓir, 'The Mount Callan Ogham Stone and its Context,' in *N.M.A.J.*, vol. xxv (1983) pp 43-57.

<sup>56</sup> Its full title is *A Short Tour or Impartial and Accurate Description of the County of Clare with Some Particular and Historical Observations* (Ennis, 1780); de hÓir, 'Mount Callan Stone', pp 45, 55.

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to satisfy the keenest Irish Celto-phile, and it includes a number of Meehan's poems in praise of local Protestants, as well as a verse introduction by Meehan himself. Whether or not Lloyd was guilty of the Conan Maol hoax, it seems clear that with the benign approval of Thomas Meehan, his *Tour* at once gratified the taste of his gentlemen readers for Celtic antiquity, while consciously directing their attention towards the Gaelic world.<sup>57</sup>

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The fashion for antiquarianism was, of course, just one facet of a developing Protestant nationalism, which reached a height in the Patriotic struggles within the Irish parliament during the late 1770s and early 1780s. As the birthplace of two of its greatest spirits, Charles Lucas and Sir Lucius O'Brien, Clare was, not surprisingly, a hotbed of Patriot sentiment. For Clare Catholics, one of the most attractive features of Protestant patriotism as it existed in the county as opposed to elsewhere, was that its proponents were also strongly in favour of further measures for Catholic relief. Apart from the anti-British sentiment that motivated a great number of them, Catholics in the county therefore had very strong reasons for supporting the Patriots, and indeed Thomas Meehan tells us in the rules he laid down for this *Cúirt Éigse* that it was the specific example of the Patriots ['*príomhcheannaibh prionsúil agus fostaibh fíoruaisle ár dtíre*'] in Parliament that inspired him to convene it in the first place.<sup>58</sup>

Along with other Clare Catholics, Meehan watched with approval as the Protestant county took with gusto to the Volunteering craze of 1778 and 1779. No less than six independent Volunteer units were formed in Clare, just one of which, the Ennis corps, can be followed for any length in the sources.<sup>59</sup> Formed in September 1778, the Ennis Volunteers had a similar membership profile to the movement elsewhere; a rank-and file of town artisans, and an officer corps composed of country gentlemen, the latter bearing many of the same names found in William Stacpoole's diary, and including Stacpoole himself.

Though the Ennis Volunteers paid at least some attention to the policing role for which they had ostensibly been formed, much of their activity was social. Enlivening a dull provincial scene by their constant drilling, weapons training, and convivial public dinners, they were especially impressive when parading in their splendid Irish-manufactured uniforms. Enhanced by some fearsome pieces of ordinance donated by their colonel, the earl of Inchiquin, their bearing was impressively military and formidable.<sup>60</sup> Over time, however, in the absence of any possibility of active service, their posturing eventually attracted the gentle satire of a local versifier:

See yonder Corps parading and marching o'er the green,  
Stout hearted, brave, and daring, as ever Monarch seen;  
Their martial looks do tell us, no danger can them scare,  
Intrepid Irish Heroes are Ennis Volunteers.<sup>61</sup>

Political success transformed the Volunteers into actual 'intrepid Irish heroes,' and in 1782 an ecstatic Thomas Meehan described them as a 'Fianna fearamhail, gliadhghlan,

<sup>57</sup> De hÓir, 'Mount Callan Stone', p. 46.

<sup>58</sup> Ó Muiríthe, *Ó Míocháin: Filíocht*, p. 33.

<sup>59</sup> Five of these are listed in James Kelly (ed.), 'Secret Return of the Volunteers in 1784' in *Irish Historical Studies*, vol. xxvi, no. 103 (1989) pp 268-92:290. Only one reference exists to the sixth, the Malbay Rangers based in Ennistymon, *C.J.*, 12 October 1778, 26 October 1779.

<sup>60</sup> Brian Ó Dálaigh, 'Flags and Emblems of the Ennis Volunteers,' in *The Other Clare*, vol. 18 (1992) p. 40.

<sup>61</sup> *C.J.*, 22 November 1779.

gaisceamhail' [manly, warlike, heroic Fianna].<sup>62</sup> Since a minor measure legalising Catholic schools had accompanied the constitutional victory of 1782, Meehan and his co-religionists could see the Volunteer achievement as adding religious freedom to commercial and constitutional independence, '...ó tharla an lá ag Catholics/Trácht na Farraige is dáil gan eagla [now that the Catholics' day has come]/commerce of the seas achieved/ and a parliament without fear].<sup>63</sup>

All of this involved a degree of self-delusion as to the precise nature of what had been achieved, and it would be some years before the reality became apparent. In the meantime a celebratory mood prevailed in Clare, a culmination of the patriotic exaltation that had been developing since the late 1770s. In a county with no significant history of agrarian tensions, where improving economic conditions ensured the quiescence of the lower orders, a grand consensus of opinion appeared to unite the Protestant gentry and town artisans, the Catholic 'underground gentry' and the semi-subversive world of the Gaelic poets. This is reflected in an interesting manner in the relationship that emerged between the promoters of Gaelic culture and the patriotic journalism of the local newspapers. Thomas Meehan, who seems to have owed a deal of his knowledge of international events to the *Clare Journal* and the *Ennis Chronicle*, advertised frequently in both.<sup>64</sup> For his part George Trinder, the *Journal's* proprietor printed poems in English by Meehan and John Lloyd, and it was he who published Lloyd's *Tour*, and if one can judge by the fact that it ran to two editions, made a substantial profit from it.

The *Tour* is itself an extraordinary product of this period, one that exaggerates past credibility whatever sense of concord actually existed across society in Clare. Lloyd's Clare is an unreal world of stupendous natural scenery and romantic antiquities, inhabited by a good-humoured, hardworking, people living in neat, clean villages and market towns humming with activity, and presided over by a benign squirearchy of different ethnic origins. These origins are left unexplored, however, and inconvenient recent history is sanitized in innocuous references or oblique comments. Thus there is a topographical quotation from Ludlow's *Memoirs*, but no mention of the savage military pacification which he carried out in Clare, and which was still engraved in the popular mind in 1780. There are no direct references to land confiscations or religious persecutions, and care is taken to praise the descendants of English settlers as well as the native-born gentry, one Cromwellian-descended gentleman, Thomas Browne of Newgrove, being described as 'chief of that respectable, antient, British stock in this county.'<sup>65</sup>

'Nothing opposite to good harmony and understanding subsists here,' Lloyd concludes, 'no seditious factions, nocturnal meetings or intestine broils are ever known or practised in the County Clare, as have been apparent in other parts of the kingdom.'<sup>66</sup> Behind this enormous generalisation, and the economies of truth with which the *Tour* abounds, lies enough of the reality of Clare in the late 1770s and early 1780s to reflect with some accuracy a vibrant, optimistic society, diverse enough to encompass the conviviality of Volunteer gatherings, the exuberance of Thomas Meehan and his Cúirt Éigse, and the Rabelaisian brilliance of Brian Merriman.

<sup>62</sup> Ó Muirthe, *Ó Míocháin: Filíocht*, poem 31, 'Moladh na Volunteer'.  
<sup>63</sup> Ó Muirthe, *Ó Míocháin: Filíocht*, poem 31.  
<sup>64</sup> Ó Dálaigh, 'Tomás Ó Míocháin', pp 67-70.  
<sup>65</sup> Lloyd, *Tour*, p. 56.  
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But the idyll, if that is what it was, could not last, and even before the renewed campaign for political reform ran into a brick wall of reaction at national level, local solidarity began to crack. The enthusiasm for Volunteering proved impossible to sustain, and from late 1782 the Clare Volunteers were divided by defections to a new government-sponsored Munster Fencible regiment. Most affected of all the Clare corps were the Ennis Volunteers, whose leading officers were forced to expel members with links to the new force, chief among them their own commander, Lord Inchiquin.<sup>67</sup> Inchiquin's betrayal was a source of anguish to Thomas Meehan, who wondered that a man of such noble Irish lineage could throw over his honourable Volunteer colonelcy and so shamefully diminish himself to the level of a mere Fencible commander, 'gan chlá, gan mheas, gan uair / Ar scata truaill pionsóirí' [without fame, without respect, without pride / over a gang of wretched fencibles].<sup>68</sup> By early 1784 Meehan's spirits had dropped even lower, with the spread of further internal dissent and, in the harsh weather of January, a subsistence crisis that brought hunger to Clare after a generation. A poem written at this time speaks of 'móide cinnte is fearg/forneart fíoch, is fealladh/bormmheas, bruíon is bear-taibh' [Swearing and anger, feuding and underhand behaviour, an upsurge of quarrelling and violent acts].<sup>69</sup>

Another two years brought an outbreak of Whiteboy activity, the first significant appearance of the movement in Clare. In itself it was a minor affair, little more than a flurry of oath-taking at chapels that nevertheless hinted at more widespread agrarian discontent.<sup>70</sup> Succeeding years would bring further blows to the 'moral economy' binding society together, chief among them the demise of the Volunteers and their replacement in 1793 by a state-controlled county militia, officered by county gentlemen who were thus prised away from their Patriot past.<sup>71</sup> Conservative and liberal factionalism emerged among Clare Protestants on the issue of further Catholic relief, and the hopes of Catholics themselves vanished in the wake of the Fitzwilliam episode of 1795.<sup>72</sup> The death of Sir Lucius O'Brien in January lost Clare the one great unifying influence it had enjoyed for the previous three decades. Sir Lucius's passing was marked by a tribute from Thomas Meehan, as much a lament for the evaporation of the promise of recent years as for the loss of a great patriot:<sup>73</sup>

What ills alas! Dromoland House invade?  
 What blasting Winds this Western clime pervade?  
 Our penal Evils, now, tho' somewhat less,  
 Domestic woes our rising hopes repress  
 Our chieftains gone and patronising lords.  
 Our language dead and all our Celtic Bards  
 By which I'm left, without a living soul.  
 To blow the sparks of one Parnassian Coal.

<sup>67</sup> 'Minute Book of the Ennis Volunteers', pp 148-9; Vincent Morley, *Irish Opinion and the American Revolution, 1760-1783* (Cambridge, 2002) p. 316; Ó Dálaigh, 'Tomás Ó Míocháin', p. 64.

<sup>68</sup> Ó Muirithe, *Ó Míocháin: Filíocht*, poem 31, 'Ar nÉirí do Fencibles'.

<sup>69</sup> Ó Muirithe, *Ó Míocháin: Filíocht*, poem 33, 'Ar Dhoilighshion na Míosa January 1784'; Sheedy, *Clare Elections*, p. 88.

<sup>70</sup> Ignatius Murphy, *The Diocese of Killaloe in the Eighteenth Century* (Dublin, 1993) pp 131-2.

<sup>71</sup> Sheedy, *Clare Elections*, p. 96.

<sup>72</sup> Sheedy, *Clare Elections*, pp 94, 96; Kieran Sheedy, 'United Irishmen in County Clare' in *The Other Clare*, vol. 22 (1998) p. 14; *C.J.*, 16, 19 March 1795.

<sup>73</sup> *C.J.*, 5 February 1795.

Political divisions widened in Clare after the death of Sir Lucius, and as the middle ground narrowed Catholic campaigners wasted their energies in petty squabbling.<sup>74</sup> Already more radical voices were making themselves heard, and from 1797 Defenderism spread widely in the county, bringing with it a level of violent agrarian disturbance hitherto unknown in Clare.<sup>75</sup> Throughout most of 1798 the county would remain in a state of unrest, culminating in an attempt at insurrection at the year's end, which spilled over into the early days of 1799. By comparison with what happened elsewhere the Clare rising was insignificant, and perhaps because of this has been little studied until recently. Because of Kieran Sheedy's work, we now know a great deal more than before regarding the events of 1798-9 in Clare, but even so the attitude towards it of significant individuals such as Thomas Meehan or Brian Merriman remain tantalisingly out of reach, just as do the full motivations of one prominent activist, their fellow schoolmaster, Hugh Kildea, who was hanged for treason at Ennistymon in January 1799.<sup>76</sup>

<sup>74</sup> *C.J.*, 16 March, 16, April 1795.

<sup>75</sup> *C.J.*, 9, 12, 16 February 1795; Sheedy, *Clare Elections*, p. 94; R.B. McDowell, *Ireland in the Age of Imperialism and Revolution* (Oxford, 1979) p. 476.

<sup>76</sup> Sheedy, *United Irishmen of County Clare*, p. 6.