

Clare County Library

Songs of Agrarian Strife by Pat Feeley

Songs of strife are important sociological and historical documents. Most of them were written close to the event which they describe. Indeed, some contain information not to be found in the official records or newspapers of the time. Although many of these ballads, which were essentially journalistic by nature, were factually accurate, it is also important to remember that they reflected the feelings not only of the ballad-maker but of sizeable sections of the ordinary people. It was the character of these songs to reflect popular thinking and feeling. If the message was unpopular people would not want to buy the ballad and sing it. So the songs give us the collective emotions of the people on the actual events outlined in the street ballads. Consequently the role of the ballad maker in acting as a mirror of popular opinion could subvert his role as journalist and make him distort the facts of the situation in order, as we shall see later, to make his products attractive to his purchasers.

In relation to this type of street literature, it should also be borne in mind that although one could be prosecuted for the singing of seditious songs from Elizabethan times, until the foundation of the Land League in 1879, ballad-singing was one of the few non-violent forms of protest available to the peasantry on questions affecting them.

Making and singing such songs was also a way of indicating support from those who themselves would not resort to acts of violence. It is worth remembering too that poor, illiterate or semi-illiterate people were often great believers in the power of words – songs, writing and speeches – to change the world, and the agrarian revolution in 19th century Ireland wrought considerable social and economic changes for the tenant farmer class, if not for labourers. Part one of this article outlines the historical context of the murders which inspired the ballad-makers, while part two examines the songs themselves. Some of the songs are represented in full in the text with a commentary. The remainder are contained in [Appendix I](#) below.

Blood Stained Castleisland

The eleven songs and stories analysed here relate to land agitation and span the period 1857 to 1895. This was a time of considerable agrarian unrest when the tenant farmers were challenging the system of land holding. They sought to introduce changes into the existing system of land tenure to increase their own rights and powers and diminish those of the landlord. From 1857 to 1870 two of the main grievances of tenant farmers, in those parts of the country where the Ulster Custom did not operate, were non-recognition of any property right of an occupying tenant, and the situation where a tenant had no right to compensation for any improvements that he carried out to his holding. (The 'Ulster Custom' allowed a tenant to sell his 'interest' in a holding to another tenant when he vacated the farm. In Ulster this was regarded as a tenant right, in the rest of the country, wherever the practice existed, it was considered a privilege.) The Land Act of 1870, sometimes known as the Gladstone Act – the product of considerable agrarian agitation and violence – sought to address these two grievances, even if in a weak, diluted form. The Act laid down that tenants who carried out improvements should be recompensed by the landlord for such improvements and acknowledged that the tenant had a property right of occupancy. It also set out a limited number of fines as a deterrent to the landlord carrying out evictions. For the purposes of this article, the 1870 Act can be seen as the culmination of the first period of agrarian unrest.¹ The second period up to 1895 was even more violent and disturbed, especially in the 1880s when the Land League and its officially unacknowledged terrorist cutting edge, the Moonlighters, were waging the final bloody phase for the land of Ireland.² Six of our songs and stories date from this period and it is not without significance that five of those relate to murders that took place in Munster, or that four of them come from Kerry, or that all four of these are from the Castleisland area of Co. Kerry, the murder capital of Ireland, 'blood-stained Castleisland' as [Peter O'Brien](#), Peter the Packer, later Lord O'Brien of Kilfenora, called it.³ In 1882, at the trials of Poff and Barrett, accused of one of the murders in the Castleisland

area, O'Brien said if a murder takes place in Clare the killer comes across the Broadford Hills, if one takes place in Limerick he comes from New Pallas, and if a murder takes place in Kerry the murderer always comes from Castleisland.⁴ This period of violence and continuous agitation wound down gradually in the first half of the 1890s and its termination can be dated to the Wyndham Act of 1903 under which 300,000 holdings were purchased.⁵

The songs and stories studied here do not present us with anything like a comprehensive picture of the land agitation during this period, for in one way or another all of the songs are about remarkable cases. The victims include an Earl, a young landlord, two substantial farmers, three land agents, a descendant of one of the great planter families of Kerry, a policeman, a herdsman and an emergency man and a poverty-ridden small farmer. During the same period, many farm labourers, herdsman, emergency men and small holders were attacked, seriously wounded, permanently maimed and killed, but no songs were written about most of these. ('Emergency men' were drafted onto a farm where a tenancy in dispute existed. These men did the farm work where local labourers were unwilling – or prevented – from doing it.)

Songs tended to be written about the more dramatic cases, ones that captured and fired the public imagination and were the subjects of gossip, talk and controversy. Of the eleven songs examined here, four are from Kerry, three from Tipperary, and one each from Limerick, Clare, Galway and Donegal. Cases where miscarriages of justice had occurred were often the subjects of songs and five of our collection belong to this category. Again, five out of the eleven are execution songs. The Irish execution song is thought to derive from the English broadsheet of that type, and, like its English counterpart, caters for the human appetite for the gruesome and the macabre. Such Irish songs are often framed in the first person and entitled '*A Lamentation*'. There are two so-titled in our selection, '*The Lamentation of James Walsh*' and '*The Lamentation of the two Cormacks*'. Execution songs like these nearly always contain an admonitory verse or verses, along with the verses or lines of repentance, affirmation in the church and its beliefs, and of hope in divine mercy.

Moonlighters and Improving Landlords

Historians have said that agricultural labourers were not very supportive of, or interested in, the Land League.⁶ This, however, does not seem to apply to its terrorist wing, the Moonlighters, specifically the Moonlighters of the Castleisland area, the acknowledged centre of the struggle. Evidence from here suggests that farm labourers were very involved in Moonlighting.⁷ Of the agrarian murders considered here most were carried out by labourers or small tenant farmers. The first of these concerns the shooting of the land agent, John Ellis, at Killahara near Loughmore, Co. Tipperary, as he returned from the railway station in Templemore on a dark October night in 1857. Two farm workers, William and Daniel Cormack, were put on trial, convicted and hanged for the murder in May 1858. They protested their innocence to the end and local lore has it that the murder was committed by an aggrieved tenant named William Gleeson, who subsequently emigrated to the United States and lived out his life in New York. The Cormacks were said to have murdered Ellis because he seduced their younger sister, Kitty.

The assassination of Lord Leitrim in April of 1878 and the killing of his young secretary, John Makim, and the car driver, Charles Buchanan, on the Milford road close to Mulroy Bay, was the work of three men, Micheál Rua McElwee, a small holder and two tailors, Hugh Shiels and Michael Heraghty. They were members of a secret society, probably some kind of Ribbon society, in the Fanad peninsula. Heraghty was traced to the crime through the smashed stock of a gun found at the scene. He was charged and was awaiting trial when he died of typhoid fever in Lifford gaol.

The murder of Francis Fitzgerald near Kilmallock in May of 1862 in the presence of his wife was the work of Thomas Beckham, a habitual criminal, described as "a man old in years and hardened in crime,"⁸ and a young tear-away and thug from the locality named James Walsh. Both were labouring men and hired killers. According to one of the songs written about the affair, Walsh was paid three pounds. Fitzgerald, a young man in his twenties, recently married, was described as "handsome, good-humoured and affable".⁹ He had inherited property worth £20,000 including an estate of about two hundred acres near Kilmallock from his father, a Limerick brewer, when the latter died. It has been noted that improving landlords often stood the risk of incurring the wrath and violence of their tenants by seeking to change long-existing conditions and forms of occupancy on their estates. This is what happened in the case of Francis Fitzgerald. He decided to take back a piece of land from

one of his tenants, a man named Denis Dillane, to square off a farm. Dillane, who had started in life as a shoemaker, was by local reckonings a successful man. He had a public house in Kilmallock and his little farm was so productive and fruitful that he was known as “the model farmer.”¹⁰ But Dillane was so black and bitter about being put off the land that he decided to have Fitzgerald killed and to do this he hired the two assassins. Thomas Beckham was of Cromwellian stock and was said to have respectable relatives in the county, though he himself could hardly be so described. He was suspected of being responsible for Fitzgerald’s murder. Beckham was on a ticket of leave from prison, having served seven years of a fourteen-year sentence for robbery of arms. Nowadays Beckham would be classified as a psychopath. Although on first contact he seemed quiet, almost kindly, he killed without compunction, showed no emotion when sentenced to death, nor fear of the gallows, where he made a speech to the crowd which was a marvel of recklessness, fearlessness and bravado. His courage as he stood on the trap won him the admiration of the journalists present and the wild enthusiasm of the crowd.¹¹

A few months later the same year, and only about twenty miles away from Kilmallock, in Tipperary town, another astounding murder took place. This happened on the 30th of July in the smoking room of Dobyn’s hotel in the quiet of the afternoon when Michael Hayes, a tenant farmer and bailiff in his sixties, discharged a pistol into John Waller Braddell, the agent of Colonel Hare’s estate on which Hayes was a bailiff and tenant. Colonel Hare and Braddell had decided to rid the estate of Hayes and his family, whose violence and lawlessness had become a nuisance to them; although in earlier times they had encouraged and prompted Michael Hayes into acts of ruthlessness. Hayes was seen as one of the ordinary people and had many relatives around Doon and Cappawhite, but he had become in the words of one commentator “a vile and hard-hearted instrument” of the landlord.¹²

No one was ever charged or tried for the ambush at Dwyer’s farm in Ballycohey in 1878, near Tipperary town, in which a young man, Darby O’Gorman and Samuel Morrow, a policeman, were killed and a number of others wounded while distributing eviction notices to the tenants of the townland for William Scully. There were a number of men involved in the shooting and local lore has it that one of these was a Kerry farm labourer working in the locality.¹³

Hired Assassins and Innocent Victims

In the case of Francis Hynes and the shooting of the cattle herd, John Doolaghty, on a Sunday in July 1882 near Ennis, there is, and always has been, some doubt as to whether he did the deed or not. The weight of evidence at the trial was against him. Having studied the case in some detail, my own feeling is that he probably did it, if not, the killing was perpetrated by one of his brothers whom he shielded. Hynes came from a markedly different class to any of the other killers. He was the son of James Hynes, a solicitor with a large practice in the County Clare and a substantial landowner. Francis was reared in [Toureen House](#), a three-storey over basement seventeenth century mansion about 2.5 miles from Ennis.¹⁴ (See [Appendix I](#) below)

At the end of March 1882 Arthur Edward Herbert was shot dead on his way home from the petty sessions at Castleisland where he had presided that day. Herbert was a descendant of the planter, Sir William Herbert, who had received 13,000 acres in the Munster Plantation of the 1580s which followed the Desmond Rebellion. Two men, John Casey, whom he had sentenced to a month’s imprisonment that day on a drunk and disorderly charge and James Brown, who had served time for indecent assault, were subsequently at different times arrested and charged with the crime, but they were never tried as there was not sufficient evidence. It has, however, always been the belief in the Castleisland area that they were the killers. They may have been acting on their own or as agents, paid or otherwise, of the Moonlighters. Casey and Brown were casual farm labourers and from what we know of them not men of much character.

In October 1882 another daylight murder was carried out in the Castleisland area. This was at Dromoulton, near the village of Scartaglen, where a well-to-do farmer, Thomas Brown, was shot dead by two men while working in a hay-field at about four o’clock in the afternoon. Two men, James Barrett and Sylvester Poff, were subsequently tried, convicted and hanged for this murder in Tralee in January 1883. It was always believed that they were innocent of the crime and, in a show of sympathy and solidarity, a large sum of money was raised throughout the County Kerry by public subscription for the widow and children of Sylvester Poff. Poff was of Palatine stock. His ancestors had come to Kerry in the 1740s or 1750s, having left Germany earlier in the eighteenth century to

escape religious persecution. Poff's family, like other colonists who have come to Ireland, had become 'Hiberniores Hibernicis ipsis'. Sylvester Poff was a Roman Catholic, a first cousin of his co-accused, James Barrett, and at the time of the crime an evicted tenant farmer. The real killers were never brought to trial, but, as with most things that happen in the Irish countryside, their identities were known. It was believed locally that they were Jack 'Cathy' Connor and George Twiss, thought to be the captain of the Cordial [recté Cordal] Moonlighters and something of a hired gun. The two are said to have been offered ten pounds by a tenant named Fitzgerald who feared that Brown was going to evict him and wanted him dead. George, and his better known brother, John, who was hanged, were the grandchildren of William Twiss, a man of land, property and considerable wealth. Their father, Robert, was a gentleman farmer and their mother was Elizabeth Hely of Donoughmore, Co. Cork, a relative of the Hely-Hutchinsons. Their parents, however, experienced a dramatic fall in their fortunes and the mother died when some of the children were quite young. George and John received little or no education and grew up to be poachers and desperados.¹⁵

The story of the Maamtrasna massacre is the most bizarre, complex and mysterious of all the cases that we are considering. This is the story of the murder of John Joyce and five members of his family on the night of Thursday, 17th August, 1882, in the miserable hovel where they lived, in a secluded valley in Maamtrasna. A few days later three so-called independent witnesses came forward to identify ten men whom they claimed were the killers and whom they said they had followed in the dark of the night to the murder-house. The ten were put on trial for the murders and three of them, including a man named Myles Joyce, were hanged, two became approvers or crown witnesses and five others had their death sentences commuted to penal servitude for life. It is now believed, however, that only four of the accused were involved in the crime and that three of the murder gang, including the man who planned, organized, and paid for it, were never brought to justice. With the exception of this man, Big John Casey of Bunachrick and his son John, who were well-to-do sheep farmers, all the others, killers, victims and condemned innocents, were poor sheep farmers and labourers.¹⁶

The raid for arms on Castle Farm, the residence of John O'Connell-Curtin, was the work of a local band of Moonlighters. We know who some of these were because one of them, Timothy O'Sullivan, was shot dead and two others, Thady Casey and David Daly, were charged, tried and convicted. At least two of the three had worked at Castle Farm and the gang seems to have been composed of farm labourers and sons of small farmers who were often labourers too.

The last of the agrarian crimes we are going to look at is the clubbing to death of James Donovan, an emergency man on a farm in the Glenlara district near Newmarket in Co. Cork by two men on an April night in 1894. John Twiss, who we have already mentioned, of Cordal, near Castleisland, a convicted Moonlighter, noted poacher and a thorn in the side of the police, was tried, convicted and executed for the Glenlara murder. Twiss affirmed his innocence of the crime in a remarkable speech from the dock after he had been found guilty. The speech, though rambling and repetitive, was notable for its strange idioms, its striking images and its patent honesty. It elevated the poor, ignorant countryman to another level and gave credence to his claim that the [word missing] was "of the blood of gentlemen".¹⁷

Part II: The Villain as Folk Hero

Now we come to the songs. Most but not all, of these were written around the time the murders took place. We have, for instance, four songs on the hanging of the two Cormack brothers, William and Dan, in May 1858, but only one of these was written at the time. The other three were composed around 1910 when in a ferment of nationalist fervour the bones of the two men – or what passed for their bones – were exhumed from the convicts' graveyard in Nenagh gaol and buried in a specially constructed mausoleum in Loughmore cemetery, in their own parish. Another song that was not written at the time of the incident (the murder of O'Gorman and Morrow at Ballycohey in 1878) is 'The Battle of Ballycohey'. This is the work of J.J. Finnan ("Myles") (1865-1912). It has not the run, structure or rhyme scheme of the street ballad. All the other songs, with the exception of two, are from the hands of the anonymous ballad-maker. The ballad of John Twiss is generally credited to Eugene O'Mara of Cordal, while the Poff and Barrett ballad was written by a national teacher, Daniel O'Brien, who was a witness at the trial.¹⁸

In speaking on the quality of the songs I shall say that the song I like best is the one entitled 'The General Fox Chase' in Zimmermann's 'Songs of the Irish Rebellion' and elsewhere, but also known as 'Farmer Michael Hayes'. There are many different and abbreviated versions of this song. John Faulkner, who sang it for the radio programme 'The Song and the Story', has one version. The late [Tom Lenihan](#) of Miltown Malbay [sang it in its entirety](#). Its attraction for me rests in its form. The pursuit of Hayes, the killer of Braddell, is presented in the form of a fox chase. The use of animals and birds in songs as symbols of men is quite common, and the blackbird and linnet are frequently used to represent the hero and leader. The image of Hayes as a wily fox is apt. The song is a sophisticated composition. One could almost accept its imagery at face value, as does James N. Healy who, in 'Old Irish Street Ballads, Vol. 3', lists it under hunting songs. He dates it as 1865. In a manuscript in the Folklore Department of UCD I came across a good version of this song on the same story, 'The Gallant Farmer Hayes'. The opening verse goes:

You heard of that brave gallant farmer
Who went with the rent for to pay
The agent refused to take it
As true as I hear people say.

(Source: Department of Irish Folklore, UCD., main manuscript collection, vol. 54, pp 348-9. Collected in Cork, 1934).

In another manuscript in the same place there is yet another song on the same case, some lines of which run as follows:

In Cappawhite I slept one night
Being aroused in the morning early
I ran to Toem and soon reached Doon
Where I knew each nook and corner.

(Source: Department of Irish Folklore, UCD., main manuscript collection, vol. 407, p223. Collected in Limerick, 1937).

We are told in this source that the author of this song was prosecuted and imprisoned and when released had the good sense to frame the next one in the form of a fox-chase.

Of course the great anomaly of the Hayes case is the fact that, before his falling out with his former employers, he was a most ruthless and pitiless instrument of their policies. One source credits him with evicting 1,000 tenants.¹⁹ I was first inclined to regard this as an exaggeration until I read elsewhere that he had been responsible for driving off the tenants of a whole townland.²⁰ But when he assassinated Braddell he became a hero amongst the people and obviously received considerable support and succour, for he was never taken. The song mentions places widely flung throughout the country where the hunt for Hayes took place. I took this also to be a wild exaggeration of, even a spoof on, the actual case. But sources reveal that there was a most unrelenting search in places as distant as Tyrone, Skibbereen, Dundalk, Liverpool and Tipperary. At one point the authorities had two gunboats cruising off the Cork-Waterford coast to prevent his reported imminent escape by sea.²¹

The General Fox Chase

(TEXT: Broadside in P.J. McCall's collection, N.L.I. missing lines, between square brackets, from a broadside probably printed in Liverpool; Linenhall Library, Belfast).

I am a bold undaunted fox that never was before to tramp,
My rent and taxes I was always willing to pay;
[I lived as happy as King Saul and loved my neighbours great and small,
And had no animosity for either friend or foe.]
I made my den in prime good land between Tipperary and Knocklong,
Where my forefathers lived for three thousand years or more,

But now of late I was betrayed by one that was a fool and knave,
He told me I should quit the place and show my face no more.

As soon as he ejected me, I though 'twas time that I should flee,
I stole away his ducks and geese, and murdered all his drakes,
I knew I could no longer stand because he had the hounds at hand,
So I tightened up my garters, and then I went away;
But soon there was a look out by land and sea to make me out,
From Dublin quay to Belfast town, along the raging sea.
By telegraph they did me insert, a great reward for my arrest,
My figure, size and form, and my name without a doubt.

They broke their brogues, some thousand pairs, this reward for to obtain,
But still there was no tidings of me or my retreat.
They searched Tipperary over, the cornfields and Galtymore,
They went along by Wexford but there did not delay;
Through Ballyhale and Stranmore they searched the woods as they went on,
Till they were hungry and cold at the approach of day.
Now, search the world far and near, the like before you did not hear,
A fox to get away so clear as I did from the hounds.

They searched the rocks, the gulfs and bays, the ships and liners at the quays,
The ferry-boats and steamers as they were going to sea;
Around the coast they took a steer from Poolbeg lighthouse to Cape Clear,
Killarney town, and sweet Tralee, and then crossed into Clare,
When they landed on the shore they searched Kilrush from top to toe,
The bathing places in Milltown or otherwise Malbay,
And Galway being a place of fame they thought 'twas there I was [concealed,]
But still their search was all in vain, for I gave them leg bail.

They searched the train in Oranmore as she was starting to Arklow,
And every wagon, car and coach, that went along the road.
Connemara being remote they thought to that place I might resort.
When they were getting weary they resolved to try Mayo.
[In Ballinrobe they had to rest until the hounds were quite refreshed,
From thence they went to Westport and searched it high and low.
Through Castlebar they took a trot, they heard I was in Castlerock,
But still they were deluded where I lodged the night before.]

In Swinford town, as I sat down, I heard a dreadful cry of horses,
So I took another notion to retaliate my chase;
I being weary from the road I took a dram at half past four,
I was then renovated whilst the hounds were getting weak;
The night being dark at Castlebar, I knew not how to make my way,
I had neither den nor manger to shield me from the cold,
And the moon began to rise; I said I'd make for a foreign clime.
I am in the land of liberty, so a fig to all my foes.

(Source: Georges-Denis Zimmermann, *Songs of Irish Rebellion*, Allen Figgis, Dublin, 1967, pp257-258).

Another song from the same time is the 'Lamentation of James Walsh', one of two killers of Francis Fitzgerald. Four men in all died arising from this affair, the murdered man, his two assassins who were hanged and Denis Dillane, the instigator and paymaster of the murder, who was also executed. A lamentation was composed for him and the whole thing was seen as a great tragedy in the area.

What I like about the 'Lamentation of James Walsh' is its reflective and analytic aspects. It generalizes on the murder to consider the causes of agrarian crime and blames the laws governing

land tenure and ownership which were so heavily on the side of the landlord that the tenant was forced to operate outside them.

Lamentation of James Walsh

Dear Christians listen to what I will mention,
With sincere repentance upon you I call,
To pray for pardon to the Heavenly Father
For James Walsh and for us all.
The first day of September my life ended,
You will all remember in '62,
And Thomas Beckham you should not forget him,
He acted both loyal and true.

Your humble servant is now the second
That is going to suffer for the very same,
As we were both concerned in one transaction,
I have an information of so many names,
But I'd sooner suffer than I would discover,
One act is enough to disgrace my name.

When I did surrender it was no wonder,
I saw no chance to escape the laws,
I was so well surrounded in woods and mountains,
I often sat down and began to pause.
By a proclamation through this nation,
For my apprehension there was a great reward,
So for fear of danger to those who entertained me,
Myself I gave up to the barrack guard.

The cause of murders in the Irish nation
I will declare it going before the Lord,
In hopes when I am buried that your legislation
My cause some alteration in their humane laws.
When a poor tenant he is badly treated
By an unfeeling agent without much cause,
And that he is driven then to desperation,
He sees the danger if he breaks the laws.

The laws that punish for depredations
Could just as easy prevent the cause,
If in the wisdom of your legislature
That gave the sons of Erin equal laws.
It would do away with hanging and transportation,
And this emigration going abroad;
If you got your land at a fair valuation
Your rents you really would disregard.

Now I ask this favour from every neighbour,
To give no circulation to those lines I've penned,
Until I'm twelve months buried, for a certain reason,
And before that period the times might mend.
Notwithstanding that you are badly treated
By those ambitious agents who claim your rent,
Whilst the pampered landlord in a foreign nation,
Where the fruits of your labour are daily spent.

My name was entered for emigration,
The money I paid when I did agree,

So to commit murder was not my inclination,
There was something strange in this I can't see.
I must say one thing it was a great temptation
That interfered with my libertie.*
The Lord have mercy on the souls departed!
You will act ever cautious when you think of me.

*libertie-liberty

(Source: Mainchín Seoighe, Tankardstown, Kilmallock, Co. Limerick. Another broadsheet ballad on the same theme may be found in James N. Healy (ed), 'The Mercier Book of Irish Street Ballads, Vol. 1'. Cork 1967, pp 72-73).

Some of the songs like the Ballad of Francis Hynes, the Poff and Barrett Ballad, and the Maamtrasna Murderers, were written close to the time of the events on which they are based. The song that I used in the RTE Radio programme on the Maamtrasna massacre was written soon after the execution of the three men, Pat Joyce, Pat Casey and Myles Joyce on 15th December, 1882.

We know this because the official version of the case is what is given and the question of false witnesses and perjured evidence is not mentioned. The song on Francis Hynes has references that could only be intelligible to people of the time. Judge Lawson, who sentenced Hynes, is mentioned and there is a verse in praise of the Lord Mayor of Dublin, Charles Dawson M.P., for trying to have the sentence commuted. A song that is remarkable for its factual accuracy is 'The Ballad of Arthur Herbert'. This contains a detailed description of his assassination which coincides with, and was probably taken from, the newspapers of the time. It also reflects local feeling on the killing, the lack of sympathy for Herbert and the perception of him as hard and cruel.

The Ballad of Arthur Herbert

Ye people all, both great and small,
Now listen unto me
Whilst I relate, of recent date,
Another tragedy.
I claim your kind attention
For this story I've penned down
Which took place in County Kerry
And near Castleisland town.

'Twas on the thirtieth day of March
in the year of '82
What was about to happen
Was known to very few.
A landlord living near the place
Was coming home from town
Where he sat in Petty Sessions
To represent the Crown.

Undaunted he was traveling
And just about halfway home
'Twas little he was fearing
And he was all alone.
'Twas little he was thinking
That there an ambush lay
That the death knell it was sounding
To call his soul away.

For so it was, for when he came
To the Cross at Lisheenbawn
With the ditches grown with brambles
Between the road and lawn

For so it was, for when he came
A few short paces more,
A shot rang out, a ball of lead
Into his right palm tore.

He turned around to meet the foe
As so the papers say,
He sought for his revolver
That in his pocket lay.
But ere he had time to fire a shot
As so it is believed
From the hidden gun behind the hedge
He another wound received.

Unconscious though he surely was
He got yet another ball
They say 'twas a rifle bullet
That finally made him fall
For thirty yards he struggled on
They say before he fell
Going in the direction homewards
As so the bloodstains tell.

And now he's dead and buried
'Tis only meet and right
That his real and true character
Should be seen in broad daylight
For hardness and for cruelty
His match was never seen
An upholder of English tyranny
In Ireland he had been.

And now to end this tale of blood
I hope 'twill do some good
I don't encourage murder.
May God forbid I should
But 'twill show unto the government
That we mean for to be free
And point out the tragic failure
Of coercive policy.

(Source: Michael Culloty, Currow, Killarney, Co. Kerry)

While all the songs are songs of agrarian murder, four are also laments for men whom the ballad-maker believed were innocent and executed in the wrong. As I said previously, I do not agree with the song-writer in the case of Hynes. These songs contain deep expressions of sorrow and grief. Francis Hynes is referred to a number of times as a 'martyr'. But what of the ballad-maker's attitude to, and feeling for, the victim, or to broaden it out into a political question, where did he stand on the land question? The answer to this is the same in regard to all of the songs. The ballad without exception is on the side of the tenant farmer and supportive of his cause, hostile to the landlord and the civil authorities, on the side of the Moonlighter and the assassin and mostly unsympathetic to the victim. For instance, in the lament for Francis Hynes there is no word of sympathy for the poor herdsman shot dead coming from mass, or for his wife, or for the seven orphans that he left behind.

The Ballad of Francis Hynes

He is dead in Limerick jail
Many hearts for him to wail,

On the scaffold Francis Hynes did breathe his last,
Many brave hearts are in grief
That had worked for his reprieve,
He is gone and fills a martyr's silent grave, silent grave,
He is gone and fills a martyr's silent grave.

For the murder of Dooloughy
Not very long ago,
Francis Hynes, he was arrested for the crime:
Guilty he was found
By a jury packed, well found,
And sentenced by Judge Lawson for to die, for to die
He was sentenced by Judge Lawson for to die.

Strong evidence was borne,
Affidavits they were sworn
To the jury's intemperate habits at his trial,*
But they feared his heart so brave
For to free him from the grave,
And a martyr died young Hynes that is gone, that is gone.
Long live our great Lord Mayor
Who had worked without despair,
For to gain young Francis Hynes his reprieve.
May he prosper to the end
May his spirits never bend
So a prayer for Francis Hynes that is gone, that is gone.
Then a prayer for Francis Hynes that is gone.

Again the Shamrock Shore
In morning gloom in thrown,
For the immortal soul of Francis Hynes;
God received his soul on High
May the memory never die
Of the martyr, Francis Hynes, that is gone, that is gone,
Of the martyr, Francis Hynes, that is gone, that is gone
Of the martyr, Francis Hynes, that is gone that is gone.

(Source: James N. Healy, 'Mercier Book of Irish Street Ballads', op. cit., pp 35,36. Another version by P. Hanley appears in Dal gCais No 7, p.125: Source: Department of Irish Folklore, UCD).

*See [Appendix I](#) below.



Scene at an Irish eviction in County Kerry, 'Illustrated London News', 15 January 1887.

Twisting Facts to Suit Feelings

The most remarkable song in this respect is the 'Moonlight Attack on Curtin's House'. This is based on the raid for arms on Castle Farm, near Firies, Co. Kerry, the residence of John O'Connell-Curtin, with a farm of about 250 acres, in 1885. It was a raid that went wrong. The raiders did not intend to shed blood, they just wanted the guns that were in the house. But the father with two sons and two daughters tackled the intruders who entered their house and in the confrontation that followed two men were fatally shot, John O'Connell-Curtin himself and a young Moonlighter named Thady Sullivan. The family displayed remarkable courage, notably the two young women. Norah snatched the mask off the face of one of the raiders and Lizzie wrestled a gun from the same man. To the objective observer, the armed gang enter a house, demand firearms, and threaten the occupants who defend themselves and their property against the intruders; most people would say that what they did was justified. But not the writer of the song. On the other hand, it must be said that raiding for arms was a recognized feature of life in disturbed districts at this time and in many instances the holders of guns handed these over without resistance. The song represents the attackers as heroes and the shooting of Mr. Curtin, who was shot at the door as the Moonlighters retreated, is described as follows:

He leveled his rifle that ne'er him betrayed
And left the old blood-hound there squealing.

He then goes on to seemingly libel the family saying that one of their ancestors brought to the gallows "four dozen croppies" in the year of '98. In 1798 some fighting did take place in the Castleisland area and some local men were executed for their part in the uprising, including a man called Tadhg Leathan Nolan. But the claim that an ancestor of O'Connell-Curtin's betrayed them seems to be a fabrication. For O'Connell-Curtin was not a native of Co. Kerry at all. He came from a prosperous farming family in West Limerick where his father held three farms from the Earl of Devon. Educated by the Jesuits at Clongowes Wood College, he had come to Castle Farm about forty years earlier when he had married Agnes de Courcy who was related to the Sandes family of north Kerry. In fact, O'Connell-Curtin's background was a nationalist one. Lore had it that the family had sheltered Michael Doheny after the abortive rising in 1848 when he was being sought by the police.²² And O'Connell-Curtin was a joint treasurer of the Firies branch of the Land League when he was killed. He was seen locally as a generous, kindly neighbour who had built four stone-walled, slate-roofed houses for his permanent farm workers at a time when not many of them enjoyed such a standard of housing. The leader of the band of night-walkers was Thady Casey, who was a regular visitor to Castle Farm and whose father had been a recipient of the family's generosity. Yet when Fr.

Murphy, the curate of Firies, spoke at Sunday mass of the dead man's charity, sincerity and devoutness, most of the congregation left the chapel. The surviving members of the family had to

have police protection and they were boycotted, jeered and booed when they went to mass. The family pew was dragged from the church and smashed and smeared with excrement. Two men, Thady Casey and David Daly, were subsequently sentenced to penal servitude for their part in the affair.²³ They are described in the song as “those two innocent men.” In 1887 the Curtins were forced to sell their fine farm and leave the area. The song is a good example of how the facts of a situation can be distorted and turned on their heads to put a particular slant on an incident.

Moonlight Attack on Curtin’s House

TEXT: Broadside ballad reproduced in ‘The Times’, 10th February, 1886.

Now listen awhile the truth I will state,
How those moonlighting heroes of late made a raid,
Down in Castlefarm in John Curtin’s place,
They entered the kitchen with masks on their face,
Demanding firearms, they followed his son
Right into the parlour in search for a gun,
From the top of the stair two bullets did come,
Which murdered the poor widow’s darling.

A young lad in the ranks, a dashing young blade,
With a darling young heart that was never dismayed,
He leveled his rifle that ne’er him betrayed,
And left the old blood-hound there squealing.
They fought and they rallied through parlour and hall,
Outside in the kitchen old Curtin did fall,
But for damp ammunition we would settle them all,
Which is but the fate of informers.

His grandfather, too, I’m informed of late,
He brought to the gallows in the year ‘98
Four dozen croppies, the truth we must state,
For which he was highly rewarded;
But the blood of those martyrs for vengeance does call,
It was heaven decreed it that Curtin should fall.
Success to the right boy that gave him the ball,
God prosper him over the water.
Norah and Lizzie with Agnes the three
Came tumbling downstairs in the midst of the spree,
With Doran that evening they drank in full glee,
But little expected the slaughter,
It’s a pity the lapdog of Kenmare Estate
Was not caught in the den, we would give him a taste
Of some powder and ball that would send him in haste
Far away from tormenting poor sinners.

So now to conclude and to finish my song,
May those boys that’s in jail be at home before long,
Those two innocent men that are in the wrong,
That the Lord he may keep them from harm.
Not forgetting Thady Sullivan shot through the head,
May the powers above for his soul find a bed,
And his loving mother is now nearly dead,
Lamenting the loss of her darling.

(Source: Georges D. Zimmermann, ‘Songs of Irish Rebellion’, op. cit., pp.278; 288)

What is one to say by way of some concluding comments on the sources of this agrarian violence?

The struggle for the control of the land of Ireland is steeped in violence. The confiscation and plantations of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, which gave the land to supporters of the English Crown, were carried out by fire and sword. The ordinary Irish countryman and woman of the nineteenth century was the government of Ireland, its laws and its agents, as hostile and alien to them and supportive of, and sympathetic to, the landlord and his representatives; or, as Wolfe Tone put it 'a government of force'. Each of the stories in our study presents us with a cameo of our agrarian history. The greed for land and the determination not to be put off it constitutes one of the principal motors of Irish history.

Appendix I

Lord Leitrim

O you boys of the shamrock, pay attention to my ditty.
Be alive to your duty, be wise and be witty.
Keep your powder dry, and we'll make the tyrant fall,
And we'll give them what Lord Leitrim got below in Donegal.
Riddle-addle-day-ri, fol-the-rol-the-ree.

It being on the 2nd of April, this old debaucher left his den,
He left bailiffs, bums and harlots in the castle of Lough Rynn.
To Makim and Kincaid he gave a hellish bawl,
Saying: 'We'll tumble down the cabins in the County Donegal!
With me Riddle-addle-day-ri, fol-the-rol-the-ree.

'Twas two crafty-looking renegades old Shiney did obey,
Saying: 'We'll hurl out the Papish and we'll drown them in the sea.
As Cromwell did in days of yore, we'll waste 'em, great and small,
And we'll desolate their farms here below in Donegal.'
With me Riddle-addle-day-ri, fol-the-rol-the-ree.

'Oh, me lord, I'll feel so horrified,' poor Makim he did say
'For it has foretold me we'll meet Rory on the way.'
His lordship then made answer in the presence of Kincaid:
'Of Rory or the devil, sure, I never was afraid!'
With me Riddle-addle-day-ri, fol-the-rol-the-ree.

So they druv away together on that unlucky day,
Until they came to Cretlagh Wood, near an angle of the sea,
Where bold Rory he was standing there, just threatened by a squall,*
All to protect the widows in the County Donegal.
With me Riddle-addle-day-ri, fol-the-rol-the-ree.

When young Rory seen him coming, his heart did jump for glee.
He gave three cheers for Tenant Right, Home Rule and liberty.
'Our maiden fairs and Colleen Bawns that was proper, straight and tall,
Caused by you they were sent o'er the seas, far, far from Donegal.'**
With me Riddle-addle-day-ri, fol-the-rol-the-ree.

Oh, this monster's face began to foam.
His venom he did spew,
And roared out in a hellish tone: 'Sir, Tell me who are you?
'Well, my Lord, I'm Rory of the Hill, that makes you welcome all
To a hearty dose of bullet pills below in Donegal.'
With me Riddle-addle-day-ri, fol-the-rol-the-ree.

Oh, young Makim cries: 'Spare us our lives, Miser Rory, if you please!'

'No, no, for when you lie with dogs you're sure to rise with fleas.'
The boys was laughing at the joke, they stood behind the wall,
Saying: 'We'll pepper 'em up with powder and smoke this day in Donegal.'
With me Riddle-addle-day-ri, fol-the-rol-the-ree.

'Oh, go on, my boys,' says Rory. 'Make ready, present and fire!'
At his old brain they took fair aim and they hurled him in the mire.
To revenge the joke, his head they broke, and his carcass there did maul.
They stuck him in a pool, his head to cool, below in Donegal.
With me Riddle-addle-day-ri, fol-the-rol-the-ree.

'Well done, my boys,' says Rory, as he turned to the sea,
Where the men they jumped into a boat that there at anchor lay.
'We can paddle our own canoe, we've got a speedy shawl,
And hooray, me boys,' say Rory, 'For the maids of Donegal?'
With me Riddle-addle-day-ri, fol-the-rol-the-ree.

Oh, the policemen like beagles gathered round this dirty beast,
And the devils all, both great and small, they had a sumptuous feast.
He was dissected like a bullock down at Manorvaughan Hall,
And the devils ate him, rump and stump, that night in Donegal.
With me Riddle-addle-day-ri, fol-the-rol-the-ree.

*Other versions have: 'who never feared a ball'.

**The version of Myles Duggan, of Belleek, Co. Fermanagh (BBC S19536) has:
'And then as he approached them, he did 'em then salute,
Saying: 'Where are you going today, you dirty ugly Orange brute?'

(Source: This text is published and discussed by A.L. Lloyd in 'Rebels and Their Causes', Maurice Cornforth (ed), Lawrence and Wishart, London 1978, pp177-179. This is substantially the version as sung by the late Thomas Moran, Mohill, Co. Leitrim and recorded by Séamus Ennis in 1954 [BBC recording S21899])

Poff and Barrett Ballad

Come on you lovers one and all,
And listen unto me,
A mournful execution that happened in Tralee.

Poff and Barrett met their doom,
May heaven be their bed,
Their dying declaration –
Those are the words they said:

James Barrett says: "I do declare
Before my God and Judge
That I never injured Thomas Browne
Or owed him any grudge.

I was not in the field that day
The fatal shot was fired,
Nor never knew the deed was done
Till after he expired.

I am a young man in my bloom,
I am scarcely twenty-five;
I never injured any man
As long as I'm alive.

In youthful days of manhood
I must give up my life,
Into the Blessed Virgin's hands,
Who's Mother, maid and wife.

God help my two young sisters
Who witnessed so much grief,
God comfort my poor parents
And grant to them relief.

Good-bye to all my dearest friends
Around my native place,
And when my spirit is at rest
Don't throw me in their face."

Sylvester Poff next handed,
The priest being in his cell,
A folded slip of paper
His dying words as well.

"Now I'm going before my God
Upon this very day;
I never injured Thomas Browne
Or took his life away."

There is one request I have to ask
Before I end my life,
I have a helpless family,
Likewise a loving wife.

I hope you won't forget them
When I am in the clay
May the Lord have mercy on our souls,
That is all I have to say."

Like soldiers bold they soon ran up
The scaffold grim and high,
You'd think that they were anxious
To know who first would die.

Their moments they were numbered
Before the trap did fall,
And turned around again once more
Those words addressed to all.

"We now confess before our God
Who reared us from our birth,
That we never injured any man
Or woman on this earth.

May the Lord have mercy on our souls
And we hope each one will pray
Unto the Blessed Redeemer,
To wash our sins away."

(Source: Michael Culloty, Currow, Killarney, Co. Kerry. Claims song was composed by a national school teacher, Daniel O'Brien, who was a witness at the trial.)

John Twiss of Castleisland

Farewell my dearest sister Jane, your fond and last adieu,
At the early age of thirty-five I now must part from you,
For the murder of James Donovan I am now condemned to die
On the ninth of February ninety-five upon the scaffold high.

John Twiss from Castleisland it's true it is my name
I never did commit a crime, why I should deny that same
I own I was a sportsman, with spirit light and gay,
But paid spies and informers, my life they swore away.

On the twenty-first of April eighteen ninety-four
That was the night, dear sister Jane, long years you may deplore
When I was taken prisoner, the police to me did say
For the murder of James Donovan we arrest you on this day.

It was at the Cork assizes my enemies all swore
That I shot James Donovan and laid him in his gore
The jury found me guilty, the judge to me did say
On the ninth of February, ninety-five, will be your dying day.

But when I heard my sentence passed to the judge – I did say
The jury found me guilty without the least delay.
I swear that James Donovan I never yet did know
May the Lord forgive my enemies who proved my overthrow.

My blessings on the Mayor of Cork, and the people there also
In thousands they petitioned, to release me they did go
But my enemies were determined I should my life lay down
For paid spies and informers – “A traitor to the crown.”

My last hour is approaching, I hear the death bell toll
The hangman he has pinioned me, I must now give up my soul
You know that I am innocent is all I have to say
May the Lord forgive my enemies, on all their judgement day.

(Source: Séamus MacMathúna (ed) 'Traditional Song and Singers', Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann, Dublin 1977, p40)

The Battle of Ballycohey by J.J. Finnan ('Myles')

The deeds of heroes true and bold
In deathless song by bards are told
To nerve the timid and the bold,
And rouse them into action.
Then I shall sing a simple rhyme
Of men who fought in our time,
Of men who fought a fight sublime
To Ireland's satisfaction.

They were no doughty sons of Mars

Who greed or glory seek in wars,
Yet fortune kindly blest their stars –
Their fame no tongue can sully.
But true man all who took their stand,
Resolved to fight for home and land –
They pulverized that hireling band
Led by the despot, Scully.

That August day in sixty-eight,
Let Irishmen commemorate,
For on that day and very date
The bullets loud did rattle:
Discharged from old, but trusty guns,
By Ballycohey's dauntless sons
At those who came to scourge like Huns,
Or banish them like cattle.

The bailiffs and the 'force' went down,
Those loyal runners for the Crown,
The second volley did them brown,
They thought their task no laughter.
And Scully too was forced to yield,
In spite of his protective shield.
They bore him bloody from the field
Whoever saw him after?

God bless the men who fought the fight,
Who fought the battle of the right,
Who never sought the smiles of might
Through any interceder.
Their fame down times long halls shall ring,
Their names shall pride and glory bring
And future bards their deeds shall sing
And of Dwyer their leader.

Their deed did more to loose our chains,
And stir the life blood in our veins,
Than all our picayunish gains
We've got by agitation.
It proved to find as well as foe
That Irishmen can strike a blow,
And cause the putrid stream to flow
Of Saxon legislation.

(Source: 'The Patriotic Songs and Poems of J.J. Finnan ("Myles")', printed and published by Guy & Co., 114 O'Connell Street, Limerick, 1913).

The Lamentation of the Two Cormacks who died Innocent in Front of Nenagh Gaol

Text: Broadside printed by Haly, Cork; in T.C.D. (White coll.)

Attend, each tender Christian, to what I do unfold;
My doleful lamentation will make you blood run cold,
Concerning those two young men that lately suffered sore
In front of Nenagh Prison – their friends may now deplore.

Being on the 11th day of May, most dreadful for to see,
Those victims standing on the trap in bitter agony,

Saying, "God He is our witness, this crime we do not know,
But from this sinful world we are reconciled to go."
Between Thurles we were born and the town of Templemore;
Our friends and neighbours may lament,
– will never see us more:
Our cruel prosecutors, all on our trial day,
They [thought] it little scruple to swear our lives away.

The day of their execution, as they stood on the drop,
The thunder came so dreadful that it did the people shock;
It seems the Lord was angry, in which he showed his power,
As they were dying innocent upon that dismal hour.
They threw themselves upon their knees to heaven they did cry,
"O God have mercy on our souls! – we are reconciled to die,
We forgive our prosecutors, that swore our lives away;
This is our declaration – good Christians, for us pray."

While the rope went round their neck their sorrow to increase,
To their lips they pressed the crucifix and each other did embrace,
We offer up our lives this day upon the gallows tree,
In union with the sacrifice of Christ on Cavalry.

The trap went quickly from their feet, and dreadful was the fall,
And all who saw the dismal sight shed tears both one and all,
The thunder still continued, with both lightning and the rain,
And here, as well as Nenagh, many trembled at the same.

O God, have mercy on their souls! For dreadful was their doom!
In front of Nenagh prison cut down in all their bloom;
They never injured any man, although condemned to die,
And launched into eternity before the Lord on high.

Now to conclude and finish my dismal tragedy,
I call on all that's standing by to join in prayer with me.
As they declared their innocence upon their dying day,
May the Lord have mercy on their souls, good Christians, for them pray.

(Source: Georges D. Zimmermann, 'Songs of Irish Rebellion', op. cit., pp248-249)

Lamentable Times on the Execution of the Maamtrasna Murderers

The fifteenth of December in the year of '82
The officials of old Galway jail a painful sight did view;
The execution of three men upon the gallows high,
For the Maamtrasna murders they were condemned to die.

The city of the tribes must bear this lasting sad disgrace,
Which years of good behaviour from it will not erase
The crime is more lamented than the hanging of the three,
And may we again such a tragedy in Ireland never see.

The clergy have attended them with unremitting care.
We hope their penitence and prayers to heaven have been sincere,
And that they may find favour before the throne on high,
Their sentence was a fearful one in manhood's prime to die.

The five who pleaded guilty, each will have a troubled mind,
When to their dark and dismal cells in Spike they are consigned,

The ghastly scene that brought them there will be before their eyes
Whether day or night they'll have no peace, these visions will arise.

The judge and jury have discharged their duty with much pain,
The verdict no one could dispute, the evidence was plain.
Then let us pray that their poor souls on high may mercy find
And to the five respited men give each a tranquil mind.

Old Grainne in deep sorrow weeps and calls on Irishmen,
To abstain from every kind of crime that would our men condemn
And with our patriotic men in peace join hand in hand
And still repeat that holy prayer, God save old Ireland.

(Source: Broadsheet in the collection of the Department of Irish Folklore, U.C.D., described as a contemporary ballad and dated December 1882.)

Notes

1. For background on the land agitation see, for example, the following references: Paul Bew, 'Land and the National Question in Ireland', 1858-82, Gill & Macmillan, Dublin, 1978; Samuel Clark, 'Social Origins or the Irish Land War', Princeton University Press, 1979; T.W. Moody, 'Davitt and Irish Revolution', 1846-82, Oxford University press, 1981; F.S. Lyons, 'Ireland Since the Famine', Fontana, London, 1973.
2. Laurence M. Geary, 'Parnell and the Irish Land Question' in Parnell; 'The Politics of Power', Donal McCartney (ed), Wolfhound Press, Dublin, 1991.
3. Georgina O'Brien (ed), 'Reminiscences of the Right Hon. Lord O'Brien', London, 1916; Kerry Independent, 18 December, 1882.
4. 'Freeman's Journal', 23 December, 1882.
5. Samuel Clark, James Donnelly Jnr., 'Irish Peasant Violence and Political Unrest', Manchester, 1983, pp. 278, 329, 330.
6. The Twiss brothers, John and George, were labouring men and active Moonlighters.
7. Interview with Michael Maher, Lough, Thurles, Co. Tipperary, 9 August, 1990.
8. 'Limerick Chronicle', 20 May, 1862
9. 'Cork Examiner', 19 May, 1862.
10. 'Limerick Chronicle', 11 March, 1863.
11. 'Limerick Chronicle', 17 July, 1862.
12. 'Cork Examiner', 7 August, 1862.
13. Interview with Paddy Lalor, Tipperary, Co. Tipperary, 10 August, 1990.
14. Sean Spellissey, "Peter the Packer – A Man for the Times" in 'Dal gCais', No. 7, 1984, pp. 121-130. (See [Appendix I](#))
15. John Twiss was convicted a number of times for poaching offences. He and George terrorized people because of their reputation as gunmen. John is reputed to have gone to the house of Robert

Meredith, a substantial landowner in the Castleisland area, where his appearance in the doorway was sufficient to terrify the landlord.

16. Jarlath Waldron, 'Maamtrasna: The Murders and the Mystery', Edmund Burke, Dublin 1992.

17. 'Kerry Weekly Reporter', 12 January, 1895.

18. Interview with Michael Culloty, Currow, Killarney, Co. Kerry, October 1990.

19. 'Cork Examiner', 7 August 1862 and 22 September 1862.

20. 'Cork Examiner', 22 September 1862

21. 'Cork Examiner', 5 November, 1862

22. Interview with John Cussen, Newcastle West, Co. Limerick, November 1990.

23. 'Kerry Sentinel', 18 December, 1885.

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